

Grounding objective resemblance – the truthmaker argument for the existence of universals

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x is P at t – Topics in the Metaphysics of Properties
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June 4, 2012

Abstract

I present a version of the one-over-many argument, in two steps: from the Moorean fact of objective resemblance to its ontological ground (against resemblance nominalism) and from the existence of ones-over-many to their multiple exemplifiability (against tropes). I conclude that there are immanent, Armstrongian universals, both determinates and determinables, and that they are essentially wholly qualitative.

The problem of universals

Even if we grant that ways to be are entities – universals, or properties in some other sense – still the predication is true not in virtue of the mere existence of the thing and the property. It's true because the thing instantiates the property. So says the Ostrich; why isn't he right? (Lewis 1992: 204)

The “problem of universals” properties are called upon to solve is the problem of explaining unity across diversity:

The problem of universals is the problem of how numerically different particulars can nevertheless be identical in nature, all be of the same ‘type’. (Armstrong 1978a: 41) (cf. also Rodríguez Pereyra 2000: 257)

The basic argument for the existence of properties is that we have to assume their existence if we want to solve the problem of universals. The argument, as I – and, I think, Armstrong¹ – understand it, proceeds as follows:

- (i) It is a Moorean fact that different particulars are ‘identical in nature’.²
- (ii) By the truthmaker principle, this ‘identity of nature’ has to be grounded in reality.³
- (iii) Properties are what grounds such ‘identity in nature’ (Armstrong 1978a: 41).

But what does ‘identity in nature’ consist in? We have to be extremely careful here, as there are at least three interpretations of such sameness, which give rise to different arguments:

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¹Of what Oliver (1996: 46) calls “the argument from the problem of universals”, Armstrong (1978a: xiii) says: “Its premiss is that many different particulars can all have what appears to be the same nature ... The conclusion of the argument is simply that in general this appearance cannot be explained away, but must be accepted. There is such a thing as identity of nature.”

²Cf. also Armstrong (1984: 250), Armstrong (1980b: 102). Loux (1998: 21) calls it a “prephilosophical truism” that “things agree in attribute”.

³Armstrong did not always emphasise the argument’s dependence on the truthmaker principle as much as he should have: Armstrong (1989a: 39, fn. 1), e.g., says that the argument for properties is an inference to the best explanation of “the facts about resemblance, talk of sameness of sort and kind, the application of one predicate to an indefinite and unforeseen multitude of individuals, etc.” As an inference to the best explanation, however, the argument lacks motivation, as shown by the availability of the ostrich’s position.

- (i-1) Two different particulars, *a* and *b*, may be both *F*.
- (i-2) Two different particulars, *a* and *b*, may share a property.
- (i-3) Two particulars, *a* and *b*, may exhibit ‘qualitative’, but not ‘numerical’ identity.

I take all these three explications of (i) as somehow preliminary: the fundamental explanandum is the ‘unity’ we observe among the things in the world – “resemblance” is just a name for this pre-theoretical phenomenon:

...resemblance is always *identity of nature*. This identity is partial in partial resemblance, and complete in complete resemblance. (Armstrong 1978a: 95)

The three explications of (i), and the three versions of the argument from the problem of universals they give us, are all somehow defective. The first argument is rightly taken by Ostrich nominalists as a demand to explain the unexplainable; the second argument is too close to the argument from logical form to be an argument for the robust kind of properties Armstrong wants it to be; only the third one deserves the honorific title “argument from the problem of universals”, even though it is question-begging:

“...if the notion of non-numerical identity turns out to be unanalyzable, then presumably we ought to accept it with natural piety as an irreducible feature of the world. And to accept irreducible non-numerical identity is to accept universals.” (Armstrong 1984: 251)

The third argument has, in my view, a number of important advantages:

1. It comes closest to the intuitive formulations Armstrong gives of the ‘One-over-Many’ argument (Armstrong 1978a: xiii, 11, 138), (Armstrong 1989b: 1-2).
2. It is equivalent to what Rodríguez Pereyra (2002: 45) calls the ‘Many-over-One’ argument: “what makes *a* *F* must be something different from what makes it *G*, if *F* and *G* are different properties”. The ‘Many Over One’ problem is then to provide ontological grounds for the different properties one and the same particular may exemplify.
3. It is effective not only against Ostrich, but also against Resemblance Nominalism, as Rodríguez Pereyra (2002: 21) acknowledges.

I aim to show, contra e.g. Devitt and Sterelny (1987: 228), that the One-over-Many, so conceived, is not a “pseudo-problem” and does not generate “pseudo-explanations”. I concede, however, the point made by Fraser MacBride (2002: 31), namely that the argument begs the question, because the very distinction between qualitative and numerical identity is only understandable by a property realist.

A certain brand of nominalism got its name from a large African bird Pliny the Elder wrongly accused of hiding its head in the sand at the first sight of danger:

Besides the five versions of Nominalism already outlined, we should perhaps include a sixth: Ostrich or Cloak-and-dagger Nominalism. I have in mind those philosophers who refuse to countenance universals but who at the same time see no need for any reductive analyses of the sorts just outlined. There are no universals but the proposition that *a* is *F* is perfectly all right as it is. [...] What such a Nominalist is doing is simply refusing to give any account of the type/token distinction, and, in particular, any account of types. But, like anybody else, such a Nominalist will make continual *use* of the distinction. *Prima facie*, it is incompatible with Nominalism. He therefore owes us an account of the distinction. It is a compulsory question in the examination paper. (Armstrong 1978a: 16-17)

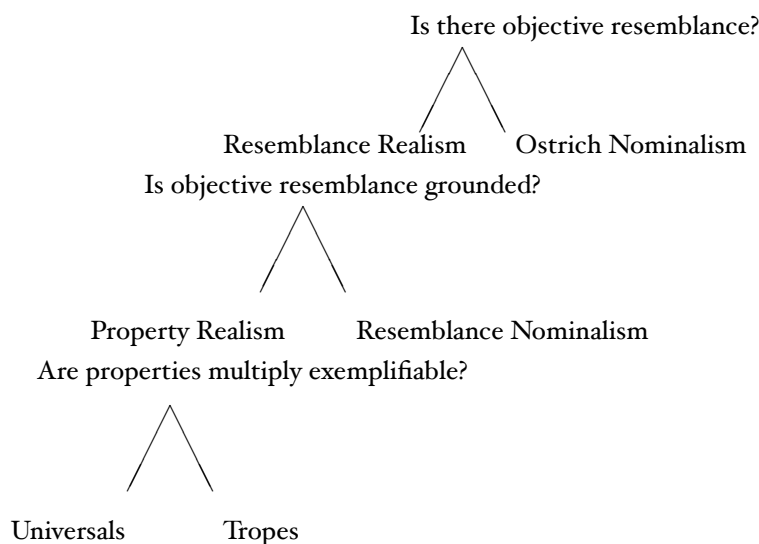
Armstrong’s argument here is far from clear: it is very doubtful, first, that the distinction between types and their tokens matches the particular/universal distinction. *Prima facie* at least, it seems perfectly possible that two tokens are of the same type without there being a property they both exemplify. Third, it is not even clear that the ‘use’ of a distinction commits one to an account that interprets it as marking an ontological division. Most importantly, Armstrong’s description makes the Ostrich nominalist position stronger than it is: “the proposition that *a* is *F* is perfectly all right as it is” is true – even on Armstrong’s view!

It is therefore not surprising that philosophers disagreed on what examination questions were compulsory: So-called ‘Ostrich nominalists’ like Quine (1953 1980), Haack (cf. also 1978: 43 et seq.), Devitt

(1980), Aune (1984), van Cleve (1994) and Melia (2005) continued their resistance, despite vigorous attempts to convince them otherwise (Armstrong 1980a; Rodríguez Pereyra 2000). Different lines of criticism have to be distinguished:

1. Some critics, like Davidson (1969: 49), argue that Armstrong has mislocated the problem and that a Tarskian theory of truth answers all questions that may reasonably be asked about these matters;
2. Some critics, like (Quine 1953; Devitt 1980; Quine 1980; Melia 2005), deny the alleged need for an ‘ontological’ analysis of predication;
3. Some others take Armstrong to demand that we “do away with unanalysed predication” and either think that he himself failed to do so (Aune 1984) or that the attempt is futile anyway (Lewis 1983).
4. Still others have taken Armstrong to claim that “intrinsic predication requires a further relation” (van Cleve 1994: 582) and that there is a relation of exemplification (van Cleve 1994: 583) and have dismissed both these claims as unreasonable.

The truthmaker argument for properties



Fortunately for the realist, there is another argument for the existence of properties, of a distinctively ontological sort. While there is some unclarity about the exact form of this *truthmaker* argument, it allows for a pretty straightforward formulation. We start from the observation of Moorean facts of ‘sameness of types’ or objective resemblance and invoke the general principle that such truths about how things are must be ‘ontologically grounded’, i.e. rooted in facts about what things there are. While it is true that some realists put this question misleadingly in terms of the grounding of our applying general terms⁴ or predicates,⁵ more careful advocates have from the beginning put the question in terms of ontological explanation. Armstrong (1980b: 443) argued against Ostrich nominalists that they give the predicate “what has been said to be the privilege of the harlot: power without responsibility. The predicate is informative, it makes a vital contribution to telling us what is the case, the world is different if it is different, yet ontologically it is supposed not to commit us.”

⁴Cf.: “In virtue of what do these general terms apply to the things which they apply to?” (Armstrong 1978a: 12); “Accepting the truth-maker principle will lead one to reject Quine’s view (1961) that *predicates* do not have to be taken seriously in considering the ontological implications of statements one takes to be true. Consider the difference between asserting that a certain surface is red and asserting that it is green. An upholder of the truth-maker principle will think that there has to be an ontological ground, a difference in the world, to account for the difference between the predicate ‘red’ applying to the surface and the predicate ‘green’ so applying.” (Armstrong 1989b: 89)

⁵“Take two white things again. They deserve a common description, namely, ‘white’. What is the link between them which underlies this linguistic fact?” (Campbell 1976: 206). Cf. also Campbell (1981: 483) and Rodríguez Pereyra (2002: 18).

and others have joined him in this accusation:

Recognizing that there are properties in an unproblematic sense, we must take the relevant ontological question to involve a request about the nature or status of properties. By doing what [the Ostrich nominalists do], they bypass the problem of universals by a sort of semantical detour. Once such a problem is raised, rather than avoided, we can obviously not be content with the claim that “ $W_1(a)$ ” holds because a is white or with the assertion that “ $W_1(a)$ ” corresponds to or plays the same role as “white” as solutions to the problem of universals. (Hochberg 1979: 335)

The craving to satisfy Truthmaker thus urges us towards a recognition of the existence of universals. Universals are the sorts of things whose existence is required to plug the gap between individual things and accidental truths about those things. (Bigelow 1988: 133)

If the truthmaker question forces us to “do[...] ontological justice to the predicate” (Armstrong 2002: 33) and if “continually to raise the truthmaker question about properties makes for ontological honesty” (Armstrong 2004: 43), then this is because it enables us to give an ontological *explanation* of objective resemblance. Oliver (1996: 75) finds this idea of ‘metaphysical explanation’ “elusive” and tries to reconceptualise it as either a type of conceptual analysis, a specification of the ontological commitment or of the truthmakers of certain sentences.

It is not just analysis, however, that motivates realism, but analysis conceived of as quest for truthmakers, i.e. analysis of a distinctively *ontological* kind.⁶ This genuinely ontological focus, however, was present already in Armstrong’s earlier work: his arguments *against* the existence of disjunctive (Armstrong 1978b: 21) or negative properties (Armstrong 1978b: 27) explicitly relied on the fact that they are not needed as *truthmakers* for disjunctive and negative truths respectively.

Consider the following two inferences:

$$(1) \quad \frac{\begin{array}{c} Fa \\ Ga \end{array}}{(F \wedge G)a(\exists x(Fx \wedge Gx) \wedge x = a)}$$

$$(2) \quad \frac{\begin{array}{c} Fa \\ Fb \end{array}}{F(a \wedge b)(\exists \phi(\phi a \wedge \phi b) \wedge \phi = F)}$$

While (1) is clearly universally valid, we feel some hesitation to grant (2) for any F : it does not follow from the facts that some elephant, Susi, is small and that some mouse, Tom, is small that there is one property Susi and Tom both have. In some cases, however, the inference is legitimate – in these cases, there has to be an explanation for this and the explanation of the validity of valid identity inferences, is that the preservation of truth is underwritten by the identity and hence the existence of some entity. There must be something *in virtue of which* the two particulars a and b resemble each other.

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⁶Lewis (1983: 20) and Lewis (1992: 203) have emphasised this in particular.

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