

**Stefano Di Bella & Tad M. Schmaltz, eds.** *The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy*. Oxford University Press 2017. 368 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190608040).

*The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy* is a collection of thirteen essays by North American and European scholars tracing the transformations in the early modern period connected to the topic of universals. Much debated in the Middle Ages, this topic becomes much less central in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, without disappearing completely. Rather, as the editors show in the Introduction to this volume, due to scientific and cultural changes, universals are approached and treated differently.

During the middle ages, the main positions regarding universals had been viewed as falling within two main camps, realist and nominalist, each of these categories admitting of a dizzying array of alternatives. Within the realist camp, the main contenders were a Platonist position which took universals to be Platonic ideas or forms, perfect, eternal, unchanging and existing independently of the intellects capable of grasping them. With the advent of Christianity and due especially to the work of Augustine, Platonic forms were relocated to the intellect of God who, upon creating the world, took these forms as archetypes and models.

A more moderate form of realism was the Aristotelian position according to which universals did not exist independently but were inherent to objects. Aristotelian hylemorphism lent itself very well to this way of conceiving universals as existing *in re*, as forms inhering in and shaping matter, thus determining and regulating the latter's behaviour. And since hylemorphism was the view favoured during the Middle Ages, universals as existing in things gained wide acceptance. It was also held that humans come to know these universal forms by abstracting from sensory information, by means of operations that the human intellect performs on materials provided by sensation.

Starting in the fourteenth century, thinkers began to be increasingly concerned with issues of language, signification and reference, rather than with problems about the ontology and epistemology of everyday objects. These philosophers transfer universals, now conceived of as concepts, from things to human minds. William of Ockham, for instance, states: 'it ought to be said that every universal is one particular thing and that it is not a universal except in its signification, in its signifying many things'; 'No universal is a substance existing outside the mind'; 'every universal is an intention of the mind' (42).

The essays composing the present volume track the changes undergone in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the medieval realist and nominalist positions outlined above. Let us briefly look at some of the significant changes.

Firstly, the Augustinian Christianized Platonism placing Platonic forms in the divine intellect, which had been the orthodoxy during the middle ages, is still accepted by many early modern philosophers. Mariangela Priarolo and Tad M. Schmaltz show in their articles that Malebranche was a prominent proponent of such a position. Theological Platonism is also endorsed by Leibniz (as interpreted by Stefano Di Bella) and the English Platonists (Henry More, John Norris and Ralph Cudworth—discussed by Brunello Lotti). Combining this 'archetypal theory of creation' (166) with a new way of understanding human cognition, Leibniz and the English Platonists devise a two-level theory of universals the details of which differ depending on whether the philosopher under discussion is an innatist about universal concepts (like Henry More and Ralph Cudworth), while allowing empirical concepts to be abstracted from sensations (like Leibniz), or a subscriber to a version of the vision in God and Augustinian divine illumination (like John Norris). On the other hand, Augustinian

Platonism about universals is, according to Lawrence Nolan, rejected by Descartes who emphasizes a strict understanding of divine simplicity.

Next, conceptualist proposals, examples of which we have already encountered in Leibniz, More and Cudworth, focus on the contents of our thoughts, are in keeping with the new (to the 17th century) way of understanding cognition in terms of ideas, and accordingly represent a distinctively early modern contribution to the treatment of universals. The version of conceptualism defended by Descartes, as Lawrence Nolan argues, is an innatist conceptualism which has realist aspects since it conceives universals as ideas the human mind finds within itself and which, being true and immutable natures, allow the mind to gain knowledge about the external world. On the other hand, Locke's conceptualism is abstractionist and has anti-realist leanings since Locke (as Martha Bolton and E.J. Lowe show in their respective contributions to this volume) views universals as 'nominal essences' that we humans put together starting from information received from the senses and using our own interests as guides.

In 'Spinoza and Universals' Samuel Newlands argues that 'although Spinoza is not always clear on the metaphysical details, he is a kind of conceptualist (to use older terminology) and a resemblance trope nominalist (to use more contemporary terminology)' (62). Newlands stresses the fact that an important distinction emerges from Spinoza's scattered remarks on universals, between true and adequate common notions having to do with extension and its properties, on the one hand, and more confused general concepts such as 'man,' 'good,' 'bad,' 'being,' etc., on the other (82-85). It is only common notions that allow us to gain knowledge about the world and thus we should focus on acquiring and applying them. Knowledge based on common notions is also a stepping stone toward the acquisition of intuitive knowledge.

Since it considers as universal not only general words but also the mental concepts corresponding to these words, the types of conceptualism mentioned so far qualify as moderate varieties of nominalism. Below we will look at two other early modern nominalist views, Gassendi's and Hobbes (whom Leibniz called the 'ultranominalist').

According to Antonia Lolordo 'Gassendi insisted on nominalism throughout his career' and took it as 'simply obvious... that every existing thing is particular' (13). Lolordo shows that Gassendi engaged polemically with Aristotelian views and rejected universals inhering in things. He was committed to the existence in human minds of general ideas. There are, Gassendi claims, two ways of using such ideas: aggregatively (which is our ordinary way) and abstractly (when selective attention is given to aggregate ideas). The latter leads to our 'grasping universals and their *ratio universalitatis*' which is tantamount to 'grasping the respects in which the various members of the aggregate are similar' (39).

The strongest version of nominalism defended in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appears to belong to Thomas Hobbes. Stewart Duncan summarizes Hobbes position as follows: 'the only universal things are universal names'; 'there are no universal objects, or universal ideas' (41). Emphasizing the importance of public, external language as a necessary condition for cognition, for Hobbes, 'there are only particular things, which come to represent multiple other particular things... the particulars that do the representing are words, not concepts or anything else that exists in the mind' (43).

In conclusion, the present collection of essays is part of recent developments in the history of early modern philosophy, developments which stress contextualization, refraining from anachronism, inclusiveness as well as the search for taxonomies and conceptual frameworks suitable both for capturing early modern philosophical theories without distorting them and for shedding light on them. This anthology covers the main figures of early modern philosophy (from Descartes to Kant,

rationalists as well as empiricists) while also discussing some less known authors (Robert Desgabets, Pierre-Sylvain Regis, etc.). It traces the history of the topic of universals focusing on the transformations that this problem underwent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In so doing this volume provides useful terminological categories enabling the reader to construct an overview of the treatments of the problem of universals in the early modern period. Examples of such classification schemes are: theological Platonism/theological direct realism; innatist conceptualism/abstractionist conceptualism; early modern nominalism/Hobbesian ultranominalism, and so on. Inviting both students and scholars to further study and refinement of these categories, the present collection represents a welcome addition to the literature on early modern philosophy.

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