The Problem of Universals: Metaphysical Realism

The question: How do we explain the similarities between objects? For example, wheels are circular. So are doughnuts and cd’s. How do we explain the similarity between these things?

Both Plato and Bertrand Russell are metaphysical realists. Metaphysical realists think that we can explain attribute similarity by positing a further kind of object to which ‘ordinary things’ are related. Metaphysical realists are to be contrasted with nominalists—who we will discuss next week.

Plato Revisited

Plato’s answer: Individual wheels, doughnuts, cd’s and other circular things participate in the Form (sometimes “Idea”) of CIRCULARITY.

Wheels, doughnuts, cd’s and so on are all circular because they bear the right relation (i.e. participation) to CIRCULARITY.

Russell on Universals

Russell accepts Plato’s basic ontological framework, although he changes the language with which he speaks about it.

Instead of speaking of Forms, or Ideas, Russell speaks of universals. Universals are to be contrasted from particulars. He tells us:

“We speak of whatever is given in sensation, or is of the same nature as the things given in sensation, as a particular; by opposition to this, a universal will be anything which may be shared by many particulars, and has those characteristics which, as we saw, distinguish justice and whiteness from just acts and white things” (15)

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.

Universals are abstract. They are imperceptible, indestructible and not located in space or time. For this reason, Russell tells us that universals have a different kind of being than particulars. Particulars exist; but, universals subsist.

For Russell, there is more than one kind of universal:

a) Properties (one-place or monadic universals): are universals that things exemplify one by one. Examples?

b) Relations (many-place universals): are universals that are exemplified by several individuals in relation to one another. Examples? (Think of a pair of objects, a trio of objects and so on, and the kinds of relations they can bear to one another.)

c) Kinds: are universals that things exemplify in virtue of their belonging to certain special groups. Examples?

So: a single thing will exemplify more than one universal at a given time as well as exemplify more than one kind of universal at that time.

E.g. I exemplify the universal 5'6", brunette (both are properties), is the sister of x, is a professor of x (all are relations, two-place), human being, female, Canadian (all are kinds) and so on....

Also: universals can exemplify further universals.

E.g. Ripe tomatoes, fire trucks and strawberries are all particulars that exemplify the universal red (or redness).

But, red is also a color. So are yellow, blue, and green. Red, yellow, blue and green all exemplify the universal color.

Blue is darker than yellow. So, the universals blue and yellow exemplify the further universal is darker than x.

Similarly red is more similar to orange than it is to blue. So, the universals red, orange and blue exemplify the further universal is closer to x than y.

Food for thought:

Last class, we talked about the fact that Plato’s theory of the Forms commits us to a very complex ontological structure. We started with the common sense observation that certain things can be similar in attribute and we have ended up with a system that seems far away from common sense. But metaphysical realists think that there is a pay-off for this complexity. The pay-off is its explanatory power. Metaphysical realism can explain a wide range of phenomena. Next class, we will talk about two of these.