UNIT-2: UNIVERSALS: CONCEPTUALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Know what is universal
- Explain the universals and its relation to particulars.
- Know what is conceptualism

2.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you the concept of universal. This unit is going to see what is universal and what its relationship with the particulars is. This unit will try to focus on the conceptualism.

2.3 UNIVERSALS:

The term universal which is used is used in metaphysics means that which is common to and shared by all the particulars of a certain class or kind. Particulars are limited in space and time. The universal is not limited to any particulars space and time, but is said to be present in many particular occupying different spaces and different times. For example, there are virtuous acts. Underlying them all there is one common element and that common element is the universal called virtue. Justice is similarly the

universal shared by all particulars just acts. Beauty, humanity etc are similarly universal.

2.4 THE NATURE OF UNIVERSAL AND ITS RELATION TO PARTICULARS:

The concept of universal may be presented in another way also. It may be pointed out here that in language there are general words ('table,' 'horse,' 'dislike,' 'beauty,' etc). These general words can be applied to anyone of a whole range of objects or activities. A. D. woozley has pointed out that apart from proper names (john, Socrates, William etc) and indicator words (such as this, that, here, there etc) all the remaining words of English language are general words. We may provisionally say that a universal is that which is common to all objects which we normally call by the same name. In other words we may say that universal is that which is indicated by a general word. A.D. Woozley of course points out that this provisional definition of universal labors under two major problems, which may be formulated and presented as two questions. These two questions are-

1. Can there be a universal common to a group of objects, even if they have no common name?
2. Can there be universals without instances?

If we accept the definition of universal that which is common to and shared by all the particulars of a class then the answer to both the questions would be an emphatic 'No.' It may be noted here that in philosophy there are different conceptions of universals and consequently there is no single definition of universal which is acceptable to all philosophers. In order to understand the nature of universals and also to understand the relation between universals and particulars we have to know that there are three theories here. Each theory gives it own version of the nature of universals and its relation to the particulars. These theories are often presented as a group of theories. They are- realism, nominalism and conceptualism. A.D. Woozley has written about the realist theories of universals. The nominalistic theories are sometimes also called similarity theories. The realistic views

about the nature of universals differ significantly from the nominalistic theories. Both Plato and Aristotle gave their versions of the nature of universals and its relation to the particulars. Plato presented one form of the realist theory while Aristotle presented another form of it. According to Plato a universal is a substantive. Universals do not require mind their existence. Universals also do not require particulars for their existence. The universals belong to a world of their own which is beyond space and time. The particulars are the copies of universals. But the universals will continue to exist even though there are no particulars. But critics point out that Plato did not succeed in giving a satisfactory account of the relation between universals and particulars. Aristotle has his own version of the realist view. Aristotle could not accept Plato's mysterious realm of substantive universals. He also found the idea of substantive universal completely unnecessary. For Aristotle a universal is not a substantive entity. It is for him a characteristic or property. It is something that belongs to particulars. According to Aristotle's view logically the universals are dependent on particulars and particulars are also dependent on universals. If we look for linguistic analogous then we shall have to say that Plato's universals are like nouns while Aristotle's universals are like adjectives (Woozley wrote, "That would be far from giving the whole story, but it would be sufficient for our purposes.") This theory, critics point out, would not explain the relationship between universals and particulars. Dissatisfaction with this vie led to the nominalistic theory of universals. According to nominalism various particular things resemble one another and therefore for convenience they are called by the same name. Various cats resemble one another and therefore they are called cats. So the nominalistic theory emphasizes the factor of similarity existing among various individual of a class.

The nominalistic theory states that various particulars resemble one another. Because of the resemblance the same name may be applied to them. Again conceptualism states that the universal is just a concept formed by the mind. But theory also cannot be accepted as the final theory about the nature of universal and its relation to the particulars.

Thus nature of universal is understood and presented in diverse ways.
Let us now discuss the third theory of universals, i.e. conceptualism

2.5 CONCEPTUALISM:

Here we will discuss the conceptualistic theory of universals. It is a philosophical theory that explains universality of particulars as conceptualized frameworks situated within the thinking mind. Conceptualism is sometimes seen as a midway position between (Medieval) Realism and Nominalism. Conceptualism is not the same as Nominalism, it is more comprehensive, and it is far more informative. But this theory is also not accepted as the final view about the nature of universal and its relation to the particulars. According to this theory a universal is a predicate, but predicates can be truly or falsely predicated of things only because they stand for concepts. As a product of mind, universals can be instantiated by many particulars at the same time. They are mental representations or ideas, conceptualized out of the particular things to which they apply. Their main function is to serve as principles of classification. "Conceptualism holds that there are universals but they are mind-made." Conceptualism admits the existence within us of abstract and universal concepts (whence its name), but it holds that we do not know whether or not the mental objects have any foundation outside our minds. The concepts have an ideal value; they have no real value, or at least we do not know whether they have a real value.
The conceptualist, however, denies that the similarity in virtue of which is common and shared by all particulars, to be analyzed in terms of identity, and thus rejects the moderate realist's claim that genus and species are real, metaphysical constituents of things. Genus and species are nothing over and above ideas or concepts in the mind.

Gyula Klima describes the difference between moderate realism and conceptualism and states that:

Moderate realists "Assert the existence of real universals in…particular things," while conceptualists "allow universals only, or primarily, as concepts of the mind."

Locke is constantly dependent on, and clearly committed to, conceptualism as a theory of universals which undoubtedly sustains marks of consistency with the rest of his philosophy. In this respect he differs from several of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. Incidentally, we may mention the case of Descartes in particular whose conceptualism, it may be argued, conflicts with certain elements in his rationalism. Besides, Locke in the Essay offers a thread-bare analysis and .thereby weighs the theory into rigorous examination.

Locke writes: "General and Universal, belong not to the real existence of Things; but are the Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only Signs, whether Words, or Ideas." So in other words as a conceptualist, Locke rejects the realist's position and he appears to hold the conceptualist position, characterized by the view that "similarity is a primitive, two term relation that is not to be further analyzed in terms of identity" In summary, on the conceptualist's view, particulars that satisfy or agree with a particular species by virtue of resembling one another, where that latter relation is not to be further analyzed in terms of a real constituent that is numerically multiplied in those particulars. Though this theory looks so organized, it too suffers from problems. In some cases concepts can be misapplied, such as when we say of a horse that it is a donkey. And misapplied concepts explain nothing deep about generality. Conceptualism's appeal to concept application must concern only correct concept application. As such, it is fair to ask, "What makes it the case that the concept black is rightly applied to both p and q but not of some third individual, r?" So it seems the Conceptualist must say that the concept black applies to p and q, but not r, because common feature is shared by both p and q and r lacks that feature. Otherwise, the application of black is permitted by the individuals to whom it applies. But simply noting that p and q resemble each other isn't going to help, because that just is the fact we originally sought to explain, put differently. The Conceptualist might now say that p and q share a property. But if this isn't to amount to a confirmation of the original datum, it must now be interpreted as the claim that some

entity is in both p and q. but that will be like going back to realism. Critics finally conclude that conceptualism cannot solve any problem on its own.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Another name of metaphysics is _____ (fill in the blank).

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Q2: Who wrote the book Leviathan?

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Q3: How many theories are there to understand the nature of universals?

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Q4: What do you mean by metaphysics?

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Q5: Define realism.

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Q6: Define nominalism

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Q7: Define conceptualism

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2.6 LET US SUM UP:

- Aristotle by 'first philosophy' means metaphysics. The word metaphysics means after physics. After the death of Aristotle his writings were collected together. His books on the First Philosophy were placed after his work on metaphysics. The word metaphysics which means after physics signifies to his arrangements.
- The nominalistic theory, because of its emphasis upon the factor of resemblance may also be called the resemblance theory.

- Conceptualism is that theory of universals that claims that universals exist as thoughts or concepts formed by the knowing mind.
- The other two are nominalism, which claims that universals are merely common names, and realism, which claims that universals exist in some mind independent fashion.
- Thomas Hobbes was a supporter of nominalism.
- Hobbes presented his conception in two ways- A. In his book 'Leviathan' he wrote, "There being nothing in the world of universal, but name for the things named are every one of them individual and singular." B. In another book he wrote, "A man denotes anyone of a multitude of men, and a philosopher anyone of many philosophers, by reason of their similitude."
- When Locke writes that "the great Business of Genera and Species, and their Essences, amounts to no more" than abstract ideas in the minds of men, Locke is giving hint towards his commitment to conceptualism for roughly the reasons just outlined



2.7. FURTHER READING

1. Chakravarty, K. D. (2000). Fundamental Questions of Epistemology and Metaphysics. OMSONS PUBLICATIONS.
2. Kuklok, Allison Sara. 2013. Conceptualism and Objectivity in Locke's Account of Natural Kinds. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University. URL: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:11181128
3. Mary C. MacLeod & Eric M. Rubenstein. Universals, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. URL: https://www.iep.utm.edu/universa/
4. Armstrong, D.M. (1989) Universals: An Opinionated Introduction Westview Press,



2.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Ans to Q 1: First Philosophy

Ans to Q 2: Thomas Hobbes

Ans to Q 3: Three theories- realism, nominalism and conceptualism.

Ans to Q 4: Metaphysics is that branch of philosophy which studies being as being. This is a subject often understood as study of reality.

Ans to Q 5: Realism is that philosophical theory according to which universals are real entities. They are substantive entities. Realism may be understood as the philosophical theory which accepts the idea of objective universals.

Ans to Q 6: Nominalism is that philosophical theory which states that various particulars resemble one another. Because of the resemblance the same name may be applied to them.

Ans to Q 7: Conceptualism is that theory of universals that claims that universals exist as thoughts or concepts formed by the knowing mind.

2.9: MODEL QUESTIONS:

A. Very short Questions

Q1: Who describes the differences between moderate realism and conceptualism?

Q2: What is the meaning of Universal?

Q3: What are the three theories of universal?

Q4: What is the other name of similarity theory?

Q5: According to who universal is substantive?

B. Short Questions (Write in about 100-150 words)

Q1: Write a short note on universal.

Q2: Why nominalistic theory states that various particular resembled one another? Briefly explain.

Q3: Briefly discuss Locke's view on conceptualism

C. Long Questions (Write in about 300-500 words)

Q1: Is there any difference between Plato and Aristotle's versions of the nature of universals and its relation to the particulars?

Q2: Describe the nature of universals and its relation to particulars

Q3: Describe the theory of conceptualism

Q4: Why conceptualism is not a satisfactory theory?

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