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The Path to Knowledge: Universals and Particulars

**Introduction**

The concept of universals and particulars was created by Plato in his pursuit to understand why there are common qualities between different material entities. While universals and particulars are not commonly referenced today outside of philosophy circles, the concept was one of the foundational attempts at understanding our perception of the world, which is why these concepts are important to understand. While Plato thinks universals and particulars are a temporal, unchanging and separate, and Aristotle thinks universals exist within particulars and within space and time, I think universals exist within the people who perceive them and that they change over time in general trends across populations.

**Plato**

Plato defined a universal as a quality that one or more material entities have in common and a particular as a specific instance of a universal within a material entity. R.E. Allen points out that the term universal and form are closely related and often used interchangeably. The universal explains the similarities between particulars because a universal is an entity in which all material entities with the same quality participate. Participation is the act of reflecting or approximating the universal or form. For example, a kind teacher, a kind dog, and a kind television character all participate in the universal of ‘kindness’ which gives each of them the quality of kindness. In Plato’s interpretation of universals and particulars, ‘kindness’ is a separate entity from the teacher, the dog, and the television character and participation is the way in which the two entities interact. Additionally, according to Plato, one universal can be in many particulars, and many universals can be in one particular. For instance, a teacher that participates in the form of kindness can also participate in the form of happiness and the form of beauty concurrently. However, due to the particulars’ participation in the universal, particulars are dependent on universal and universals are independent from particulars. So, the kind teacher is dependent on the form of kindness because the teacher participates in that form of kindness to get that quality of ‘kind’ while the kind form does not depend on anything to maintain itself.

According to Plato, universals do not exist in space or time which means that they are abstract immaterial entities that do not change. Particulars, on the other hand, are changing material entities that exist within time and space. For example, Plato would say that the form of kindness will not change but the teacher, the dog, and the television character will likely change over time. Allen claims that Plato uses the unchanging nature of universals to explain knowledge. He claims that knowledge is unchanging and therefore knowledge must be rooted in something that is unchanging. Since particulars change, knowledge cannot be rooted in particulars. Therefore, knowledge of the material world must be rooted in universals.

**Aristotle**

Aristotle’s definition of universals and particulars bears a lot of similarities to Plato’s definition. The crucial difference between the two philosophers’ definition of universals and particulars is that unlike Plato, Aristotle does not think that universals are independent and separate from particulars. Rather, Aristotle thought that a form was present in every entity that had the quality of that form. For instance, according to Aristotle, the form of kindness is not separate from the teacher, the dog, or the television character. Rather, they each hold a bit of the form of kindness. This means that, according to Aristotle, the universal is dependent on all the particulars that contain that form.

That being said, there is a significant difference between the type of explanatory power that Aristotle and Plato attributed to the theory of universals and particulars. Most notably, Aristotle thought that the separation between the immaterial world and the material world caused problems in Plato’s theory. He thought that the separation did not explain many potential problems involving knowledge and participation. Aristotle’s solution was to create another theory that combined matter and form called hylomorphism.

**My Idea**

I argue that universals exist in the people who perceive them and they project these universals onto the particulars. Instead of fixed forms, each person has their own set of forms which change and develop as the person changes. Forms depend on the person, rather than being independent or dependent on a material entity. For instance, one person may think a puppy contains the form of cuteness while another person may think the dog contains the form of annoyingness. Even the form of colors varies from person to person. What one person may call blue, another person may call purple. However, I think there can be general trends in forms and these trends can change over time. For instance, many people’s form of attractiveness has changed over time. At one point, attractiveness, at least superficial attractiveness, meant having curly hair and bellbottoms. Just a few years ago, superficial attractiveness meant straight hair and skinny jeans. The form of attractiveness has changed over time. The general trends also change through space. What is commonly considered attractive on the University of Washington’s campus is not necessarily what is commonly considered attractive in a city halfway around the globe. This means universals are not unchanging and a temporal.

Someone could argue it is a human’s perception of a form that changes, not the form itself. However, since one person can see completely different forms in a entity than another person - take cuteness and annoyingness, it cannot be a person’s perception of a form, but the forms themselves that change from person to person. There is so much variation that the variation could not exist within the entity, rather the person perceiving the entity. This means people gain different knowledge from the same entities and that this knowledge changes over time as their forms surrounding the entity changes. Knowledge does not necessarily have to be rooted in a permanently unchanging entity, but rather in a thing that changes as the person develops.

**Conclusion**

There are a variety of interpretations involving universals and particulars. Plato thinks that forms are separate, unchanging, and atemporal. Aristotle critiques this view and creates another theory that does not involve universals and particulars. I think that universals and particulars are person dependent and changing. No matter their definition, universals and particulars are part of a search to determine how humans perceive and interpret the world. Hence, the act of exploring universals and particulars, while a part of a philosophy created thousands of years ago, still has significance to us today. Universals and particulars are the beginning of the process to discover more about ourselves which in turn has led to the place we are today.

Citations

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