

Metaphysics and Epistemology: Question 7

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What is the problem of universals?

The problem is typically taken to arise from what we might call the possibility of *sameness*: the fact that there can be distinct things that are the same in some respect - the fact, that is, that there can be distinct x and y such that, for some R , x and y are the same in respect of R . There can be, for example, (and perhaps are) two distinct cars that are the same in respect of colour, two distinct pencils that are the same in respect of length, two distinct people that are the same in respect of sex, and so on. The things x and y may themselves be pairs of things (x_1, x_2) and (y_1, y_2) , or triples of things (x_1, x_2, x_3) and (y_1, y_2, y_3) , or, more generally, n -tuples of things (x_1, \dots, x_n) and (y_1, \dots, y_n) , for any $n \in \{1, 2, \dots\}$. The pairs $(a, \{a\})$ and $(\{a\}, \{a, \{a\}\})$, for example, are the same in respect of whether or not the first element is a member of the second; the triples (London, Paris, Rome) and (Wales, Italy, India) are the same in respect of whether or not the first element is west of the second and the second element is west of the third; the 4-tuples (2, 4, 12, 6) and (3, 10, 17, 10) are the same in respect of whether or not the fourth element is the arithmetic mean of the first three; and so on.

The problem that this fact gives rise to is typically taken to be about giving an account of sameness - an account, that is, of what it *is* for distinct things to be the same in a certain respect. Some think that giving such an account forces one to postulate universals - strange entities that, counterintuitively, can be wholly present in distinct locations at the same time. They might say that the problem of universals is that there are such things. Others deny that one is forced into postulating universals, but think instead that one is forced into postulating relations which, in order to avoid an infinite regress, must be taken as unanalysable - relations such as *instantiation* between universals and particulars, or *compresence* between universals (or between tropes), or *resemblance* between particulars (or between universals, or between tropes). They might say that the problem of universals is inappropriately named. Others deny that there is any problem giving an account of sameness, and they might say that 'the problem of universals' is a non-referring term.

As I see it, there are problems for trying to give an account of sameness, the gravest of which is that we cannot give any account, let alone one that postulates strange universals or unanalysable relations, or is in some other way unsatisfying.

For consider one well known proposal.¹ According to one kind of universals theory, for distinct things x and y to be the same in a certain respect is for there to be a universal U such that both x instantiates U and y instantiates U . But this assumes and appeals to the very thing that it purports to be accounting for. For consider the ordered pairs (x, U) and (y, U) . If there is no respect in which (x, U) and (y, U) are the same, then, whatever is meant by 'instantiates', it cannot be the case that both x instantiates U and y instantiates U , for if it were then *that* would be a respect in which (x, U) and (y, U) are the same: they would be the same, we might say, in respect of whether or not the first element instantiates the second. To say that both x instantiates U and y instantiates U , but that there is no respect in which (x, U) and (y, U) are the same sounds to me like a contradiction. So to claim that both x instantiates U and y instantiates U is to assume and appeal to the fact that (x, U) and (y, U) are the same in a certain respect. So the proposed account assumes and appeals to a certain sameness between (x, U) and (y, U) in order to give its account of the sameness between x and y . That *might* be an account of the sameness between x and y , because it does not appeal to the sameness between x and y . But it is *not* an

¹ See, for example, Armstrong (1989) for a more detailed account.

account of sameness, because it appeals to sameness.² At least, it is not the kind of account that I take it we are looking for - an account, that is, that does not appeal to what it is accounting for, or at least not quite so immediately.

Similar remarks can be made about other proposals.³ According to one kind of class nominalist theory, for distinct things x and y to be the same in a certain respect is for there to be a class C such that x is a member of C and y is a member of C . But this assumes and appeals to a certain sameness between the ordered pairs (x, C) and (y, C) - sameness, we might say, in respect of whether or not the first element is a member of the second. According to one kind of trope theory, for distinct things x and y to be the same in a certain respect is for x to have a trope t_x , for y to have a trope t_y , and for there to be a resemblance class of tropes C such that t_x is a member of C and t_y is a member of C . But this assumes and appeals to a certain sameness between the ordered pairs (t_x, C) and (t_y, C) - sameness, we might say, in respect of whether or not the first element is a member of the second. According to one kind of predicate nominalist theory, for distinct things x and y to be the same in a certain respect is for there to be a predicate P such that x satisfies P and y satisfies P . But this assumes and appeals to a certain sameness between the ordered pairs (x, P) and (y, P) - sameness, we might say, in respect of whether or not the first element satisfies the second. According to one kind of concept nominalist theory, for distinct things x and y to be the same in a certain respect is for there to be a concept C such that x falls under C and y falls under C . But this assumes and appeals to a certain sameness between the ordered pairs (x, C) and (y, C) - sameness, we might say, in respect of whether or not the first element falls under the second.

Each of these proposals purports to give an account of the sameness between x and y by appealing to some third thing z (a universal, a class of objects, a resemblance class of tropes, a predicate, or a concept), and then by assuming and appealing (surreptitiously) to some sameness between the pairs (x, z) and (y, z) (instantiation, class membership, satisfaction, or falling under). This appeal to sameness between (x, z) and (y, z) might not rule each out as an account of the sameness between x and y , but it rules it out as an account of sameness.

Perhaps, then, this is just the wrong approach. There are, after all, proposed accounts of other phenomena whose formulations do not appeal to the phenomena that they propose to be accounting for, or at least not quite so immediately. One such phenomenon is possibility, the phenomenon exhibited in the fact that there are propositions that are possibly true. According to one well-known proposal, for a proposition to be possibly true (in the actual world) is for it to be true in at least one of a certain set of worlds (those accessible from the actual world). It might turn out that in order for the proposal to adequately specify what a world is (and, moreover, which set of worlds are accessible from the actual world) it must ultimately do so in terms of which propositions are possible, in which case it would be appealing to the possibility that it purports to be accounting for, and so would not, after all, be an account. But even if it must, it seems that this proposal does not need to appeal to possibility as immediately as the above proposals need to appeal to sameness. Another such phenomenon is event causation, the phenomenon exhibited in the fact that there are events C and E such that C caused E . According to a simple counterfactual account, for C to have caused E is for the occurrence of E to be counterfactually dependent upon the occurrence of C - that is, for it to be the case that if C had not occurred then E would not have occurred. Coupled with an account of counterfactuals like David Lewis's, which does not make any obvious appeal to causation, it seems that even if this

² It might be that there are different kinds of sameness, and that we can give an account of one kind in terms of another - perhaps, even, in terms of one that is in some way more natural or fundamental. But a kind of sameness is still sameness, and it is with sameness, simpliciter, than I am concerned.

³ Again, see Armstrong (1989) for a more detailed account of each.

account does ultimately need to appeal to event causation, it does not need to do so as immediately as the above proposals need to appeal to sameness.⁴

If such accounts can be offered for other phenomena, then why not for sameness? Perhaps a different approach will prove more fruitful. Perhaps, for example, we can find an account of the sameness between x and y that appeals to a third thing z but does *not* appeal to a certain sameness between (x, z) and (y, z) . But it is difficult to see how. There seems to be something missing in a proposal that says: for x and y to be the same in a certain respect is for there to be a z such that x such-and-such z and y so-and-so z , where this is *not* a respect in which (x, z) and (y, z) are the same. For if this is not a respect in which (x, z) and (y, z) are the same, then how does it account for the sameness between x and y ? It seems that any proposal that appeals to a third thing z must also appeal to sameness. But if it appeals to sameness then it is not an account of sameness. Perhaps we can find an account that, unlike each of the five proposals above, and unlike every other proposal that I know of, does not appeal to a third thing z . But, again, it is difficult to see how. To say that x is the same as y in some respect is to say that there is something the same about x and y , or that there is something that they have in common: anyone who says that x is the same as y in some respect, but that there is nothing the same about x and y , or that there is nothing that they have in common, is naturally taken to misunderstand the word 'same'; so too anyone who says that there is something the same about x and y , or that they have something in common, but that x and y are not the same in any respect. Note that we say: there is *something* the same about x and y , and *something* that they have in common. This, I take it, is an expression of our strong intuition that sameness between x and y is to be accounted for by appealing to a third thing z , whatever that thing might be.

I don't think that we can give an account of sameness. But, as grave and as interesting as that might seem, I don't think that we should think of *that* as the problem of universals.

A similar problem arises from what we might call the possibility of *difference*: the fact that there can be distinct things that are different in some respect - the fact, that is, that there can be distinct x and y such that, for some R , x and y are different in respect of R (where x and y may themselves be pairs, triples, and so on). What is it for x to be different from y in a certain respect? Similar intuitions guide our search for an account. To say that x is different from y in a certain respect is to say that there is something different about x and y , or that there is something about x that is not the case for y , or that there is something true of x that is not true of y , and so on. Note that we say: there is *something* different about x and y , *something* about x that is not the case for y , and *something* true of x that is not true of y . Our intuition, again, is that we should appeal to a third thing z in order to account for the difference between x and y . We might try a universals theory, and say that for x to be different from y in a certain respect is for there to be a universal U such that x instantiates U but y does not. But that is to assume and appeal to a difference between the ordered pairs (x, U) and (y, U) : if there is no respect in which (x, U) and (y, U) are different, then, whatever is meant by 'instantiates', it cannot be the case that x instantiates U but y does not, for if it were, then *that* would be a respect in which (x, U) and (y, U) are different. So to claim that x instantiates U but y does not is to assume and appeal to the fact that (x, U) and (y, U) are different in a certain respect. The proposed account of difference assumes and appeals to difference, so it is no account of difference. It would be no help if instead of taking z to be a universal we took it to be a class of objects, or a resemblance class of tropes, or a predicate, or a concept: unless we appeal to some difference between (x, z) and (y, z) it is difficult to see how it can account for the difference between x and y . But once we do, it cannot.

⁴ There are good reasons to think that this simple account cannot be correct, but some sophisticated and more plausible proposals are on offer. See Lewis (2000) for a good overview. Also, see Lewis (1973) for his causation-free account of counterfactuals.

A similar problem arises from what we might call the possibility of *self-sameness*: the fact that there can be a *single* thing that is the same as itself at different times - the fact, that is, that there can be an x such that, for some R and for some times t_1 and t_2 , x is the same at t_1 as it is at t_2 in respect of R . Similar arguments show that we cannot give an account of self-sameness. And a similar problem arises from what we might call the possibility of *self-difference*: the fact that there can be a single thing that is different from itself at different times - the fact, that is, that there can be an x such that, for some R and for some times t_1 and t_2 , x is different at t_1 from how it is at t_2 in respect of R . Similar arguments show, again, that we cannot give an account of self-difference.

We have here a family of facts (the possibility of sameness, of difference, of self-sameness, and of self-difference) giving rise to a family of problems (the impossibility of accounting for sameness, for difference, for self-sameness, and for self-difference). I don't see any reason to single out one of these problems as being the problem of universals.

I believe, in fact, that each of these problems just amounts to a problem about identity and distinctness. I have argued in detail elsewhere that in order to make sense of what we say about the way things look, we must take ourselves to be quantifying over such things as the way a thing looks in a certain respect (at a certain time), and that to say that x looks the same as y in respect of R is to say that the way x looks in respect of R is identical to the way that y looks in respect of R (that is, it is to say of two things that they are identical).⁵ Exactly analogous arguments show that in order to make sense of what we say about the way things *are*, we must take ourselves to be quantifying over such things as the way a thing *is* in a certain respect (at a certain time), and that to say that x is the same as y in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R is identical to the way that y is in respect of R (again, it is to say of two things that they are identical). Similarly, to say that x is different from y in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R is distinct from the way that y is in respect of R ; to say that x is the same at t_1 as it is at t_2 in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R at t_1 is identical to the way that x is in respect of R at t_2 ; and to say that x is different at t_1 from how it is at t_2 in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R at t_1 is distinct from the way that x is in respect of R at t_2 .

If this is right, then we can see that the problem of the unaccountability of sameness, difference, self-sameness and self-difference amounts to the problem of the unaccountability of identity and distinctness. To say that x is the same as y in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R is identical to the way that y is in respect of R . So giving an account of sameness amounts to giving an account of what it is for a certain two things to be identical. To say that x is different from y in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R is distinct from the way that y is in respect of R . So giving an account of difference amounts to giving an account of what it is for a certain two things to be distinct. To say that x is the same at t_1 as it is at t_2 in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R at t_1 is identical to the way that x is in respect of R at t_2 . So giving an account of self-sameness amounts to giving an account of what it is for a certain two things to be identical. Finally, to say that x is different at t_1 from how it is at t_2 in respect of R is to say that the way that x is in respect of R at t_1 is distinct from the way that x is in respect of R at t_2 . So giving an account of self-difference amounts to giving an account of what it is for a certain two things to be distinct. Giving an account of each amounts to giving an account of either identity or distinctness, and it is widely agreed that that cannot be done.

And we can, incidentally, also see why we are inclined to appeal to some third thing z in order to try to account for sameness, difference, self-sameness, and self-difference. When we say that x is the same as y in respect of R we *are* talking about a third thing: the way that x is in respect of R (and, identically, the way that y is in respect of R). So too, when we say that x is different

⁵ See Me (2003), esp. Ch. 1-2.

from y in respect of R we are talking about a third thing: the way that x is in respect of R (and also about a fourth thing: the way that y is in respect of R). And when we say that x is the same at t_1 as it is at t_2 in respect of R we are talking about a third thing: the way that x is in respect of R at t_1 (and, identically, the way that x is in respect of R at t_2). And when we say that x is different at t_1 from how it is at t_2 in respect of R we are talking about a third thing: the way that x is in respect of R at t_1 (and also about a fourth thing: the way that x is in respect of R at t_2).

The problems of sameness, difference, self-sameness, and self-difference are, then, just problems about trying to account for identity and distinctness, and none of them, I suggest, is distinctive enough to be singled out and called the problem of universals.

But I think that if we dig a little deeper we can find a fact that *does* give rise to a distinctive problem - one, I suggest, that we should take to be the problem of universals. I am thinking of what we might call (for consistency, if not aural appeal) the possibility of *isness*: the fact that there can be something that is some way in some respect (at some time) - the fact, that is, that there can be an x such that, for some F and R (and time t), x is F in respect of R (at t). Sameness, difference, self-sameness, and self-difference would not be possible at all if it were not for the possibility of isness. If x and y are the same in respect of R then it follows that x is some way in respect of R : to say that x and y are the same in respect of R but that there is no way that x is in respect of R is, I take it, a contradiction. (Consider: x and y are the same in respect of colour, but there is no way that x is in respect of colour.) So if there cannot be a thing x that is some way in some respect then there cannot be distinct things x and y that are the same in some respect. Sameness, that is, would not be possible if isness were not possible. Similarly, if there cannot be a thing x that is some way in some respect (at some time) then there cannot be distinct things x and y that are different in some respect, nor a single thing that is the same as itself at different times in some respect, nor a single thing that is different from itself at different times in some respect - difference, self-sameness, and self-difference would not be possible.

Once we have the possibility of isness, and once we start talking as if, when x is a certain way in a certain respect, there is such a thing as the way that x is in that respect, we start to get the family of problems to which the unaccountability of sameness, difference, self-sameness and self-difference belong. If x is a certain way in a certain respect then there is such a thing as the way that x is in that respect and, like all things, it is self-identical - the way that x is in that respect is identical to the way that x is in that respect or, we might say, x is the same as itself in that respect. Then we can ask: what is it for x to be the same as itself in a certain respect? But we can give no account: to say that x is the same as itself in a certain respect is just to say that a certain thing is identical with itself, and no account of that can be given.

Earlier I singled out five theories and presented them as proposing accounts of sameness. But we can think of them, instead, as proposing accounts of isness - of what it is for x to be a certain way in a certain respect. According to the universals theory, it would be for x to instantiate a certain universal; for the class nominalist theory, it would be for x to be a member of a certain class; for the trope theory, it would be for x to have a trope that is a member of a certain resemblance class; for the predicate nominalist theory, it would be for x to satisfy a certain predicate; and for the concept nominalist theory, it would be for x to fall under a certain concept. We can also think of them as proposing answers to the question of what kind of thing it is that 'the way that x is in respect of R ' refers to: a universals theory proposes that it is a universal, a class nominalist theory that it is a class, and so on.

Thinking of these theories as proposing accounts of isness rather than sameness, however, does not save them from failure, for accounting for isness is just as problematic, and I think even more evidently so. What is it for an object x to be a certain way in a certain respect? Any proposed account must assume and appeal to some fact about x - if it doesn't, then how can it be an account of what it is for x , rather than some other object, to be a certain way in a certain

respect? That is, it must assume and appeal to some fact that x is thus-and-so.⁶ But the fact that x is thus-and-so is the fact that x is a certain way in a certain respect - most awkwardly, we might say that it is the fact that x is thus-and-so in respect of whether or not it is thus-and-so. So the proposal must assume and appeal to the fact that x is a certain way in a certain respect, in order to say what it is for x to be a certain way in a certain respect. It must, that is, assume and appeal to the very thing for which it purports to be accounting. But that is no account. There can, then, *be* no account.

This strikes me as a deep problem. It is, I suggest, the distinctive problem in the area, and the one that we should think of as being the problem of universals: that there can be no account of isness - no account, that is, of what it is for something to be a certain way in a certain respect.

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⁶ I am assuming here that every fact about x, or at least every fact that a proposed account might appeal to, can be expressed by a sentence of the form 'x is ...'. For example, the fact that x runs quickly is the fact that x is something that runs quickly. I think that this is plausible, or at least not obviously false. But a more detailed argument is needed.