Bertrand Russell’s Platonic Universals Essay, Research Paper

The consideration of Platonic universals consequently rouses controversy among philosophers. Thinkers like Bertrand Russell and Thomas Hobbes contribute reflective explanations for the undeniable usage of question-begging ideas in language and thought. While the deliberation of Platonic universals might seem to be fruitless and, at best, obscure to the layperson, it does function as a critical foundation for metaphysics and epistemology. Whether a philosopher agrees or disagrees with the idea of Platonic universals is irrelevant to the certain truth that he or she must form some opinion of them preceding most any philosophic endeavor.

To attempt to summarize Plato?s theory of universals in a paragraph would do it a great injustice but a simple, working definition of the theory is necessary to move any further. Plato?s theory can be condensed as follows: A universal (or form) is an independently existing, nonspatial, nontemporal ?something? known only through thought and that cannot be known through the senses; independently existing objects of thought; that which makes a particular thing uniquely and essentially what it is. In even simpler terms, a universal would be something like the ?redness? of an apple. According to Plato, the red quality of the apple must exist because the apple is red. But ?redness? itself isn?t a tangible thing that can be directly experienced with the senses. You cannot produce ?red? itself, only things that are red. But it is not only the fact that an apple is red that distinguishes it from other objects in the world. In addition to its ?redness?, an apple is an apple. An apple is not a pear. The quality unique to the apple is its ?appleness?. Thus, by appealing to the Platonic universals one can make a distinction between an apple and a pear, or all other things in the world.

I. Thomas Hobbes? Nominalism

Plato concluded that universals must actually exist. That is, that when ?appleness? is appealed to, something ?out there? provides classification for the thing in question. This was (and still is) a radical notion that demanded explanation and was highly susceptible to criticism. Among those critics was Thomas Hobbes, a 16th Century social and political philosopher. In his work, The Leviathan, Hobbes argued that thought is a purely material event and that universals are just a result of language.

Hobbes was a nominalist. Nominalism is the view that there are no universals over and above particular individuals2. For Hobbes, one of the answers to the question of universals could be found in the commonality of things. For instance, if a rock and a table are both hard, it is not because we refer to a universal, ?hardness? for them, it is because we use the word ?hard? to describe both of them. Another point made by Hobbes was that humans place things into categories in order to satisfy certain needs. Heimir Geirsson made a good analogy of this idea in his Metaphysics textbook, Beginning Metaphysics. He uses a weed for the analogy:

A good example of this is the term ?weed,? which is defined as a plant that is not desired or cultivated by human beings and grows profusely. This is not a natural species that would exist even if human beings had never decided to classify some plants as ?weeds.? Many human beings are interested in having a special category for plants they don?t like and that grow abundantly, and they create that category for plants they don?t like, and they create that category with that name and definition. If human beings had not worried about weeds, then there would be no weeds. Of course, there would still be plants that we now call ?weeds,? e.g. dandelions and crabgrass, but they would not be weeds. Whether or not there are weeds depends on human beings classifying these plants as weeds.2

Geirsson?s analogy is an interesting one because of the question it evokes. Why aren?t all definitions like that of the weed, i.e., human classification? Hobbes thought that they were. For Hobbes, there were no real universals. Those things, which we refer to as universals, are simply created by humans out of a need to organize the world.

II. Bertrand Russell on Platonic Universals

Bertrand Russell attempted to defend the theory of Platonic universals. In order to do this he first thought it necessary to distinguish between universals that were qualities of things and those that were relations between things. The most practical way to separate qualities and relations is to understand them through their linguistic functions.

Adjectives and common nouns express qualities or properties of single things, whereas prepositions and verbs tend to express relations between two or more things.3 For example, the sentence ?The dog ran around the tree.? Contains instances of quality and relation universals. ?Dog?, ?tree?, and ?ran? refer to a universal that is a quality of the objects and the action. When we think of ?dog? and ?tree?, we first have neutral objects that we distinguish by attaching their respective qualities, which are ?dogness? and ?treeness?. Similarly, the verb ?ran?, being in the past tense, not only attributes the quality of running to a neutral action, but also refers to a point in time when the action took place.

To think of the whole phenomenon of a dog having run around a tree, there must also necessarily exist a corresponding universal for the preposition ?around?. This universal differs from the previously mentioned ones in that it connects and relates the other universals to each other. Without it, the sentence would read something like this: ?The dog ran tree.? In order to make any sense of the statement a relation between ?ran? and ?tree? must first be established. Thus, it follows that ?around? must be a different type of universal than ?ran?, ?dog?, or ?tree?. No sense can be made of anything unless there is some understood relationship between them. Russell thought that since inference of relation universals was unavoidable, there was sufficient metaphysical evidence to approve of the ontological status given to them by Plato.

In order to further shield his argument from scrutiny, Russell also thought it was necessary to adjust the language about universals in regard to their ontological position. He judged that it was preferable to allude to universals as subsisting rather than existing. To speak of some as existing implies some sort of spatio-temporal location. If the question is asked, ?When and where does this universal exist?? the answer must be ?Nowhere and nowhen,? says Russell.3 The realm of universals is rigid an unaffected by the world of perception. The term used for objects within the world of perceptions that refer to their obligatory universal cannot be used. This is also to avoid the objection that universals only exist in the mind. Russell suggested that the word subsist should be used in language about universals. This is because the term simply implies that they have being.3 In doing so, Russell seems to adequately preserve his logic from Hobbes-like arguments.

III. Conclusion

While Russell?s argument does seem to refute those made by the likes of Hobbes; it is not without uncertainty. A more obvious objection to Russell?s argument would be that of an infinite regression of universals. If there is a relation between ?dog? and ?tree?, then there must certainly also be a relationship between the relation universal ?around? and the ?whatever? (around) that it classifies. But it might not stop there. Why would there not be yet another relationship between these three relationships? Anytime there are ideas or things; there must be some relationship between them. So, for ?The dog ran around the tree,? there must be a relationship between ?dog,? ?ran,? and ?tree.? Those relationships are ?ran,? and ?around.? But of course there must be an understood relationship between ?ran? and ?around? also for the statement to make any sense. Since realists like Russell contend that these things refer to some universal, there must be a relationship between them and the universal. But now we have two universals and there needs to be a relationship established between the two universals. That relationship could be as simple as their equality as universals. And now that equality must too be a universal. And there is a relationship between that equality and its universal. This web can continue indefinitely, preventing any objective classification from exposing itself out of the statement, ?The dog ran around the tree.?

As for Hobbes, his argument has a similar fate. Using his logic, a statement?s meaning would be circular in nature. Going back to Geirsson?s analogy of the weed, we can infer the statement ?Weed satisfies the need for humans to categorize certain types of plants.? Geirsson?s own opinion of this is that now the term ?satisfy? needs to be satisfied and thus leads to a vicious circle.2

It is unfortunate that both men are dead and unable to respond to such objections. However, of the two, Russell?s point-of-view still seems to be the more persuasive. Russell, having been a mathematician as well, could have fairly easily pointed out that there is nothing subject to controversy in the idea of an infinite measure of anything. An elementary principle of mathematics is that no matter what number you have, one more can always be added. Just because this infinite amount of relationships seems to make anything impossibly complex, does not make it illogical or inconceivable. Consequently it is my conclusion that, while not error-free, Bertrand Russell?s concept of relationship universals is, so far, most impressive.