The Problem of Universals:
Introduction

1. Examples of particulars: Charles I, Charles I’s head, the act of cutting off his head
Particulars occupy a single region of space at a given time.

Examples of universals: justice, whiteness, being a head
Universals are repeatable entities. At any given time, numerically one and
the same universal can be wholly and completely exhibited, or exemplified,
by several different spatially discontinuous objects.

Metaphysical realists (hereafter ‘realists’) accept the following two claims:
(A) We need to explain what it is for two particulars to be of the same type (e.g. for two pillar boxes to
both be red);
(B) The only satisfying explanation of what it is for two particulars to be of the same type is that they
share a universal.

Nominalists: agree with Locke that “all things that exist are only particulars”. There are no universals.
Nominalists must deny one (or both) of (A) and (B).
Many nominalists accept (A) and deny (B).
Others deny (A)—and as a result (B).

Realists claim that their two-category framework provides us with the machinery for dealing with a set of
(allegedly) otherwise irresolvable philosophical problems. Here are two problems that metaphysical
realists say they can solve:

2. Subject-Predicate Discourse

Consider the following sentences:

i. Socrates is courageous
   \(\text{sub} \quad \text{pred}\)
ii. Plato is a human being
    \(\text{sub} \quad \text{pred}\)
iii. Socrates is the teacher of Plato
    \(\text{Sub} \quad \text{pred}\)

Notice: What we do with these kinds of sentences is pick out a particular object (e.g. Socrates, the
man; Plato, the man) and characterize that object in some way. (e.g. say that it is courageous,
is a human being, is the teacher of Plato). Sometimes we succeed in saying something true.

Fact: Some sentences of this kind are true.
Problem: How do we account for their truth?
Realists say: “We can do it!” See the steps below:
Step 1:
Suppose that we succeed in saying something true in the case of (i).

Sentence (i) is true if it corresponds with the way the world is—that is, if Socrates, the actual man, is courageous.

So, if (i) is true, the structure of the sentence ‘Socrates is courageous’ must mirror the structure of a certain ‘part’ of the world—the ‘part’ where Socrates is.

Step 2:
Notice that we can say the same thing about other individuals. Consider the sentences:

a. Plato is courageous
b. Frank is courageous
And so on...

Sometimes these other sentences will also be true. Suppose that (a) is true.

Step 3:
So, we have two true sentences that say the same thing about different objects. That is, they say that courage is repeated in the world. Socrates has it, and Plato has it.

Question: How do we account for the truth of each of them?

Step 4:
We know that what is said in (i) and (a) must correspond to the way that the world is. (The sentences are true after all!)

But wait! Universals are repeatable entities.

Step 5:
So, with universals and particulars, we have the right framework with which to account for this kind of correspondence.

‘Socrates’ names the man Socrates—a particular.

‘Courageous’ doesn’t name a universal (it isn’t a name). ‘Courage’ does, though. Still, ‘courageous’ points to the universal courage by expressing the universal courage.

Sentence (i) is true because the particular man Socrates actually does exemplify the universal courage.

The same goes for sentence (a): it is true because the particular man Plato actually does exemplify the universal courage.

3.
Abstract Reference

Consider the following sentences:

iv. Courage is a moral virtue
v. Triangularity is a shape
vi. Hilary prefers red to blue.

‘Courage’, ‘triangularity’, ‘red’ and ‘blue’ are all abstract terms.

Fact: Some sentences of this kind are true.

Problem: How do we account for their truth?

Realists say: “We can do it!” See the steps below:
Step 1:
In (iv), ‘courage’ seems to be functioning as a *singular term*. A *singular term* is a piece of language that has the function of referring to or naming a particular object or thing. The sentence seems to pick out a particular thing (i.e. courage) and seems to characterize it a certain way (says that it is a moral virtue).

Step 2:
Suppose that we succeed in saying something true in (iv).
We know from before that sentence (iv) is true if it *corresponds* with the way the world is—that is, if *courage* is a moral virtue.

Step 3:
But wait! A universal can be the things named by ‘courage’.
So, with universals (and particulars), we have the right framework with which to account for the truth of (iv).

‘Courage’ names the universal **courage**.
‘Moral virtue’ is also an abstract term and names the universal **moral virtue**. Remember, many different things (i.e. acts, character traits, etc.) can be morally virtuous. So, moral virtue is repeatable.
The sentence (iv) is true because the universal **courage** exemplifies the universal **moral virtue**.