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On the Necessity and Sufficiency of Universals

In my dissertation, I argue for the thesis that the sole denizens of reality are extrinsic universals, that is, repeatable entities with a qualitative character, each of which depends for its existence on some other universal. Although figures such as Plato and Russell upheld analogous theses, nowadays, this is a rather unpopular and controversial view, about which Peter Strawson once said: “This is a project which I leave to anyone whose taste for exercising ingenuity for its own sake is greater than mine.” Unlike Strawson, I believe this project can shed some new light on an old, and undeservedly forgotten, metaphysical picture, which is best suited to accommodate the way in which we gain knowledge of reality. My goal in the dissertation is to draw this picture using the tools of contemporary Metaphysics and Semantics.

I begin by arguing that properties (be they repeatable, i.e. universals, or non-repeatable, i.e. tropes) are necessary in order to do Ontology. I suggest that, even if we suppose that there are individuals, the only way to single out an individual is by appealing to some of its properties. For example, we infer that Mary is in the room because we see the shiny redness of her hair, or we smell her perfume. In order to commit to the existence of the individual Mary, it is necessary that we first acknowledge the existence of the peculiar color and smell properties.

I then examine the various criteria for singling out individuals via their properties. I show that appealing to the Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals (“For any individuals \(x\) and \(y\), if \(x\) is identical to \(y\) then, for any property \(P\), \(x\) has \(P\) if and only if \(y\) has \(P\)” or to the existence of so-called haecceitates (unrepeatable, non-qualitative properties) cannot succeed in singling out individuals because each strategy is question-begging. In the former case, in order to know that they are distinct, we must have already singled out the individuals in question; in the latter case, an haecceitas is a peculiar non-qualitative kind of property, so its existence is inferred from the existence of an individual, not \textit{vice versa}. Next, I examine two criteria for singling out an individual through essences. Both criteria are revealed to be doubtful, however, because there is no clear-cut criterion for inferring the existence of an individual from the existence of a collection of essences, and the existence of essences themselves has been questioned on various independent grounds, such as by evolutionary theorists. Finally, I consider intrinsic properties. I show that they are able to provide a criterion for singling out individuals, but despite their popularity in contemporary Metaphysics, I argue that we have several reasons, both \textit{a priori} and \textit{a posteriori}, to doubt that intrinsic properties exist. \textit{A priori}, I argue that intrinsic properties are not indispensable for providing an ontology, contrary to what Rae Langton claims in her \textit{Kantian Humility} (Clarendon Press, 1998). \textit{A posteriori}, I argue that no intrinsic property has thus far been discovered. As a result, a world whose properties are all extrinsic is possible. It is the holistic world in which the existence of any property depends on the existence of some other properties.

Thus, although we do have evidence for the existence of properties, we find it problematic to bind them to individuals. It is here that I propose to dispense with individuals altogether. I argue for the existence of a specific type of property, \textit{i.e.}, universals. Moreover, in light of the arguments I offer against the existence of intrinsic properties, I suggest that all universals are extrinsic. Hence, the name of my view: \textit{Extrinsic Universalism}.
My defense of *Extrinsic Universalism* comes in two parts. First, I show that among the two types of properties, tropes and universals, the latter should be favored. Tropes are particularized properties, such as *This-particular-redness*, said of Maria’s new coat, and universals are repeatable properties, such that the very same *Redness* can be both in Maria’s and John’s coat. I argue that we should deny the existence of tropes because the trope-theorist requires an indefensible notion of “primitive similarity”. But if we accept that only universals exist, as I suggest, then we must explain the nature of repeatability. I argue that to endorse repeatability one must commit to the truth of the following “Paradox of Repeatability”: the sentences we use to express the repeated existence of an entity are non-compositional: two sentences $P$ and $Q$ composed of the same sequences of expressions $<x_1, \ldots, x_n>$, such that each $x_i$ has the same meaning in both $P$ and $Q$, can nevertheless have different overall meanings. Hence, for example, suppose that $P$ is “There is Redness” and that $Q$ is “There is Redness”. To endorse repeatability is to allow that $P$ and $Q$ have different meanings.

The remainder of the dissertation is devoted to dissolving the Paradox by constructing a language and a semantics in which the existence of repeatable entities can be asserted. I thus offer a novel contribution to the discussion of the concept of repeatability which, in addition to providing a more detailed formulation of *Universalism* than the one given by Russell, can also be used to clarify so-called *Endurantism* (the view that individuals persist in time by being wholly present at each instant at which they exist). I show how different types of statements in subject-predicate form can be interpreted in the language of *Extrinsic Universalism*, thereby demonstrating that much of our talk can be interpreted as talk about universals, and disproving Strawson’s claim. I conclude by addressing three Open Questions: (1) How can the *Extrinsic Universalist* explain the concept of a material object? (2) Which properties can be said to exist for the *Extrinsic Universalist*? (3) How can the *Extrinsic Universalist* account for the concept of the first person?