« DARIAH-KPHTH Development of the Greek research infrastructure for Humanities DYAS»

2o Workshop
"Controlled vocabularies for the humanities
and the relation between universal και particular terms"

Particulars and Universals: different philosophical approaches

Maria Venieri,
Associate Professor, University of Crete – Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences
Email: venieri@phl.uoc.gr

Foundation for Research and Technology-Hellas (FORTH-GR),
Heraklion, 18.06.2015

[Abstraction is the process from concrete to abstract or from particular to universal. It is important to build good systems or hierarchies, so that good categorizations can be made, that can be useful in many disciplines.]

1. What are universals and what are particulars
2. Brief account of theories of universals

3. How do we arrive at universals: abstraction
4. categories and their systems

Particulars and Universals: What are they?

Particulars are individual substances, entities like Socrates, Planet Mars, Rethymno,

What are universals is a question that still occupies philosophers at least since Plato. As a first approach we could say that universals are properties and relations that can be instantiated in multiple individuals e.g redness in apples, tomatoes etc. They are what this individual have in common. For realists such as Plato, they are mind independent entities that exist beyond space and time. Thus they could exist independently from their instances. A universal could have no instances. Universals could also be seen as existing in things (Aristotle's universalia in rem). Philosophers such as Locke believe that universals are just concepts in the mind (conceptualism). There also philosophers, who maintain that what is common between individuals i.e. the universal is nothing more that a word or a name (nominalism)

Abstraction

In this workshop we are not interested so much in the nature of universals as in their relationship to particulars. The intellectual process by which we arrive from particulars to universals is called abstraction. We start from concrete objects and we find similarities. E.g we compare a tomato, a poppy an a fire extinguisher and we find a common feature, the color red, which, in a way we abstract from the concrete objects. Red or redness is a universal that has many instances. If we proceed further in

the way of abstraction, we find another common feature between colored objects, which is the universal "color". Color is a quality.
We thus build an hierarchy of universals staring from the particulars. This is better shown in one more example inspired by Aristotle and Locke

Different individual cats---felines--- mammals---animals, species-genus

For Locke universals are concepts or general ideas in the mind. They form the essence of particulars with the same essential features. We arrive at them through empirical investigation of the characteristics of particulars and then through abstraction we build general ideas or concepts. A general idea forms the **nominal essence** of a kind or a sort (e.g. cat horse, fish) This nominal essence is contrasted to the **real essence** of a cat or a horse which is its atomic constitution. According to Locke we will never achieve a full knowledge of the real essence of things. Then language comes in as the general idea is the meaning of a general term such as "horse" or "animal"

This system is inspired by Aristotle. Only Aristotle, according to some interpretations, intends to find the essence of natural kinds and thus the real structure of the world, while Locke stresses that there is no single/unique classification of particulars, no unique hierarchy of universals. There are different ways to classify things depending on the purpose of the classifier. In investigating nature, scientists may try to come nearer to the real essence, but even in nature there are no fixed boundaries between species. There are borderline cases. If we consider classificatory systems in other areas and disciplines, it is evident that those can be more flexible depending on the interests of the researchers.

In more recent times W. advocated an even more flexible system of classification of particulars fighting against essentialism, the doctrine that there are fixed essential features (as opposed to accidental) that determine the nature of an object or particular.

Forms of life, language games

More extreme position that there is not necessarily at least one common feature to all things that are subsumed under a concept. There are just family resemblances.

Categories

Through abstraction we arrive at the highest genera, the most general concepts, which are used to categorize all entities. These are the categories.

The first who has built a list of such most general concepts is Aristotle. His list has played a most important role in western thought: It has been the base for all great philosophers' classifications. (Plotinus, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger etc

So many attempts

Criterion for categorical systems:

Exhaustiveness
Mutually exclusive (each entity belongs to one of the highest categories)

Aristotle's categories

- Substance (e.g., man, horse)
- Quantity (e.g., four-foot, five-foot)
- Quality (e.g., white, grammatical)
- Relation (e.g., double, half)
- Place (e.g., in the Lyceum, in the market-place)
- Date (e.g., yesterday, last year)
- Posture (e.g., is lying, is sitting)
- State (e.g., has shoes on, has armor on)
- Action (e.g., cutting, burning)

Passion (e.g., being cut, being burned)

Kant's categories

- Quantity
  - Unity
  - Plurality
  - Totality
- Quality
  - Reality
  - Negation
  - Limitation
- Relation
  - Inherence and Subsistence (substance and accident)
  - Causality and Dependence (cause and effect)
  - Community (reciprocity)
- Modality
  - Possibility
  - Existence
  - Necessity

- Entity
  - Abstract
    - Property
    - Relation
    - Proposition
  - Concrete
    - Event
    - Time
    - Place
    - Substance
      - Material Object
      - Spirit
    - Limit
    - Collection
    - Privation
    - Trope

- Entities

  ◦ Particulars

  ▪ Objects

  ▪ Substances

  ▪ Non-substances

  ▪ Modes (monadic and relational)

  ◦ Universals

  ▪ Kinds

Attributes (properties and relations)

Some conclusions:

No definite criteria of categorization
Philosophers may still search for metaphysical categories, but they usually try to arrive at the most general features of our conceptual scheme and to build systems of concepts. Indeed this is metaphysics as done by some contemporary philosophers

Other disciplines try to build such classificatory systems. I take this is meant by "Ontology"
It depends on the needs