Universals

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Huizinga, noting the vogue that the problem of universals enjoyed throughout the Middle Ages and the fact that the controversy was still unresolved in his day, was disposed to find, in its persistence, confirmation of his view of philosophy as a form of agonistic play. It is certainly true that there has always been, and is still, a rough division between those who "countenance," or take a welcoming attitude to, universals and those who would prefer to admit the existence of nothing but particular objects and events. But it may be possible to find, for this continuing division, some further explanation to supplement, at least, that which appeals to love of competition on the part of men in general and philosophers in particular.

Hostility to universals usually goes with complacency about particulars. Those philosophers who are suspicious of general properties, sorts, relations, and types usually have no doubts about the reality of people, physical objects, datable events, and tokens. This partiality of theirs has sometimes seemed paradoxical. For it has seemed unclear how they, or anyone else, could distinguish and identify the particular individuals they so readily accept unless they could distinguish and identify some, at least, of the general sorts or kinds to which those individuals belong and some, at least, of the general features that characterize them. If practical recognition of particular things entails practical recognition of general things, why should theoretical recognition, so readily accorded to the former, be given so grudgingly, if at all, to the latter?

Part of the answer lies in a certain anxiety or fear: the fear of the making of myths, objectionable in themselves and productive of absurdity. The fear has a more specific character. Let it be granted that spatio-temporal particulars—or spatio-temporal particulars of certain sorts—are model cases of what really exists or occurs. The fear is that a theoretical commitment to the existence of universals amounts to a confused half-assimilation of the general to the particular, accompanied, perhaps, by a confused analogical picture of the relations of these spurious quasi-particulars, the universals, to the actual objects to be found in space and time. Plato is represented

as the prime example of this confusion; and who is to say he is free from it? The Forms are altogether too like quasi-prototypes. That the fear has, or sometimes has, this character is also suggested by the unpleasant image of a "bloated" or "overpopulated" universe so frequently used by those who would eschew theoretical commitment to abstract entities.

Should we not, in our sophisticated days, have progressed beyond these myths and hence beyond these fears of myth? Surely no one denies that different particular things may share identical properties, may belong to the same kinds; that different pairs or trios of particular things may stand in the same relations. And if so, what can be wrong with, what myth need attend, the admission that there *are* properties, kinds, relations that different particular things or pairs or trios of them may share? Indeed, the admission is implicit in the use, as just made, of the phrases, 'identical property', 'same kind', 'same relation'.

To this there is a stubborn, familiar reply. There is nothing wrong with saying that there *are* properties, kinds, etc., if the remark is construed as merely an idiomatically permissible way of saying that different particular things may alike, for example, be red or white or dogs or trees; that different particular pairs may alike, for example, be such that one member loves, or is larger than, the other. But the suspicion lingers that the remark is taken, by those who think it worth making, to carry some further and disputable commitment. As for the point about practical recognition, it is again harmless to say that the ability to distinguish and identify particular individuals depends upon the ability to distinguish and identify general kinds and properties, if the remark is properly construed. We may admit that the ability to recognize a particular individual as the particular individual it is depends, in general, upon the ability to recognize it *as* a tree, say, or *as* a dog. If this is all that recognition of the general kind comes to, it may safely be acknowledged. But the ability to recognize something as a dog does not require that we have to recognize, in any sense, a further thing, the universal, *dog*.

To these replies there is an equally stubborn rejoinder. Why the reductive tone? Grant that the practical ability to recognize the universal amounts to no more than the ability to recognize its instances as being such. But note that to make the point thus generally is already to recognize, in another sense, the universal itself. Grant that the existence of universals is no more than the fact, or the possibility, that particular things do, or might, exemplify them. But acknowledge that the fact or possibility of their being exemplified is no less than the fact of their existence.

I shall suggest that the fears and tensions here recalled are likely to continue for as long as philosophical discussion of the topic continues.

Such a suggestion may appear profoundly unsatisfactory. It may be objected that we now have a clear-cut way of resolving the issue or at least of construing it as an issue that can be resolved in a clear-cut way. For the elegant and perspicuous notation of standard logic has suggested a test whereby we can determine just what ranges of items are such that we are inescapably committed to belief in their existence. The suggestion is most prominent in the work of Professor Quine, to whom it is primarily due. Quine summed up the test in a celebrated epigram: "To be is to be the value of

a variable." It can be expressed in slightly more traditional terminology as follows: the only things we are bound to acknowledge as entities, as existing, are those that we find it indispensable, for the expression of our beliefs, to reckon among the subjects of our predications or—which comes to the same thing—among the objects of reference. To apply the test, we must submit the referential extravagance of natural language to a discipline of regimenting paraphrase that aims at maximum ontological economy. And to help us weed out the bogus pretenders to the status of entities, we have a second test: nothing is to count as an entity unless there is a clear general principle of identity for all things of its kind. Quine summed up the second test, too, in an epigram: "No entity without identity." To see the connection between the two tests, it is enough to recall the notation of logic. The subjects of predication are just the objects that the variables of quantification range over. Those variables are essentially such as to be able to stand on either side of the identity-predicate. If the variables purport to range over items for which a principle of identity is lacking, then the sentences containing such variables have no determinate sense.

Unfortunately the hope, which these tests might seem to offer, of clear-cut decision on our question turns out to be an illusory hope. It is true that the substantial particular individuals of the world—Aristotle's primary substances—pass both tests with impressive ease and success. And this is a satisfactory result insofar as scarcely any rational man would, even in his philosophical moments, wish to question the existence of such objects. These objects pass the first test, one might say, ahead of all competitors. They are the primary subjects of predication. As I have written elsewhere, "we tell the day-to-day story of the world, we describe the changing postures of its states of affairs, essentially by means of predications of which such objects are the subjects; and we cannot seriously envisage any alternative way of doing so."[1] They pass the second test too; for the common concepts under which such particular individuals are identified yield of themselves general principles of identity for their particular instances. If, for example, one has mastered the common concept "horse," one has thereby mastered a general principle for counting, distinguishing, and identifying particular things, namely horses.

However, when one turns to consider the case of universals or of purported abstract entities generally, disillusion sets in. One is led to question the relevance of the second test and the utility of the first. I do not mean that one is led to question the slogan "No entity without identity"—in its strict and literal meaning; for certainly there exists nothing that is not identical with itself. But if the slogan is construed as meaning "No entity without a *common* principle of identity for all things of a kind to which the purported entity belongs," then its relevance to the case of universals or purported abstract entities generally must come into question. For universals and abstract entities generally—if such exist—are distinguished from spatio-temporal particulars in general precisely by the fact that each has an *individual* essence which constitutes its *individual* identity. So there is no need of a common principle of identity for all universals of some kind to which the given universal belongs. To insist on this requirement would be arbitrarily to fix the rules of the game so that only spatio-temporal particulars and some favored types of abstract object, like sets and numbers, could win it.

To expand a little on this point. Suppose 'F' is a predicate and '∅' the corresponding name of the universal—if such exists. Then we have

x is F (say, "witty" or "red" or "triangular")

and

$$x \left\{\begin{matrix}\text{is an instance of}\\ \text{exemplifies}\end{matrix}\right\} \emptyset \text{ (say "wit" or "red" or "triangularity").}$$

To grasp the sense of F *is* to grasp the principle of identity for ∅. It is not *eo ipso* to grasp a general, common principle of identity for things of the kind to which ∅ belongs. There may or may not be such a principle. In the case of intellectual qualities (the general kind to which wit belongs) or in the case of colors (the general kind to which red belongs) there is no such principle. In the case of geometrical shapes it is perhaps arguable that there is. But the point is that we do not need such a principle. For in the sense of the predicate, and hence in the sense of the associated name for the universal, we already have the essence, the individual principle of identity, of the universal thing—if there exists such a thing. The case is quite different with particular things: their names—their proper names—contain in their sense, insofar as they can be said to have a sense, no *individual* principles of identity for the individuals that bear them. When we seek a principle of identity for them, we do indeed have to have recourse to the general sort or kind to which they belong; to a sortal concept that covers them; to a general principle of identity for all things of that sort. Hence, if we amend the slogan, as just now rejected, to read "No *particular* entity without a common principle of identity for all things of a kind to which the purported particular entity belongs," then the slogan is plausible enough. Unamended, it simply begs the general question against general things. (As already indicated, this is not to say that no abstract entities pass the test. Some do; but there is no reason why all should; and many do not.)

The first test—that of indispensability as subjects of predication—may seem at first sight a little more promising. For it is easy to think of simple cases of successful reductive paraphrase, cases in which, for example, without loss of intended sense, we can eliminate reference by name to abstract qualities in favor of general reference to particulars that characteristically have or lack those qualities, coupled with predicates corresponding to the quality-names. But to infer from such trivial successes that we could, without a crippling effect on discourse, bring about any significant reduction in the range of abstract reference by such means, is to make a wholly unjustified leap; as the study of almost any page of theoretical writing would show. And to cripple discourse is to cripple thought.

Moreover, even if the paraphrasability claim could be made good, the fact would not, by itself, serve the intended purpose. For it might be that the availability of the sentence to be paraphrased was a necessary condition of our thinking the thought to which we then try to approximate in the substitute sentence or sentences. Committed in thought to what we shun in speech, we should then seem like people seeking euphemisms in order to avoid explicit mention of distasteful realities.

The main point, however, is not that the suggested tests fail, through irrelevance in the case of the second and ineffectiveness in the case of the first, to yield any significant reduction in what adherents of the tests would call our ontological commitment to abstract entities. The point is, rather, that they fail in the more general aim of providing a clear-cut means of resolving, in any way at all, the issue that has formed the matter of perennial debate. For if it would be a mistake to think that the tests supply a clear means of limiting our ontological commitment, it would be no less a mistake to conclude that their failure to do so provides of itself a clear and final demonstration of the existence—or of our commitment to belief in the existence—of qualities, properties, types, and abstract entities generally, besides the particular events, objects, and processes that take up space or occur in time in the natural world and that *exemplify* qualities, *belong to* kinds, and are *of* types. It is not, indeed, a mistake that disappointed adherents of the tests are likely to make; they are more likely to give up their adherence. But in asking why these things are so, one may uncover the real source of the poignancy of the perennial debate.

The source lies, I suggest, in a certain inevitable tension in our thought. To locate that tension, we must first recall those considerations that underlie the whole problem, considerations of the utmost generality, relating to features characteristic of any stage of human thought and experience which deserve the names—indeed to any stage of the thought and experience of any being endowed, as Kant would say, with sensibility and understanding. At the most elementary level they amount to this: that we cannot think of, or, in a full sense, perceive, any natural thing, whether object or event, without thinking of it, or perceiving it, under *some* general aspect; as being so-and-so or a such-and such; as having some general character or as being of some general kind. Generality and particularity are alike necessary features, and mutually dependent features, of our experience; as of our speech. This being so, it is natural that we should at least be under the impression that we can distinguish in thought between particular objects and events in nature and the general characters and types that those objects and events exemplify; and indeed that we can extend our thought to embrace types and characters perhaps not exemplified at all by any particular things, or complexes of things, in nature. Should we not, then, recognize that qualities, properties, types, hence universals, *exist*, as abstract objects of thought, distinct from particular objects in nature?

But here we already meet the source of tension. For when, and if, we are disposed to acquiesce in an affirmative answer to this question, we encounter the full and fierce pressure of a different disposition: a strong, natural disposition to understand by the notion of existence the same thing as existence in nature; to think that whatever exists at all exists in nature and that whatever relations hold between things are relations that are exemplified in nature. No reconciliation of the two dispositions is possible. For universals, if they exist at all, do not exist in nature. They are *incorrigibly* abstract; objects, if objects at all, of thought alone, even if indispensable objects of developed thought.

But if universals, if they exist, are outside nature, how are they related to the natural objects that exemplify or instantiate them? To repeat the professional terms,

'exemplification' or 'instantiation', seems to be to give no reply at all to this question. But it is the only reply that the believer in universals can safely give. For the question, the demand for an account of the relation, really incorporates the naturalist prejudice—if I may call it so *without* prejudice. So Plato, though right to place universals outside nature, was wrong to seek even a suggestive analogy in nature—for example, copy and original, production-line model and prototype—for the relation of exemplification. The relation of exemplification is not a natural relation and can have no natural analogues. Aristotle was right to reject the analogy, but wrong to try, if he did try, to locate universals in nature. But it is not clear that he did try; for to say that universals are *in* particulars may not be an attempt to identify any natural relation, even by way of natural analogy; it may simply be to say that universals exist in nature only insofar as, and in the sense that, their instances exist in nature; and that they do not exist at all in any other sense.

The believer in universals, then, must be prepared to say that though instances of (some) universals are encounterable, and recognizable, in nature, the universal itself, the abstract thing, is not. The abstract thing is an object of thought alone. (The natural thing is an object of thought too, but not of thought alone.) But thinking takes place in nature. So the believer must also say that we can, in nature, think of the abstract thing which is not in nature as well as recognizing, in nature, its natural instances. (He may say that implicit in our recognition of the instance, the thing in nature, as what it is, is a capacity, even if an undeveloped capacity, to think of the abstract thing, the universal it is an instance of.)

Here he is exposed to another challenge from our native naturalism, that challenge which perhaps has more force than any other, since it covertly appeals to what seems the most fundamental dimension of natural existence, namely, time. It runs: If these supposed entities are objects of thought, and objects of thought alone, are we not obliged to say one of two things: either that they come into existence when first conceived of and enjoy, while they exist, only a mind-dependent existence; or that they pre-exist their conception, waiting, in some non-natural sphere of their own, to be discovered by minds? And does not either answer seem singularly unattractive? Indeed both are unattractive, and both must be rejected by the believer; not in favor of a third temporal alternative, but on the ground that temporal predicates have no application to abstract objects, that they neither come into existence at a certain time nor exist sempiternally; that they are not in time. And here the believer has to resist the pressure of the naturalist prejudice at its strongest, the sense that whatever exists at all exists in time.

If he has stomach for this, he faces a third challenge. For it often seems that when we appear to be talking about universals, naming them and quantifying over them in such ways that we can find no plausible paraphrase, that both captures our thought and dispenses with such reference, yet we may have no further intention than to speak of what is found in nature. Should we not then conclude that even in our apparently ineliminable reference to universals we have nothing more than a feature of idiom, a *façon de parler*, an especially and perhaps inimitably vivid or economical way of suggesting, or alluding to, a more or less determinate, more or

less compendious, array of natural facts—offering, perhaps, at the same time, a picture, not to be taken literally, like the personifications of eighteenth-century poetry—so that our thought has really no object other than natural things?

This is a point at which the believer can make a concession without surrendering his belief. If aggressively disposed, he may say that the occurrence of such apparent reference to universals is dependent upon the possibility of genuine reference to them; or, more bluntly, that it is only because they exist, as objects of thought, outside nature, that we can thus appear to refer to them even when we are speaking only of what is in nature. Because they exist, as objects of thought only, we can use their names to speak, picturesquely and indirectly, not of them at all, but of merely natural things that are not only objects of thought.

But the believer may not make quite so strong a claim. He may remark simply that the way just discussed is not the only way in which we use the names of universals or quantify over them. For sometimes we speak of the non-natural relations that hold between universals, or abstract entities, themselves. This we do whenever we speak of conceptual (or logical or analytic or semantic) necessities; for these are outside nature too. It is not, for example, a natural fact that scarlet things are necessarily red. When we assert, or think of, these necessities, the objects of our thought, whether they are directly named or represented by predicates, are the abstract entities themselves. It is not claimed that the existence of conceptual necessities is *explained* by a further fact, namely the existence of non-natural relations between universals or abstract entities generally. Rather, they are the same thing, neither more nor less than each other. And it is admitted that when we speak explicitly of non-natural relations between universals, the words we use are often borrowed from the vocabulary of relations exemplified in nature: for example 'includes', 'excludes', 'is incompatible with'. So we seem to picture these relations on analogy with, for example, spatial relations. Here again we see how natural is the fear that theoretical recognition of universals involves myth and confusion. The pictures seem to haunt us, however hard we try to neutralize them; and, of course, there is a quite blatant irony in the attempt to neutralize them by saying that universals are *outside* nature. But if we are to say that necessary truths are truths at all, then we must say that they are truths about objects of thought alone (concepts, universals, abstract entities); and this is why some who think that every truth must be a truth about the natural world are found to declare that all of what are called necessary truths say the same thing, namely nothing.

The more careful of committed naturalists, of course, will avoid this rather baffling epigram. He has more considered things to say. He will attempt what might be called a naturalistic reduction of our intuitions of conceptual necessity. For thinking, after all, is something that occurs in nature. So he will seek an account of these intuitions in terms of what is naturally found—in terms of this or that natural mental content or in terms of this or that natural, and socially reinforced, disposition to behavior, especially linguistic behavior. Talk of grasping or perceiving necessary relations between abstract objects or concepts he will see as at best an attempt to do justice to some aspects of the phenomenology of thought, but as a misguided attempt insofar

as it appears to invoke objects that have no place in this, the natural, and the only, world. His opponent, on the other hand, will continue to insist that the fact that thinking is a natural phenomenon does not require that all its objects be so too; and that recognition of the full powers of thought is *eo ipso* recognition of its abstract objects.

As I have already suggested, I do not think that the dispute is finally resolvable. In saying this I do not mean that there is a right answer which will remain forever hidden from us because we lack the power to reach that impartial vantage point from which the truth can be discerned and the final judgment delivered. I mean, rather, that there is no such vantage point; neither in the natural world nor out of it; for any location of our judgment seat would be a prejudgment of the issue. If I am right in this, then the picture of a profound metaphysical disagreement should ideally be replaced by that of a choice: between the adoption of a naturalist stance, with a consequential restriction of the notion of existence to what is found in nature; and a contrary willingness to extend the notion to thought-objects, exemplifiable, but not locatable, in nature. Ideally still, it should not matter greatly which choice is made; for any pair of philosophers of opposed persuasions (or, in this matter, perhaps, of temperaments) should be able to appreciate, across their difference in idiom, the force of each other's attempts on the less general and more substantial problems that confront them both. But this *is* ideal; and it seems more likely that the old debate will continue, in variant guises and variant forms, as long as our civilization lasts. May that be long indeed!

Note

1. See "Entity and Identity," in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, Fourth Series, ed. H. D. Lewis (London, 1976).