

Title: On God's Knowledge of Universals and Particulars Author: Emin Reşah
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In ancient philosophy, knowledge is divided into *universals* and *particulars*, that is the existence of an apple *idea* or *meaning* through which a particular apple can be identified is called *universal*. It is used to explain how humans understand the world. We divide the world into categories, names, events that are pretty much arbitrary and practical. However earlier philosophers argued that this division is natural and God has also this divided types of knowledge. Avicenna famously described God having the knowledge of universals but not particulars. This limit of God's knowledge was to averse from the problem of evil: God knows universals of good and evil but doesn't know whether my particular existence is good or evil before I commit sins, therefore we cannot blame him for creating me evil.

This division of knowledge into universals and particulars is arbitrary, does not consider how humans learn their environment and it also carries the defect later revealed by Frege's paradox on set theory.

In this essay I'll explore the topic in the opposite direction: Instead of limiting God's knowledge on particulars, I will claim that all God's knowledge is on particulars and God *doesn't need* to know *universals*. Albeit their higher-ranking name, universals are a product of limited human knowledge. We can't describe the difference between two red apples (and don't need most of the time) and call both of them *apple*. For God however, this distinction is possible, he can differentiate any apple or object, up to their atoms without calling their names. In Qur'an, God tells Adam the names of the things after he created and classical commentaries all refer as if God taught something he already uses. Yes, there was an education process but this is most likely because of the human's limited thinking capacity and teaching a finite mental power to live in a world he can't fully comprehend. God taught Adam names, because without names humans are incapable to ponder on things.

However this limit doesn't apply to God. When we believe in his infinite knowledge, we also believe this knowledge pertains to infinitesimally small beings, down to atoms or quarks. If God has the knowledge of every human cell and every atom in their lungs, does he need to group this knowledge with the names of humans use? My answer is no. This particulars/universals distinction is caused by our inability to understand the universe with its full state as it becomes. So if we need to put a limit to God's knowledge, our strategy should be removing human imposed mental limits.

One may pose a question here: In the scripture, Allah is described as knowing all the *things* and we are given examples about these, e.g. *he knows your hearts*. If he *doesn't know* what a heart is, can he what's in our hearts?

Qur'an describes Allah having knowledge of all things but Qur'an is written for humans which cannot think or communicate by any other means. Humans

cannot experience *knowing everything at once*. Our consciousness can only deal with a limited number of thoughts in a given time. Anything that takes humans as audience has to address this limitation. So, yes, Allah knows our hearts down to atomic details but this knowledge does not depend on its name and description.

The reason we need to deal with this problem is the classical paradox of Theology. If God is infinitely all-knowing, infinitely good-doing and infinitely capable, why we have evil on Earth? All answers to this question *has to* limit these superlatives in some way: Either we need to claim that God has limited himself not to break natural laws, so that he is not so capable; or we need to claim that he's not good as in our understanding of the term or he doesn't know the future and his knowledge is limited in some way. All philosophical inquiries on this topic has to come up with an explanation that limits these infinitudes with a certain prescription. In some sense, philosopher has to teach God his occupation. Here I will describe *the least limiting* version, which I think could be used as a basis to refute the problem of evil without attributing much to God.

From the perspective of the individual human, there are good and evil things and events which correspond to needs of it as an organism. When something is good, the organism benefits from it directly or indirectly, when something is evil, it's a source of danger to this organism. Our basic good/evil distinction and *universals* are caused by our humane needs.

However when our focus is redirected towards other levels, smaller levels like cells of that organism and higher levels like groups of people, we will find out that good/evil distinction is harder to apply. Can we really ascribe some *meaning*, like *good* or *evil* to an organism's cell? If so, for example, can we consider death of a cell in human body is always good or bad? In these upper or lower levels, good/evil distinction becomes more and more meaningless. If we have to find *good* cells, we have to define *goodness* by the terms of the individual. Apart from the purpose of the individual, there is no *ethics* that we can readily ascribe to cells. This way of thinking goes upwards and downwards to galaxies or atoms, there are no good or bad galaxies, there are no good or bad atoms other than their relative merits to the individual.

Attributing universals to God is one of the anthropocentric claims of the philosophers. We need a way to categorize the world into nouns and verbs, into events and locations and this need is caused by our limited mind. Suppose we were able to transmit the whole experience, without linguistic distortion to others and suppose we had a way to enumerate all our experiences uniquely. In this case would we need universals?

Such a case of language and communication is pretty much unfathomable. Our sense and thought is ingrained by this *collector* that categorize experiences under identical labels that we are not able to come up a viability of such a communication. It's like recording and transmitting videos, but the receiver is also able to experience the recording directly. In such a case, would we really need

universals?

When I would like to tell something, I'd dream it with all the unique experience it has and transmit it to you. You can experience it directly, alter it and send me. Such a communication method, which relies on direct experience rather than symbols would not need universals. There would not be any need to collect experiences under identical labels.

I claim that if God knows the universe in some way, it's most likely to resemble such a communication method. He may alter his *vision* or not, but his knowledge does not need universals or labeling groups of atoms by names. He simply knows what is without any linguistic intermediary.

In this case *the problem of evil* also does not arise because cutting some parts of the experience as events and labeling these as good or bad cannot be attributed directly to God.

However this is not to say that God is equal to universe's existence. Instead universe is something superficial like word is to the thing it describes. When Qur'an states that *he says be and it is*, it seems to underline that the word of God is what we call *reality* and the universe. His word is the Truth because his word is the creation itself, there cannot be a distinction between the word of God and the reality.

The problem, then, is to conform our limited language and limited thinking to the reality. Universals are basic structures of human thinking, we cannot communicate otherwise, nevertheless they also point that our thinking relies on conventional groups, learned from the environment. When we confront God's existence and creation, through the reality, we consider the language we talk as the ultimate description. This seems the cause all of our problems in a path to understand God and his creation.