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NOMINALISM AND REALISM

Universals and Scientific Realism

VOLUME I

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Nominalism and Realism

UNIVERSALS AND SCIENTIFIC REALISM
VOLUME I

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THESE VOLUMES ARE DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
PROFESSOR JOHN ANDERSON

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Despite the political upheavals in our universities in recent years, the Australian philosophical community has remained a good one to work in.

Sydney University D.M.A.
May 1977

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Introduction

It is argued in this work, first, that there are universals, both monadic and polyadic, that is, properties and relations, which exist independently of the classifying mind. Realism is thus accepted, Nominalism rejected. Second, it is argued that no monadic universal is found except as a property of some particular, and no polyadic universal except as a relation holding between particulars. Transcendent or Platonic Realism is thus rejected. Third, it is argued that what universals there are is not to be determined simply by considering what predicates can be applied to particulars. Instead, it is the task of total science, conceived of as total enquiry, to determine what universals there are. The view defended is therefore a *scientific* Realism about universals. It might also be called *a posteriori* Realism. The working out of a scientific Realism about universals is intended to be the special contribution of these volumes.

Contemporary philosophy recognizes two main lines of argument for the existence of objective universals. The first is, or is a descendant of, Plato's One over Many argument. Its premiss is that many different particulars can all have what appears to be the same nature. In the terms used by C. S. Peirce, different *tokens* may all be of the same *type*. The conclusion of the argument is simply that in general this appearance cannot be explained away, but must be accepted. There is such a thing as identity of nature.

I take this argument to be sound. But the argument is sometimes presented as an argument from general words. It is asked how a general term can be applied to an indefinite multiplicity of particulars. It is answered that these particulars must be identical in some respect. There are two disadvantages in presenting the argument in this linguistic fashion. First, it obscures the fact that the same term may apply in virtue of different natures of the different particulars. As a result, where Realism is embraced, it is likely to be *a priori* rather than scientific Realism. Second, presenting the argument

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linguistically encourages confusion with an unsound argument to universals from *meaning*.

This second argument moves from the existence of meaningful general words to the existence of universals which are the meanings of those words. Universals are postulated as the second term of the meaning relation. The argument from ideal cases, such as Plato's perfect circle, is perhaps a special case of this semantic argument to universals.

I regard this second line of argument as completely unsound. Furthermore, I believe that the identification of universals with meanings (connotations, intensions), which this argument presupposes, has been a disaster for the theory of universals. A thoroughgoing separation of the theory of universals from the theory of the semantics of general terms is in fact required. Only if we first develop a satisfactory theory of universals can we expect to develop fruitfully the further topic of the semantics of general terms. Philosophers have all too often tried to proceed in the opposite way.

In this first volume, *Nominalism and Realism*, I criticize at length and reject various versions of Nominalism, together with Platonic Realism. I also examine and reject the view that properties and relations are as particular as the objects which have properties and relations. I conclude that we must admit objective universals which, however, cannot exist independently of particulars. I go on to examine the notion of a particular and reject the view that we can give an account of particulars as "bundles of universals". The conclusion drawn is that particularity and universality, irreducible to each other, are both involved in all existence. I end the first book by sketching a world-hypothesis which admits nothing but particulars having (universal) properties and relations.

The position reached at that point, though contested by many, is, at least in general outline, familiar enough. But in the second volume a detailed attempt is made to work out a theory of universals which is based upon natural science. In making this attempt, I enter relatively unexplored territory. For with the exception of a suggestive paper by Hilary Putnam (1970a) contemporary philosophers, at least, have largely ignored the possibility of developing a theory of objective universals, where the particular universals admitted are determined on the basis of scientific rather than semantic considerations. It might perhaps be argued that Plato in his later works, Aristotle and the Scholastic Realists were ahead of contemporary

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philosophy in this matter, although handicapped by the relative backwardness of the science and the scientific methodology of their day.

My contention is that, by accepting this *a posteriori* Realism, the theory of universals, arguably the central problem of ontology, can be placed on a securer and more intelligible foundation than anything previously available. In particular, such a doctrine makes possible the reconciliation of an empiricist epistemology, which I wish to retain, with ontological realism about universals.

Not all particulars are first-order particulars. Universals themselves fall under universals. That is to say, universals have certain properties and stand in certain relations to each other. In the final part of the second book an attempt is made to work out a theory of higher-order universals, but, again, one which is compatible with an empiricist epistemology. Of quite particular importance is the topic of *relations* between universals. For this topic may hold the key to an account of the nature of causation and of nomic necessity. By this means, it may prove possible to answer Hume without sacrificing Empiricism.

Finally, a word on the phrase "*a posteriori* Realism". The phrase may suggest that the theory advanced in this work is supposed to be supported by *a posteriori* reasonings of the sort with which natural science has made us familiar. This is far from being the case. The reasoning will have the characteristically *a priori* flavour which philosophical reasonings, especially when they concern first philosophy, seem inevitably, if distressingly, to have. What is maintained is the proposition that what universals there are is to be determined *a posteriori*. The status of this proposition is, however, a further question. It may have to be established, if it can be established, by *a priori* or relatively *a priori* reasoning.

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