

# How to tell universals from particulars

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Philipp Keller\*

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## Ramsey’s challenge

“the whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality what is merely a characteristic of language” (Ramsey 1925)

- (1) Socrates is wise.
- (2) Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates.

“assert the same fact and express the same proposition”

*Two quick rejoinders:*

- i (1) and (2) incur different ontological commitments
- ii the subject term of (1) is not the predicate in (2)

*Their common problem:* They beg the question. Ramsey’s worry: On what grounds do we read (1) (or (2) for that matter) as “...is wise(Socrates)” rather than as “...is a characteristic of Socrates (Wisdom)”?

## The worry generalised

How can  $(\lambda x(xRa))b$ ,  $(\lambda y(aRy))b$  and  $(\lambda x, y(xRy))(a, b)$  be (logical forms of) the same proposition, if that they have different components? A worry for Russell: What is the ‘logical subject’ of a phrase? A worry for Frege: How can we identify unsaturated parts of thoughts if these can be carved up in different ways? A worry for Quine: What is the independent motivation to say that predicates (and not proper terms) refer ‘dividedly’ and do not stand for entities?

**Metaphysics to the rescue?** Has Ramsey neglected metaphysical resources to draw the distinction?

A difference with respect to exemplification relation (MacBride: 2005)?

- i numerical pattern of instantiation
  - i *But:* multigrade universals
- ii particulars always enter into the first position
  - i *But:* higher-order universals
- iii properties are unsaturated
  - i *But:* this is just a metaphor

A difference between kinds of entities?

- i particulars cannot at two places at the same time
  - i *But:* might be true of some universals as well
- ii identity of indiscernibles is definitionally true of universals
  - i *But:* they might have quiddities
- iii universals need to be exemplified
  - i *But:* bare particulars might be possible

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\*University of Geneva, Switzerland, philipp.keller@lettres.unige.ch.

<i>Properties</i> are exemplified how a thing is qualitative may be lowest-level perfect similarity	<i>Kinds</i> are instantiated what a thing is classificatory typically high-level approximate similarity
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### **An ambiguity in Ramsey's argument**

“Wisdom”, as it occurs in “Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates” (2), stands for a *kind* rather than a property: it takes adjectives (“ironic wisdom”), nominal modifiers (“Socrates’ wisdom”), may be quantified (“much more wisdom”) and does not allow for negation – all this in contrast both to “...is wise” and to “being wise”.

*Disambiguating Ramsey:*

Socrates is wise.

“asserts the same fact and expresses the same proposition”

*Either as:*

(The kind) Wisdom is instantiated by Socrates.

*Or as:*

(The property) *being wise* is instantiated by Socrates.

*My claims:*

- i in the first case, the argument is harmless
- ii in the second case, the argument is inconclusive

### **Properties and kinds**

*Why they are intimately related:*

- i to instantiate the kind MAN, something has to be human (to some degree)
- ii if something is human (to a sufficient degree), then it instantiates the kind MAN (if it exists)

*Why they are not identical:*

- i the Dog is four-legged, the property is not
- ii the Apple-Blossom is the state flower of Michigan, the property is not
- iii the Dino is extinct, but the property is not

*A problem (Frege 1892):*

Are there singular terms for properties at all?

### **Properties and kinds, ctd.**

(3) Red is George's favourite colour.

(4) The property of being red is the property of being

of George's favourite colour.

are both contingent, while only

(5) Red is George's actual favourite colour.

but not

(6) The property of being red is the property of being  
of George's actual favourite colour.

is necessary: while nothing other than the kind RED could be the colour that George actually prefers, the property (of) *being red* could have other roles than it actually has.

*A worry:* The 'generalization problem' (cf. Soames 2002):

Macbeth (1995) and Schwartz (2002) have argued that *any* statement of an identity between properties is necessary: any supposedly non-rigid singular term "*P*-ing" designating a property may be taken to refer to the disjunctive property of "*P*'-ing in *w* or *P*''-ing in *w*' or ..." for the supposedly different referents of "*P*" in those different worlds. Instead of saying that "*P*-ing" non-rigidly refers to whatever *Ps* in the relevant world, we may then say that it rigidly refers to this disjunctive property.

*Answer:* Compare: "The president of the USA" is rigid after all for it designates in every world the 'office person' (Sidelle 1992), constituted by the US president in that world. In the same way as Bushy is not the president of the USA, *P*' is not *P*. Office persons (and kinds) are 'criterial' in a way ordinary persons are not (and neither are properties): what it is to be Bushy is not what it is to be a particular person.

*A diagnosis:*

- i When we say that the property of being *F* is the property of being *G*, we are talking about *what it takes* for something to exemplify *F* (and *G*).
- ii Kinds do not in this way specify the qualitative character of things: they are instantiated by things *in virtue of* their properties.
- iii Even if the difference between kinds and particulars were ungrounded, not much would be lost.

This is why predicates differ from singular terms in that we do not need to grasp some principle of identity for their referents to be competent in using them: the identity of their semantic values is not determined by something over and above what they bestow on the particulars that exemplify them: "...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..." (Strawson 1979: 57)

### **What universals essentially are**

A deeper explanation of the modal asymmetry (if there is one): properties have their exemplifications essentially, while kinds have their instances accidentally. Kinds *have* roles, while properties *are* roles.

If *a* exemplifies *F*, *a* exemplifies the property (of) *having F as a property* and *F* exemplifies the property (of) *being a property of a*. While the first is essential to *a* iff *F* is, the latter is always essential to *F*.

*A worry:* Is this possible? It better had be:

- i Aquinas: it is essential to the world to have been created by God, but it is not essential to God to have created the world.
- ii Kripke: it is essential to me to have the parents I have, but it is not essential to my parents to have begotten me.
- iii Fine: it is essential to the set  $\{a, b\}$  that *a* is a member of it, but it is not essential to *a* to be a member of the set.

### **In terms of possible worlds**

A formulation in possible-world talk: The counterpart relations for properties is strict numerical

identity.

(Heller 1998 defines counterpart relations for properties in terms of similarities of their roles, but has to take these similarities as primitive.)

But similarities between the roles of properties does not make for similarity of properties. The fact that two properties are the philosophers' favourite property in their respective world does not make them similar, for the philosophers in question may be different.

More generally: we cannot have primitive transworld-identity between particulars because they may differ in accidental intrinsics: the same particular cannot be straight and bent. This presupposes, however, primitive transworld-identity for properties: it is the *same* property that cannot be had by one and lacked by the other. And: properties do not have accidental intrinsics.

*An modal-realist argument:*

- i (Some) properties make for similarity across possibilia (in different worlds).
- ii If some possibilia similar, they (literally) share a property.
- iii So (some) properties are strictly identical across possible worlds.
- iv So they cannot differ in properties which are not implicitly relational.
- v The property of being exemplified by *a* is not implicitly relational.
- vi So if it is had in some world by some of these properties, it is had in all in which it exists.

### **Haecceities and quiddities:**

Haecceities are what distinguish indiscernibles in different worlds. If counterparthood is a matter of similarity and perfect similarity across worlds is possible, haecceities are needed to falsify the identity of indiscernibles.

The quiddity of a property would be its individual essence, as opposed to its role, something over and above what it bestows on the particulars exemplifying it. Quiddities are needed to make sense of scenarios of role swap, e.g. the possibility of a world with the same exemplification pattern than ours except that one of the quark colours has been swapped for one of the flavours (Lewis 1986: 162). But quiddities do not exist: as Lewis himself noticed, property swapping leads to 'Ramseyan humility' (Lewis 2006) and Kantianism.

Ramsey's question – how can it be that all of  $(\lambda x(xRb))a$ ,  $(\lambda y(aRy))b$  and  $(\lambda x, y(xRy))(a, b)$  are the same proposition, given that they have different components – may now be answered: the three sentences express indeed the same proposition in the sense that they have the same truth-conditions; they differ, however, in being *about* different things, the first one being about *a*, the second about *b* and the third about their pair. If the sentences are understood purely classificatory, this difference does not show up: all three of them classify  $\langle a, b \rangle$  as being *R*-interrelated (in this order). Interpreted as property-ascriptions, however, the sentences differ radically: what it takes to *R* *b* may be very different from what it takes to be *Red* by *a*. If this does not show up in the respective formalisations, all the worse for them.

### **Conclusion**

If Ramsey's argument concerns kinds, rather than properties, then it does not concern the "deepest of metaphysical fissures" (MacBride 2002).

If Ramsey's argument concerns properties, rather than kinds, there is some prospect for a metaphysical distinction.

We may still agree with him that "which sentence we use is a matter either of literary style, or of the point of view from which we approach the fact," as long as we are free to help ourselves to some regimentation.