

The Nature of Universals

Let me state my position straightaway. While I believe that universals do not *exist* like particulars, I do not believe that universals are mere names and nothing more. With regard to this problem, I find myself in disagreement with the nominalist indictment of universals as well as with the realist disparagement of particulars.

What are universals? What is their status *vis-a-vis* particulars? What is the relation between the two? The problem of universals, in my view, is the problem of generalized conceptual thinking. Of course, generalized conceptual thinking grows out of particular perceptual thinking. These two forms of thinking are closely related, and we can dismiss neither of them as unreal. Let us see why.

What does the progress of scientific reflection consist in? We see that, as science progresses, its thinking becomes more and more generalized. Starting from the crude perceptual aspects of matter, sciences appear progressively to move towards the discovery of the *nature* and *essence* of matter, and of the *general laws* governing its behaviour. From the "elements" of Empedocles to the electrons, protons and neutrons of the modern physicist, progress in the direction of generalized thinking has been quite steady and deliberate. Science and philosophy are rich in instances of this kind of progress.

Sayyid Karamat Husain Jaffari was Part-time Chairman of the Department from 1970 to 1971. The present article was read at a Symposium at the Pakistan Philosophical Congress Session 1958.

Scientific reflection about the *nature* and *essence* of our environment leads us beyond the 'things' of practical commonsense—the gross objects of motion, manipulation, and social intercourse—to general concepts, principles and laws. This means that general notions or universals are an essential aspect of the progress of scientific thinking. Indeed, the discovery of universals may even be said to be the principal motive of thought. It will appear, in short, that the ideal of arriving at universals is no fantastic hobby, but a canon of knowledge. The discovery of this ideal has not debased knowledge, but has enriched logic and methodology. Now, this fact alone entitles universals to respectful consideration, and to acceptance of them as not mere names—unless, of course, we hold that the discovery of universals is not the aim of scientific thinking or that the aim of scientific thinking is to lead us into the realm of illusions.

With regard to the relation between particulars and universals, Plato's 'copy view'—the view, namely, that universals (or Ideas) are originals and the objects of perceptual experience, their copies in spatio-temporal form—does not command assent. The universals of the realist are no longer charged with the vague ontological predicates of commonsense, and so far the assertion of nominalism is unexceptionable and instructive. But the burden of nominalism is a 'name view' of the universals—the view that universals are nothing but names. I believe that nominalist scrupulosity over-reaches itself and leads one to a denial, even in the face of good reasons to the contrary. I think a good case can be made out for the view that universals are descriptive of relations, qualitative and quantitative, obtaining among particulars. We may call it the theory of the synthetic universals. According to nominalism, particulars alone are real and universals are nothing but symbols or signs which have no reality, although they have practical value in so far as classifications of particulars through them is useful for practical purposes. Realism, too, is equally one-sided in its pronouncements. But, according to

the theory of the synthetic universal, both universals and particulars are real ; particulars are real as existents, and universals are real as organizations of particulars. Viewed in the light of the actual procedure of scientific reflection, both realism and nominalism appear to be unconvincing.

Nominalism derives a certain plausibility from the fact that it agrees with commonsense in accepting a map of experience which it is the business of philosophy to examine. To commonsense, particulars are peculiarly clear. They are readily identified ; one knows what one is talking about. Not so the universals. When the philosopher talks of truth, beauty and goodness, we do not know where to turn. Nominalism speaks in the native vernaculars of commonsense, philosophy in unfamiliar language. The instance, the case, the example, which a word *denotes*, is always some individual body or group of bodies, capable of being identified by gesture or manipulation. Commonsense is never entirely at its ease, except when it is working in the field of individual objects—a field in which our action finds its fulcrum and its tools.

Thus, nominalism and commonsense (the former consciously and the latter unconsciously) move within the same limits. They go in the direction of a systematic materialism, share the same unreflective classification of experience, and employ the same axes of reference. This is human thought's original sin, its inertia and line of least resistance. And it is precisely this fact that is responsible, on the one hand, for the sympathy between commonsense and nominalism, and, on the other, for the somewhat strained relations between commonsense and philosophy.

Let us approach this problem from the point of view of epistemology. In regarding universals as mere names nominalism not only assumes the priority of the physical order, but also restricts reality to it, and regards it as belonging essentially and exclusively to this

order. This is to commit, though indirectly, the mistake of Hume's radical phenomenalism or psychologism from which knowledge must perpetually seek to escape. If to be is to be a particular thing (and a particular thing has no being other than its momentary presence), then the world consists of the co-existence and succession of individuals which arise and perish. The outcome of it all would be a scepticism which it is impossible for the ordinary man, or even for the philosopher in his ordinary moods, to accept. Kant, doubtless, rendered a service to epistemology by proving the necessity of the principles of permanence—the truths of logic and mathematics. Truths of logic and mathematics are independent of the conventions employed to express them. Physical hypotheses, which describe physical facts, presuppose logical and mathematical hypotheses which describe logical and mathematical facts. Logic and mathematics describe the nature of relation, order, dimensionality, number, space, and physics studies special cases of these. It follows that there is no sense in which physics can be regarded as the fundamental science; nor is there any sense in which the facts which are determined by physical hypotheses can be regarded as ultimate. And this conclusion which gives to being, in the last analysis, a logical rather than a physical character, is fatal to nominalism. The status which Kant assigned to his permanent 'categories' may be doubtful matter, but there is no doubt about the fact that any particular object whatsoever must possess, in some measure, the structure and determinateness which such 'categories' alone can supply. Kant deserves credit for proving that if any knowledge is to be possible, then mathematical and logical knowledge must be possible. The knowledge of the transitory presence of particulars, to which nominalism seek to reduce all knowledge, is not self-sufficient. It presupposes other knowledge; and all knowledge ultimately presupposes logic. This priority of logic in the field of knowledge leads us to discredit the nominalist interpretation of universals as just symbols of nescience. We must rescue knowledge from a merely descriptive empiricism, for know-

ledge is not mere *description* of empirical data *a posteriori*, but determination of them in accordance with certain *a priori* principles. Nominalism, with its naturalistic predilections, neglects the logical aspect of knowledge. Formal relationships, such as implication, causation time and the like, are no less fundamental than sensible qualities. These relations can be discovered only by logical analysis, *i.e.*, by carrying analysis beyond the bounds of sensible discrimination.

This, however, is not to accept realism. Realism, when it takes the form of absolutism, is guilty of the error of formalism. For even if we grant that for logical purposes all things must be regarded as having meaning and that this implies the acceptance of universals, we cannot, from the bare conception of meaning, understand the world in its characteristic physiognomy; we cannot, in other words, understand why this homely, familiar, old world should be as it is. Universals are not 'stars that dwell apart'. They are not arrived at by neglecting particulars. It is careful scrutiny of particulars that leads to their discovery. Precise observation of particulars and constant reference to them is essential to scientific thinking. Nevertheless, it is wrong to regard universals as nothing more than convenient fictions or conceptual shorthand. If they are discovered by a careful study of particulars, they must be connected in some genuine sense with them. If, for example, the law of gravitation is arrived at by observing the mass and spatial relations of distance and motion of particular objects, then gravitation must be a real aspect of the particulars through the observation of which it is discovered. The universal law of gravitation is no less real than the fall of a particular apple; of course, both are real in different senses. A given universal, such as gravitation or evolution, is involved within the particulars to its discovery and formulation.

The philosophical justification of the theory of the synthetic universal involves, then, a critique of nominalism and realism; not a

refutation but a delimitation of them—a proof that nominalism and realism, strictly construed, are not unqualifiedly and exclusively true. In other words, the theory of the synthetic universal does not propose to reject nominalism and realism, but rather to correct and improve upon them. It is only when it is viewed in this light that its inner dialectic can be appreciated. By seeking to unite the empirical temper of nominalism with the realist's recognition of problems that lie outside the field of the positive sciences, it saves us from the narrowness of nominalism and the extravagance of realism. It accepts neither the finality of particulars nor that of universals exclusively. The dilemma, in which the theory of the synthetic universal departs equally radically from nominalism and realism, is really unnecessary, for it proves possible to be both empirical and rigorous after the manner of nominalism, and also to be emancipated from exclusive regard for particulars. And it is this possibility that defines the opportunity of the synthetic universal. There are methods other than those of manual experimentation and verification; there are entities other than bodies; and there are types of relation and determination other than those of physics. There is room for a philosophy that shall search beyond the limits of physical science for the solution of those problems that underlie the belief in universals. There is no other position by which we can steer safely between the two opposite dangers of believing too little or of believing too much.