

REALISM

The theory of universals

Realism is the philosophical theory that claims universals exist in the world independent of mind and language.

Philosophical Definitions

UNIVERSALS: First introduced by Plato, universals are repeatable and common characteristics that exist in the world and are often divided into two categories—properties (like squareness, for example) and qualities (like similarity). Though few, if any, properties and qualities are shared by everything, realists assert that universals do reveal a genuine commonality in nature and provide a systematized order to the world.

So, according to realism, a red apple and a red cherry have a universal essence of “redness.” Realists claim that the property “redness” does, in fact, exist even if there are no minds to perceive it. In this example, the apple and the cherry are particulars. In other words, they are not themselves universals, but are said to represent them.

TYPES OF REALISM

There are many different types of realism that touch on morality, politics, religion, science, and metaphysics. Two of the most well-known forms of realism include:

1. **Extreme Realism:** This is the oldest form of realism, initially created by Plato. To Plato, universals (which he refers to as Forms) are immaterial and exist outside of space and time.
2. **Strong Realism:** This form of realism rejects Plato’s idea of Forms, and instead claims that universals not only exist in space and time; they can also exist in many entities at the same time. The redness in the apple and cherry is actually the same universal redness, and not distinct from entity to entity.

Realism attempts to answer the “problem of universals,” which is the question of whether or not universals exist in the first place.

OBJECTIONS TO REALISM

Realism is a much-debated subject in philosophy. While there are many objections to realism, these arguments do little to disprove realism entirely, and cannot be used to deny the existence of universals.

Argument from Oddity

Philosopher Bertrand Russell’s “argument from oddity” states:

- **Premise 1:** Universals are extremely odd entities (after all, their very nature and existence is strange and hard to identify).
- **Premise 2:** If universals are extremely odd entities, then they don’t exist.
- **Premise 3:** If universals don’t exist, then realism is false.
- Therefore, realism is false.

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell describes a relation between two places: "Edinburgh is north of London." This relation seems to exist independently of human perception. Russell asserts, however, that there are objections against this conclusion; antirealists (those who subscribe to the belief that there is nothing outside of the mind and even if there were, we would not be able to access it) claim that universals do not exist in the same sense as physical objects or particulars.

While it is easy to say where and when London exists (on a specific part of the earth, from the time it was created until the time it is destroyed), it is impossible to say the same of the relation "north of" because that entity does not exist in time or space. Therefore, as stated by the first premise of the argument, it is rational to believe that universals are very strange entities. The argument goes on to say that because universals are odd in that they do not exist in any spatiotemporal sense, it follows that universals do not exist at all (Premise 2). Because it is impossible to know when or where a universal is, it is logical to deny its existence. If universals do not exist, then the theory that claims they do exist, realism, is false (Premise 3). Premise 3 is the negation of realism.

Because the "argument from oddity" is a valid argument, it seems at first to be a solid objection to realism. Further analysis of its definition of existence, however, demonstrates the argument to be far less sound. The main problem with the argument is its leap from the first premise to the second. Though universals may indeed be odd in that they don't exist in a spatiotemporal realm, it does not mean that they do not exist at all. It may seem rational to view spatiotemporal existence as the only type of existence, but this is not the case. Indeed, while physical objects, thoughts, emotions, etc., exist, universals can be said to subsist. Universals subsist rather than exist (meaning they exist without space or time), says Russell,

because they are timeless and unchangeable. Ultimately, though universals exist in an odd way, they do, indeed, exist.

Problem of Individuation

A second objection to realism is called the "problem of individuation." This objection states:

- **Premise 1:** If realism is true, then there are universals.
- **Premise 2:** If there are universals, then it is possible to individuate universals.
- **Premise 3:** It is not possible to individuate universals.
- Therefore, realism is not true.

To *individuate* a universal means to know of a "criterion of identity" for that universal. In other words, to individuate a universal means to know a necessarily true, noncircular statement of the form.

The first premise simply states the theory of realism. Premise 2 asserts that if universals exist, then it must be possible to know their form (in the same way one can say, for example, X is the same event as Y if and only if X and Y share the same cause and effect). When attempting to individuate a universal, the result becomes a circular argument, therefore proving Premise 3 to be true.

Like the "argument from oddity," the "problem of individuation" is a valid but unsound argument. It may very well be the case that universals can, indeed, be individuated, but we have not yet determined a way to articulate their form. Unless the "problem of individuation" can prove that universals absolutely cannot be individuated at any point in the future, rather than simply stating that they have not been individuated in the past, the argument has no logical merit.