The truthmaker argument for properties

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, Armstrong – 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:

(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

1 Of 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.”


3 Armstrong did not always emphasise the argument’s dependence on the truthmaker principle as much as he should have: Armstrong (1989: 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.
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)

Ramsey’s challenge

Frank Plumpton Ramsey argued in 1925 that “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: 13,405). Let us reassess his arguments and the arguments of others to the same effect, elaborate their criticism of the traditional distinction between particulars and universals and see how much of it can be salvaged.

Quickly dismissing alleged differences between universals and particulars of a physical or psychological sort, Ramsey first undercuts the most obvious way of finding a ‘logical’ difference, namely the contention that particulars must, whereas universals may or may not occur as the subject, as opposed to the predicate, of an atomic proposition. His argument to this effect is that

(i) Socrates is wise.

and

(ii) Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates.

“assert the same fact and express the same proposition” (Ramsey 1925: 12,404), while having their subject and predicate exchanged respectively. A distinction based solely on the difference in grammatical role between the subject and the predicate term in (i) thus does not seem to cut any ice. Two lines of criticism immediately suggest themselves: First, (i) and (ii) incur different ontological commitments and therefore cannot be synonymous (Simons (1991b: 152), Mulligan (2000: 12)); second, “Socrates”, the subject term of (i), is not the predicate in (2) (Simons (1991b: 152), Mulligan (1998: 12)). (i) and (ii) are then analysed as “F a” and “Gb” respectively, with relational, but nevertheless atomic, properties F (being wise) and G (being a characteristic of Socrates).

Unfortunate as this is for the friends of the distinction, both these arguments beg the question against Ramsey. Ramsey’s argument, as I understand it, is best presented as follows: We start with the sentence “Socrates is wise”, without, at this stage, already any particular logical form attaching to it. Someone who wants to ground the distinction between particulars and universals on a grammatical asymmetry between the terms representing them e.g. in the sentence under consideration might want to claim that at most one of two possible precisifications of its logical form, namely “…is wise (Socrates)” (F a) and “…is a characteristic of Socrates (Wisdom)” (Gb), gives the true ontological picture. Ramsey does not have to dispute that, within a theory of logical form, these two precisifications differ e.g. with respect to what they logically entail – but what, he asks, makes us prefer one precisification over the other and what makes us see our choice as marking out an ontological distinction if, as Ramsey contends, they do in fact “assert the same fact and express the same proposition”?

After this first critique of the legitimacy of the distinction, Ramsey (1925: 14,404) goes on to question the prospects of any distinction based on the subject/predicate model on an even more basic level. The

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4 By ‘universal’ I mean here and in the following whatever it is that, if it existed, were involved, over and above Socrates, in the truthmaking of simple sentences such as “Socrates is wise”. I use “property” as the ontologically non-committing generic term (properties are semantic values of predicates, whatever their ontological analysis is). The arguments I discuss and put forward may be suitably adapted to apply to fusions or sets of tropes.

5 If we choose the first, as most of us probably would, we have to justify it against the second (this was the way Ramsey originally put the dilemma). If we choose the second, we have a symmetrical obligation – and the additional difficulty of explaining what being a characteristic of Socrates and, say, being a characteristic of Plato have in common.
subject/predicate distinction, he claims, is inapplicable to complex propositions. Surface grammar does not give us any ground to accept complex and relational universals, i.e. universals which occur in propositions the categorical structure of which they do not uniquely determine. If there were such a ground, Ramsey (1925: 14.406) asks, how could it then be the case that \((\lambda x(aRx))b\), \((\lambda y(yRh))a\) and \((\lambda x, y(xRy))(a, b)\) represent (are logical forms of) the same proposition, given that they have different components?

This problem already surfaced in the work of Frege whose thoughts admit of several equally legitimate analyses and have no joints privileging one of them above the others: our carving them up in one rather than another way is not based on a real distinction. Their predicative and their non-predicative elements are separated by fiat, not by bona fide boundaries. If thoughts consist of saturated and unsaturated parts (cf. e.g. Frege 1906: 208–210), and if two thoughts are identical iff someone who does not hold them true or false conjointly fails to grasp at least one of them, what assures us then that two thoughts are identical iff they have the same parts? The difficulty is aggravated by the fact that Frege repeatedly claims that different decompositions of a thought may be equally correct, and that the composition of a sentence by and large (or at least in a logically perfect language as the concept-script aspires to be) corresponds to the composition of the thought expressed (cf. e.g. Frege 1914: 243). In “Über Begriff und Gegenstand”, he says that the thought expressed by “Socrates is wise”, then, do we have a wider and a narrower variation class.

Colin McGinn (2000: 55–56) has elaborated Ramsey’s symmetry considerations into an argument against the Quinean contention that predicates have ‘divided reference’, i.e. are true of things but do not denote any properties: “a” in “F a” stands for a single entity of which we predicate a plurality to which “F” ‘dividedly’ refers; “Fa” is true iff the referent of “a” belongs to the extension of “F”. McGinn’s point is just that this picture is not forced on us: we may with equal right construe “Fa” differently, with “F” referring to a property and “a” referring ‘dividedly’ to the set of all and only the properties a has (its ‘secondary extension’). “Fa” would then be true iff the extension of the predicate is a member of this secondary extension of the singular term. Again, we have a symmetrical picture: any seman-

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6Ramsey includes under this heading both relational and impure universals, the latter arising from logically complex propositions.

7Equipollence (“Äquipollenz”), defined in this way, is only one of the identity conditions Frege gives for thoughts (Frege 1906: 219). He uses it in his letters to Husserl to justify the claim that the active/passive transformation preserves the identity of the thought (Frege 1976: 105).

8This thesis may be found in “Über Begriff und Gegenstand” (Frege 1892: 173), in a letter to Marty (29.7.1882) (Frege 1976: 164) and repeatedly in the posthumous writings (Frege 1969: 155, 203, 209, 218). He goes as far as to claim that the same assertion may be “F” (“von”) a concept according to one conception (“Anfassung”) of it, and of an object according to another (Frege 1892: 173).

9A possible precursor of this line of argument may be found in the contention of Nelson Goodman (1978: 347–348) that discusses the view that “a predicate applies initially to a property as its name, and then only derivatively to the things that have that property”. He thinks this view is mistaken on the ground that nominalists might want to cut the middleman out.
tics committing us to particulars may uniformly be translated into another semantics committing us to universals.

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

A difference with respect to exemplification relation (MacBride: 2003)?

1. numerical pattern of instantiation
   - But: multigrade universals
2. particulars always enter into the first position
   - But: higher-order universals
3. properties are unsaturated
   - But: this is just a metaphor

A difference between kinds of entities?

1. particulars cannot at two places at the same time
   - But: might be true of some universals as well
2. identity of indiscernibles is definitionally true of universals
   - But: they might have quiddities
3. universals need to be exemplified
   - But: bare particulars might be possible

Ramsey's argument may be put as follows: for any sentential matrix \( S(a, b) \) which features (what we would ordinarily think of) a proper name \( a \) and (what we would ordinarily think of) an open sentence \( b \), we have a bijective function \( a \mapsto c \) and \( b \mapsto d \) such that \( S(d, c) \) is a sentence which cannot be assumed to differ with respect to the ontological status of its two components from \( S(a, b) \) without presupposing a prior distinction between particulars and universals.\(^{10}\) The worry with this line of argument is that, even if we agree that “…is wise” stands for a property in about the same way than singular terms stand for their bearers, “wisdom” is importantly different. “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 measured (“much more wisdom”) and does not allow for negation – all this in contrast both to “…is wise” and to “being wise”.

Kinds differ from properties in that they are instantiated, not exemplified: their relationship to the things they qualify is the one between types and their tokens and between the species and one of its exemplars.\(^{11}\)

The distinction between properties and kinds in place, however, we get two versions of Ramsey’s transformation: one mapping a proper name \( a \) on “…is a kind instantiated by \( a \)” and predicates on their corresponding kinds, another one mapping \( a \) on “…is a property exemplified by \( a \)” and predicates to proper names of the corresponding properties. Instead of one argument, we therefore get two: one against the distinction between particulars and properties, another one against the distinction between particulars and kinds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Kinds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are exemplified</td>
<td>are instantiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>how a thing is</td>
<td>what a thing is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qualitative</td>
<td>classificatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may be lowest-level</td>
<td>typically high-level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perfect similarity</td>
<td>approximate similarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*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).

\(^{10}\)In his original example, “Socrates” was mapped on “…is a property of Socrates” and “…is wise” on “wisdom”.

\(^{11}\)Both the type/token and the species/exemplar distinction explain the ambiguity between what we might call ‘generic’ and ‘individual’ counting in the answers to questions like “How many words are on the blackboard?” or “How many different plants do you have in your garden?” (Wolterstorff 1970: 237).
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 modal asymmetry

(iii) Red is George’s favourite colour.

(iv) The property of being red is the property of being of George’s favourite colour.

are both contingent, while only (3), but not (6)

(v) Red is George’s actual favourite colour.

(vi) 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.

In (5), “red” would also have to be rigidified (something like “the property of being actually red”).

A worry: A variant of the green/grue problem: One might argue 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 P is in the relevant world, we may then say that it rigidly refers to this disjunctive property.

Cf: “sky-coloured” - why is this not a property term? It is a priori that it is necessary that everything that’s sky-coloured is coloured and we have to use color vocabulary to give its full analysis.

Answer: Compare: “The president of the USA” is rigid 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 (and properties) are not: what it is to be Bushy is not what it is to be a particular person.

(The generalization problem is different: Soames (2002), Macbeth (1995) and Schwartz (2002). All properties have a (canonical) nominalization that is always rigid; rigidity for predicates (or general terms) defined as rigidity of some nominalization of it; hence all general terms are rigid (attacked by Dan who says that not all canonical nominalizations are rigid)

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)

References


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