UNIT 13 UNIVERSALS: REALISM (PLATO AND ARISTOTLE)

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- explain the problem of universal
- discuss the relation between universal and particular
- discuss the theories of universal
- define realism
- explain the views of Plato and Aristotle

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you the problem of universals sprang from our experience, thought and language. It is matter of common experience that particular things exist in space and time. Particular things like a chair, a table, a red colour, a cow, a tree etc exist in a particular space and in a particular time. They are different from and exclusive of one another. However, we do not call each one of them by a specific name like we call our friends by their names. Rather we group them, give them a collective name which says they belong to a particular class. Now, questions bound: what makes them come under a particular class? What underpins our

attempt to bind them in a group? Why are all cows, to cite an example, named by the term 'cow' regardless of their innumerable differences? Is it essence which is shared in common by all the members of a class? Or, is it simply similarity among them? The problem of universal, so to speak, mainly deals with these questions.

13.3 UNIVERSAL: ITS NATURE AND THEORIES

In nature, we have broadly two kinds of knowledge of things— sensuous and conceptual. Sensuous knowledge presents a thing in a particular part of space and time. Thus we have particular knowledge of manifold of objects viz. chair, a table, a red colour, a cow etc. Conceptual knowledge, on the other hand, presents a thing without any note of particularity. It is not limited to any space and time. However, it is a sort of thing without which we cannot think of particular objects. Though we can see and touch particular objects, we have to use general concepts while thinking or talking about them. For they are perceived by us as belonging to a certain class. The particular things have something common in them by virtue of which they are grouped together in the same class and called by the same name. Red, white, yellow, blue, green etc. have something common in them on account of which they are grouped into the class of colours and called by the same name 'colour'. Similarly cows, dogs, cats, horses etc. have something common in them because of which they are brought under the same class of animal and called by the same name 'animal'. This something which is common to all the members of a class is called universal or generality. Thus the universal may generally be defined as something which is common to and shared in common by all the members of a particular class, and is the ground of their being grouped into the same class and called by the same name.

Now the knotty questions that often churn up the philosophers' mind are— What is common to a group of things (or particulars)? What sort of thing is universal? Does the universal stand for something that is objectively real? Or is it merely a word that we use for a group of things due to their similarity between them? Philosophers answer to these questions from

their own stance. And since their views are different, we have several theories regarding the nature of universal, viz., Realism, Conceptualism, Nominalism etc. All these theories have got supporters from both the corners of Indian and Western philosophy.

Realism is a theory according to which the universal is extra-mental. It has independent reality. It is the essence residing equally in all the members of a class. Conceptualism states that universal is a concept in mind; it is a pure mental entity. There is no universality in things outside mind. According to Nominalism, universals are mere words or names. For this theory, names are made universal by being used for a number of different particulars.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 State whether the statements are true or false (True/False)

a) Womanhood is universal. (True/False)

b) Tree, cow, table, etc are not particulars. (True/False)

c) Sensuous knowledge presents a thing in a particular part of space and time. (True/False)

d) Conceptual knowledge presents a thing without any note of particularity. (True/False)

e) According to the theory of realism, universal is mind-dependent. (True/False)

Q.2. Define universal.

Q.3. What are particulars?

Q.4. Mention the main theories of universal.

Q.5. What is conceptualism?

Q.6. Define nominalism in a sentence.

13.4 REALISM

Realism holds that universal exists independent of the knowing mind. It has objective reality. Universal is the essence that is equally present in all the members of a class. However, this theory has got various forms in the

hands of its upholders as they have espoused their views in accordance with their own philosophy. While some regard universals to be substantive, some others hold them to be adjectival even though they all agree on the core notion of realism. Thus we have many supporters of this theory both from Indian and Western camps. They are— Nyaya-Vaisesika and Mimamsa, Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore and S. Alexander. Here, however, we shall discuss the views of Plato and Aristotle, the champions in realism, in a brief detail.

13.4.1 Plato's Realism

Plato advocates extreme realism. For him, a universal is substantive, an entity which exists in a non-temporal, non-spatial world without depending on mind. It is not affected by whatever happens to the particulars in the world of space and time. Although the existence of the particulars in the universals logically depends upon the existence of the universals in the particulars, the other way round is not true. Even if there is not any example of perfect square anywhere, perfect squareness exists in the transcendental world of universals. To Plato, a universal is a model to which particular things approximate.

In his theory of Ideas, Plato advocates the existence of universal entities which are different from the particular things. Plato maintains that there must be an essence common to all things of a given kind. For him, a thing will not be a table unless it has the essence of tablehood that all other tables possess in common. A table may differ from other tables in shape, size and colour, but it must possess a single form or essence which constitutes their being table and which distinguishes them from other things like chairs, beds or doors etc. Thus Plato holds that we always postulate one single form for every class of particulars to which we assign the same name. It is not only true of objects indicated by nouns, such as chairs, tables, beds, trees, etc but also of qualities indicated by predicates, such as beautiful, ugly, greater than, less than etc. Just

as there must be a form or essence of tablehood common to tables, so there must be a form or essence of ugliness common to all ugly things. Plato gives the name **'Ideas'** or **'Forms'** to these objective essences.

Thus for Plato, there is an absolute difference between the Forms or universals, and sensible objects or particulars. The universals are patterns in the nature of things, while the particular things are made in their image and hence are likenesses of the 'Forms'. The 'Forms' exist in themselves. According to Plato, the universals are substances. A substance is that which has its whole being in itself and which does not derive its reality from anything else except itself. It is the ground of other things, but it does not have any ground except itself. In this sense, the universals are self-caused and self-determined; they are absolute and ultimate realities. The particulars, on the other hand, are not self-caused or self-determined; they are relative, for they have to depend upon other things for their existence. Unlike the particular things, the universals are thoughts. Universals are not found in nature like any particular thing. There is no such thing as the cow-in-general. However, 'thought', in this case, should not be taken as my thought or your thought or the thought of God. For it is absurd to think that our thoughts can be the cause of the universe. They are not subjective ideas, but are objective Ideas having reality on their own. The universal or the Idea is a unity. It is one amidst many. But the particular things are many. The Idea of horse is one, but the horses are many. There cannot be more than one Idea for every class of things. Universals are immutable and imperishable, while the particulars are ever-changing and perishable.

In spite of these differences, there is a close connection between universals and the particulars. Their relationship is described in two ways: (i) as a participation of the particular thing in the Idea (ii) as an imitation of the Idea by the particular thing, the

particular things being the copy of the Idea and the Idea being the exemplar.

Now, as universals are not given in sense-perception, the question pertinent here is: How are they known? Plato's answer, however, is mythical. For, he said that the soul is said to possess the universals (in Plato's words, pure Forms or Ideas) in the incorporeal world before embodying the present body. When we perceive the similar things in the present life, we remember the Forms forgotten in earthly life. Again in the Timaeus, Plato said that God makes the things of this world according to the model of the Forms. God takes the model of the Forms in creating things of the world. This implies that the Ideas or the Forms exist apart, not only from the things of the sensible world, but also from God. Hence, the Ideas are something hanging in the air.

Plato also spoke about different levels of Forms related as higher and lower in a hierarchy. Just as many individual things are presided over by one Idea which is the common element in them, so many lower Ideas are presided over by one higher idea which is the common element in them. Again, over this higher Idea together with many others still a higher Idea will rule. For example, the Ideas of whiteness, blackness, greenness, blueness, yellowness, all come under the Idea of colour. The Ideas of sweetness, sourness, bitterness, all come under the Idea of taste. Now these two Ideas of colour and taste are subsumed under the still higher Idea of quality. In this way, the Ideas form a pyramid with an apex. Over all these Ideas, there must be one highest Idea which is the supreme of all of them. This is the final and absolutely real being. It is the ground of itself, of other Ideas and of the whole universe. Plato calls this Idea the Idea of Good. Thus we find that though the Ideas are many, they culminate in one single Idea. In brief, the Ideas form one organised system culminating in one supreme Idea which is the highest expression of its unity. And every individual Idea is a many in one.

Considered in itself, it is one and as considered in relation to others, it is many.

13.4.2 Aristotle's Realism

Aristotle rejects the mysterious world of substantive universals. He advocates a moderate form of realism. According to him, a universal is not a substantive at all but a property which belongs to particulars. While Plato treats universals as nouns, Aristotle treats them as adjectives. According to Aristotle, there is a logical interdependence between the universals and the particulars. Just as there can be no chairs, unless each chair possesses the property of being a chair, so no such property (chairness) can exist unless there are chairs.

Aristotle sharply criticises Plato's theory of universals and regards the 'Ideas' as quite unnecessary. His objections to Plato's theory of Ideas go like this—

1. Plato unnecessarily doubled the number of things to be explained. The Forms or Ideas are as many as the particular things whose causes are the Ideas themselves. For Plato holds that there is an entity corresponding to each thing bearing the same name with it that exists independently of the particular things. Such postulation does not solve any problem, as it makes repetition on a different level. The same questions that are raised in cases of the particulars may also be raised in cases of the Ideas or Forms. Thus, mere multiplication of objects cannot be said to be a solution to any problem.

2. Plato's Ideas fail to explain the existence of things. The main problem of philosophy is to explain why the things exist. By following Plato's theory of Ideas, we cannot explain this. Even if we accept that the Idea of whiteness exists, we cannot see how it produces white objects.

3. Even if the existence of things is explained, their motion will be left unexplained. The world of things is a world of change, motion, life and becoming. But Plato's Ideas cannot explain this fact.

According to Plato, the Idea of whiteness produces white things, the Idea of beauty beautiful things and so on. But, since the Ideas themselves are changeless, motionless, so the world of things, which are their copies, will be alike. Thus the world will turn into a static one, which is impossible.

4. Plato has not explained properly the relation between the Ideas and particular things. He holds that particular things are the "copies" of Ideas and they "participate" in them. For Aristotle, such a contention is nothing but talking in empty metaphor.

5. The Ideas, which are supposed to be non-sensuous by Plato, are, in fact, sensuous. Plato thinks it necessary to seek a non-sensuous principle to explain the sensible world. But not finding such a principle, he takes the sensible things over again and regards them non-sensuous. In fact, there is no difference between the cow and the Idea of the cow, between the man and the Idea of man, except a meaningless and unnecessary "in-general" or "in-itself" which is attached to each sensible thing to give it a different look. Aristotle holds that Ideas are like the anthropomorphic gods of popular religion. These are nothing but the eternalized things of nature. He alters Plato's version by stating that things are not the copies of Ideas, but Ideas are the copies of things.

6. The view of Plato that the Ideas cause the particular things cannot be said to be true because the Ideas being changeless patterns without any principle of motion cannot function as the efficient cause. Even Plato's recognition of Ideas as the final cause cannot solve the problem, since it does not explain the efficient causality.

7. Plato commits the logical mistake of regarding Form or Idea both as an individual substance and a property. Forms are regarded as individual substances, as they have separate existence, and they are regarded as properties, since they are universals. But the question is: how can one and the same thing be both an individual substance and a property? Aristotle argues that it is impossible for anything 'general' to become an individual substance or a 'primary being', as an individual substance or primary being is such a thing

which is peculiar to an individual object and on the other hand, 'general' is something which is common to a group of things. According to Aristotle, a substance is the same as subject to which predicates are assigned. It is not a predicate of something else. So, if Forms or Ideas are treated as individual substances, they cannot be universals, since substances possess properties. Again, if Forms are treated as universals, they cannot be individual substances, as common property never indicates a "this-something" but a "this-such". Hence it is a logical impossibility to regard Form as both individual substance and a universal.

8. Aristotle's argument of the "Third Man" is noteworthy. The 'Third Man' argument states: An individual man is like the idea of man in being man and so there must be a further Idea, the 'third man', in which both the individual man and the idea of man participate. It leads to infinite regress.

9. If the Ideas are the essences of things, they must reside in the things themselves and not outside them. But Plato has isolated the Ideas from particular things and has placed them in a non-sensuous, non-temporal, mysterious world. Plato seems to have ended in absurdity when he asserts that there is horse-in-general existing independently somewhere beyond the particular horses. Plato's theory of Ideas is self-contradictory as it starts with stating that the universal is real and the particular is unreal and ends by lowering the universal at the level of the particular.

10. Even if Forms are supposed to exist apart, it is not possible to say in which cases it does so and in which it does not. Definitely, it cannot exist apart in the cases of all particulars or individuals, e.g., individual men. It is absurd to say that the essence of all men is the same, because all particular things whose essence is same or one are themselves one. It is also unreasonable to take essence as multiple and different.

All these criticisms against Plato's Ideas or Forms may be subsumed under two headings — first, that Plato introduced an unnecessary and useless duplication by making the Forms perfect

and independent or separate substance. Secondly, Plato confused the categories of substance with property.

Thus Aristotle rejects Plato's view that universals exist apart from particular objects. The universal is not something which has a higher reality than the individual things experienced by us. It is a common predicate which resides in many objects of a class. Thus the concept of cow is what is common to all cows. The concept of cow is the same thing as the predicate 'cowness'. Now this 'cowness' cannot exist apart from cows , just as softness cannot exist apart from the soft things. The universal is real in the particular in the sense that it realises itself in particular. Unlike Plato, Aristotle holds that the individual man is not the imperfect copy of the universal man. He is an actual man. He is called man because he has certain essential qualities of man. These certain essential qualities constitute the nature of man. Likewise, being an object of certain kind is determined by the properties possessed by the object. As the universals cannot exist by themselves, they cannot be called substances; nor are they particular substances, for there is not anything like absolute particular or isolated thing. If cowness does not exist independently of cows, then cows also do not exist independently of cowness. If we take away from cow what it has in common with other cows, we shall find nothing, as all qualities are taken away from it.

Both Aristotle and Plato hold that the knowledge of universal is acquired by the intellect. But while Plato regards it to be a priori, Aristotle regards it to be derived from sense-experience by abstraction.

From the foregoing discussion, what comes in the fore is that Aristotle's theory of universals is more moderate than that of Plato. Moreover, Aristotle's theory is more economical than Plato's, as he recognizes one world instead of two. Plato's theory is a theory of universalia ante rem, i.e., universals independent of particulars and Aristotle's is universalia in rebus, i.e., universals in things.

Aristotle's theory of universals is similar to the Indian realistic theories of universals in certain respects. Like Aristotle, the Nyaya-Vaisesika also holds that the universals do not exist independently of the particulars in a world of their own. They reside in the particular things as their predicates which are the basis of their classification and generalization. However, a subtle difference is there between these two camps. For Aristotle, the universals do not have existence different from and independent of the particular things. But the Nyaya, as differed from Aristotle yet being closer to Plato, holds that the universals are existentially independent of the particulars, although they depend on the particulars for their awareness.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What is the main thesis of realism?

Q 8: Name some supporters of realism.

Q 9: State briefly Plato's view of realism.

Q 10: How are the Ideas known according to Plato?

Q 11: Define Aristotle's realism.

Q 12: Write whether the following statements are true or false. (True/False)

a) Plato treats universals as properties. (True/False)

b) Aristotle regards universals as adjectives. (True/False)

c) According to Plato, universals exist in a separate world beyond the particulars. (True/False)

d) Aristotle's theory is universalia in rebus. (True/False)



ACTIVITY 13.1

- Whose view do you think to be more plausible— Plato's or Aristotle's?

Ans. .....

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13.5 LET US SUM UP

- What we have understood from the foregoing discussion is the problem of universal is a very knotty one.
- The two views discussed here seem to be right from their own perspectives, though none of them are above criticism.
- However, the definition of universal that is commonly held is—universal is something which is common to and shared in common by all the members of a particular class, and is the ground of their being grouped into the same class and called by the same name.
- According to realism, this common element is mind-independent and has objective reality.
- While for Plato, universal exists in a non-spatial and non-temporal world, for Aristotle, it exists in particular things.
- The problem of universal is originated from our experience, thought and language.
- Universal provides the ground of grouping things together. It establishes a unity among the discrete particulars.
- Realism, conceptualism and nominalism are the some main theories of universal.
- Realism is the theory according to which universals have independent reality. Champions of this theory are Plato and Aristotle.
- According to Plato, universals are substantive, but for Aristotle, they are adjectival. For Plato, universals exist apart from the particulars, but for Aristotle, it is impossible.



13.6 FURTHER READING

1) Aaron, R. I. (1952): The Theory of Universals: Oxford.

2) Edman, I. (ed.) (1956): The Works of Plato: The Modern Library: New York.

3) Sarma, Dr. Ramala (2013): Theory of Universals: N. L. Publications: Guwahati.

4) Warrington, J., (ed.) (1961) Aristotle's Metaphysics: Everyman's Library: London.



13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q no 1: a) True b) False c) True d) True e) False

Ans to Q no 2: The universal may generally be defined as something which is common to and shared in common by all the members of a particular class, and is the ground of their being grouped into the same class and called by the same name.

Ans to Q no 3: Particular things are those that exist in a particular space and time. For example, a chair, a table, a red colour, a cow, a tree etc.

Ans to Q no 4: Realism, Conceptualism and Nominalism.

Ans to Q no 5: According to conceptualism, universal is a concept in mind; it is a pure mental entity. There is no universality in things outside mind.

Ans to Q no 6: According to Nominalism, universals are mere words or names which are made universal by being used for a number of different particulars.

Ans to Q no 7: The main thesis of realism is that universal exists independent of the knowing mind. It has objective reality. It is the essence that is equally present in all the members of a class.

Ans to Q no 8: Nyaya-Vaisesika amd Mimamsa, Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore and S. Alexander are the supporters of realism.

Ans to Q no 9: Plato's realism is extreme realism. For him, a universal is substantive, an entity which exists without depending on mind in a non-temporal, non-spatial world. It is not affected by whatever happens to the particulars in the world of space and time. Particulars depend on universals for their existence, but the other way round is not true.

Ans to Q no 10: According to Plato, Ideas are known through the theory of reminiscence. He said that the soul is said to possess the universals (in Plato's words, pure Forms or Ideas) in the incorporeal world before embodying the present body. When we perceive the similar things in the present life, we remember the Forms forgotten in earthly life.

Ans to Q no 11: Aristotle advocates a moderate form of realism. He rejects the mysterious world of substantive universals. According to him, a universal is not a substantive at all but a property which belongs to particulars. For him, there is a logical interdependence between the universals and the particulars.

Ans to Q no 12: a) False b) True c) True d) True



13.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short Questions

Q1: Is Russell a supporter of realism?

Q2: Which Indian thinkers advocate realism?

Q3: Which theory of universal admits essence as identically present in all the particulars of a class?

Q4: What is particular?

Q5: Give an example of universal.

Q6: Give some examples of particular.

Q7: Name the theory by which Ideas are known according to Plato?

Q8: According to Aristotle, does universal exist apart from the particulars?

Q9: Which Indian theory assimilates Aristotle's view?

Q10: Which philosopher is associated with the concept the Idea of Good?

B. Short questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q1: Define universal.

Q2: What is realism?

Q3: Write the difference between universal and particular.

Q4: Write short notes on Plato's Idea of Good?

Q5: Write how Aristotle's view assimilates that of Nyaya-Vaisesika.

Q6: Mention some differences between the views of Plato and Aristotle.

C. Long questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q1: Discuss critically Plato's theory of universal.

Q2: How does Aristotle criticise Plato's theory of Ideas?

Q3: Give an account of Aristotle's realism.

Q4: In what sense is Aristotle's realism more moderate than that of Plato?

Q5: What do you mean by the hierarchy of universals? Discuss in the light of Plato's view.

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