

UNIVERSALS, RESEMBLANCES AND PARTIAL IDENTITY

The Introduction of Universals

Plato maintained that the repetition we observe in nature is not a mere appearance; it is real and constitutes an objective fact about the world itself. According to Plato, the very same properties, singly, in pairs or in conjunctions of greater numbers, recur in different places and times actually, and not simply as an empirical manifestation: The *very same* entities exist in innumerable many objects in different spatial and temporal positions. Since on this view each property exists multiply, properties are conceived as generic beings, or in technical terminology, as *universals*. Just as particulars exist, (in an even stronger sense) universals also exist, and all properties, singly or in conjunctions, are universals¹. Plato's reasoning has served as a point of departure for the philosophical position called "realism of universals". Surely everyone will agree with Plato that properties *look as if* they repeat themselves in space and time. There will be many, however, who will deny that the appearance of recurrence gives us reality as it is. These will reject that the repetition of the very same properties is also real. In fact, Plato was quite aware of the possibility of this alternative point of view². He thought, however, that *there is no plausible way in which one can explain the manifest recurrence away*, and that the realism of universals must be affirmed.

Realists may grant that in the ten sheets of paper on the table before me I can count ten distinct whites. But they will maintain

1. See the *Republic*, 596A, the *Parmenides*, 147D-E, and *Hippias Major*, 287C-D.

2. See the *Timaeus*, 51C.

that this is because there are in these sheets ten spatially separated *instantiations* or tokens (examples) of white, each of which instantiates one and the same *type* white. Existing as a particular means to be at a unique position; property-*types* or universals are different, however. That the distinct particular instances of white instantiate the same thing, namely white, means that the same thing, white, recurs in a multiplicity of things, that as a type it exists in a repetitive way. Realists proclaim, therefore, that existence contains universals, as well as particular entities. Since universals are at least as objective as particulars, they are completely independent of the classifying mind.

It is well-known that the question “*Where* do generic beings exist?” bifurcates the realist tradition in philosophy, creating a controversy that stems from the opposition between Plato and Aristotle. The former thought that the perceptual world contains only particulars, while universals exist in a transcendent realm. Repudiating such an other-worldly existence, Aristotle held that universals are confined to the same reality that we grasp by perception. He said that they exist in objects, exactly where their instantiations are. In our time, the latter view (called “immanent realism”) is the more influential. Among living philosophers, David Armstrong³ has been an explicit defender of it.

The Motive for Rejecting Universals

Now I will try to articulate a plausible version of the principal competitor of realism, regardless of its ramifications. The most important and effective alternative to realism is *conceptualism*. According to this view, universals are not objective existences at all; they are concepts, which result from our minds’classifying the perceptual world. There are different forms of conceptualism also, and some of these commit themselves to quite extreme theses. The version we encounter in Berkeley’s philosophy, for example, regards even the particular properties inhering in objects as subjective entities. What I view as a serious conceptualist rival to the diverse forms of

3. David Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, vol. II, 1978 ; *idem*, *Universals : An Opinionated Introduction*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1989.

realism concerning universals, instead, takes a realistic view of particular properties. (Some, prefer calling such real particular properties “tropes”.) According to this position, properties are objective insofar as their instances existing in objects are concerned; in the world they exist distinctly, as do the whites in the ten sheets of paper before me. What is mind-dependent is the property-type, *i.e.*, whiteness, alleged to exist as a single entity in its instantiations in the ten sheets at once.

It may be objected that the fact that the particular colours on the sheets are matching, or that they are instantiations of the *same* colour, cannot be the result of our conceptualizations. That they are all white cannot be determined by my concept of white. Rather the converse seems true. Even if there were no intelligent beings on Earth, capable of conceptualizing the world they perceive, would not these sheets, a glass of milk and a stick of pure chalk still share the same colour? If, as it begins to appear, the common aspects of objects are not made up by our minds and instead are objective facts, are we not forced to return to realism, vindicating the tenet that in reality the same properties are common to several things?

No, says the conceptualist. When I declared that universals are nothing but concepts, I was not claiming that the *resemblances* between particular properties are subjective matters as well. I have not suggested at all that the resemblances amongst particular properties exist because of the ways we conceptualize the world. On the contrary. My position is that such resemblances are objective, and they determine our concepts.

According to this conceptualist whose view I wish to support, the realist has created a logical myth. In an attempt to interpret and make sense of the apparent fact that properties repeat themselves in space and time, realism commits the mistake of projecting the concepts the mind forms, onto reality itself. It is true that there exists an objective fact that gives the appearance of recurrence, but this fact is not that of the same thing repeating itself. What gives rise to the appearance of recurrence is that great numbers of particular real properties are mutually related by *particular* relations of resemblance. For example, the colours of the ten sheets before me, that of natural chalk and that of milk all resemble one another. Nothing in fact repeats itself in these substances. Instead, the mind conceptualizes particular objective resemblances in terms of repetition, and thereby obtains a simpler representation of what is in itself a much more complex phenomenon.

The resemblance of qualities and relations admits of degrees. Just as we can speak of very close resemblances existing between the different tones of white, for example, we can also speak of more distant similarities as between colours like blue and green. The limit of closeness in such a similarity is *exact resemblance*. If I tear one of these sheets in two, the two particular whites I obtain will be exactly similar. But exactly similar colour patches are not identical, since they will occupy different positions in space. How can particulars be the same if they are separate? Moreover, leaving aside surfaces coloured by man-made dyes, the perception of nature hardly ever reveals exact similarities. When we examine things in detail we find that properties differ in a great many respects. In classifying the resemblances it perceives, the mind conceptualizes them, and creates for itself the effect of recurring identities. To be sure, such concepts are universal, but as such their existence is mental. This version of conceptualism, supported by objective resemblances, has been defended explicitly, since the times of Boethius. As a full-fledged modern theory, however, its principal proponent is John Locke⁴. I will try to defend it here against a more recent criticism leveled by realists.

The Analysis of Resemblance as Partial Identity

To repeat, the heart of the specific conceptualist thesis I have described above is that property-occurrences relate to one another by similarities and not by identities. Following tradition, I will call this aspect of conceptualism “the resemblance thesis”. The resemblance thesis offers a plausible way of explaining away the apparent repetitions of properties, and thereby blocks the so-called “one over many” argument. Deriving the reality of the repetitions from their appearance is then left without logical support.

In response to the threat posed by the resemblance thesis, an influential contemporary realist manœuvre has been to try to reinstate the “one over many” by an indirect way: Strategically, the realist grants that the apparent repetitions are explained away by

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Yolton (ed.), London, Dent, 2 vol. 1968, p. 17. For Boethius' views, which come close of Locke and for Abelard's, which also coincide with the ideas described here, see Richard McKeon (ed.), *Selections from Medieval Philosophers*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957, vol. I, p. 97 and 228.

resemblances, but then he maintains that the *explanans* itself, that is, the very notion of resemblance, entails identity. Thus he tries to establish that the admission of recurring identities is inevitable.

According to this criticism resemblance is a compound relation, one component of which is identity. Thus wherever we have a resemblance, there we have a concealed identity. To put the same idea somewhat more metaphorically, what we call a similarity, declares the realist, is nothing but a “diluted” or *partial* identity⁵. In illustrating this idea, I will first appeal to colours, and to dyes in particular. Suppose we have three white cotton shirts which we intend to dye red. We immerse two of them in the same dyeing liquid, and then hang the shirts side by side. Ordinarily, it will be said that these two shirts have the same colour (red). Suppose we mix, now, some yellow dye in the red dyeing liquid, and after stirring the third shirt in it, we hang it alongside the first two. The third shirt will still be red, but not quite as closely similar (or the same) in colour, to the first two, as they are to each other. The more one dilutes the red dye, the more distant will be the similarity of the colours of the shirts dyed in it. In analogy with the example of the dyes we may think of similarity as an identity that is diluted or infused with impurities, proportionally to the lessening degree of similarity. Similar properties (the colours of the first and the third shirts) are obtained by adding impurities or differences to what are in themselves identical properties (the colours of the first two). Thus a relation of identity is made partial by mixture with other properties, and that is what resemblance is.

Of course, one must avoid regarding the example of the dyes as something more than an analogy. One way of obtaining similar

5. This idea originally belongs to Francis Bradley See his *Writings on Logic and Metaphysics*, James Allard and Guy Stock (eds), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994. In *The Nature of Things*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, Quinton declares, for example, p. 260: “Similarity is, indeed, neither more nor less than the possession of a common property. As Bradley put it, similarity is a partial identity.” Over the past two decades Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism*, p. 260, has developed and defended this thesis, forcefully arguing that “properties... resemble each other because they are partially identical”. See also p. 38, and *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, p. 105-107. In the latter work (*ibid.*, p. 124-125) : however, Armstrong is less confident of the eventual success of this enterprise: “I suggested that resemblance of universals might be explained in terms of partial identity of the constituents of the universals concerned. That is a program for research that I think is hopeful, but that may possibly have to be abandoned.”

colours is explained by mixing dyes, but this does not give us a clear and precise account of (i) how other colours resemble, (ii) whether diverse colours have similar structures, or even (iii) whether they have structures at all. We may think of other analogies that illustrate the idea of partial identity. Let us take three lengths, the first three inches, the second four and the third five inches. Clearly, the first resembles the second more than it resembles the third. Here is how this is explained by partial identities: The first and the third lengths have a portion in common (i.e., identical), and this is three inches. What the third adds to this portion is a length of two inches, and the latter constitutes the part that makes the identity of the first and the third length a partial one. Moreover, the reason the first resembles the second more than the third is that the additional length creating partiality in identity is less in the second than it is in the third. Finally, the following is a more formal example due to David Armstrong: ABCD and BCDE resemble more closely than ABCD and CDEF. Again, the reason is that the elements in common between the former pair are proportionally more than those shared by the latter. The smaller the proportional amount that is unshared, the closer is the resemblance of the entities compared⁶.

The realist's objection, therefore, is that it would be in vain to try and explain the repetition of properties by appeal to resemblances, for *every* resemblance is a partial identity. Wherever one reduces the apparent repetitions to resemblances, there resemblances reduce to (partial) identities. Since on this view one falls back on repeating identities, however impure these may be, one is driven to the admission of universals. Thus the resemblance thesis itself is reduced to realism.

6. D. Armstrong, *Universal and Scientific Realism*, p. 121: "... Consider the conjunctive property, P & Q & R & S. The properties, P, P & Q, P & Q & R, are all partially identical with this property. What is more, they form a simple series whose limit is identity with P & Q & R & S. Again, each successive member of the series may be said to resemble P & Q & R & S more closely." For the partial identities of resembling lengths see p. 122. Another analogy giving a good insight is the following, *ibid.*, p. 37: "Two adjoining terrace houses are not identical, but they are not completely distinct from each other either. They are partially identical, and this partial identity takes the form of having a common part. Australia and New South Wales are not identical but they are not completely distinct from each other. They are partially identical, and this partial identity takes the form of the whole-part 'relation'."

The Refutation of Partial Identity

I will show that the very notion of partial identity is logically defective. According to the conception under discussion, partial identity holds between two different properties at least one of which is a compound (X and Y, where Y is a compound of X' and Z), and is constituted of two aspects: the aspect that is identical between the two properties (X', which is identical with X), and the aspect that prevents the identity from being a complete one (namely, Z). I will call the latter the "non-identical aspect" of the two properties; this is the *impurity* that makes the identity of the two a partial one. Now the non-identical aspect must fall under the same determinable as the identical aspect. These aspects cannot belong to different determinables, for if they did, they would coexist in a *compresence* rather than form compounds that are partially identical. Under different determinables, properties coexist without modifying one another; as such they are complementaries. As complementaries, however, they cannot constitute impurities for one another. For example, the different *shapes* of two peppers, which are said to be partially identical, cannot fail to be completely identical by one pepper being crisp and the other flabby. The crispness and flabbiness of the peppers are not determinates that can *combine* with identical shapes, *as the non-identical aspects that add to these shapes*, rendering them partially identical. If anything at all, only other shapes can have such an effect⁷. The constituents of partial identity (both the identical and non-identical aspects) must be determinates under the same determinables.

If this observation is correct, then the thesis of partial identity faces a dilemma; if it refuses to admit the existence of resemblances that are *not* analyzable in terms of partial identities, it slips into a regress, which, I think, makes it logically incoherent. The crucial point is that the non-identical aspect cannot be anything but a determinate that *resembles* the identical aspect. If the two fall under the same determinable and are *not* identical (which they cannot be, if they are to form together a *partial* identity) there seems to be no possibility for them other than to be similar. But *ex hypothesi*, similarity

7. We may imagine curving slightly a side of one of a pair of exactly similar triangles. As is obvious, the modified triangle will no longer be exactly similar to the other.

is partial identity. Now either the identical and non-identical aspects are compounds and yield to the analysis, or they are simples. If they *can* be simples at all, we have a counterexample to the idea of resemblance as partial identity, and the analysis proposed must be given up. If, on the other hand, properties are assumed always to be compound, then one will have to say that the two constituents of the partial identity, namely the identical and the non-identical aspects, are themselves partially identical. If this is the case, however, the non-identical aspect itself possesses an aspect that is identical and an aspect that is non-identical with the identical aspect of the original properties. Furthermore, for reasons articulated already, the subordinately identical and non-identical aspects must be partially identical among themselves, and thus contain an aspect identical with the originally identical aspect, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

This regress implies that for there to be one particular partial identity between two property instances there must be infinitely many *different* partial identities between them. Note that in the regress every new subordinate partial identity must be a *different* one, for without such a difference the relevant contrast between the identical and non-identical aspects will not obtain, and hence even the existence of the original partial identity will be blocked. If resemblance is partial identity, it follows absurdly that any particular resemblance is an infinity of different resemblances under the same determinable.

Moreover, every new subordinate partial identity in the regressive series contains an identical aspect relative to what is for it the next higher-order partial identity. The consequence is that such identical aspects accumulate infinitely, and this entails that at the limit, the non-identical aspects diminish infinitely. Thus the analysis cannot retain the non-identical items residing in each stage of the regress, and every partial identity turns out to be a complete identity. Similarly, if resemblance is a partial identity, however distant, every resemblance is an exact similarity, and, again absurdly, no resemblance is in fact what it is.

It emerges that first appearances notwithstanding, the notion of partial identity proves to be an incomprehensible one. One should not be surprised, since in addition to the difficulties already brought to light, this idea tends to violate the principle that no two determinates of the same determinable can exist at the same position in space and time. On the present conception of partial identity,

the identical and non-identical aspects of uniform properties⁸ such as phenomenal colours that mutually resemble each other will have to coexist, so that there will be *more than one* at the same place at the same time. This coexistence cannot be envisaged as existence side by side, for that does not yield partial identity. Rather impossibly, one would think, in the case of uniform qualities partial identity has to involve two incompatibles extending over exactly the same position at the same time!

No doubt realism has other arguments against the resemblance thesis, and I do not intend to comment here on their strength. Moreover, I have to grant that, as a device of analysis, the notion of partial identity may itself be characterized differently from the way it has been presented here. I am not able to envisage any specific form this would take, but I have no *a priori* reasons for excluding such a possibility. My conclusion is merely that the purported vindication of realism against the resemblance thesis by appeal to partial identity, where the latter is understood in the sense I have tried to bring out, is a strategy that cannot possibly be successful.

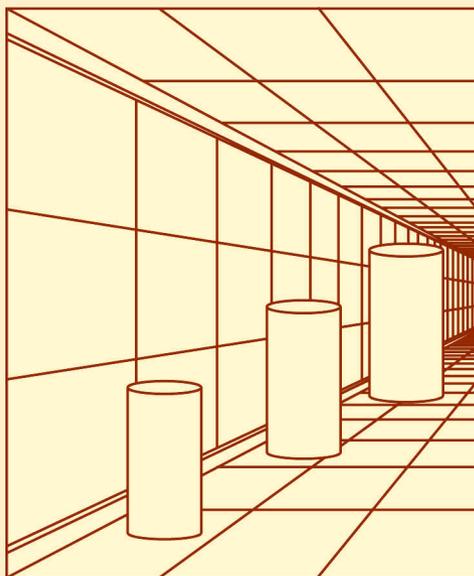
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8. Parallel to *homoeomerous* versus *anomoeomerous* objects, properties, too, seem to fall into two types: some are uniform (simple?) and some articulated (complex). Every part of the extension of a uniform colour is exactly similar to the whole. In contrast, no proper part of a shape is so related to the whole of it. In uniform qualities, adjoining one to another under the same determinable yields a mere juxtaposition, while in articulated ones the juxtaposition of different qualities under the same determinable amounts to *integration*. The result is a single quality which is more articulated and larger in extension. In uniform qualities only the juxtaposition of the *same determinate* yields such an expansion.

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