Ramsey's *Universals*

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Abstract

Ramsey's *Universals* has not been served well by its critics and, as a result, the real and important contentions of Ramsey's essay are often obscured in discussion of his work. This thesis is intended to form the beginning of an attempt to rectify this by offering an exposition and critique of Ramsey's essay that is particularly sensitive to the background context and purpose of the essay as a whole and to the subtle structure of the argumentation within it.

The construction of the arguments in *Universals* is so intricate that to assess any of its arguments without placing them in the context of the overall strategy of Ramsey's essay is to grossly underestimate them. For this reason, most of the labour in this thesis will be directed towards articulating Ramsey's concerns in his essay and the way in which Ramsey's arguments are supposed to supplement each other in order to establish his main contentions. These tasks take up the first two chapters. Only then will the third chapter consider one particular argument- the incomprehensible trinity argument- and assess whether it is successful by first identifying the role that the argument is intended to play in the overall structure of Ramsey's argument and then asking whether or not the argument can be said to fulfil such a role.

This final chapter is a mere beginning towards a proper critique of Ramsey's difficult and subtle argumentation in *Universals*. Nonetheless it serves as an example of how offering a critique of Ramsey which places his arguments within the context

and concerns of the essay as a whole, while it does not immediately vindicate them of all criticism, shows them to be far more subtle and robust than they have been estimated to be.

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Introduction

Ramsey's article *Universals* is about as well-known as it is undervalued. Though it has been influential and is considered by most to be somehow important, the majority of what has been quoted or criticised about the paper has focused on one or other of its arguments in isolation. This includes Dummett (1981), Geach (1975) Anscombe (1959), Armstrong (1978), Oliver (1992), and Moore (1962), to name but a few. A focused exegesis or critique of a single aspect of a paper is a common and useful practise but Ramsey's article has been not been served well by this approach. The nature and subtlety of the view that Ramey intends to challenge causes him to adopt a non-standard methodology in his paper which employs a careful balance between argumentation and diagnostic and produces arguments that are interdependent and work as a whole to support Ramsey's overall conclusion. For this reason, ignoring the context and wider concerns of *Universals* has meant that Ramsey's arguments have been either undervalued or misrepresented. Furthermore Ramsey's real concerns have not been carried along with attention to the arguments in the essay and as such they have failed to be assimilated into contemporary debate.

This thesis will aim to provide two things. In the first two chapters, it will begin the work of providing an accurate and helpful overview of Ramsey's article of the kind that is lacking in the secondary literature. It will do so by focusing the exegesis in such a way that is sensitive to the unique structure of Ramsey's paper. The third

and final chapter will be an exercise in a more suitable kind of evaluation of one of Ramsey's most famous arguments: one that gives central place to the context of the argument and of its relation to the overall argument of *Universals*. For this reason the approach of the thesis will be primarily to engage first hand with Ramsey's text in order to lay out its structure and concerns, rather than responding to an existing secondary literature. Having said this it will be necessary to provide a detailed exposition of one particular secondary source; Bertrand Russell. Ramsey's contentions simply cannot be understood without some attention to Russell who is the cause of Ramsey's investigation, the source of his background metaphysical framework, and the individual to whom the article is explicitly addressed.

It is important to try and establish the real contentions of *Universals* given the fame and influence of the essay. Though this is a worthy task in its own right it also serves as a general lesson in rediscovering theoretical perspectives that have been dismissed or underestimated because they have been unfavourably and damagingly cut off from their intended context. Criticism of such arguments is taken to be decisive when it merely refutes a specimen half made of straw and this deprives the contemporary arena of the real and more substantial concerns that the arguments are directed towards. This is not to imply that drawing out a particular aspect of some theory or focusing on some argument in isolation is not, most often, an extremely fruitful philosophical method. Instead it is merely to recommend exercising some care in how we extract an argument for examination and critique,

ensuring that it is not too radically divorced from the context in which it was intended to function in a way that would substantially weaken its force since such an error could lead to the important philosophical concerns of the argument and its context to be lost or ignored.

The thesis will take the following course. The first chapter will elucidate Ramsey's main concerns in the article by attempting to characterise the precise contention that he seeks to reject. The struggle to pull out Ramsey's target and to accurately identify the subtlety of the way in which he opposes these ideas will lead us to a discussion of the different kinds of incompleteness that are in play, as well as a thorough exposition of Russell and his theory of universals spanning across 1911 to 1918. The second chapter will engage more directly with Ramsey's article expounding the overall strategy of the essay towards engaging with Ramsey's opponent. It will then present the detail of the arguments that Ramsey employs within the context of the article's wider structure. It will be concerned to focus on representing the intricately interrelated nature of the arguments as well as the role that the arguments play towards the overall conclusion of Ramsey's essay rather than independently assessing the success of each argument. The third chapter will then critique perhaps the most infamous of Ramsey's arguments, the incomprehensible trinity argument. It will explore the mechanisms of the argument by using Dummett's distinction between analysis and decomposition and expose the erroneous assumption that the argument relies on. The second half of the chapter

will consider where this mistaken assumption comes from and, in particular, whether or not Ramsey is guilty of making it. To do so it will bring in the wider context of *Universals* and Ramsey's aims in the paper in order to suggest that the situation is not as simple as one in which Ramsey's incomprehensible trinity argument is straightforwardly based on a fundamental confusion.

It will conclude that the although Ramsey's incomprehensible trinity argument can be identified as relying on certain assumptions, once we take into account the wider view of *Universals*, we can understand why Ramsey leaves them implicit as he does. Furthermore, while the assumptions that the argument makes may be undefended they are, at least, plausible positions. In this way they differ from the confused assumptions that Ramsey is usually attributed with by most assessors of the incomprehensible trinity argument and in particular Dummett (1981).

In the most succinct of summaries: the first chapter will characterise *what* Ramsey aims to reject; the second will expound *how* Ramsey's article is constructed so as to reject these ideas; and the third chapter will explore *whether* Ramsey is successful in employing one of his arguments towards this end.

Chapter one

After a brief introduction to Ramsey's article this chapter will consider Ramsey's conclusions in *Universals*. It will resolve an apparent tension in his conclusion by examining Russell's theory of universals and demonstrating that the two aspects in Ramsey's conclusion respond to different aspects in Russell's early and later thought. It will then more precisely characterise the nature of Ramsey's contention in the essay by distinguishing three different types of incompleteness and clarifying Ramsey's position regarding each of them.

1.1 Ramsey's article and its conclusion

This section will give a short introduction to Ramsey's article; sketching out its aims and the conclusion that it reaches. It will then draw out two different strands in Ramsey's conclusion which appear to be in tension with each other. The search for a resolution to this tension will lead us to an exposition of Russell.

1.1.1 A brief overview of the article

The title and topic of Ramsey's essay is 'Universals'. He begins his article by formulating what it is that he intends to call into question:

> The purpose of this paper is to consider whether there is a fundamental division of objects into two classes, particulars and universals (Ramsey, 1931:112).

His approach towards answering this question however is unlike contemporary contributions to the universals debate. Ramsey has a very particular target in sight: Russell's theory of universals. As such Ramsey's essay does not investigate the multifarious incarnations of such an ontological posit, and barely acknowledges arguments traditionally advanced in favour of, and in opposition to, universals.

It is how and what Ramsey takes issue with regarding Russell's particular conception of universals, however, that gives the essay its untypical direction of argumentation. From the outset Ramsey reorients his investigation away from straightforwardly assessing the failings and merits of Russell's theory. Instead his essay is concerned with the failings and merits of the *reasons* that have led philosophers, and in particular Russell, to hold that there must be universals and to separate off legitimate concerns regarding this ontological claim from certain assumptions and considerations that have been wrongly assimilated into the debate.

1.1.2 Ramsey's conclusion

Ramsey's conclusion in the essay brings into focus exactly what he is concerned with isolating and rejecting as the illegitimate considerations that have led to the theory of universals. In the penultimate line of the essay he declares the theory of universals to be a 'great muddle' (1931:134). To the question of whether there is a fundamental division between objects into particulars and universals he concludes that we do not and cannot know (1931:133).

The muddle

The muddle Ramsey takes to be a muddle between names and incomplete symbols. To explain this *roughly*: by 'name' Ramsey means a simple name of a simple object. He borrows the term 'incomplete symbol' primarily from Russell who holds that a symbol that is incomplete can only be defined in connection with other symbols and so does not mean or stand for anything in the world. Any misleading syntactic appearance the symbols have to the contrary will disappear upon analysis (Russell, 1918:253; Ramsey, 1931:130)[1].

For Ramsey, incomplete symbols and names are two very different kinds of symbol which derive from very different directions of enquiry and as such must be recognised as two philosophically distinct categories. The illegitimate assimilation of the properties of namehood and incompleteness has led to the idea that there are incomplete symbols which are also names, so that some incomplete symbols do stand for things in the world. Furthermore, *what* these symbols stand for must be incomplete in some way corresponding to that which designates them (Ramsey, 1931:134). The muddled notion that there must be things in the world which are incomplete has given rise to the notion that there are universals. It has led Russell to say that universals depend on the form of the proposition in a way that particulars do not, in this way accounting for their incompleteness (Russell, 1918:205). The theory of universals, therefore, has come about due to this conflation of two

[1] As will become clear, however, Ramsey's usage of the term incomplete symbol is wider than Russells.

philosophically very different kinds of thing; incomplete symbols and names. This, at any rate, is Ramsey's view of the terrain.

The agnostic

Ramsey remains explicitly agnostic about whether there is a fundamental division between objects into particulars and universals (1931:134-135). He takes it that we could only conclude that such a fundamental division held between objects if we had knowledge of the forms of atomic propositions. Atomic propositions would have to reflect this deep distinction in reality in order to represent it; therefore, if such a division was to be found in atomic propositions, we could infer that it must obtain between objects in reality (1931:135). Since Ramsey agrees with Wittgenstein that we are not acquainted with atomic propositions, however, it follows that we cannot know if such a distinction obtains between objects or not (Ramsey, 1931:123).

In his post-script Ramsey revises, to some extent, his view regarding our access to atomic propositions. He states that he has come to believe that the forms of atomic propositions may be discoverable by 'actual analysis' (1931:135). It is not easy to say how far exactly this retracts upon his previous view but Ramsey's position regarding whether there are universals can still be characterised as an agnostic one. This is because on the one hand he explicitly accepts that there is no impossibility that the forms of atomic propositions would be such that they would support a theory of universals (ibid), though this is no deviation from his previous

view (1931:133). On the other hand he stresses that there is 'no strong presumption' that the analysis would give this result (1931:135). This is because he maintains that the work done in his article shows that the forms of atomic propositions - and thus whether there are universals - cannot be known *a priori*, i.e. in advance of actual analysis. For this reason Ramsey may be said to advocate agnosticism pending analysis regarding such a question; maintaining that we cannot know *a priori* whether the forms of atomic propositions support a fundamental division of objects into particular and universal.

The agnostic and the muddle

We can summarise Ramsey's conclusion to be that the theory of universals is a muddle, a conflation of two philosophically disparate ideas and that we cannot know, *a priori* at least, whether or not universals exist. Ramsey's conclusion, then, contains two separable strands; the first that the theory of universals is a muddle and the second that we cannot know *a priori* whether they exist. No sooner are these strands identified, however, than the worry arises that they are in tension with each other.

As we saw, Ramsey begins his paper with the question of whether there is a fundamental division between objects into particulars and universals. Though the first strand of his conclusion does not address this question directly, it still provides an answer to it. In particular, given that the first strand holds that a conflation of

different features of different symbols has led to the muddled notion of a universal, it follows that there can be no such thing as a universal. Whatever entity is purported to exist because of a confusion will of course disappear along with the untangling of the ideas that were illegitimately assimilated together in the first place. Plainly, if something is a muddle, it can't be right. To declare something as muddled, therefore, is enough to reject it. Ramey's denouncement of universals thus makes the investigation into whether they exist redundant. Yet in the second strand of his conclusion where Ramsey explicitly addresses the question that guides his investigation, he remains agnostic about whether there are universals. Furthermore he goes onto concede in his post-script that 'actual analysis' could discover there to be universals as Russell had envisaged (1931:135). The results of legitimate analysis, however, could never establish something that was a muddle. It would be like discovering a round square. It would not be a discovery, but a mistake.

Therefore, it seems that in order to remain an agnostic Ramsey must drop the claim that the theory of universals is a muddle. That there is an illegitimate conflation between namehood and incompleteness, however, forms the central argument and purpose of Ramsey's paper. It's clear that this strand of his conclusion cannot be dropped. In order to consistently argue that there is such a muddle, on the other hand, Ramsey must strengthen his agnosticism to full blown scepticism regarding the existence of universals. However, as we shall see, this is a much

stronger claim than is supported by the arguments in Ramsey's paper and furthermore is not the kind of view that Ramsey wants to advocate. It is clear, then then that the two strands of Ramsey's conclusion seem to be in conflict with each other.

It is not obvious how to approach this conflict and separate out the ideas that Ramsey is looking to reject from those that he leaves open as potentially legitimate considerations. I suggest that we should begin where Ramsey himself began, that is to say, with Russell. Ramsey's essay after all is a specialised and directed attack on certain ideas in Russell's philosophy regarding universals. To understand the different strands of Ramsey's response to Russell therefore we must begin at the source of Russell's theorising about universals, the different considerations he brings into play and the wider philosophical picture into which they are placed. It is only within this context that we can attempt to makes sense of the conflict in Ramsey's conclusion and to expound the details of Ramsey's arguments. For this reason the following section will provide a substantial exposition of Russell's views regarding universals spanning from 1912 to 1918 which will be drawn upon throughout the thesis as the starting point of Ramsey's critique.

1.2 Russell's theory of universals

Ramsey attributes the formulation of the question that opens his essay (whether objects divide into particulars and universals) to Russell's essay; *The Relation of*

Universals and Particulars (1912). Concurrently with this article Russell forwards a view of universals in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912). Though Ramsey does not explicitly mention *The Problems of Philosophy* in his essay a comparison of these two parallel writings will be fruitful in expounding the more general view that Ramsey encounters in Russell. As Ramsey's paper develops, however, it becomes clear that he is attributing to Russell the position that Russell adopts around 1918, articulated most clearly in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1918). Therefore in order to expound the relevant view that Ramsey is counteracting this section will track Russell's theory of universals spanning these three works hereafter referred to as RPU, PP and PLA respectively.

1.2.1 Universals in *The Problems of Philosophy*

In *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) Russell devotes two chapters to presenting his idea of a universal in an intuitive and accessible way. He then proceeds to discuss the kinds of considerations that he takes to be relevant to the debate in varying levels of detail. Significantly, nowhere in the article does he directly argue for the claim that there are universals. Instead he is focused on clarifying various features of universals and how they contrast with particulars. As a result, the two chapters on the topic provide a picture of Russell's conception of universals around this time rather than a defence of the existence of universals.

Universals in language

In his chapter 'The World of Universals' Russell notes that, in general, particulars are denoted by proper names and universals by 'other substantives, adjectives, prepositions and verbs' (1912:48). He is fervent in emphasising that universals include not only qualities (denoted by predicates) but also relations (ibid). He makes this clear from the plethora of examples of universals he gives: those typified in sense-data such as 'white…sweet…loud, hard' but also 'time-relations' and 'space-relations' such as 'being to the left of', 'before', 'after', 'resemblance' or 'similarity' relations between sense-data, etc. (1912:47-53). Indeed, Russell regards the failure to recognise the separate existence of relations as responsible for much metaphysical error and confusion (1912:48-50). It is for this reason that Ramsey surmises Russell's view to be that universals are given by the class of predicates *and* the class of relations (1912:113).

Russell's Platonic realism

At the beginning of the same chapter Russell modifies Plato's 'theory of ideas' in order to present his conception of a universal. He observes with Plato that in order to investigate a notion such as 'justice' we will consider the different acts that are just. That is to say, we will consider what it is that is preserved across the variety of these acts. Russell then identifies the intuition that 'justice' is constituted by what just acts have in common with each other. This is not to say, as he stresses, that

justice is to be identified with its particular instances but rather that it is something over and above them of which its particular instances partake (1912:47). The same is true of notions such as tall, hot, shy, breakable and those that 'will be applicable to a number of particular things, because they all participate in a common nature or essence' (ibid). Russell calls such entities 'universals', avoiding the platonic terminology of 'ideas' (ibid).

On Plato and Russell's account, universals do not exist in the 'world of sense' (ibid). According to Russell our most direct interaction with the world is in the ever-fluctuating impressions and experiences that constitute our sense-data (1912:8). It is an intrinsic feature of such sense-data that it is particular. Thus Russell's summary:

> We speak of whatever is given in sensation, or is of the same nature as things given in sensation, as a particular, in opposition to this, a universal will be anything which may be shared by many particulars, and has those characteristics which, as we saw, distinguish justice and whiteness from just acts and white things (Russell, 1912:48).

Russell expands on this idea in the following chapter where he discusses our knowledge of universals. He holds that there are some universals we are acquainted with such as 'white' and some we know through description such as 'greater than'. In the case of knowledge by acquaintance:

…when we see a white patch, we are acquainted, *in the first instance*, with the particular patch; but by seeing many white patches, we easily learn to abstract the whiteness which they all have in common. (Russell, 1912:52, emphasis added)

The idea is that those universals which can be known by acquaintance are those which are abstracted more immediately from the particular cases while universals that are known by description require a greater degree of abstraction (1912:53). The universal 'similarity', for example, can be abstracted from two experiences of white but we must subsequently deduce from two relations of similarity the universal 'more similar than' or 'greater than' (1912:52). In both cases though, it is still the case that universals are 'abstracted' from particulars. Therefore while particulars are immediate to us in our sense-data, universals always require a process of abstraction (to some greater or lesser degree) from our particular experiences in order for us to be acquainted with them. This is what Russell means by saying that only particulars exist in the 'world of sense' (1912:47).

A related feature of universals according to Plato and Russell is that, not being in the world of sense, they lack the characteristic of being in a perpetual state of change. By contrast to those momentary things given in sensation, universals are eternal and unchanging (1912:47). Russell claims that it is this quality of universals that led Plato to posit the 'world of ideas' of which the reality we experience is only

a pale reflection (ibid). For Plato the impermanence of the ever-altering particulars given in sensation makes them 'less real' than the immutable universals of which they are instances. Though Russell largely adopts Plato's position he does not afford the 'supra-sensible world' with the same metaphysical priority that Plato does (ibid).

The existence of universals

For Russell, rather than an obscure philosophical posit, universals are centrally significant to many areas of philosophy and to our knowledge of truth. It's clear that in *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell conceives of universals to be such that they are already deeply familiar to us and that their existence is not especially contestable. This is clear, for instance, when he remarks:

> Seeing that nearly all the words to be found in the dictionary stand for universals, it is strange that hardly anyone except students of philosophy ever realises that there are such entities as universals (Russell, 1912:48).

That the existence of universals is not more widely acknowledged Russell attributes to our affinity with particulars so that we contemplate the instances of a universal and not the universal itself. We do not draw the same ontological commitments from terms for universals as we do from names for particulars because:

We feel such words to be incomplete and insubstantial; they seem to demand a context before anything can be done with them (Russell, 1912:48).

This idea sows the seed for a thought that, as we shall see, is developed by Russell in *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* and is articulated by Ramsey as a central motivation behind Russell's theory of universals.

On the face of it Russell is more concerned in the book to explain and expound his theory of universals while the question of whether or not there are universals is never addressed directly. It is addressed indirectly however, when Russell denies the reducibility of universals to particulars, and it's also clear that Russell considers this sufficient to satisfy the question of their existence (1912:49). Indeed, he introduces the discussion following the irreducibility of universals thus: 'Having now seen that there must be such entities as universals…' (Russell, 1912:50).

Russell's discussion of the irreducibility of universals takes the form of a rebuttal of Berkeley and Hume's idea that when we conceive of something like 'triangularity' we do so by conceiving of a particular triangle, and reasoning about it in such a way that we exploit only those features it shares with other particular triangles (1912:49). Thus we are not required to posit universals; they are accounted for by the particulars which Russell takes to be their instances. Russell argues against this view by pointing out that in order to exploit only those features that triangles have in common one has to rely on a notion of what their common

features are. In other words, we cannot recognise that certain diverse particulars are all triangles unless we already have in play some way of identifying them as a class. According to Russell, whatever Berkeley and Hume employ to account for this problem cannot be particular. Whether they admit there to be triangularity which the triangles partake in, or a relation of resemblance between the shapes that enables us to group them as a class, or even a second-order resemblance between the resemblance relations that hold between the triangles, they will be forced to admit some kind of universal. He then concludes that:

> …having been forced to admit this universal, we find that it is no longer worthwhile to invent difficult and implausible theories to avoid the admission of such universals as whiteness and triangularity (Russell, 1912:49).

Leaving aside the adequacy of Russell's representation of Berkeley and Hume and granting Russell the claim that to admit a universal such as resemblance is to open the flood gates to admitting the plethora of universals he envisages, there is still an assumption in Russell's argument that seems strangely undefended. It is that if we accept the truth of the proposition 'triangle A resembles triangle B', for example, then we accept that the resemblance relation in the proposition denotes the existence of a universal. This point is made by Bostock:

Russell's assumption seems to be that if you accept the truth of any such [simple sentence containing a predicate] then you thereby accept the existence of an entity that is named by nominalising its predicate. That entity will be a universal. No wonder Russell writes as if the existence of universals is not - or should not be - a matter of controversy (Bostock, 2012:243).

In fact Russell makes the stronger claim that every sentence contains a word that denotes a universal (whether or not its grammatical form makes this obvious). From this he concludes that all truths must involve universals (1912:48). Here again we see that Russell adopts a position of Platonic realism regarding universals. Articulating this assumption therefore explains the attitude Russell adopts towards defending universals and why he takes the existence of universals so much for granted, as Bostock points out. However, it also helps to explain why Russell does not even articulate any of the competing positions that stand opposed to his Platonic realism and thus does not adequately defend the assumption on which so much seems to rest regarding his approach to and conception of universals.

Mind-independence

Legitimately or not, Russell takes his demonstration of the irreducibility of universals to afford them some kind of existence and his next move is to argue that this existence is mind-independent.

He first observes that certain facts involving universals such as 'Edinburgh is north of London' will be true whether or not there are minds (1912:50). In other words, I do not make such a proposition true by knowing it; I *discover* that it is true. If the proposition is mind-independent, Russell continues, it must be the case that its constituents are also mind-independent. For if they were not then the proposition would be dependent on the mind after all, since it depends for its truth on its parts. Since propositions involving universals are mind-independent and since they have universals as their constituents it follows that universals must be mind-independent (1912:50).

If we concede to Russell that propositions are mind-independent, this argument still requires the same assumption of Russell's Platonic realism that substantiates his argument for the existence of universals. Otherwise Russell cannot assume that when we speak of the propositions that 'involve' universals what we mean is that the propositions have universals as their constituents. For, it is the premise that universals are parts of proposition's that enables Russell to conclude that they too must be mind-independent.

Another argument Russell puts forward to this effect is that if universals were dependant on the mental then they would be robbed of perhaps their most essential feature, that of their *universality* (1912:51). In order to say that two people can apprehend the same universal it must be that the universal has some kind of objectivity akin to the objectivity of particulars. Universals are denied this

important feature, however, if they are conceived of as private mental objects (ibid).

Subsistence

Russell diagnoses that people have mistakenly thought of universals as mental entities because of the 'very peculiar kind of being that belongs to universals' (1912:50). This brings to the fore a question that has so far remained in the background of Russell's account, namely, what Russell means when he claims that universals exist. We have seen that universals are not mental and yet neither are they physical: they do not exist in the world of sense and they do not exist in time, yet they have some kind of being which Russell takes to be demonstrated by their irreducibility. We may legitimately wonder what it means to say that something exists although it is not in the world of sense and it is independent of time; such characteristics being at least typical of existing things. Whatever this 'peculiar' kind of existence turns out to be, it is clear that it is very different from the existence which Russell attributes to particulars (1912:12-13).

In acknowledgement of this Russell distinguishes between 'being' and 'existence'. On his account something *exists* if it is in time, that is, if it is temporally ordered in some sense (1912:51). Contrastingly, saying of something that it has *being* or that it *subsists* does not imply that it is temporally ordered but still posits the entity in question (ibid). Straightforwardly then, particulars exist and universals

subsist (ibid). Making this distinction satisfies the claim that universals do not exist in the same sense as particulars and yet still have some kind of being. Less straightforwardly it means that Russell posits two ontological realms:

> The world of universals, therefore, may also be described as the world of being. The world of being is unchangeable, rigid, exact…The world of existence is fleeting, vague, without sharp boundaries, without any clear plan or arrangement, but it contains all thoughts and feelings, all data of the sense, and all physical objects… (Russell, 1912:51).

Russell's discussion not only leaves opens up the question regarding the relationship between the existence of particulars and the subsistence of universals, but names further broader questions as to the relationship between the two realms that he posits for universals and particulars to respectively inhabit. One such question area is whether, on Russell's account, the existence of particulars is prior to the subsistence of universals. Putting this more broadly, given that Russell distinguishes between two kinds of existence which are connected in some way it is natural, I think, to feel that one must be prior to the other, or somehow depend upon the other. Further aspects of Russell's account provide us with reasons for wondering whether he takes the existence of particulars to have metaphysical priority.

Generally throughout both chapters it's clear that Russell relies on the notion of a particular in order to forward his conception of universals. In this way it seems that particulars are prior to universals, at least in order of *explanation*. Furthermore, as we have already seen in the discussion of Russell's Platonic realism, Russell holds that all universals are abstracted from particulars; though some are grasped almost immediately from the particular cases while others require a greater degree of abstraction (1912:53). It's not clear whether Russell intends this priority of abstraction to imply that universals depend on particulars merely in terms of how we comprehend them, or whether he means to say that universals depend for their very existence on the particulars from which we abstract them.

Russell makes it clear however that he denies the intuition that the familiar existence of particulars must necessarily be prior to the more elusive 'subsisting' of universals. He explicitly insists that the way we conceive of the direction of the priority relationship between particular and universal will be affected merely by our oscillating preferences (1912:53). The 'mathematician' and the 'builder of metaphysical systems', for example, will have more interest in the subsisting eternal, unchanging, world of universals than the ever-fluctuating immediate world of sense data and so will consider the existence of universals as primary and the kind of existing done by particulars as dependant on it. Russell concludes that the priority of explanation between particulars and universals need not have much

metaphysical weight since the direction of the dependence is accounted for merely by our interests and bias:

> According to our temperaments, we shall prefer the contemplation of the one or the other. The one we do not prefer will probably seem to us a pale shadow of the one we prefer, and hardly worthy to be regarded as in any sense real (Russell, 1912:51).

He is careful to leave open, however, the question of the relationship between the two kinds of existence and with it the intuition that one may ground the other. He concludes of the separate realms of existence afforded to the particular and to the universal that

> …both are real, and both are important to the metaphysician. Indeed no sooner have we distinguished the two worlds than it becomes necessary to consider their relations (Russell, 1912:51).

Thus the substance of the relation between existence and subsistence does not lie in either's metaphysical priority, since it is only our own interests and bias that make us see one as prior to the other. The remaining question of what the relation between the existence of particulars and the subsistence of universals amounts to is instead subsumed into the broader question of the relationship between the two

ontological realms of 'existence' and 'being', and this question is simply left open by Russell.

Summary

The two chapters in *The Problems of Philosophy* that Russell dedicates to his theory of universals are 'The World of Universals' and 'On Our Knowledge of Universals'. Suspending an analysis of the success of his arguments and the legitimacy of his assumptions in these chapters Russell is certainly successful in presenting an intuitive and accessible picture of what he takes a universal to be.

In *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell conceives of universals as the common essence of particulars. Unlike particulars they do not exist in the world of sense; instead we become acquainted with them through a process of abstraction from the particulars that partake in them. Their existence is mind independent. They are denoted in predicates and relational terms in propositions, and since there is a universal denoted by every proposition, universals are involved in all truths. They are as common and familiar as the words that denote them in the dictionary. They do not exist in the same sense that particulars exist. Rather, they subsist, that is, they do not exist in time. They are eternal and they do not change. Universals are contrasted with but not reducible to or necessarily dependent upon particulars. It is clear that the two entities are deeply interwoven. For Russell, particular and

universal make up either side of the same ontological division; they come together in his toolkit for explaining and understanding the world.

1.2.2 Universals in *On the Relations of Universals and Particulars*

Russell's *On the Relations of Universals and Particulars* (1911) is the starting point of Ramsey's article. Indeed Ramsey intentionally borrows from the first line of the paper his own opening line and the formulation of the question in dispute:

> The purpose of the following paper is to consider whether there is a fundamental division of the objects with which metaphysics is concerned into two classes, universals and particulars, or whether there is any way of overcoming the dualism (Russell, 1911:1).

> The purpose of this paper is to consider whether there is a fundamental division of objects into two classes, particulars and universals (Ramsey, 1931:112).

Again, in this paper Russell does not directly defend his view that there is such an ultimate metaphysical distinction but instead sets about articulating and developing what he takes to be the main considerations involved in the debate. He does so by investigating the main views that one might forward to substantiate the difference between particulars and universals and to argue that the distinction is ultimate. The four candidates Russell considers are: a distinction in psychological

properties; a distinction between things that exist in time and things that do not; a distinction in logical properties; and finally a distinction in physical properties.

Psychological difference

Russell quickly rejects the attempt to distinguish particular and universal by employing the psychological distinction that can be drawn between percepts and concepts. He acknowledges that there is a distinction between objects that we perceive (percepts) and objects that we conceive of (concepts) and that it is intuitive to suppose that this distinction aligns with the distinction between objects that are particulars and objects that are universals, respectively. He then goes on to give two reasons for rejecting this psychological division as a basis for the distinction between particular and universal.

Russell notes, on the one hand, that basing the particular-universal distinction on something psychological would mean that we would be unable to apply it to those objects that are not the objects of mental acts (1911:2). In this case, even if we granted that the existence of universals was mind-independent; those objects that could be called universals would be strangely limited to those that were objects of mental acts. It seems clear however that since the distinction between particular and universal is one that posits a metaphysical difference - a difference in reality - it should neither depend upon on or be limited by the mental acts that occur regarding them.

The second[2] and primary reason that Russell gives for rejecting a psychological approach is that distinct psychological acts may not have the same object:

The distinction of percepts and concepts is too psychological for an ultimate metaphysical distinction. Percepts and concepts are respectively the relata of two different relations, perception and conception, and there is nothing in their definitions to show whether or how they differ (Russell, 1911:2).

For instance although I could perceive a giraffe I could also conceive of one, even if I had never seen the animal; in this case the giraffe is able to be the object of my perception and equally the object of my conception. It is clear from this that the distinction between percepts and concepts does not sufficiently align with the distinction between particulars and universals which posits a mind-independent division in reality.

Existence in time

Russell then moves to consider a metaphysical distinction, employing again the idea of universals as entities that do not exist in time. Particulars contrast with universals by existing in time, that is to say, by being distinct from time slices and bearing temporal relations to each other such as 'before' (1911:2). He observes that the distinction can be resisted from both sides; either by maintaining that nothing exists

[2] Though I call it the second reason, as a matter of fact it comes first in the order of Russell's own text (Russell, 1911:2).

in time and that any entities that seem to violate this can be shown to be reducible to and explained by things with timeless existence; or by maintaining that everything exists in time and that things that seem to violate this can be shown to be reducible to and explained by things with temporal relations (1911:3). Seemingly because of this stand-off Russell does not put much weight behind the distinction between 'things that exist in time' and 'things that do not' as a basis for the distinction between particular and universal, and scarcely mentions it again.

Physical difference

The physical difference that Russell identifies between particulars and universals regards their location. The essential characteristic of particulars is that they can only occupy a single spatial location, that is to say, they cannot be in more than one place at any one time. This contrasts with universals which are not distinguished by their locations. The universal 'blue', for example, is a single universal even though there are many instances of it which occupy distinct spatial locations. Russell takes care in the article not to lean on the elusive notion of 'place' in order to say that a particular cannot be in two places at once while a universal can. For this reason he prefers the definition that, for particulars, 'certain perceptible spatial relations imply diversity of their terms' (1911:24). In other words, if our sense data present two instances of the same colour as being in a different location then it implies some corresponding different in the objects of the sense data, the objects in reality.

…if I perceive two objects in the field of vision, we must suppose that at least two real objects are concerned in causing my perception (Russell, 1911:20).

Logical difference

Russell's preferred way of grounding the particular and universal division, however, is to employ the logical distinction between the class of subjects and the class of predicates and relations. Russell holds that it is intuitive to align these two distinctions by defining particulars as those things which can only be subjects or terms of relations and which cannot themselves be predicates or relations (1911:5-6). Anything that is a predicate or relation is instead defined as a universal (1911:6). If predication is an ultimate relation, the best definition of particulars is that they are entities which can only be the subjects of predicates or terms of relations i.e. that they are (in the logical sense) substances. This definition is preferable to one introducing space or time, because space and time are accidental characteristics of the world with which we happen to be acquainted, and therefore are destitute of the necessary universality belonging to purely logical categories (Russell, 1911:23).

Russell is careful to note explicitly that when he speaks of 'subjects' and 'predicates' or 'substantives' and 'verbs' this is merely shorthand. His concern is not with the grammatical entities themselves but rather with the objects that they denote (1911:4). Thus when Russell claims that predicates and relations are

universals he should strictly be interpreted as claiming that the objects denoted by predicates and relational expressions are universals.

On this view then, the central characteristic that is used to separate universals from particulars is whether or not something is a predicate or relation (that is to say, whether or not an object is denoted by a predicate or relation). If some entity is denoted by a predicate or relation then we can say that it's a universal, and if it is not and the entity can only be the subject or term in a relation, then we can say it's a particular. It is therefore important to Russell, if he is to separate particulars and universals in this way, that there is a class including predicates and relations and that we can articulate the rule by which we include its members and exclude everything else.

Russell thus lays out some of the concerns that he takes to be involved in identifying this class of predicates and relations. Since this class will be a disjunction of two classes (the class of predicates and the class of relations) he focuses on considering the connection between predicates and relations. In the course of this examination Russell leaves the class of relations undisputed; he simply states that he will assume that there are relations and that they are distinguished according to the number of terms that they take as subjects in the simplest propositions in which they occur (1911:4-5). It is the class of predicates that is put under most scrutiny by Russell. This is because Russell takes it that predicates denote those universals whose existence is most commonly the subject of dispute since 'universals are

generally conceived as common properties of particulars, in fact, as predicates (1911:4)'. Therefore, in order to preserve the common notion of a universal Russell must identify whether there is a class of predicates.

In order to do this Russell observes that we must employ logical analysis (1911:4). If it turns out that predicates are not reducible to relations then logical analysis of propositions that have a grammatical subject-predicate form will show whether there is a term in these propositions that is 'philosophically as well as grammatically intransitive' (1911:5). Such a term we may call a predicate. If it turns out that predicates are reducible to relations then logical analysis will be required to inspect those propositions with the misleading appearance of a subject-predicate proposition to reveal what relations such propositions involve. In this case, the question becomes whether among such relations we can identify a relation of predication or whether the relations that are yielded by the analysis are simply too diverse to support such a division (1911:6). What Russell draws out from both scenarios is that we can conclude that there is a class of predicates only if we can identify a similar logical functioning of a class of terms which aligns with those terms which we would identify as denoting universals. That is to say, when we analyse propositions we can identify a logical feature common to all predicates that distinguishes them from subjects.

As such the debate over whether there are universals is taken by Russell to especially hinge on whether we can identify a unified class of predicates that

correspond in some way to how universals are commonly conceived of. If such a class does not exist then the project to identify a logical feature that will distinguish particular and universal will not succeed.

> The question whether philosophy must recognise two ultimately distinct kinds of entities, particulars and universals, turns… on the question whether there is an ultimate simple asymmetric relation which may be called predication, or whether all apparent subject-predicate propositions are to be analysed into propositions of other forms, which do not require a radical difference of nature between the apparent subject and the apparent predicate (Russell, 1911:6).

Having identified the question of whether there is an ultimate relation of predication as key to establishing universals by logical means, Russell wonders if this question could be answered by 'inspection' and concludes that although it may be possible he cannot understand how it would work. It's unclear what Russell means by 'inspection' here and in particular whether he means it to be different from analysis. If so, perhaps he means it to be something like collating the results of analysis, or perhaps he means more generally, considering whether or not grammatical predicates *seem* to manifest a simple relation of predication in common with each other. At any rate Russell rejects this method in favour of the even vaguer method of 'thing' analysis:

I think… that [the question] can be decided in favour of predication by the analysis of *things* and by our considerations as to spatio-temporal diversity (Russell, 1911:6).

As Russell's reflections on such an analysis unfold we see that he means a kind of conceptual analysis of the word 'thing'. This leads him into a lengthy defence of the irreducibility of 'things'- particulars - to universals in which Russell articulates the physical differences between them. As we have already discussed, this amounts to the claim that particulars cannot be in more than one place at one time while universals can. Russell takes this defence to be necessary because particulars and universals are either side of the same coin, they come together in our attempt to explain and categorise the world. In other words, to deny that there are particulars is to deny that there is an ultimate particular universal distinction (1911:23).

Russell concludes that the difference in spatio-temporal location between particular and universal makes the distinction between particular and universal 'unavoidable' but that, as we mentioned, the logical definition of the division is superior. He gives a succinct summary of his results including a warning about the contingency of the non-logical distinctions that he articulates:

We have thus a division of all entities into two classes: (1) particulars, which enter into complexes only as the subjects of predicates or the terms of relations, and, if they belong to the world of which we have experience, exist in time and cannot occupy more than one

place at one time in the space to which they belong; (2) universals, which can occur as predicates or relations in complexes, exist in time, and have no relation to one place which they may not simultaneously have to another (Russell, 1911:24).

Comparison of RUP with PP

In *The Problems of Philosophy* (PP) and *On the Relation of Universals and Particulars* (RUP) Russell takes the same kind of considerations to be involved with establishing a distinction between particulars and universals. Russell's discussion of the distinction between percepts and concepts in RUP can be seen at some points as an extension of his discussion of mind-independence in PP. Both works involve a lengthy defence of the irreducibility of particulars to universals. Both bring out the distinction between things that exist in time and things that do not, although in RUP Russell acknowledges the strong counter-arguments that can be levelled against such a distinction. Both acknowledge the physical differences between particular and universal, although they play a more central role in RUP. Both also bring out the interdependence of particular and universal as an ontological division. Finally, both PP and RUP acknowledge a logical distinction that puts on the one side universals as defined by the class of predicates and relations and on the other particulars as defined by those terms that can only be subjects or terms in relations and cannot themselves be predicates or relations. In RUP the strength and importance of this way of dividing particular from universal is brought out more

fully but so is the difficulty involved in establishing such a definition owing to the question of whether there is a fundamental unified relation of predication. In general the dependence of the logical distinction upon analysis is a theme in which RUP notably exceeds PP.

1.2.3 Universals in *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*

The centrality of a logical definition carries over into Russell's conception of a universal in *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1911). In these lectures Russell presents a view of the relationship between logic and metaphysics in which he acknowledges a great debt to Wittgenstein (1911:177). As part of his view Russell maintains the ontological distinction between particular and universal and forwards a conception of universals that is distinct from the considerations that preceded it.

Russell's Logical Atomism

Let us first sketch some features of Russell's logical atomism in order to place his theory of universals in a wider context. In the lectures, Russell disclaims that he intends not so much to defend, as to set out a view that he has arrived at as a result of his thinking in the philosophy of mathematics (1918:178-179). He calls this theory 'logical atomism' which he explains to be the view that analysis will yield 'atoms' from which we may derive a metaphysics (1918:179). In explaining what he means by 'atoms' Russell brings out how this view is closely connected to a theory of universals.

The reason that I call my doctrine *logical* atomism is because the atoms that I wish to arrive at as the sort of last residue in analysis are logical atoms and not physical atoms. Some of them will be what I call 'particulars'- such things as little patches of colour or sounds, momentary things - and some of them will be predicates or relations and so on (Russell, 1918:179).

Russell is conceiving of particulars and universals, then, as among those things that are given in the results of such an analysis. As such it's clear that his concern is with the atomic case, that is, with the distinction between particular and universal at the atomic level, as it had been earlier in RUP's search for a fundamental relation of predication.

Throughout the lectures Russell also articulates an idea that is merely implicit in PP and RUP, namely, the reason why in the search for a distinction in reality it is at all fruitful to turn to language, and in particular the distinction between subjects and predicates. This approach relies on the assumption that there is some link between language and the world; in other words, that some features of language must mirror some features of reality if language is to successfully represent the latter. On this assumption identifying a feature of language enables us to make a conclusion about reality. For instance if in all atomic propositions we discover a distinction of elements into a subject and a term functioning as a predicate or relation we can conclude that this must mirror some distinction in reality, thus

establishing a division between objects into particulars and universals. Russell is explicit that his theory takes there to be such a word-world link.

> …in a logically correct symbolism there will always be a certain fundamental identity of structure between a fact and the symbol for it; and… the complexity of the symbol corresponds very closely with the complexity of the facts symbolised by it…I shall therefore in future assume that there in an objective complexity in the world, and that it is mirrored by the complexity of propositions (Russell, 1918:197).

Logical Definition

In the course of the lectures, Russell again defends the irreducibility of particulars to universals that he takes to be a rejection of ideas in Hume and Berkeley (1918:206). He also once more gives centrality to the logical definition of particulars and universals, defending the superiority of logical definition as divorcing the truth of the definition from a reliance on empirical facts (1918:199). Russell claims that in every atomic fact there is something that is 'naturally' expressed by a verb, predicate or adjective and something expressed by a 'proper name' (1918:199-200). He then groups the former as relations and the latter as subjects. Russell defines a name as a word that stands for a particular (1918:200).

Russell also distinguishes descriptions from names, and throughout the lectures Russell emphasises a division between these two kinds of symbol (1918:200-201). This is brought out most fully in lecture VI, *Descriptions and Incomplete Symbols*. Since an atomic proposition is one which does not describe particulars but mentions them, that is, 'actually names them', and since 'you can only name them by means of a name' Russell concludes that, indeed, the only word that *could* stand for a particular is a name (1918:200). Thus universals are defined by the class of predicates and relations in atomic propositions and particulars by the class of names in atomic propositions that are terms in relations but not themselves relations (1918:199-200).

Asymmetry of dependence

Russell puts a lot of emphasis on the fact that understanding a name is more straightforward than understanding a predicate and from this he derives a deep asymmetry between the nature of a particular and the nature of a universal (1918:201-206).

He begins with the observation that, strictly speaking, we can only understand symbols, and we understand a symbol when we know what the symbol stands for (1918:205). Russell takes it that to understand a name one has simply to be acquainted with the particular that is its meaning[3] (1918:201). Therefore, to

[3] This, of course, drastically restricts the category of names to words like 'this' and 'that' and means that the well-worn 'Socrates' is really just a truncated description (Russell, 1918:200-201).

understand a name, for Russell, is a straightforward process of acquaintance with its denotation and does not depend on anything else.

…in order to understand a name for a particular, the only thing necessary is to be acquainted with that particular. When you are acquainted with that particular, you have a full, adequate, and complete understanding of the name, and no further information is required. No further information as to the facts that are true of that particular would enable you to have a fuller understanding of the meaning of the name (Russell, 1918:202).

For Russell, then, particulars have an important kind of independence. Our understanding of any one particular will rely only on our acquaintance with that particular and not on anything else (1918:201-203). In this way, though particulars can combine with other elements to form a fact, they do not depend for their existence on such facts or indeed on anything else. Particulars are self-contained, they are complete.

Particulars have this peculiarity, among the sort of objects that you have to take account of in an inventory of the world, that each of them stands entirely alone and is completely self-subsistent…That is to say, each particular that there is in the world does not in any way logically depend upon any other particular (Russell, 1918:201-202).

By contrast, understanding a predicate is a more complicated matter (1918:205). Grasping a predicate does not only involve acquaintance with a universal but requires acquaintance with how the predicate is used, that is, with what sort of thing the predicate will be applied to. Only then can we be said to have understand the predicate and to have grasped the universal that it stands for. Russell gives the example of understanding the predicate 'red'. In order to do this we have to understand what someone means when they attribute 'red' to something. In this sense we do not fully understand 'red' if we only understand it as an isolated abstract property. Rather, we master the predicate when we grasp what 'being red' amounts to, that is, when we grasp how it would apply to some object. For this reason predicates are not independent in the way that names are. To understand a predicate is to understand how it will function in a proposition, how it will combine with a name to say something about the world. In this sense Russell holds that we must grasp not the word 'red' but the propositional function 'x is red' (ibid). A predicate thus has a kind of dependence upon the proposition, a kind of incompleteness. That is why he says that to understand a predicate, 'You have to bring in the form of a proposition' (ibid)[4].

Since we can only understand symbols and do so by understanding their denotation, it follows that we understand universals by understanding the predicates

[4] Elsewhere Russell is explicit about what he means by a proposition's form, 'The form of the proposition is what which is in common between any two propositions of which the one can be obtained from the other by substituting other constituents for the original ones' (Russell, 1918:238).

that refer to them (1918:201-205). For this reason the dependence of the predicate on the proposition transfers to the universal so that, for Russell, a universal cannot stand alone in the way that a particular can because understanding it requires us to 'bring in the form of a proposition' (ibid). In this sense they are somehow incomplete and depend on the propositions, or the facts that they constitute[5]. The same applies to relations and indeed 'all those things that are not particulars' (ibid).

Russell therefore identifies a deep logical distinction between predicates and names. Predicates depend for their meaning on the form of the proposition in a way that names, as independent self-contained elements of a proposition, do not. Since predicates are incomplete in a way that names are not, we have identified a characteristic that is sufficiently asymmetrical and that we can therefore exploit to distinguish predicates from names. Thus Russell identifies a fundamental difference in the functioning of expressions in atomic propositions that enables us to ground a distinction in reality between particular and universal. Particulars are independent, self-standing entities while universals are incomplete and have internal to them the form of the propositions that they can enter into.

Comparison of PLA with PP and RUP

In PLA Russell makes the logical distinction between a particular and a universal, which also appears in PP and RUP, more central to his thinking. Relatedly, he

[5] Atomic facts and atomic propositions are used interchangeably here because, for Russell, atomic propositions have in them as actual constituents those things in reality which they are about (Russell, 1918:196, 242).

focuses on expressions in atomic propositions. This picks up from Russell's search in RUP for a fundamental relation of predication. PLA, however, contains more substantial theory about atomic propositions, their structure, their relation to atomic facts, etc. It is Russell's conception of a universal as incomplete, as dependant on the form of the proposition which is most significantly novel to PLA and neither PP nor RUP contain any doctrine comparable to this.

1.3 Ramsey's target

This section will suggest a solution to the problem identified in §1.1 by employing the exposition of Russell given in §1.2. It will do so by articulating exactly what Ramsey aims to deny in *Universals*; separating out the aspects of Russell theory that Ramsey is not concerned with from those aspects he is concerned to explicitly reject. In order to fully expound the subtly of Ramsey's contention it will then distinguish between different relevant notions, in particular the different kinds of incompleteness in play.

1.3.1 Resolving the tension

This section it will aim to demonstrate that being explicit about the precise target of Ramsey's resolves the apparent tension in his conclusion.

Summary so far

After our long survey of Russell's theory of universals spanning three works, we can return to the problem that initiated this exposition. We noted that Ramsey's conclusion contained two separable strands. On the one hand Ramsey holds that that the theory of universals is a muddle and on the other he claims that we cannot know *a priori* whether universals exist. We found these two claims to conflict with each other. In particular it seemed that in order to maintain that some sort of analysis could establish that there are universals Ramsey would have to drop the claim that the theory is universals is simply a muddle. For, no analysis could ever establish something that was a muddle; instead the process of analysis would simply reveal the way in which the theory was a mistake. However, the claim that the properties of namehood and incompleteness have been muddled so as to produce a conflation of ideas that has led to the theory of universals is the central contention of Ramsey's paper, as we will see in the following chapter. The other option is that Ramsey strengthens his agnosticism regarding the existence of universals to full blown scepticism. In this case his conclusion would be that the theory of universals results from a mistaken conflation of ideas and, for this reason, universals do not exist; they are merely the product of a failure to separate out the properties of two very different kinds of symbol. However, this is a much stronger claim that Ramsey's arguments support, as we will also see in the following chapter. In summary, although by calling something a muddle Ramsey is rejecting it, it's not

clear what exactly it is that he's rejecting and what he remains agnostic about, and whether both of these positions are consistent with each other.

The most striking feature of Russell's theory of universals that is brought out by our lengthy exposition is the diversity of considerations that Russell takes to relate to the question of universals. The exposition lets us see the way in which Russell's theory of universals develops over the course of these three works so that while some themes remain, by the time we get to PLA some considerations seen to have fallen out of Russell's thinking about universals altogether while some entirely new considerations have become central. While all three works attempt to expound the nature of universals by examining the suitability of different distinctions to act as a basis for establishing a distinction between particular and universal, Russell can be seen to increasingly emphasise logical over broadly metaphysical considerations.

We saw that while articulating a logical difference between particular and universal by defining them using the class, one the one hand, of subjects and, on the other hand, the class of predicates and relations is a theme that runs through all three works, it is most central to PLA. Similarly, while the irreducibility of universals to particulars is a common theme, though it is given most emphasis in PP and by PLA is a more of a mere corollary. There are also considerations that Russell develops both in PP and RUP such as: the distinction between things that exist in time and things that do not; the psychological distinction between percepts and concepts; the mind-independence of universals; the physical distinction between

universals that can be multiply located and particulars that cannot be in more than one place at a time. Russell does not address any of these considerations in PLA. Instead his central concern is to articulate a logical distinction between particular and universal that likewise does not appear in PP or in RUP. This is the contrast of a particular as independent and able to stand alone and a universal as incomplete in that it is dependent on the form of the proposition.

Therefore, when we identify Russell's theory of universals as the target of Ramsey's article we must keep in mind that this target is not a single unified theory. We can thus understand the different strands in Ramsey's conclusion as responding to different aspects of Russell's theory. There is a particular conception of a universal proposed by Russell that Ramsey's article aims to outright reject, and there are other considerations Russell takes to be relevant to a theory of universals regarding which Ramsey is happy to remain on the fence.

Ramsey's rejection

There is a very specific consideration in Russell's theory of universals which inspires Ramsey's paper. This is the conception of a universal as incomplete, as having intrinsic to it the form of the proposition and in this way being distinguished from the self-subsistent particular. Thus Ramsey does not so much reject Russell's theory of universals in its entirety as he rejects a conception of universals that came to dominate Russell's thinking when he was writing PLA.

Ramsey does, however, agree with Russell that particular and universal must be distinguished by means of some logical feature, if this is to be a substantial ontological division (Ramsey, 1931:113). He also agrees that this logical distinction must be found in atomic propositions, so the distinction will amount to some asymmetry of the functioning of terms in atomic propositions (1931:120-121).

The point at which Ramsey and Russell's positions diverge regards Russell's realisation of this aim; that is, his conception of a universal as incomplete. Russell's theory involves a conception of particular and universal in a way that posits a logical asymmetry between them; one is complete and one is not. This amounts to a difference in the functioning of terms in an atomic proposition that relies only on an *a priori* investigation into language. For this reason Ramsey specifically identifies Russell's conception of a universal as incomplete as the subject of the second half of his paper:

> Only on Mr Russell's theory will there be an intelligible difference between particular and universal, grounded on the necessity for there to be in each fact a copulating term or universal corresponding to the need for every sentence to have a verb (Ramsey, 1931:121).

It is this aspect of Russell's theory of universals that Ramsey will eventually call muddled and that his article takes as its target.

Ramsey's agnosticism

Having singled out Ramsey's conception of a universal as incomplete as it occurs in PLA we are left with the remaining aspects of Russell's theory of universals. Though we suggested that Ramsey is agnostic regarding some considerations in Russell's theory, it would be wrong to conclude that Ramsey is agnostic to *all* the various other aspects of Russell's theory. Ramsey, in fact, explicitly rejects most of these as well. The reason for this is that Ramsey agrees with the importance that Russell's gives to finding a logical distinction, if not with the realisation of this aim that Russell presents. What is most important to realise is that the only thing Ramsey rejects, as a *muddle* between the properties of two different symbols is the conception of a universal as incomplete. And though Ramsey does reject some other aspects of Russell's theory he does so for different reasons.

Ramsey gives no attention to the distinction between things existing in time and things not existing in time or the irreducibility of universals to particulars. Instead, Ramsey's summary of Russell's view near the beginning of his essay identifies only three kinds of distinctions between particular and universal: 'psychological, physical, and logical' (1931:113). Ramsey quickly rejects the psychological distinction between percept and concept for much the same reason that Russell

does in RUP (Russell, 1911:2). He expresses this objection by observing that 'a difference in two mental acts may not correspond to any difference whatever in their objects' (Ramsey, 1931:113).

Ramsey's rejection of the physical distinction between particular and universal - so central in RUP - is more nuanced. He separates out the empirical claim that is being made when we say that a particular cannot be in more than one place at one time while a universal can, pointing out that the empirical facts are not in dispute. For when, for instance, Dr Whitehead says that a table is an adjective, and Mr Johnston that it is a substantive, they are not arguing about how many places the table can be in at once, but about its logical nature (Ramsey, 1931:113).

Ramsey concludes that only logical considerations could establish a distinction between particular and universal. Although Ramsey rejects Russell's suggestion for such a logical distinction, and along with it the possibility of establishing that universals exist for *a priori* reasons, this still leaves open that other considerations could establish an asymmetry in the functioning of terms in an atomic proposition that would enable us to ground a theory of universals. Perhaps Ramsey would accept, for example, the considerations regarding the multiple occupation of space-time points if they could be used to argue for the necessity of some logical division in atomic propositions. Ramsey does not give us much clue as to what kind of thing he has in mind unfortunately, referring as he does only vaguely to 'actual analysis' (Ramsey, 1931:135), but it's clear that he does leave a space for the debate to be

furthered and perhaps establish the existence of universals, and it is towards these legitimate considerations that Ramsey can be seen to remain agnostic.

3.1.3 Ramsey's target

We can therefore see that Ramsey's essay is very specifically directed towards one target and as a result does not pronounce on some of the surrounding issues. Ramsey's aim is to reject that universals are incomplete in the way that Russell claims they are in PLA. Therefore Ramsey is not so much rejecting a theory of universals *per se*, as he is rejecting a particular conception of a universal; namely, that of a universal as incomplete in a sense that a particular is not. This leaves space for Ramsey to maintain that universals might exist as long as what we mean by a universal has not been arrived at as the result of a muddle. Articulating the variety and diversity of the different concerns that Russell takes to be relevant to a theory of universals shows how Ramsey can both maintain that universals- as conceived of in PLA- are the result of a muddle while remaining agnostic as to whether or not some other considerations, collected under 'actual analysis', may satisfy him that universals exist.

Ramsey originally asks whether there is a fundamental division between objects into particular and universal. His answer to the question recognises alternatives possible ways of conceiving of universals. The conception of a universal as having internal to it the form of the proposition, the idea that there are things in the world

that are specially incomplete, has resulted from a muddle and thus should be rejected. If a theory of universals is to be successfully defended it must not conceive of universals in this way, lest it be reduced to a mere confusion. This conclusion unifies both the agnostic aspect of Ramsey's conclusion and the identification of the muddle.

However, the claim that Ramsey's real target is the conception of a universal as incomplete is still not entirely perspicuous. This is because Ramsey's denial that universals are incomplete in the way Russell presents them to be in PLA is not a straightforward rejection of Russell's position. For Ramsey does not deny that a universal possesses *all* of the features that Russell attributes to them in PLA. Rather, Ramsey intends to reject only those features of incompleteness which have become muddled with features of names. In order to properly articulate this subtle distinction and reach the heart of Ramsey's contention we need, therefore, to distinguish three different types of incompleteness that are in play and use these to identify the sense in which Ramsey wants to deny that universals are incomplete.

1.3.2 Three ways of being incomplete

This section will distinguish the characteristics of these three relevant types of incompleteness. To begin with there is the kind of incompleteness that Russell attributes to universals in PLA that we have so far identified as the target of Ramsey's paper. Since Ramsey's rejection of the characteristics Russell attributes to

universals denies that universals have some of these characteristic but accepts that they have others, to fully articulate Ramsey's contention we must therefore distinguish three types of incompleteness whose features overlap with each other.

PLA-incomplete

Firstly, there is the kind of incompleteness Russell attributes to universals in PLA that we discussed in §1.2.2. We saw that this incompleteness amounted to a kind of dependence on the form of the proposition, so that a predicate cannot be fully grasped without some understanding of its semantic role in a proposition. As such we cannot grasp a universal, like red, unless we grasp what it would be for an object to instantiate that universal, that is, unless we grasp what 'being red' amounts to. For this reason, in Russell's notation universals are always represented by use of a propositional function so that 'mortal' does not sufficiently denote the universal of mortality. Instead mortality must instead be represented by '*x* is mortal', making explicit the form of the proposition intrinsic to the universal. When I speak of a propositional function I mean no more than a function whose values are propositions. Propositional functions cannot stand alone because they include a variable and because the sameness and distinction of their argument places are essential to the functions that they are. Thus, by their nature, propositional functions and predicates have the same dependence on the propositions which are

their values, and so are the appropriate symbols to represent universals, according to Russell.

Importantly, a universal is incomplete in this way relative to the particular which is complete. Particulars are able to stand alone from a metaphysical point of view, which is to say that they have an independence from the propositions they enter into that universals do not. To understand a predicate is to understand how it will function in a proposition, that is, how it will combine with the other elements in a proposition to say something about the world. To understand a name however one need only be acquainted directly with the particular that it names. Thus while names can of course enter into propositions and combine with other elements to form a proposition, they are independent self-contained elements of that proposition, and as such the particulars that they denote do not have internal to them the form of the proposition in the way that universals do.

Russell attributes this incompleteness to predicates in atomic propositions so that he is able to exploit the asymmetry between the incompleteness of predicates and the completeness of names to argue for a fundamental difference in the functioning of expressions in atomic propositions, and hence find a way to ground an objective distinction between particular and universal. Russell also holds, less controversially, that this distinction holds in complex propositions and hence that complex predicates are incomplete in this way.

Thus the kind of incompleteness that Russell attributes to universals in PLA is characterised primarily as dependent on the form of the proposition as represented by employing a propositional function, as an attribute of complex and atomic expressions, and as contrasting with independent self-standing particulars. This will henceforth be referred to as 'PLA-incompleteness'.

Russell-incomplete

There is another kind of incompleteness that is expounded by Russell in PLA. This is the incompleteness captured in Russell's theory of incomplete symbols, which Russell devotes an entire lecture to explaining (Russell, 1918:lecture VI). Importantly, the theory is presented later on in the lecture series so that the context of Russell's logical atomism is already in place and, in particular, the central role of analysis in his approach has already been brought out. Against this backdrop Russell introduces an incomplete symbol as a symbol that is complex and can be replaced by a simpler paraphrase and, as such, will disappear during the process of analysis leaving only simple symbols (1918:244-245). An incomplete symbol then, according to Russell, cannot be said to have a simple designation to anything in reality but instead has a more complicated relation of meaning; referring by virtue of the simple designating symbols that define it (Russell, 1918:245). At some points in his paper, Ramsey too explicitly defines incomplete symbols in this way, '[an

incomplete symbol] has a relation of meaning not to one complex object but to the several simple objects that are named in its definition' (Ramsey, 1931:119).

The canonical examples of such incomplete symbols are, of course, class terms and definite descriptions such as 'the author of Waverley'. Such expressions appear on the surface to be simple designations - to refer directly to objects - when in fact they derive their meaning only from the context of the propositions in which they feature. This is, again, a kind of dependence on the form of the proposition, but a different kind from that involved in PLA-incompleteness:

> These things…which I call incomplete symbols, are things that have absolutely no meaning whatsoever in isolation but merely acquire a meaning in context…they are aggregations that only have a meaning in use and do not have any meaning in themselves (Russell, 1918:253).

Incomplete symbols only give the appearance of being a proper part of a proposition and fall out altogether when analysis reveals how the proposition is constructed. Therefore, such symbols are not designative elements and are better conceived of as logical constructions. Such constructions must 'be subject to analyses, be taken to pieces, pulled to bits, and shown to be simply separate pieces of one fact'(Russell, 1918:224).

Thus the kind of incompleteness that Russell presents in lecture VI of PLA is characterised by a complete dependence on the form of the proposition in that such complex symbols cannot be defined in isolation but only in the context of a proposition. This is because they derive their meaning entirely from the simple symbols named in their definition. As such, analysis will reveal that they are not among the ultimate building blocks of a proposition and that despite their misleading syntactic appearance they do not designate anything in reality. This will henceforth be referred to as 'Russell-incompleteness'.

Ramsey-incomplete

Lastly there is the kind of incompleteness that Ramsey himself attributes to universals. Even at the beginning of his article Ramsey admits that:

In a sense it might be urged, all objects are incomplete; they cannot occur in facts except in conjunction with other objects, and they contain the forms of the propositions of which they are constituents (Ramsey, 1931:115).

Thus Ramsey accepts that objects have a dependence on the form of the proposition. However, counting universals as objects, he then asks; 'In what way do universals do this more than anything else?' (Ramsey, 1931:115). The extent to which Ramsey accepts that universals are incomplete is the extent to which he accepts that particulars are also incomplete. He takes it that the dependence on the form of the proposition is no more a characteristic of an atomic predicate than it is

of an atomic name. That is to say that when we examine what this 'dependence' amounts to we find it to apply no more to universals than to predicates:

There is a sense in which any object is incomplete; namely that it can only occur in a fact by connection with an object or objects of a suitable type; just as any name is incomplete, because to form a proposition we have to join to it certain other names of suitable type (Ramsey, 1931:121).

The sense in which a predicate is dependent on the form of the proposition is not so much that it literally contains a gap - a variable - but rather that it has the potential to combine with other words to form a proposition. This is just to say that a predicate has a certain grammar; that it has internal to it its semantic role, which of course must also be true of names and all expressions that can together form a proposition. Ramsey quotes proposition 2.0122 of Wittgenstein's Tractatus to this effect:

The thing is independent, in so far as it can occur in all possible circumstances, but this form of independence is a form of connection with the atomic fact, a form of dependence. (It is impossible for words to occur in two ways, alone and in the proposition) (Wittgenstein, 1922:33).

Here there is no distinction made between different kinds of expressions in a proposition because all words have to be seen to function in this way. At the atomic

level the grammatical categories of subject and predicate are understood interdependently; to grasp a name is to grasp that it's the sort of thing that combines with a predicate; and to grasp a predicate is to grasp that it's the sort of thing that combines with a name. We see this feature in Frege's context principle that holds that only in the context of a proposition does a word have meaning (Frege, 1884:§60,62). Again this principle encompasses all expressions and as such does not make a distinction between subject and predicate.

Therefore, the kind of incompleteness that Ramsey attributes to universals is characterised by a dependence on the form of the proposition, but only in such a way as does not produce any asymmetry between predicates and names in atomic propositions. Both universals and particulars have as internal to them the functional role that they play when combined with other expressions in a proposition; they are both as complete and as incomplete as each other. This will henceforth be referred to as 'Ramsey-incompleteness'.

Ramsey's view of incompleteness

With these three kinds of incompleteness in place we can now fully articulate Ramsey's contention. In short, Ramsey's view is that all the elements in atomic propositions are Ramsey-incomplete and that anything that is PLA-incomplete is also Russell-incomplete.

This is to say that, according to Ramsey, there is a sense in which the elements in atomic propositions are incomplete (Ramsey, 1931:115,121). They have intrinsic to them their potential for combination with other elements of a proposition. Vitally, however, this incompleteness is not asymmetric; predicates have it no more than subjects, it is equally a feature of *all* expressions. For this reason the incompleteness of terms in atomic propositions cannot be a basis upon which we establish a logical distinction between particular and universals since it provides no distinction between the functioning of elements in an atomic proposition.

On the other hand Ramsey holds that some terms are PLA-incomplete, in particular complex predicates (Ramsey, 1931:123,129). Thus complex predicates have a dependence on the form of the proposition that subjects do not. However, Ramsey (1931:119,131,134) takes it that such expressions are also Russell-incomplete in that they do not correspond directly to anything in reality and instead derive their meaning entirely from the simple symbols that define them. Therefore, although complex predicates, and other such terms that are PLA-incomplete, present us with a sufficiently asymmetric division between the functioning of subject and predicate, they do not link up with reality in the right way so that we cannot infer from them a metaphysical distinction between particular and universal.

This is not to say, of course, that PLA-incompleteness is the same as Russell-incompleteness. Both are distinct theories; in particular Ramsey does not claim that an expression that is PLA-incomplete will necessarily have all the same features as

one that is Russell-incomplete. An expression that is PLA-incomplete may not, for example, have a misleading syntactic appearance. The point is simply that anything that is PLA-incomplete does not refer directly to anything in reality just as Russell-incomplete expressions fail to do. They are merely logical constructions that will disappear upon analysis and so the asymmetry of dependence that there is between complex predicates and subjects will not be able to ground a distinction between particular and universal.

We may put Ramsey's contention like this. To ground a distinction between particular and universal we need to articulate a logical difference in the functioning of two kinds of terms. Russell believes that we can do so by attending to a difference in dependence on the form of the proposition, that is, a difference in incompleteness. However, the only kind of incompleteness that is asymmetric (PLA-incompleteness) is not a feature of symbols that correspond to anything in reality and therefore cannot ground an objective ontological division between objects. There is a kind of incompleteness (Ramsey-incompleteness) that exists among expressions that do refer to reality and could be used to ground such a distinction, but it is not asymmetric and is instead a property of all words. Thus Ramsey holds that no object in reality, no universal, is PLA-incomplete.

1.4 Conclusion to chapter one

We began by saying that Russell was the target of Ramsey's essay, and in particular his theory of universals. When we explored Russell's theory of universals we found it to contain many different strands and considerations. We then identified the specific aspect of Russell's theory of universals that Ramsey wanted to reject, that is, Russell's view that universal are incomplete; that they have internal to them the form of the propositions that they can enter into. This satisfied the worry we had regarding the apparent tension in Ramsey's conclusion which, on the one hand, rejected universals as muddled and, on the other hand, remained agnostic as to whether universals exist. We can now see his conclusion as rejecting the conception of universals as incomplete while remaining agnostic as to whether other considerations could succeed in establishing a logical distinction that would ground the desired ontological division. In the preceding section we saw that that Ramsey's denial of incompleteness amounts to a denial that expressions that refer to reality directly have a dependence on the form of the proposition that is *asymmetric*. This is a denial that a distinction between complete and incomplete expressions could function as the logical distinction between the elements in an atomic proposition that Ramsey and Russell both seek.

When we enquire deeper into the aims and conclusions of Ramsey's essay it becomes apparent that it is very specifically directed towards one target and as such does not pronounce on some of the surrounding issues or fully engage with some of

the wider views in play. Though the target at first seemed to be Russell it is better to think of Ramsey's target as a specific view that manifests itself in Russell's work in PLA. Ramsey even predicts towards the end of his article that Russell would accept his diagnosis that a certain aspect of his theory of universals is a muddle (Ramsey, 1931:131). Thus Ramsey's target is rather a conception of predicates as being incomplete in a way that contrasts asymmetrically with the completeness of subjects. This is the linguistic analogy of the view that universals are somehow essentially incomplete in a way that particulars are not. Against this view Ramsey holds that no term in an atomic proposition, and no entity, is PLA-incomplete. The real opponent of Ramsey's paper, therefore, is any view that manifests a conception of universals violating this position.

Chapter two

Having identified the view that Ramsey intends to counteract in his paper, this chapter will expound how the arguments of *Universals* are structured towards challenging this target. It will first lay out the indirect way in which Ramsey's arguments work against the view that universals are PLA-incomplete by using a balance of argumentation and diagnosis. It will then detail the mechanisms of Ramsey's various arguments within this framework, demonstrating how they are each intended to contribute towards the eventual rejection of PLA-incompleteness in the world.

§2.1 Ramsey's rejection

We saw in the preceding chapter that Ramsey wants to reject the view that universals are PLA-incomplete. This section will consider the way in which Ramsey's article works towards this end. It will first expound how far Ramsey counteracts the opposing view, before setting out the arguments he employs to do so.

2.1.1 An indirect attack

Ramsey does not reject the view that universals are PLA-incomplete in a straightforward way. At the beginning of his article, after expounding Johnston's view of a universal and Russell's view of a universal in PLA, Ramsey explains that

he does not aim to *directly* refute the opposing view, observing that although '[n]either of these theories seems entirely satisfactory' they are such that 'neither could be disproved' (Ramsey, 1931:114). Instead Ramsey aims to counter the positions of Russell and Johnston by offering an alternative position by 'rejecting something assumed as obvious by both disputants' (1931:116). This he identifies to be the assumption that in every proposition we can identify a subject and a predicate functioning in different ways (1931:116).

As such, Ramsey's position is a subtle one: though he does not directly falsify the opposing view he instead attacks the reasons that have led to it. In this way Ramsey aims to cut off the opposing position at its source. Additionally, from the beginning of the article Ramsey carefully sets up the dialectic so as to put the burden of proof onto his opponent. Rather than setting out to prove that there is no difference between a particular and a universal Ramsey takes up a method of Socratic questioning against his opponent.

> What then, I propose to ask, is the difference between a particular and a universal? What can we say of one that will not also be true of the other? (Ramsey, 1931:112)

Approaching the issue from this direction means that Ramsey is not required to directly establish that universals cannot be PLA-incomplete but instead requires his opponent to provide some reason for thinking that universals are PLA-incomplete.

Ramsey then considers and rejects the reasons that his opponent could provide to this effect. As part of this process he offers a diagnosis as to why universals have been commonly and mistakenly conceived of as PLA-incomplete. He concludes that the reasons for conceiving of universals as PLA-incomplete are fallacious and as such any theory that has conceived of universals in this way ought to be rejected.

As such Ramsey's article is a carefully intertwined balance of argumentation and diagnosis that is constructed to reject the view that universals are PLA-incomplete by establishing that none of the reasons for conceiving of universals in this way are good reasons. This statement of Ramsey's conclusion is deliberately ambiguous between two readings. We could interpret it in a strong sense as holding that universals *cannot* be conceived of in this way, so that there cannot be any possible reason for conceiving of universals as PLA-incomplete. We could also interpret it as the weaker claim to conclude that, of the reasons that Ramsey considers, none is a good reason for conceiving of universals as PLA-incomplete, though there might be alternative satisfactory reasons for supporting this view. Ramsey's conclusion falls somewhere between the two of them. On the one hand Ramsey's diagnosis acts to identify the actual reasons that universals are taken to be PLA-incomplete and then Ramsey's arguments serve to expose the fault in these reasons. As such Ramsey does remain agnostic towards the possibility that some kind of analysis could establish that universals *exist* but he categorically rejects that there could be any

possible *a priori* reason that such universals would be PLA-incomplete (Ramsey, 1931:135).

Furthermore although it is possible that considerations bracketed under 'actual analysis' might provide support for Russell's logical definition of particular and universals it seems unlikely that they would (Ramsey, 1931:135),. For it would be some kind of unprecedented happy accident if a theory that resulted from a muddle regarding one type of consideration happened to be independently established by considerations of a completely different kind. Therefore, although Ramsey is happy to admit that he is agnostic as to whether same view can be established by other non *a priori* considerations he points out that 'there is no strong presumption in its favour' (Ramsey, 1931:135).

Ramsey's diagnosis, then, acts to identify the actual reasons that universals are taken to be PLA-incomplete and as such is an essential part of his argument. With the diagnosis in place Ramsey's arguments can focus on attacking only these reasons and need not directly prove the stronger conclusion that there is no *possible* reason for universals to be conceived of in this way. This is important because, as we saw, Ramsey notes the theory that universals are PLA-incomplete has no inherent contradiction, and as such cannot be directly disproved; it's just wrong, according to Ramsey (1931:114).

2.1.1 Ramsey's diagnosis

Since all the argumentation in the essay is directed towards the diagnosis in this way, in order to make the mechanisms of Ramsey's article explicit we must begin at the end of Ramsey's article where he gives his diagnosis for why universals have come to be conceived of as PLA-incomplete. His diagnosis is key to the refutation of Ramsey's opponent as it reveals that the reasons that have led to the guilty conception of a universal are the result of a confusion between two different kinds of symbol.

> The result of replacing names of these individuals in propositions by variables [the mathematical logician] then calls functions, irrespective of whether the constant part of the function is a name or an incomplete symbol, because this does not make any difference to the class which the function defines. The failure to make this distinction has led to these functional symbols, some of which are names and some incomplete, being treated all alike as names of incomplete objects or properties, and is responsible for that great muddle the theory of universals (Ramsey, 1931:134).

We saw already that there is a sense in which Ramsey accepts that all names are incomplete (i.e. Ramsey-incomplete) and so when Ramsey distinguishes names from incomplete symbols there is a different kind of incompleteness that he has in mind. To employ the terminology that is already in play we may alter the above passage:

The result of replacing names of these individuals in propositions by variables the mathematical logician then calls functions, irrespective of whether the constant part of the function is a name or a *Russell*-incomplete symbol, because this does not make any difference to the class which the function defines. The failure to make this distinction has led to these functional symbols, some of which are names and some *Russell*-incomplete, being treated all alike as names of *PLA*-incomplete objects or properties, and is responsible for that great muddle the theory of universals (Sullivan, 2009:2).

Ramsey blames the neglect of the important distinction between names and Russell-incomplete symbols on the mathematician's interest in classes, so that different symbols have been treated like the classes that define them (Ramsey, 1931:131). As we saw before, this has resulted in philosophically different kinds of symbol, in particular names and Russell-incomplete symbols, being treated as the same kinds of function. The failure to separate the distinct properties of each symbol has led to the impression that there are symbols that have both the property of name-hood and the property of incompleteness. This has given rise to the idea that there are PLA-incomplete symbols that stand for objects in reality which must be similarly PLA-incomplete corresponding to that which names them. Herein lays the root of the conception of universals as such an object; as incomplete in the way that Ramsey wants to reject.

2.1.3 How the arguments are directed by the diagnosis

We can articulate two premises that Ramsey contests:

A*. Complex predicates are names

B*. Simple predicates are PLA-incomplete

Contrasting with these are two contentions Ramsey does not dispute:

A. Simple predicates are names[6]

B. Complex predicates are PLA-incomplete

With these in place we can express Ramsey's diagnosis as claiming that incompleteness enters into the picture as a feature of complex symbols (B) as does name-hood as a feature of simple predicates (A). Simple and complex predicates are then treated as the propositional functions that may define the same class, and in this way are assimilated into a single class of functions. The incompleteness of complex predicates then gets (incorrectly) transferred to simple predicates (B*) and, likewise, the property of name-hood is transferred to complex ones (A*). This gives the impression that there are incomplete entities corresponding to incomplete predicates, while in Ramsey's view incompleteness is a feature of symbols.

Ramsey's diagnosis of the reasons for which universals have come to be conceived of as PLA-incomplete focuses his argumentation towards rejecting A* and B*. In order for Ramsey to conclude that no object in the world is PLA-incomplete he must reject both of these contested premises.

[6] The premises concern *predicates* because it is accepted that these are the terms that potentially refer to universals.

This is because both A* and B* could be used to infer that there are objects in the world that are PLA-incomplete. Since Ramsey accepts that complex predicates are PLA-incomplete (B) he must deny that complex predicates denote anything in reality, since if they did what they would name would be correspondingly PLA-incomplete. Similarly, since Ramsey accepts that simple predicates are names (A) then he must deny that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete or else this would deliver the result that we could infer from the incompleteness of simple predicates the incompleteness of the simple universals they name. Therefore, Ramsey must deny both that complex predicates are names (A*) and that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete (B*) since if either of these premises held it would offer a legitimate reason to conclude that there must be incompleteness in the world, and more specifically that universals are PLA-incomplete.

The majority of Ramsey's paper, after his extended introduction, therefore builds up different arguments that confront A* and B*. Ramsey first denies that complex predicates are names by using the incomprehensible trinity argument and the argument from definition (Ramsey, 1931:117-120). These two arguments reject A* in a strong sense, claiming that such a position can be shown to be absurd. Ramsey then moves onto the more lengthy rejection of the view that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete, considering two arguments that Russell might make in defence of this position (Ramsey, 1931:122-132). The first holds that there is a

difference that can be 'felt' between subject and predicate and which is captured by Russell's theory that the simple predicate is especially incomplete. The second is that Russell's symbolism, which represents all predicates as incomplete by using a propositional function, is the most convenient and therefore 'correspond[s] to reality closer than any other' (Ramsey, 1931:122). Ramsey's arguments here serve to reject B* only in a weaker sense; he offers us sufficient reason only to conclude that simple predicates do not *have* to be conceived of as PLA-incomplete. However, together with his diagnosis, his arguments do enable us to conclude in a stronger sense that there is no *a priori* reason for conceiving of simple predicates as incomplete and in this way he offers Russell a way out of the muddle that he has made. His assertion that simple predicates are Ramsey-incomplete (and in this way are no different from simple subjects) is at the same time a denial that they are PLA-incomplete.

As we saw before Ramsey therefore leaves space for some non-*a priori* considerations grouped under 'actual analysis' to possibly establish that the forms of atomic propositions were such that they would support Russell's logical definition of universals using the class of predicates and relations (Ramsey, 1931:135). But of course such considerations would involve no mention of a universal as intrinsically incomplete and dependent upon the form of the proposition, that is, they would not involve the conception of a simple predicate or a universal as PLA-incomplete.

2.2 Ramsey's arguments

Having identified the subtleties of Ramsey's conclusion and the way in which his arguments are intended to support it we can now turn to expounding the arguments themselves. This section will navigate the particulars of the incomprehensible trinity argument, the argument from definition, the felt difference argument, and the argument from convenience of symbolism, in order to show how they are intended to support Ramsey's diagnosis by rejecting A* and B*.

2.2.1 The incomprehensible trinity argument

This is the most notorious of Ramsey's arguments. Since it will be the subject of further scrutiny in chapter three we require for now only a minimal exposition. As we saw, the aim of this argument is to reject A*, that complex predicates are names. Ramsey explicitly identifies the target of the argument as the theory that in compound propositions we can discern complex predicates that name complex universals (Ramsey, 1931:118). The argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* and as such it aims to demonstrate the view in question leads to absurd conclusions and hence should be rejected.

The incomprehensible trinity argument is short enough to quote in full;

In order to make things clearer let us take a simpler case, a proposition of the form *aRb*; then this theory will hold that there are three closely related propositions; one asserts that the relation *R* holds between the terms *a* and *b*, the second asserts the possession by *a* of

the complex property of 'having *R* to *b*', while the third asserts that *b* has the complex property that *a* has *R* to it. These must be three different propositions because they have different sets of constituents, and yet they are not three propositions, but one proposition, for they all say the same thing, namely that *a* has *R* to *b*. So the theory of complex universals is responsible for an incomprehensible trinity, as senseless as that of theology (Ramsey, 1931:118).

Regarding the three 'closely related' propositions in the argument, we may isolate two distinct assumptions which Ramsey claims the opposing view is committed to:

> (Unity Premise): the propositions are the same *because* they 'say the same thing'.
>
> (Trinity Contention): the propositions are three different propositions *because* they 'have different sets of constituents'.[7]

In order for the argument to be successful as a *reductio ad absurdum*, Ramsey must also be granted the following assumptions.

First, it must be that the unity premise and the trinity contention are sufficiently contradictory. This is satisfied by the incompatible claims that they make regarding the number of propositions in question.

Secondly, it must be that the opposing view is genuinely committed to the unity premise. The claim that the propositions are the same because they have the same

[7] We will see in §3.1.1 why this is the trinity *contention* and not the trinity *premise*.

meaning is set up to be intuitive, although strictly speaking Ramsey owes us an account of what a proposition is, MacBride notes (2005:84). The idea is that the opposing view is committed to the unity premise in so far as everyone should be. Chapter three will identify a deeper reason for why the unity premise is essential but for now it's enough to grant Ramsey that the premise is couched in sufficiently intuitive terms.

Thirdly, it must be that the opposing view is genuinely committed to the trinity contention. Ramsey intends the trinity contention to be derived from the very essence of the view he disputes. On the opposing view, complex predicates stand for complex universals. Ramsey couples this with the observation that given a single complex proposition we can identify different complex predicates, different ways of splitting it up. In his example '*aRb*' we can identify three candidates for the predicate of the proposition: '*xRy*', '*xRb*' and '*aRx*' (Ramsey, 1931:118). These three predicates are distinct and so must be part of three distinct propositions. However, this leaves the opposing view to explain how these three distinct propositions are connected and brings the view into tension with the unity premise.

It's a much more difficult matter to say whether Ramsey's opponent is committed to the trinity contention. It's one thing to say that there are three different propositions, but another to claim that this is due to their being three different sets of constituents. This claim that distinct parts entail distinct propositions is not a straightforward one. It relies on assumptions about the

combination of the elements of a proposition, about the uniqueness of a proposition's constituents and about the structure of propositions in general. These issues will be taken up and considered in depth in chapter three.

2.2.2 The argument from definition

The argument from definition is a puzzling argument that acts as a kind of supplement to the incomprehensible trinity argument, applying the same considerations to an important concrete case, that of the process of definition. Ramsey observes that we may wish to represent 'aRb' by a more convenient symbol such as 'φb'. We are able to do this by the process of definition, defining '$\varphi x = aRx$' (Ramsey, 1931:118). Ramsey contends that the opposing view either violates this process of definition or else is unable to name complex universals or to have any reason to postulate them.

Ramsey derives the *reductio ad absurdum* by asking whether or not 'φ' is now the name for the complex universal aRx. He argues that if the proponent of complex universals concedes that 'φ' is a name then 'φb' will be a subject predicate proposition distinct from the relational proposition 'aRb'. Since 'aRb' does not contain the name 'φ' then 'φb' and 'aRb' will not have the same meaning. This, however, violates the hypothesis that they are respectively definiendum and definiens. To hold such a view, then, would counteract the vital process of definition since it is essential to this process that the definiendum and definiens are

equivalent and substitutable. Here the incomprehensible trinity argument feeds back in, generating this time as an incomprehensible duality.

Alternatively, if the proponent of complex universals holds that 'φ' is not the name of the complex universal then Ramsey asks how the complex universal could ever become the 'object of our contemplation'. After all, 'φ' is the best candidate to be the name of the complex universal; it is hard to see what other arbitrary symbol would be more apt at naming it. And without employing its name, Ramsey asks, how are we able to postulate or speak of an entity? (Ramsey, 1931:119).

Therefore the argument from definition presents us with a dilemma. Either we maintain a view that is vulnerable to the previous *reductio ad absurdum* or we are seemingly unable to speak of complex universals. In order to establish the dilemma, however, the argument from definition makes some assumptions. Firstly, Ramsey exploits the connotation on the word 'name' to mean a simple name: much of the force of the argument trades on this. Furthermore, as a supplement to the incomprehensible trinity argument the argument from definition rests on the assumption already identified that if propositions have distinct constituents then they are different propositions. Articulating these assumptions makes it easier to see why Ramsey states that the proponent of complex universals will be forced to the absurd conclusion that 'aRx' and 'φx' do not mean the same thing if they admit that 'φ' is a name. Ramsey takes them to claim that 'φ' is a *simple* name and so since 'aRx' does not contain an equivalent simple name but only a complex predicate they

must therefore be two different propositions *since they have different parts*. It follows that '*aRx*' and 'φx' are not equivalent, contrary to the definition in the hypothesis.

The argument from definition does however make points not already apparent in the incomprehensible trinity argument. Both horns of the dilemma serve an unapparent purpose that in some way supports the rejection of A*. The first horn of the dilemma is intended specifically to strengthen the unity premise. It does so by elucidating a context in which it is essential that the unity premise holds, in this way substantiating it beyond a mere intuition. Underlying the process of definition is the possibility that two propositions with different parts can nonetheless be considered to have the same meaning. Therefore maintaining the unity premise in any given case is essential to the process of definition, and in bringing this out Ramsey means to highlight the importance of the intuitive unity premise.

The second horn of the dilemma is intended to direct us away from the idea that every expression we might identify must be a simple designation of something in reality. When Ramsey says that unless 'φ' is the name of the complex universal we could never come to grasp it, he is asking how we can grasp a complex universal if it is not denoted by a simple name. Put like this we can see that his question is rhetorical (Sullivan, 2010:17-18). By Ramsey's own lights we can, of course, understand expressions that are not names: we can grasp the meaning of incomplete symbols. But Ramsey has in mind here the kind of incomplete symbol that describes reality by virtue of the simple symbols that make it up, and does not directly

correspond to anything in reality in other words, that is, a Russell-incomplete symbol. We see this when he finishes his argument with an ontological question, 'And then what reason can there be to postulate the existence of this thing?' (Ramsey, 1931:119). With this horn of the dilemma Ramsey is pushing us towards the admission that something's possibly being an 'object of our contemplation' doesn't make it an object in the world (ibid).

2.2.3 The felt difference argument

The felt difference argument is the first of the arguments that Ramsey presents to reject the view that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete (B*). Ramsey admits that there does seem to be a difference that one can feel between subject and predicate, such as between John and wisdom. Surely John is in some sense more independent than wisdom, which instead depends on John and other admirable individuals for its instantiation (Ramsey, 1931:122-123). Continuing his method of Socratic questioning Ramsey then asks what this feeling might consist of and where it might be rooted. After locating its source Ramsey considers whether the substance of this deep intuition supports the view that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete. He concludes that the source of the felt difference shows no essential division between subject and predicate and no reason to conclude that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete. We see again Ramsey's strategy of rejecting a theory by providing a

diagnosis of its origins that reveals the way in which it is mistaken or, in this case, unessential.

The source of the felt difference

Ramsey begins his investigation into the roots of the feeling that there is a difference between particular and universal with the observation that 'Socrates is wise' is not an atomic proposition (1931:122). He emphasises that the difference we feel regards terms like 'Socrates' and 'wisdom' which are parts of complex propositions and which according to Ramsey are 'not the names of objects but incomplete symbols' (1931:123). We see here Ramsey's separation of symbols that are names, from symbols that are Russell-incomplete. His aim, however, is to deny that *simple* predicates are PLA-incomplete (B*). Furthermore Ramsey accepts that complex predicates are PLA-incomplete, as we saw (B). This means that the aim of the felt difference investigation is to establish whether a difference that is felt between two kinds of incomplete symbol is an essential *logical* difference. This is because only a logical difference between complex symbols would be sufficient for us to infer a distinction between complete subjects and PLA-incomplete predicates in atomic propositions.

Ramsey considers when it might arise that subject and predicate, or more exactly, the two kinds of incomplete symbols in question, are considered in isolation as opposed to considering the proposition of which they are a part.

Agreeing with Wittgenstein, he identifies this as the context of generalisation (Ramsey, 1931:123). As we have seen, an incomplete symbol cannot be defined except in conjunction with other symbols (1931:130). Such a symbol is defined by its range, by what symbols can replace it and by what symbols it can replace. For this reason incomplete symbols are used to identify common patterns in propositions and so to group together some set of propositions in order to say something about all of them, that is, in order to generalise over them. We use 'Socrates' to collect together all those propositions in which the occurrence of 'Socrates' is a common part, such as, 'Socrates is a man', 'Socrates is both famous and clever', 'Socrates is not dead', etc. These propositions then become the range of a generalisation such as 'φ Socrates' or 'Socrates is something'. Similarly we use 'wisdom' to gather a range of propositions that include the occurrence of 'wise', such as, 'Socrates is wise', 'Owls are wise', 'Neither of the brothers is wise', etc. These are the values of 'φ wise'. However, Ramsey points out, we typically use 'wise' to collect a narrower range of propositions, 'Socrates is wise', 'Plato is wise', 'I am wise', etc., which have in common not only their occurrence of 'wise' but also the proposition's form, 'x is wise', where x is a simple subject (Ramsey, 1931:124).

Ramsey attributes the felt difference between particulars and universals to this divergence. While the subject 'Socrates' can be used to delineate one class of propositions, the predicate 'wise' can be used to delineate two: a wide range

parallel to the range given by 'Socrates' and a narrower range that has not only 'wise' as a common element but the shape of the original proposition of which 'wise' was a part (ibid). Having identified this as the source of the felt difference Ramsey immediately moves on to ask what causes this asymmetry: what reason, or more exactly what *kind* of reason, is there to recognise contrasting ranges determined by subject and predicate, and what does this reason tell us about the nature of the terms in atomic propositions?

The ranges made symmetrical

In order to answer whether the difference in the ranges determined by two sorts of incomplete symbols is a 'real difference' Ramsey considers whether it's possible to make the ranges of generalisation symmetrical (1931:125). If the asymmetry between the ranges of generalisation is due to the kind of logical difference between the incomplete symbols we seek then it will be impossible for the ranges to be made symmetrical. Therefore if Ramsey is able to show that it is merely *possible* to make the ranges symmetrical then he can conclude that the asymmetry is not due to a logical distinction between subject and predicate at the atomic level.

Ramsey sets about attempting to make the ranges of generalisation determined by 'Socrates' and 'wisdom' symmetrical, asking, 'Is this impossible, or is it merely that we never in fact do it?' (1931:125). He offers an account of how the subject might be used to construct a further range analogous to the narrow range that we

found to be most naturally determined by the predicate. Recall that the narrow range of the predicate had not only 'wise' as a common element but also the form of the proposition, so that while the wider range gathered all the propositions that included an occurrence of 'wise', the narrow range gathered a proper subset of the wider range which also attributed wise to a simple subject, i.e. the values of '*x* is wise'. 'Neither of the brothers is wise', for instance, is included in the wide range, 'φ wise', but not in the narrow range, '*x* is wise', since 'neither of the brothers' is not a simple subject. Ramsey's suggestion is that we first delineate a subset of properties called qualities, 'the idea being roughly that only a simple property is a quality (1931:125)'. Say for instance that 'red' and 'green' are colour qualities, then 'red or green' would be a complex property but not a quality. Using these qualities we can then identify a narrow range for subjects that forms a proper subset of the range of propositions gathered by the values of 'φ Socrates'. This narrow range will also have in common the form of the proposition 'Socrates is q' where q is a quality. 'Socrates is neither red nor green', for instance, will be included in the wide range, 'φ Socrates', but not in the narrow range, 'Socrates is *q*', since 'neither red nor green' is not a quality.

Thus, by delineating qualities from properties we are able to identify a narrow range given by the subject. In this case, both subject and predicate determine a wide range *and* a narrow range in connection with generalisation. If we were to systematically carry out this identification of qualities, therefore, there would be no

asymmetry between subject and predicate and we would no longer feel there to be any difference between them.

Johnston, however, questions whether such a delineation of qualities from properties could be systematically carried out, since there is no means to settle what properties are simple properties which would qualify as qualities (1931:126). In response to this Ramsey points again to the fact that we are dealing with complex symbols and not 'genuine objects'; and so concedes that the kind of simplicity in question is not absolute or objective, but is rather a more flexible matter of 'relative simplicity' (Ramsey, 1931:127). Accepting that such delineation may be extremely difficult, Ramsey points out that what matters is that there is no impossibility to it and if it is merely possible for the ranges to be symmetrical, this means that the difference felt between the logical constructions 'Socrates' and 'wise' is not a logical one. Ramsey concludes that it is instead 'of a subjective character and depend[ent] on human interests and needs' (Ramsey, 1931:129).

As Ramsey stresses, arguing that it is possible for the ranges of generalisation to be symmetrical is entirely compatible with holding that they are nonetheless, in actuality, asymmetric. Ramsey's point is that although it is true that predicates determine a wide and a narrow range of propositions while subjects determine only a wide range in connection with generalisation, this is not because of a logical impossibility on the subject's part to determine a narrow range but is rather effected practically (Ramsey, 1931:125). Anything short of the asymmetry in range

being due to a difference in the intrinsic logical nature of subject and predicate will not do however if the felt difference is to be a defence of the particular-universal distinction.

Therefore, since the difference between the incomplete symbols is not a logical difference it cannot support a distinction between objects into particulars and universals. For, as we saw, it is a *logical* distinction between subject and predicate that Ramsey is searching for to ground the ontological distinction. In particular, the felt difference cannot support the view that predicates are intrinsically more incomplete than subjects. The difference between the range of subject and predicate, identified as the essence of the felt difference, was found to issue not from the intrinsic logical nature of subject and predicate but from unessential convention. Thus the felt difference between subject and predicate fails as a defence of the view that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete.

The remaining force of the felt difference

One avenue remains, however, for the argument. Although Ramsey's investigation into the felt difference at the complex level concludes that it is not substantiated by any logical difference, this still leaves open whether the difference felt between subject and predicate at the complex level is actually a manifestation of some logical difference at the atomic level. In other words, although it is true that we *could* use ranges which were symmetrical, we use the ranges of generalisation that we do

because of some feature of atomic propositions that supports the view that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete.

Of course the mere fact that there is a distinction between elements of complex propositions does not on its own give us reason to assume some difference in the elements of atomic propositions. And so Ramsey next moves onto consider whether or not there is indeed any reason to think that the felt difference has a corresponding logical difference at the atomic level.

2.2.4 The argument from convenience of symbolism

Ramsey combines investigating whether the felt difference indicates a distinction in atomic propositions with his treatment of Russell's second defence: that his symbolism is superior to its alternatives and that its convenience can only be explained by taking it to most accurately correspond to reality.

As we saw, in Russell's symbolism subjects and predicates are differently represented. While the subject is depicted as standing alone the predicate is never depicted independently but is instead always represented as a 'propositional function' such as '*x* is *p*' by the use of some variable *x* (Ramsey, 1931:129), even in the atomic case. If it is true that Russell's symbolism, which represents predicates differently from subjects, is the most convenient, it certainly gives support to the idea that there is some essential difference between the objects they represent. Furthermore since the difference is one of independence this would be sufficiently

explained by the view that predicates are intrinsically more incomplete than subjects.

Since the role of this argument is to challenge the view that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete (B*), then it is particularly relevant is whether it is necessary to represent elements of *atomic* propositions by way of a propositional function. Furthermore, since in Russell's symbolism predicates in atomic propositions are represented in the same way as predicates in complex propositions, this would support the idea that the felt difference between elements of propositions at the complex level corresponds to some kind of difference at the atomic level.

Ramsey expounds why representing predicates as propositional functions is so singularly essential. Regarding the property 'either having R to a or having S to b' he points out that we simply cannot represent this property by a simple symbol such as 'φ' standing alone. This is because we would not be able to define 'φ'. Representing 'φ' as a propositional function 'φx' we can define it by 'φx . = . xRa . v . xSb.' (Ramsey, 1931:130). Without use of the variables, however, we would not possibly be able to indicate the argument places using only 'φ'. Most importantly we would not be able to indicate whether the arguments were to be filled by the same objects or by different ones. We could only produce something like 'φ = Ra . v . Sb' (ibid). In other words, we would not be able to tell if 'φ' represented a property or if it represented a relation such as 'x having R to a or y

having *S* to *b*' for two variables *x* and *y*. Therefore Ramsey concedes that for this purpose Russell's symbolism is 'absolutely essential' (ibid).

Ramsey continues his investigation, however, by qualifying that this point applies only to properties like 'either having *R* to *a* or having *S* to *b*'. In other words, it only pertains to complex predicates. If we take the example of a two-termed atomic proposition 'φa' then it is clear that there is no need to indicate its argument places in the same way as before (Ramsey, 1931:130). The simple predicate 'φ' can stand alone without a variable just as much as '*a*' can, since in the case of an atomic proposition there is just not the same ambiguity regarding the predicate. This will always be the case because there will only ever be such ambiguity if a predicate has multiple argument places and if a predicate has multiple argument places then it must, of course, be a complex predicate. A simple predicate with a single argument place such as 'φ' need not be represented as a propositional function 'φx', it is as unambiguous as a simple name. Therefore although simple predicates are standardly represented by way of propositional functions in Russell's symbolism, it is not essential to them that they be represented in this way since the vital reason to do so holds only in the case of complex propositions.

Ramsey concludes:

…because some φ's are incomplete and cannot stand alone, and all φ's are to be treated alike in order to avoid useless complication, the only solution is to allow none to stand alone (Ramsey, 1931:131).

This, of course, means that simple predicates are not represented by PLA-incomplete propositional functions for any essential reason, but that this form of representation has led to them being mistakenly conceived of as PLA-incomplete. Therefore the argument from convenience of symbolism fails as a defence of the theory that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete.

2.3 Conclusion to chapter two

We saw that Ramsey's essay aims to challenge the view that universals are PLA-incomplete by establishing a diagnosis as to why universals have come to be conceived of in this way and targeting his arguments towards exposing the fault in these reasons. We identified the premises that Ramsey's arguments aim to reject to be the claim that complex predicates are names (A*) and the claim that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete (B*).

We saw that the incomprehensible trinity argument and the argument from definition are intended to supplement each other in rejecting (A*) by *reductio ad absurdum*. The felt difference argument and the argument from definition are intended to work together to reject (B*). The latter arguments do so also in a more

indirect way; identifying the reasons that simple predicates have been conceived of as PLA-incomplete and exposing them as groundless or unnecessary. All of the four main arguments in Ramsey's paper are carefully tailored to their purpose and depend upon the others for their success. Therefore it is clear that given the structure of Ramsey's article we can only truly understand and assess the merits of each of these arguments if we take into account the diagnosis that he offers in his paper, the role of the surrounding arguments and the background context of the view that he aims to challenge.

Chapter Three

This chapter will take up the incomprehensible trinity argument in more depth. It will explore the mechanisms of the argument by employing the distinction between analysis and decomposition and present Dummett's criticism that the argument is based on an assumption that confuses features of the two. It will then consider the origin of this mistaken assumption arguing that Ramsey is in fact attributing it to his opponent. Finally it will consider whether Ramsey has any motivation for targeting his argument towards a view that adheres to such a faulty assumption and argue that he does only if he is granted certain atomistic assumptions that he shares with Russell.

Distinguishing between analysis and decomposition only exposes the incomprehensible trinity argument to rely on a confusion if we fail to take into account the wider context of Universals and the features of the surrounding arguments that make it clear that such a confusion is exactly what Ramsey aims to reject. Thus rather than providing an objection to the argument, analysis and decomposition provide a lens through which the conclusion of the incomprehensible trinity argument is made clearer.

3.1 Dummett and the incomprehensible trinity argument

Dummett accuses Ramsey's incomprehensible trinity argument of failing to distinguish between features of analysis and features of decomposition (Dummett, 1981:264). This section will return to the attempt to comprehend the mechanisms of the incomprehensible trinity argument. It will show that employing Dummett's distinction of analysis and decomposition seems to resolve the argument and in particular renders unproblematic the claim that the same proposition can be conceived of as having different parts, in this way expounding Dummett's criticism.

3.1.1 What is incomprehensible about the incomprehensible trinity argument?

Let us once again take up the short but notorious incomprehensible trinity argument:

In order to make things clearer let us take a simpler case, a proposition of the form *aRb*; then this theory will hold that there are three closely related propositions; one asserts that the relation *R* holds between the terms *a* and *b*, the second asserts the possession by *a* of the complex property of 'having *R* to *b*', while the third asserts that *b* has the complex property that *a* has *R* to it. These must be three different propositions because they have different sets of constituents, and yet they are not three propositions, but one proposition, for they all say the same thing, namely that *a* has *R* to *b*. So the theory of complex

universals is responsible for an incomprehensible trinity, as senseless as that of theology (Ramsey, 1931:118).

Meeting the incomprehensible trinity argument in chapter two we saw that Ramsey explicitly considers it to function as a *reductio ad absurdum* (1931:199). As such it aims to demonstrate that the opposing view leads to absurd conclusions and hence should be rejected. We saw also that Ramsey identifies the opposing view to be the theory that complex predicates name complex universals (1931:118).

The target of the argument

Ramsey takes it that subject and predicate are not applicable to a compound proposition such as 'Either Frege is wise or Russell is foolish'. Of course he concedes that we might pick out, for some purpose, a complex term such as 'being wise unless Russell is foolish'. However, he denies that this complex term is functioning as a predicate in the compound proposition in the way that 'is wise' and 'is foolish' are functioning as predicates in the two disjuncts 'Frege is wise' and 'Russell is foolish'. He then anticipates that some interlocutor might protest that the complex terms that can be identified in complex propositions are indeed functioning as predicates, and it is towards the end of denying the coherence of this view that the incomprehensible trinity argument is introduced.

This denial is significant if we remind ourselves that Ramsey is searching for a difference in the functioning of elements in a proposition that would support a theory of universals, that is, for a logical distinction between subject and predicate that could provide a basis for a distinction between objects into particulars and universals. As Ramsey stresses in the passage leading into the incomprehensible trinity argument; although he asks which propositions have subjects and predicates his concern remains with reality.

> …let us remind ourselves that the task on which we are engaged is not merely one of English grammar; we are not school children analysing sentences into subject, extension of the subject, complement and so on, but are interested not so much in sentences themselves, as in what they mean, from which we hope to discover the logical nature of reality (Ramsey, 1913:117).

Thus his concern with language is only in so far as language is taken to be a vehicle for accessing reality.

To apply this point to the specifics of the argument: whether or not we may call something a predicate is only relevant to Ramsey if calling it a predicate means identifying something in reality (that we might call a universal). Hence we see more clearly that Ramsey means to oppose a view that has not just a linguistic contention about predicates but an ontological one. The claim that complex predicates can be

discerned from complex propositions is only of concern to Ramsey if by this his interlocutor means that the complex predicate is taken to stand for a universal which must be complex, corresponding to the complexity of that which denotes it.

The view anticipated by Ramsey that complex predicates denote complex universals will henceforth be referred to as CU.

Review

Chapter two identified the two assumptions which Ramsey claims CU is committed to and that generate the argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*. These regard the three 'closely related' propositions in the argument and were presented as the unity and trinity contention:

> (Unity Premise): the propositions are the same because they 'say the same thing'.
>
> (Trinity Contention): the propositions are three different propositions because they 'have different sets of constituents'.

For the argument to go through we also articulated three assumptions that must be made:

- That the unity premise and the trinity contention are sufficiently contradictory.
- That CU is committed to the unity premise.
- That CU is committed to the trinity contention.

We were satisfied that the premises where contradictory. We then conceded that CU was committed to the unity premise in as far as everyone should be. It's important, however, that we articulate why the unity premise is taken to be uncontroversial.

The comprehensible unity premise

Though the unity premise is the most intuitive it is, perhaps, not as obvious why it is so singularly essential that we maintain '(*a*)*R*(*b*)', '(*a*)*Rb*' and '*aR*(*b*)' are all the very same proposition and not merely three closely related ones. Of course there is a sense in which we may deny that these propositions are identical: given an extremely fine grained conception of a proposition. What Ramsey intends to capture in the unity premise, however, is that although the three propositions are not expressed by the same sentence, they have the same meaning. That is to say, the three sentences all 'say the same thing' (1931:118).

Ramsey tells us that splitting up a proposition in the way described by the argument occurs in connection with generalisation (Ramsey, 1931:123). Consider the simple example of putting a chain of inferences together to constitute a proof, something of the form $A \vdash B \vdash C$. To make apparent the relevance of the example let's use the incomprehensible trinity argument itself: $\forall x\,.\,xRb \vdash aRb \vdash \exists y.aRy$. This says that everything *R*'s *b*, which implies that *a R*'s *b*, which implies that *a R*'s

something. This is a valid proof which means both sides of the proof are valid inferences.

To see why the proof is valid we must consider the middle proposition. In the proposition '*aRb*' we can identify (at least) two ways of splitting it up. We can treat either the *a* or the *b* as subject so as to give either (*a*)*Rb* or *aR*(*b*). Since $\forall x\,.\,xRb$ and (*a*)*Rb* both treat the same argument place as variable we are able to see the validity of the first inference and similarly since $\exists y.\,aRy$ and *aR*(*b*) have their form in common exposes the validity of the second inference. Hence it is essential to explaining the validity of the proof that the middle proposition admits of these two distinct representations. The most essential point is that although we can identify these different ways of splitting up the proposition this fact must not lead us to conclude that in '*aRb*' there are two different propositions. For if (*a*)*Rb* and *aR*(*b*) were in every sense distinct propositions, if they did not have the same meaning, then we could not conceive of the proof as being validated by a single link that connects the first inference with the second inference by having something in common with both of them. It must be the same thing that is split up in one way to be the conclusion of one inference and split up in another way to be the premise of the other.

In short, the validity of the first inference depends on us being able to decompose *aRb* into (*a*)*Rb*, the validity of the second inference depends on us being able to decompose *aRb* into *aR*(*b*) and the validity of the proof depends on us being

able to recognise (*a*)*Rb* and *aR*(*b*) as a single proposition. In this way the validity of the proof depends upon the unity premise. Therefore the unity premise, the idea that we can split up a *single* proposition in different ways is essential to the role of a proposition in logic. The proposition that is the conclusion to the first step of the proof must be the very same thing as the proposition that is a premise of the second step of the proof. This is why Geach said:

> Logic would be hopelessly crippled if the same proposition could never be analysed in several different ways (Geach, 1962:55).

Since the unity premise is set up as undisputable for this reason, it follows that CU is committed to it and thus that the *reductio* is weighted towards the rejection of the trinity contention. That is to say, the argument is structured as a *reductio* by first identifying CU's commitment to the trinity contention and then bringing the trinity contention into conflict with the uncontestable unity premise, causing the trinity contention and thus CU to be rejected as absurd.

From this we can see that the key move, vital to the success of the argument as a *reductio*, is establishing CU's commitment to the trinity contention (3). Once this is in place CU's uncontroversial commitment to the unity premise and the obviously contradictory claims in the unity and trinity contention do the rest of the work to output the result that the view is absurd. However, this pivotal point is the most

contentious of the argument and most criticism of the incomprehensible trinity argument has fastened upon it.

The incomprehensible trinity contention

Ramsey starts with the observation that given a single proposition we can identify different complex terms, different ways of splitting it up. He couples this with the fact that the proponent of CU will consider some of these complex terms to be predicates so that from one proposition we can discern various complex predicates. From Ramsey's own example '*aRb*' the proponent of CU will hold that we can identify three predicates: '*xRy*', '*xRb*' and '*aRx*' (1931:118). Further to this CU will hold that these three complex predicates stand for three complex universals, three different properties.

So far there is not much to dispute given Ramsey's example and the characterisation of his opponent. But Ramsey further concludes that the proponent of CU is committed to saying that there are three distinct propositions in '*aRb*' for the reason that there are three complex predicates (and corresponding subjects). In other words CU is committed to the trinity contention: the claim that there are three different propositions *because* there are three different sets of constituents.

The trinity contention is named as such because unlike the unity premise it is a mini-argument. As such it *contains* a premise within it rather than being a premise itself. When the contention 'there are three different propositions because there are

three different sets of constituents' is broken down it yields the premise that there are three sets of constituents, the inference that the different sets of constituents imply different propositions, and the conclusion that there are three propositions. Thus the argument has the following structure:

(Trinity Inference): different sets of constituents imply different propositions.

(Trinity Premise): there are three different sets of constituents.

(Trinity Conclusion): there are three different propositions.

Taken together these three premises compose what we called the trinity contention:

(Trinity Contention): there are three different propositions because there are three different sets of constituents.

With this new terminology we can say more clearly that the most problematic part of the trinity contention is the trinity inference. For, while Ramsey rightly attributes CU with the trinity premise (the claim that there are three different sets of constituents), he also attributes CU with commitment to the trinity inference and hence to the trinity conclusion. The claim made by the trinity inference, however, that distinct parts entail distinct propositions is not a straightforward one and is certainly not uncontentious. Most significantly, it is a claim about the uniqueness of the combination of elements in a proposition. While this is of course a respectable position, it seems far too presumptuous of Ramsey to saddle the

proponent of CU with a view about the structure of propositions and the uniqueness of sub-propositional parts on the basis of a view regarding complex predicates. It seems clear, on the surface at least, that one could hold the view that complex predicates discerned from propositions denote complex universals while remaining agnostic as to how those propositions are themselves structured and in particular whether their parts were unique. That is to say, it seems clear that one could maintain CU while denying the trinity inference.

In order to proceed, therefore, we must consider the trinity contention in more depth, in particular exploring the claim in the trinity inference that propositions are distinguished by their parts. We must also consider whether Ramsey's opponent is committed to the trinity contention. Both of these objectives will be satisfied by evaluating the argument in the light of Dummett's distinction between analysis and decomposition.

3.1.2 Analysis and decomposition

Not only will expounding the distinction between analysis and decomposition enable us to assess the puzzling trinity contention, but with the distinction in place we will be able to present Dummett's insightful criticism of Ramsey. As we shall see, Dummett's distinction is a powerful tool that provides us with an invaluable means to understanding the mechanisms of the incomprehensible trinity argument.

Explaining analysis and decomposition

Dummett introduces analysis and decomposition to resolve a tension in Frege regarding the composition of propositions. On the one hand Frege clearly took the meaning (or 'sense') of a proposition to be dependent on the sense of its parts (Frege, 1969:243, 1976:225, 1989:§32). On the other hand Frege is also explicit that propositions are not built up from their constituent concepts, and that we can identify different concepts in a proposition by analysing it in different ways (Frege, 1969:273, 1979:253).

In order to resolve this seemingly contradictory position Dummett characterises two very different kinds of analysis. He reserves the term 'analysis' for the first of these, so that analysis is taken to be the investigation into a proposition's intrinsic structure. For Dummett, the purpose of analysis is to reveal how the meaning of a proposition depends on the meaning of the parts.[8]

> Analysis… is concerned with how the sense of the sentence is given to us, that is, with what it is to understand that sentence as expressing the thought that it does (Dummett, 1981:287).

Analysis typically takes place in several stages and traces the 'constructional history' of the proposition, revealing what Dummett calls its *constituents* (Dummett,

[8] Here and elsewhere I am innocently conflating 'meaning' and Fregean 'sense' in order that we are not pulled too deeply into Frege's terminology and to highlight the points of intersection with our current concerns. Likewise with 'thought' and 'proposition'.

1981:271, 283). The parts of a given proposition may themselves have parts which will be traced back in the analysis so that its ultimate constituents will all be simple. Understanding of a proposition's constituents is always prior to the understanding of the proposition. In other words, the constituents are what we need to have grasped in order to grasp the proposition. Importantly, the constituents of a proposition will be unique. Dummett likens the process of analysis to the process of investigating a molecule's atomic structure (Dummett, 1981:263,272). A molecule is built up out of atoms in the same way that a proposition is built up from its constituents. The atoms that make up a molecule are similarly simple and unique and a matter of the molecule's intrinsic structure.

From this kind of analysis Dummett distinguishes 'decomposition'; the process by which expressions are removed from a proposition and replaced by variables to form an incomplete expression (Dummett, 1981:273). For Dummett, the purposes of decomposition are twofold. Firstly, it aims to explain the validity of an inference or exhibit such an inference as displaying a general pattern. Decomposition allows us to do this by providing us with the means to extract from premise and conclusion some common expression. As we saw the validity of the proof $\forall x\,.\,xRb \vdash aRb \vdash \exists y.aRy$, relies on us being able to recognise the function shared by xRb and *aRb* and the function shared by *aRb* and *aRy*. Since *aRb* can be decomposed to give (*a*)*Rb* or *aR*(*b*) this demonstrates that *aRb* can be conceived of as having a function in common with the premise of the first inference and with the

conclusion of the second. Decomposing it in this way thus exposes exactly what features of the proposition we exploit in order to move from premise to conclusion while preserving the validity of the proof.

Secondly, decomposition is part of the formation of sentences. Decomposition takes place in a single step and reveals, not the constituents of a proposition, but what Dummett calls its *components* (Dummett, 1981:275). Since these components are involved in the formation of new terms it's clear that in general we do not need to grasp the components of a proposition in order to grasp the proposition. Components of a proposition can be simple or complex; they are more aptly described as *patterns* that can be discerned in propositions rather than *parts*. For this reason the different sets of components that can be found in propositions are certainly not unique and are compatible with each other. Dummett likens the process of decomposition to the process of dividing up a country into regions (Dummett, 1981:263,275). There is no unique way of identifying such regions and such a division is not part of the internal structure of the country.

Analysis and decomposition as interconnected

Importantly, analysis and decomposition are compatible with each other; they are merely two different kinds of analysis, two different models of the relation of a whole to its parts. One is concerned with the dependence of a proposition on its

internal structure and the other is concerned with a proposition's inferential relations to other propositions. Dummett is careful to stress their compatibility.

> No inconsistency is involved in saying that the sentence, or the thought expressed, must be regarded as having been formed out of its constituents in one unique way, but that, once it is formed, it is possible to see it as exemplifying each of several different patterns (Dummett, 1981:280).

Dummett also brings out here that far from analysis and decomposition being inconsistent with each other, the two directions of enquiry are intricately interconnected. In particular he notes how decomposition *presupposes* analysis, so that the different decompositions that are available will depend on the constituent structure of the proposition.

To see that this is the case consider Ramsey's own example 'Either Socrates is wise or Plato is foolish'. Ramsey identifies '*x* is wise unless Plato is foolish' as a legitimate decomposition of this proposition. Although by decomposition we may expose different patterns in a proposition in this way, it is not the case that we can conceive of just any part of the proposition as replaceable by a variable to form an expression. If this were the case then we should be able to decompose the proposition 'Either Socrates is wise or Plato is foolish' to give 'Either So-*x* is wise or Plato is foolish' and then, exploiting the intersubstitutability of the words 'crates'

and ‘boxes’, use the decomposed function to conclude nonsensically ‘Either Soboxes is wise or Plato is foolish’.

But why is it that we cannot conceive of the word ‘crates’ as it occurs in ‘Socrates’ as a pattern that we might extract when we can straightforwardly do so for propositions such as ‘The crates were heavy’? The reason is that the legitimate patterns that we can identify in a proposition - the elements that we can conceive of as going variable - are determined by a proposition’s constituent structure. In Ramsey’s example ‘Socrates’ is a constituent, a name, and so forms an individuated part of the proposition in the same way as ‘crates’ in ‘The crates were heavy’. As a result both words are only replaceable in their entirety by other words in the range of the function that takes them as argument. Therefore the decompositions that we are able to identify in a proposition are dependent upon, and in this way presuppose, the intrinsic structure of a proposition, as uncovered by analysis.

As Dummett acknowledges, this reliance is not one-sided. Analysis depends on decomposition too.

> Although analysis and decomposition are distinct processes, they are… intimately linked. The analysis of a quantified sentence requires us to see a predicate, in a general complex, as a constituent of it, and the conception of the complex predicate is attained by decomposition of a simpler sentence (Dummett, 1981:276).

Analysis presupposes a grasp of the proposition's constituents which we obtain via the decomposition of *other* propositions. To see why this doesn't become circular recall that although grasping a proposition's *constituents* is required to grasp the proposition, this is not the case with the proposition's *components*. Therefore we can say without circularity that we grasp some basic concepts and thus some basic propositions, and from them extract some new concepts by decomposition, which become the constituents of other propositions. This is only feasible if we recognise that:

> The components arrived at by [decompositions] are not, in general, genuine constituents of it, and our understanding of the sentence is therefore independent of our recognition of the complex predicate as occurring in it (Dummett, 1981:278).

Analysis and decomposition then, while being two distinct directions of enquiry, nonetheless exist in this perpetual state of interdependent presupposition to each other. In particular, decomposition presupposes analysis in that the components that can be identified in a proposition depend on its constituent structure. Analysis on the other hand requires us to already have grasped some concepts by way of decomposition, and so the components of simpler sentences become the constituents of more complicated ones.

Analysis and decomposition in Frege

Having established this lemma Dummett returns to Frege. He argues that it is entirely consistent for Frege to hold that a proposition has a unique structure and that the meaning of the proposition is dependent on the meaning of its parts, while also maintaining that the proposition can be analysed in distinct ways and that there are concepts that are not parts of the proposition but are arrived at subsequent to our grasp of the proposition.

Simply, the first of these theses relates to the analysis of a proposition, where it is the case that the constituents are unique and must be grasped prior to grasping the proposition. The second thesis relates to decomposition where the components of a proposition are generally grasped subsequent to the grasp of the proposition itself and the proposition can admit of many different patterns in this way. As we saw, analysis and decomposition are not only compatible but the two processes cannot be understood except as distinct but closely interdependent directions of enquiry. In this way Dummett resolves the apparent tension in Frege's view of the structure of propositions (Dummett, 1981:261-291).

3.1.3 Interpreting the incomprehensible trinity argument using analysis and decomposition

Let us now turn back to Ramsey and the incomprehensible trinity argument. Analysis and decomposition, as we have seen, articulate two distinct but connected

directions of enquiry into the parts of a proposition. One is concerned with the parts that go into making the proposition and one with parts that can be identified in a proposition, once it is so constructed. This brings us back to the claim that propositions are distinguished by their parts, made by the trinity inference, since we are now in a position to ask: what kind of parts does Ramsey have in mind, constituent parts or component parts? Once we have established this we may then consider whether the proponent of CU need be committed to the same interpretation of 'parts'. But for now let's consider the trinity inference in light of two distinct interpretations of the trinity contention.

Let us first interpret the trinity contention in terms of analysis. This will yield:

(Trinity Inference A): different sets of *constituents* imply different propositions.

(Trinity Premise A): there are three different sets of *constituents*.

(Trinity Conclusion): there are three different propositions.

(Trinity Contention A): there are three different propositions because there are three different sets of *constituents*.

The trinity inference (A) makes the claim that three sets of constituents imply three propositions. When we are using the Dummetian notion of a constituent in connection with analysis, this will certainly be true. As we saw, the constituents of

a proposition are simple and they are *unique*. This means that propositions will be distinguished by their constituents and in particular distinct sets of constituents will imply distinct propositions. Thus interpreting the trinity contention in terms of analysis gives us an understanding of the claim made in the trinity inference that is legitimate.

Interpreting the trinity contention in terms of decomposition will give:

(Trinity Inference D): different sets of *components* imply different propositions.

(Trinity Premise D): there are three different sets of *components*.

(Trinity Conclusion): there are three different propositions.

(Trinity Contention D): there are three different propositions because there are three different sets of *components*.

The trinity inference (D) makes the claim that three sets of components imply three propositions. But on a Dummetian understanding of component in connection with decomposition, this just isn't the case. For a proposition to have different sets of components, or rather, for us to be able to identify different component structures in a proposition, does not entail that there are multiple propositions. The decompositions of a proposition aren't unique in this way. Drawing out patterns in a proposition may be dependent upon, and thus in some sense constricted by, the

constituent structure of the proposition, as we saw earlier. But this is not to say that finding one pattern in a proposition excludes us from being able to find another.

Furthermore it is vital that we are able to recognise that there are distinct patterns that can be identified in a single proposition. After all, as Dummett has pointed out, one of the central functions of decomposition is to exhibit the validity of inferences. If the components of a proposition were unique in the same way as its constituents then we would not be able to recognise a single proposition as featuring as a shared premise in a valid argument. This is because if we drew out two different patterns from a proposition then we would have to say that these were patterns in two propositions, rather than saying that they were two decompositions - two components - of the same proposition. However, if a single premise could not admit of different decompositions this would endanger the validity of copious arguments including the previous example $\forall x\,.xRb \vdash aRb \vdash \exists y.aRy$ which employs 'aRb' as the middle link in a chain of proof. Therefore distinct sets of components cannot be said to imply distinct propositions.

Therefore, interoperating the trinity contention in terms of analysis yields an understanding of the trinity inference it on which it is valid. Interoperating the trinity contention in terms of decomposition, on the other hand, shows the trinity inference to be mistaken, and furthermore, *that* it is mistaken is essential to the very function of decomposition.

3.1.4 Dummett's objection

With this in place we may return to asking what interpretation of parts Ramsey means to employ in the trinity contention and whether the proponent of CU is committed to this same interpretation.

Constituents or components?

On the one hand it seems that Ramsey must mean constituent parts, given that we found the only sound interpretation of the trinity inference to be

> (Trinity Inference A): different sets of *constituents* imply different propositions.

On this view, the three propositions are different because they have different *ultimate* parts, that is, different simple, unique constituents.

However, recall that Ramsey deduces the trinity contention from the theory of CU. He says that CU will take there to be three 'related' propositions: one including the predicate '*xRy*', one including the complex predicate '*xRb*', and a third including the complex predicate '*aRx*' (Ramsey, 1931:118). Though it seems fair to draw out from CU the view that these different predicates can be discerned from a single proposition, it seems, at best, a stretch to further attribute CU with the view that these predicates are all *constituents* of the proposition.

Recall Ramsey characterises CU as the position that in compound propositions we can discern complex propositions that denote universals. CU, therefore, is a theory concerning the complex parts of a proposition. Given this, it seems that the proponent of CU could remain completely agnostic regarding the *simple* predicates that could be discerned from a proposition. In other words, given that the proponent of CU takes there to be different complex terms that can be identified in the proposition, what reason could he have for accepting that these terms were *constituents* of the proposition, and thus that they were unique and even *simple*?

However, the assumption that '*xRy*' ,'*xRb*' and '*aRx*' are *all* constituents of '*aRb*' is essential to establishing trinity premise (A). Therefore, if Ramsey does intend the subject of the trinity inference to be a proposition's *constituents* it looks as though he is simply mistaken in conceiving of the complex predicates recognised by CU as constituents of the propositions they can be discerned from.

If Ramsey means component parts to be the subject of the trinity premise then we get

> (Trinity Inference B): different sets of *components* imply different propositions.

It was this interpretation, however, that we found to be problematic. In particular it doesn't follow from the fact that there are distinct components that there are distinct propositions. Furthermore we saw that this was no trivial point;

for if propositions were distinguished by their distinct components, it would be disastrous to the central purpose of decomposition.

It seems, therefore, that applying the distinction between analysis and decomposition to the trinity inference puts Ramsey between a rock and a hard place. For it looks like we must either accuse Ramsey of mistaking a feature of analysis or mistaking a feature of decomposition. In particular: his argument either wrongly assumes that complex predicates are among a proposition's constituents or wrongly assumes that the component structure of a proposition is unique, in the way that its constituent structure is. Let us now consider how this impasse regarding the trinity inference impacts upon the incomprehensible trinity argument as a whole.

Trinity (A) and the incomprehensible trinity argument

Ramsey seems vulnerable to the accusation that he wrongly conceives of complex predicates as constituents if we take him to have intended trinity contention (A). Furthermore it looks as though there is nothing in the theory characterised as CU that commits Ramsey's opponent to trinity premise (A). It seems that the proponent of CU, in so far as he accepts Dummett's story about analysis, will agree that different constituent parts imply different propositions, and as such will agree to trinity inference (A). However, CU has no reason to hold that complex

predicates discerned from a proposition are constituents of that proposition and therefore seems unlikely to accept trinity premise (A).

This is especially damaging because Ramsey needs CU to be committed to the trinity contention for his argument to be successful as a *reductio*. For if CU is not shown by Ramsey to be committed to the trinity conclusion (that there are three propositions) then Ramsey has nothing to bring into tension with the unity premise (that there is one proposition) in order to expose CU as absurd. And even if CU is committed to trinity inference (A), unless CU is also committed to trinity premise (A) then CU need not be committed to the trinity conclusion that there are three propositions. Therefore, if we are not able to establish CU's commitment to the trinity premise (A) then the *reductio* will not be successfully generated against CU.

Trinity (D) and the incomprehensible trinity argument

We found that on a Dummetian understanding of component, trinity inference (D) is internally incoherent. That is to say that interpreting the trinity inference as concerning component parts is problematic since three sets of components do not imply three propositions. A central feature of decomposition is that the components recognised in a proposition are not unique in that they do not individuate propositions. This feature we saw was essential to the very function of decomposition, in particular to recognising a single proposition as a shared premise in a valid proof.

The proponent of CU will have no problem counting the predicates Ramsey identifies as three different components of the proposition since the *components* of a proposition can be complex, and so will accept trinity premise (D). As we saw, however, when we articulate the features of decomposition it undermines trinity inference (D). This is problematic because when the trinity inference (D) is undermined in this way CU is no longer committed to the trinity conclusion and as such no longer makes a claim that is in conflict with the unity premise. Simply, one proposition can admit of multiple decompositions, multiple patterns. Thus the unity premise and the trinity contention become compatible through the lenses of decomposition and the argument only masquerades as a *reductio*.

What both interpretations of the trinity contention respectively bring to light is that for the incomprehensible trinity argument to be successful Ramsey has to either attribute to CU the view that complex predicates are constituents, or the view that a proposition's components are unique in the way that its constituents are. Both of these theses we found to be contestable in themselves: on a Dummetian understand of analysis and decomposition, both are simply mistakes. And there seems to be no reason for Ramsey's opponent to be committed to either dubious view.

Dummett's criticism

Dummett (1981) clearly takes it that the distinction between analysis and decomposition has some bearing on the issues brought out in Ramsey's paper. Indeed, it is in the chapter *Alternative Analyses,* where Dummett explains analysis and decomposition in greatest depth, that he introduces the criticism against the incomprehensible trinity argument[9].

In short, Dummett accuses Ramsey of failing to recognise that a single proposition can be analysed in different ways. Dummett takes the incomprehensible trinity argument to be fuelled by Ramsey's struggle to answer the question, 'How can there be distinct possible analyses of the same proposition?' (Dummett, 1981:264). Dummett's answer to this is: by the process of decomposition. For Dummett, the supposed conflict between the unity premise and the trinity contention is resolved by articulating and separating features of analysis and features of decomposition.

> [Ramsey's] difficulty ought to dissolve as soon as it is realised that the analysis of a proposition is not like the analysis of a molecule, but like the analysis of a country into regions (Dummett, 1981:264).

[9] Dummett takes his criticism to be in line with Geach's objection to the same argument (Dummett, 1981:264-266).

With such a realisation in place we can say that while 'aRb' admits of one unique analysis, it admits of three complimentary decompositions. And given the interdependence of analysis and decomposition there is no contradiction left for Ramsey to exploit against CU.

In this sense, Dummett takes no stand on whether Ramsey should be interpreted as forwarding trinity contention (A) or trinity contention (D). He is not concerned with asking whether Ramsey intended the trinity contention to involve constituents or components because he takes Ramsey to have been confused between the two. In particular, Ramsey has taken a proposition's *components* to be simple and unique and as such to distinguish the propositions they are a part of when simplicity and uniqueness are features only of a proposition's *constituent* parts. In this way Ramsey has mixed up features of analysis with features of decomposition and in his bid to see through the muddle of universals is responsible for a muddle of his own.

It seems then that interpreting the incomprehensible trinity argument in terms of analysis and decomposition dissolves the argument as a *reductio*. It resolves the tension between the trinity and the unity premise by separating out the features of the two different directions of enquiry and exposing Ramsey as having failed to do the same. The argument only seems incomprehensible, therefore, because it works on the basis of this mistake.

3.2 Is Ramsey mistaken?

This section will continue on from the identification of the mistaken assumption that underlies Ramsey's *reductio* and explore the root of this mistake. It will first show that it is, at the very least, not obvious that the mistake being made is Ramsey's. It will then explore different features of Ramsey's argument to consider how likely it is that Ramsey is guilty of such a damaging and fundamental confusion.

3.2.1 The parts-confused view

Thanks to Dummett's diagnosis we have got to the heart of the incomprehensible trinity problem and have been able to express exactly why it seems so puzzling. At its heart, we found there to be a confusion. Ramsey takes a proposition's components to be simple and unique and as such to distinguish the propositions they are a part of when simplicity and uniqueness are features only of a proposition's constituents. In treating a proposition's components like its constituents Ramsey has mixed up features of decomposition with features of analysis. As we saw in detail, the argument only successfully functions as a *reductio* if is it able to exploit this confused notion of a proposition's parts.

We may also express the confusion in non-Dummetian terms. The complex predicates that can be discerned in a proposition are being treated by Ramsey as if they were simple predicates. In particular, the complex predicates are being taken to individuate the propositions they are a part of as if they were the simple parts of

those propositions. Coupling this confusion of treating complex predicates as simple constituent parts of a proposition with CU's theory that complex predicates name complex universals Ramsey then attributes to CU the view that a complex predicate names a universal in the same way that a simple predicate names a universal. In other words, instead of taking the complex predicate to be a complex name that denotes a complex universal Ramsey treats the complex predicate as a simple designation of its object - the complex universal.

For the sake of brevity the specifics of this mistaken view will, henceforth, occasionally be referred to as 'the parts-confused view'.

From this angle there is no point in considering whether the proponent of CU would accept the parts-confused view: of course he would not; once separated out its patently confused. However, we must be careful in formulating our conclusion as to where this leaves Ramsey. For we would be too hasty to conclude with Dummett that merely articulating the distinction between analysis and decomposition will 'dissolve' Ramsey's worry to the extent that it invalidates his entire argument. All we have established so far is that the argument cannot function without exploiting a conception of sub-propositional parts that we found to be confused between two directions of analysis. Having identified such a conception as a mistake we must at least ask, and not simply assume, whether the mistake is Ramsey's own.

For, as we will see, other features of the incomprehensible trinity argument provide strong reasons to suggest that Ramsey is at least conscious of the parts-confused view, in which case we can rule out that it was an error in his own thinking. Such considerations suggest the possibility that Ramsey is both consciously and deliberately attributing the parts-confused view to his opponent. This in turn opens up the search for some reason why Ramsey should attribute to the view he opposes erroneous assumptions that conflate features of decomposition with features of analysis.

3.2.2 Ramsey is not parts-confused

This section will make two arguments to establish that the confusion that has been identified between components and constituents in the incomprehensible trinity argument cannot be easily attributed to Ramsey. It will do so by considering two features of Ramsey's argument: first, the very structure of the *reductio,* and secondly, the assumptions that are exploited in the unity premise and the argument from definition.

The structure of reductio

As we saw before, the *reductio* is structured so that it is that it is weighted towards the rejection of the trinity contention. In other words the unity premise, for reasons that we detailed, is set up to be both intuitive and undeniable and as such CU is committed to it (in so far as any theory should be). Ramsey first establishes CU's

commitment to the trinity contention and then brings this into conflict with the unity premise, making as they do contradictory claims regarding the number of propositions in question.

Given that the argument is set up to reject the trinity contention in this way, it is significant that the view that a proposition's complex predicates are its constituents, the parts-confused view, is required in order to establish CU's commitment to the trinity contention. We can infer from this that the structure of the *reductio* is in fact set up to anticipate the rejection of the contested mistaken view. Rather than failing to recognise such an important assumption that functions at such a pivotal point in the *reductio*, it is more plausible to suppose that Ramsey intends to oust the mistaken view along with complex universals. That is to say, Ramsey is taking the parts-confused view to be part of the theory that he's opposing. From this angle we can see Ramsey not only as avoiding the blame for simply being confused but as agreeing with Dummett that the conception of a proposition's parts implicit in the opposing view is indeed mistaken and is to be rejected.

The unity premise and argument from definition

Let's first spell out more fully the accusation that Ramsey is simply making a mistake and confusing features of analysis with features of decomposition. As we have seen, the accusation is more specifically that he is failing to recognise that the component structure of a proposition is not unique in the way that its constituent

structure is. We also found that the fact a proposition's components are not unique is not a mere feature of decomposition but is rather an extremely important characteristic, without which decomposition could not fulfil one of its primary roles. For if components individuated propositions in the way that constituents do, that is to say, if trinity inference (D) held, then we would be unable to recognise that a single premise could be shared in a valid argument and as such we would be unable to explain or exhibit the validity of such a proof. Therefore, if we accuse Ramsey of making a mistake in this way, we accuse him of neglecting to realise that it is essential to recognising the validity of arguments involving a shared premise that the component structure of a proposition is not unique.

Recall, however, the motivation for the unity premise that legitimates Ramsey in assuming it to be intuitive, incontestable, and robust enough to shatter the trinity contention when they are brought into conflict by the *reductio*. We found that '(*a*)*R*(*b*)', '(*a*)*Rb*' and '*aR*(*b*)' have to be recognised as the same proposition if we are to be able to explain the validity of inferences involving a shared premise. We considered the valid proof $\forall x\,.\,xRb \vdash aRb \vdash \exists y.aRy$. In order to recognise the validity of this proof we had to conceive of aRb as admitting of two distinct functions, (*a*)*Rb* and *aR*(*b*) so that it had a function in common with both the premise of the first inference and the conclusion of the second inference and in this way could act as a link between them. It was essential to this story however, that recognising the distinct functions in '*aRb*' did not entail that it was two proposition,

for unless it is recognised as a single proposition it cannot act as such a link and we would be unable to account for the validity of the proof. For this reason it is odd to accuse Ramsey of making such a mistake as neglecting to realise that the component structure of a proposition is not unique and as such being unable to explain the validity of certain arguments. For, this is the very feature that Ramsey exploits elsewhere in the argument in establishing the unity premise.

To further evidence the fact that Ramsey is aware that component structure is not unique and indeed that he exploits this feature elsewhere in his paper, recall the argument from definition. We noted there that the first horn of the dilemma is intended to strengthen the unity premise by articulating a context in which the unity premise is more obviously essential, that of the process of definition. Since by the process of definition two propositions with different parts can nevertheless be attributed with the same meaning it must be that propositions with different structures can still be recognised to be the same proposition. Therefore, maintaining the unity premise in any given case is essential to the process of definition, and one of the purposes of the argument from definition is to exploit the non-uniqueness of a proposition's components in this way.

Therefore although it is not outwith the bounds of possibility that Ramsey has made such a mistake it is nonetheless absurd to accuse Ramsey of failing to recognise a feature of decomposition when he set up the trinity contention since the very same feature underlies the unity premise and is emphasised by him in the

argument from definition which supplements the incomprehensible trinity argument.

Who is parts-confused?

These considerations of two different features of the incomprehensible trinity argument therefore show that we gravely underestimate Ramsey if we take him to be making a mistake in the argument in a straightforward way: in particular, by simply failing to appreciate that a proposition's components are not unique in the way that its constituents are.

Rather than making this mistake himself it must be that Ramsey means to attribute the mistake to his opponent. In this sense the confusion between features of components and features of constituents is part of the muddle that Ramsey sets out to deny. If this is the case then the *reductio* does not fail because Ramsey confuses two notions but, rather, the very articulation of the parts-confused view merely brings out what Ramsey himself takes to be an error in his opponent's theory. The *reductio* is of course perfectly entitled to exploit any such error if it is part of the opposing position. Thus, instead of concluding that the argument dissolves we should rather conclude, merely, that since the parts-confused view is essential to establishing that Ramsey's opponent is committed to the trinity contention, it is the parts-confused view that makes Ramsey's opponent vulnerable to the incomprehensible trinity argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*. And it should

come as little surprise that a theory containing a confused view would be vulnerable in this way.

3.2.3 The parts-confused straw man

Of course, these observations do not yet deliver Ramsey from the woods. Instead they reveals wherein Ramsey's real error might lie. For, the parts-confused view may not be Ramsey's but it still seems a mistake for him to attribute it to his opponent. Insofar as CU is taken to be the opponent of the argument we have, as yet, found no reason for CU to be committed to the parts-confused view or for any feature of CU to imply the mistake in question. This leaves us with the worry that Ramsey's argument attacks a straw man which becomes a worry towards the legitimacy and utility of the only target that the incomprehensible trinity argument can be said to refute.

The straw man worry

The view characterised in CU holds that in compound propositions we can discern complex predicates that denote complex universals. Preceding the lengthy elucidation of analysis and decomposition we said in §3.1.2 that it seemed that one could maintain CU while remaining agnostic as to how the compound propositions where structured and in particular whether complex predicates individuated the propositions they were a part of - that is - whether a proposition's component

structure was unique. In other words, we concluded that the proponent of CU could remain agnostic regarding the concerns of the parts-confusion view.

Considering the parts-confused view in more depth, we found there to be more tension than mere agnosticism. For the parts-confused view holds that the complex predicates recognised by CU are names for complex universals in the same way that simple predicates are names for simple universals. On this confused view, a proposition's complex parts are erroneously attributed with features of its simple parts. It would be strange, therefore, for CU to treat *complex* parts as if they were *simple* when the theory solely concerns *complex* predicates. It not only seems, therefore, that the proponent of CU need take no stance on whether a complex predicate is a simple name, but that such a view is in tension with the theory put forward in CU.

Thus, while it might be clear that the mistaken view is not Ramsey's own in a straightforward way, this opens up further questions as to whether Ramsey makes another kind of mistake in deriving the parts-confused view from CU. Since CU cannot be charged with adhering to the parts-confused view it seems that Ramsey's argument attacks a mere straw man.

The confused man

We must recognise, however, that accusing Ramsey of attacking up a straw man results in a rather curious scenario. After all, the incomprehensible trinity argument

is born from a characterisation of CU that Ramsey himself suggests. To argue that Ramsey's argument fails because he defeats a mere straw man is to say that Ramsey characterises a certain position and then mistakenly levels an argument against a different position. Less abstractly: that he characterises CU and then attacks a view that maintains both CU and the parts-confused view. It is not impossible that this is what Ramsey has done, of course. But it seems more likely that it is Ramsey's characterisation of his opponent that was mistaken or not completely explicit and that the so-called 'straw man' was the real target all along.

If this was the case then Ramsey would be attacking a man that was more substantial than straw. For it would be much less damaging to accuse Ramsey of not explicitly identifying all of the commitments of his opponent than of underestimating him. This would be more of an elucidation of Ramsey's real target than a criticism of his argument. If we suppose Ramsey's opponent to be anyone who adopts both the position of CU and the parts-confusion view this guarantees the success of the *reductio*. However, if we are to use this as a defence of Ramsey's argument it must be that there is evidence that Ramsey does indeed attack this combination of views and, most importantly, that there is sufficient motivation for Ramsey to do so.

It is all very well to suppose that, given the set-up of the argument, Ramsey's real target was the view that adheres both to CU and the parts-confusion (henceforth known as the confused man view). But it is another matter to argue

what use it is for Ramsey to defeat such an opponent. For it may be that, trivially, the incomprehensible trinity argument functions against this view, but it doesn't seem like much of a victory to defeat a view that adheres to a confusion in this way.

Therefore, in order to elaborate the suggestion that Ramsey intends to attack the confused man, into a real defence of Ramsey's argument we must investigate how plausible it is that Ramsey's argument is aimed at attacking not merely CU but CU *and* the parts-confused view. In other words, we must consider whether *Universals* as a whole provides sufficient reason for Ramsey to deny the view that complex predicates are simple names of universals. Such an investigation may be carried out by returning to Ramsey's conclusion and target in *Universals* as we identified in chapter one, and by considering what role the incomprehensible trinity argument plays towards Ramsey's overall conclusion as we brought out in chapter two.

3.3 The confused man in the context of *Universals*

Having identified a possible avenue of defence for the incomprehensible trinity argument this section will now consider whether Ramsey has any motivation for defeating the view that the complex predicates recognised by CU are names for complex universals in the same way that simple predicates are names for simple universals. We dubbed this the confused man view and found it to be the only view that the incomprehensible trinity argument to successfully reduce to absurdity.

3.3.1 The role of the incomprehensible trinity argument

To establish the missing motivation we must first return to the macro-purpose of Ramsey's paper, as we discussed in chapter one; as well as the role that the incomprehensible trinity argument plays towards this end, as we discussed in chapter two. Once this is in place we may consider whether refuting the view that Ramsey's arguments attack has a purpose in the over-all context of Ramsey's paper. For if it does not then we shall have identified a powerful objection to Ramsey. We will have exposed the incomprehensible trinity argument as a faulty cog in the intricately connected mechanism of his argumentation. Since we saw in chapter two how the incomprehensible trinity argument is needed in order to successfully reject the view Ramsey opposes, such a result would carry the double blow of trivialising Ramsey's argument and denying him the success of his conclusion. If the wider context of the article does, however, secure a motivation for attacking the confused man then we shall have achieved a precise explanation of Ramsey's contention. For, the identification of such a motivation will further elucidate what Ramsey is concerned to deny regarding universals and in particular will make perspicuous the subtlety of his rejection of a certain kind of incompleteness.

Review of chapter one and two

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the context already put in place by the previous two chapters. Chapter one identified exactly what it is that Ramsey aims to

reject in *Universals*. It found that Ramsey's view is that no object in reality is PLA-incomplete and that, as such, his paper aims to target a specific conception of a universal as being intrinsically incomplete in a way that particulars are not.

Chapter two identified how Ramsey rejects this conception of a universal. It found that Ramsey employs a diagnosis that identifies the reasons that universals are conceived of in this way and directs his arguments towards attacking those reasons. In particular we grouped the various arguments in Ramsey's paper as attacking the claim that complex predicates are names (A*) and the claim that simple predicates are PLA-incomplete (B*). This strategy enables Ramsey to conclude that there is no *a priori* reason to conceive of universals as PLA-incomplete, and although he remains agnostic as to whether some other considerations outside of the diagnosis may independently establish that universals exist, there is no strong presumption in favour of this happening. Simple predicates have only been conceived of as PLA-incomplete as the result of a muddle- because they have been assimilated into a single class with complex predicates and the distinct properties of both symbols have mistakenly assumed to be the properties of a single type of symbol which is both PLA-incomplete and names an object in reality.

Review of the role of the incomprehensible trinity argument

We saw that the purpose of the incomprehensible trinity argument to be is to reject the view that complex predicates are names (A*). Refuting this view is the

contribution of the argument to the overall purpose of *Universals*, that is, towards denying that PLA-incomplete symbols can be taken as a basis from which to infer that PLA-incompleteness is a feature of objects in reality.

In this chapter we have seen that Ramsey explicitly takes the argument to counter the view that in propositions we can discern complex predicates which name complex universals (CU). This is a minor elaboration of the view that we expressed in A*: that complex predicates are names, since, if complex predicates were names they would of course name complex universals corresponding to the complexity of their denotations.

However, we also saw the only view that the incomprehensible trinity argument can be said to counteract is one that adheres to both CU and the parts-confused view (which we called the confused man's view). That is to say, a theory that holds that complex predicates in complex propositions name complex universals and also holds that complex predicates are simple constituent parts of propositions. Such a theory would therefore maintain that a complex predicate names a complex universal in the same way that a simple predicate names a simple universal. We can express this as the view:

A** Complex predicates are simple names

Comparing A* and A** makes it clear which aspect of the confused man's view is problematic. For although the context of Ramsey's overarching argument explains why he must reject the view that complex predicates are names (A*) it

remains unclear why he should reject the view that complex predicates stand in a *simple* naming relationship to that which they designate (A**).

3.3.2 Why simple?

This section will identify a motivation for why Ramsey must deny A** which will draw on the wider context of Ramsey's argument. In the course of doing so it will make explicit two assumptions that underlie Ramsey's rejection of the view that complex predicates name universals in the same way that simple predicates do.

The word-world link

The key to understanding why Ramsey must reject A** is to ask why Ramsey must reject A*. In other words, we must remind ourselves why it is that Ramsey wants to deny that complex predicates are names. We said in §2.1.3 that since Ramsey accepts that complex predicates are PLA-incomplete (B) he must deny that complex predicates denote anything in reality, since what they would name would be objects that were PLA-incomplete corresponding to that which named them. Ramsey's real aim, then, is to deny that any objects in reality are PLA-incomplete and that such incompleteness can be read into the world from of a feature of symbols.

When we expounded this point we exploited an assumption that we saw Russell make in PLA. That is, the assumption of a link between language and the world and in particular that there are certain features of language that that must mirror features of reality for language to be successful. These kinds of features we can think

of roughly as ones pertaining to the ability to combine with other elements, so that the possibility intrinsic to a term in an atomic proposition for combining with other terms in a proposition reflects the possibility intrinsic to the objects in an atomic fact for combining with other objects in a fact (Russell, 197:248). This is why regarding the search for a metaphysical division in reality Russell considers it fruitful to turn to language and to try to identify a logical distinction in language. In other words Russell is looking for a division in the intrinsic nature of the elements in an atomic proposition because this is what would enable him to infer that such a division must be reflected in reality and therefore that there is a distinction between the intrinsic nature of objects such that we may call one complete and one incomplete and one a particular and one a universal.

Ramsey shares this assumption in *Universals*. As we already saw in §1.3.1 he shares Russell's belief that a distinction between particular and universal can only be established via a logical distinction, that is, a logical distinction in language. It's also clear that Ramsey considers there to be the same kind of link between language and the world. As he sets up his enquiry he emphasises that his concern with language is only towards 'discover[ing] the logical nature of reality (Ramsey, 1931:117).' If Ramsey did not share this assumption with Russell then there would be no point to his engaging and attacking the views A* and B* since a mere feature of a predicate (whether simple or complex) could not be a possible reason to conclude anything about the incompleteness of universals.

The missing motivation

In order to locate a motivation for defeating the confused man we must keep in view that Ramsey's target is the idea that there is PLA-incompleteness in the reality. In order to reject this idea Ramsey engages with the reasons that PLA-incompleteness *has* been read into the world. We saw that one of these reasons was the belief that complex predicates were names. We have to appreciate, then, that Ramsey is only concerned with the premise that complex predicates are names in so far as it provides a reason to consider PLA-incompleteness a feature of an object in the world. Ramsey maintains, of course, that not all features of symbols should be read into features of the world. Indeed, this is a way to characterise the very contention of Ramsey's essay.

> I shall argue that nearly all philosophers, including Mr Russell himself, have been misled by language in a far more far-reaching way…that the whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality what is merely a characteristic of language (Ramsey, 1931:117).

Therefore Ramsey is only concerned with those symbols whose features are such that they can be read into the features of objects.

We must ask, therefore, which symbols have this characteristic such that we could infer from their incompleteness an incompleteness in the objects they denote.

Well, according to Ramsey there are two kinds of symbol: names, that is, simple names; and incomplete symbols, that is, Russell-incomplete symbols. We've said already that Ramsey holds a simple name to be such a symbol (Ramsey, 1931:120-121, 130). So that the incompleteness of a simple name would allow us to legitimately assume some corresponding incompleteness in the object that it stood for. On the other hand we also saw that a Russell-incomplete symbol has its denotation in a more indirect way. Such a symbol refers to an object in virtue of the several simple symbols named in its definition. For this reason there is no complex object that directly corresponds to the Russell-incomplete symbol and as such no features of the incomplete symbol can be used to investigate the features of something in the world. In particular, the incompleteness of a Russell-incomplete symbol such as 'the author of Waverley' does not transfer incompleteness to anything in reality.

Therefore, only a simple naming relationship between symbol and object will give us reason to infer from the intrinsic incompleteness of one, the intrinsic incompleteness of the other. This provides the missing motivation for Ramsey to attack the view that complex predicates are simple names (A**). We are thus able to see how Ramsey's argument works by understanding it in the wider context of his article. The incomprehensible trinity argument attacks the view that complex predicates are simple names because we cannot assume that the features of a Russell-incomplete symbol correspond to objects in reality and therefore only a

simple name will enable us to infer PLA-incompleteness into the world. Since Ramsey's aim is to deny that PLA-incompleteness is a feature of the world it follows that he is only concerned to deny that complex predicates are names (A*) insofar as this is interpreted to mean that complex predicates designate in the same way as simple names (A**) and thus give us licence to infer from their incompleteness an intrinsic incompleteness in reality.

Ramsey's assumption

Although we have seemingly identified the motivation that legitimises Ramsey in attacking the view that complex predicates are simple names this does not yet deliver the result that the incomprehensible trinity argument is uncontroversially successful. It should already be apparent that in order to ground the motivation we identified Ramsey needs to be granted a certain assumption. This is the assumption that all symbols can be divided into simple names or Russell-incomplete symbols.

Ramsey makes this assumption throughout his essay, most explicitly in his diagnosis (Ramsey, 1931:131-134). However, it has a particular significance to the incomprehensible trinity argument. For, if we grant Ramsey that the only sense in which a complex predicate refers is either as a simple designation or as a Russell-incomplete symbol then to understand the point of the incomprehensible trinity argument reducing to absurdity the view that it does (the view we called A**) we need only point out that Ramsey's aim is to reject incompleteness in reality and the

fact that the incompleteness of a symbol does not tell us anything about the world unless it is a simple name.

However, it is not obvious that this is the only alternative. In particular it's not obvious why, for Ramsey, a name must be simple. Frege, and Dummett after him, distinguished between a simple proper name and a complex proper name (Dummett, 1973:183, Frege, 1969:387,156). On this view there are simple names like 'six' but also complex names like 'four plus two' so that the complexity of a symbol does not exclude it from being a name or even from naming the same object as simple symbol. As such it is unclear why a symbol could not be a name while also standing in a complex designation relation to an object, designating an object in virtue of its simple parts. Most importantly it is unclear why the complex symbol could not maintain some correspondence between its features and the features of its denotation. If we held that a complex predicate was a complex name of a complex universal, for instance, we might consider the complexity of the universal to be mirrored by the complexity of the predicate that denotes it. Thus we might legitimately wonder whether incompleteness was a similar kind of feature so that we could infer from the intrinsic incompleteness of a proper complex name the intrinsic incompleteness of the complex entity that it stood for.

Here we find ourselves in the realm of speculation, but this is only in order to illustrate the kinds of considerations that Ramsey does not exclude with the arguments he makes. In particular the incomprehensible trinity argument by itself

does not give us any reason to consider the division between simple names and Russell-incomplete symbols exhaustive with regard to all symbols. If Ramsey has a reason for maintaining this assumption it is to be sought in his more general ontological framework. For the assumption is not a linguistic contention but is rather born from Ramsey's background metaphysic commitments, in particular, from the basic principles of logical atomism that Ramsey inherits from Russell and from Wittgenstein. The idea that only the atoms yielded by logical analysis should be considered to name objects, that only the simple names in atomic proposition are the ones that latch onto the world and as such generate our ontological commitments, is not defended by Ramsey in his paper; and the search for a defence of such an assumption is beyond the scope of this thesis.

This is not to suggest that Ramsey straightforwardly overlooked providing a defence of this assumption. There is an obvious tactical reason we might suggest for why he left his position undefended. This is of course that Russell, his original target, shares the same assumption. For this reason we can say that Ramsey's argument is successful as an internal critique of Russell's position regarding universals in PLA. Russell's dichotomy between simple names and incomplete symbols legitimates Ramsey as targeting the theory that complex predicates are simple names for complex universals (A**) since this is the only view that would enable Russell to infer from the incompleteness of the complex predicate that some objects in the world were intrinsically more incomplete than others. The

incomprehensible trinity argument then exploits the features of a simple designation relationship to expose (A**) as untenable. In this case it is clear that Russell must more easily give up his conception of a universal as PLA-incomplete rather than such a fundamental axiom to his logical atomism.

However, as we have already discussed, strictly speaking the target of Ramsey's paper is not Russell but rather a certain conception of universals as PLA-incomplete wrongly believed to have arising from *a priori* considerations that is manifest in Russell's theory of universals in PLA. Therefore, although Ramsey's argument might internally persuade Russell of the error of his ways, it remains an open question whether the argument will be effective independent of a commitment to Russell's atomism. The effectiveness of the incomprehensible trinity argument will therefore depend on how far we should adopt the assumption that the division of symbols into names and incomplete symbols is exhaustive. Within the article at least, Ramsey gives us no reason to think that we should do so, other than merely inhabiting the view himself and demonstrating its advantages indirectly.

3.4 Conclusion to chapter three

Employing Dummett's distinction between analysis and decomposition, therefore, irreversibly damages success of the incomprehensible trinity argument unless we take into account the surrounding context of Ramsey's article. Bringing into play the wider context of Ramsey's intricately constructed combination of argument and

diagnosis exposes the mechanisms that the incomprehensible trinity argument relies upon. On the one hand it offers us an understanding of how the incomprehensible trinity argument successfully functions but on the other hand it exposes certain atomistic assumptions that the argument relies upon to do so. We have first of all the assumption of some link between language and the world so that an investigation into the logical features of language can be considered a fruitful method by which to investigate certain features of reality. Even more debatable is the second assumption that there is an exhaustive division between those things that have simple designative relations to objects and those things that are Russell-incomplete and refer to the objects via the several simple symbols that compose it.

Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to vindicate either assumption we can still observe that hinging the success of the *reductio* on the extent to which Ramsey's opponent is committed to these assumptions puts Ramsey in a better position than before. It is certainly preferable than concluding that the incomprehensible trinity argument is based the faulty assumption that complex predicates are simple. Though it is true that the assumptions we have identified need to be supported, this is not a task for Ramsey's focused critique. Such a task has a place in the context of a broader defence of the project of logical atomism and of its basic tenets. Exposing the atomism that underlies Ramsey's article and in particular the success of the incomprehensible trinity argument shows that the atomistic assumptions that Ramsey makes, though undefended, are tenable

positions. Furthermore it exposes the background metaphysical view that Ramsey maintains in the article and reveals Ramsey's sensitivity to the wider implications of Russell's logical atomism on the local position that Russell adopts regarding universals.

Conclusion

In chapter one we established exactly what Ramsey aimed to reject in *Universals*: the idea of a universal as specially incomplete, as dependant on the form of the proposition in a way that particulars were not. In chapter two we expounded the arguments in *Universals* using a framework that emphasised their interdependence and their role in establishing the main conclusion of universals. In chapter three we assessed the incomprehensible trinity argument and used the wider context of the argument established in the first two chapters to argue that analysis and decomposition provides an elucidation of the argument rather than a decisive criticism of it.

This thesis is only a beginning towards the task of providing a thorough exegesis of Ramsey's essay that is sensitive to its intricate structure and main concerns. Another exegesis would be able to consider the features and functions of the different arguments in the essay in more depth. The exposition that is given is intended to provide enough context to support the final chapter where we consider an extremely powerful criticism that has been raised against one of Ramsey's central arguments. Taking into account the wider context of the method and target of Ramsey's argument renders his position safe from the particular criticism levelled against him by Dummett.

I do not, however, claim to have rendered Ramsey's incomprehensible trinity argument secure from all criticism. All that the thesis establishes is that the incomprehensible trinity argument relies on *different* assumptions in order to be successful. Of course, the assumptions that I accuse Ramsey of making are a lot more tenable than the parts-confused position attributed to him by Dummett. Furthermore, since these assumptions issue from Ramsey's background metaphysical view it is at least understandable, in part, why Ramsey did not attempt to explicitly defend them, despite their importance to the argument. The source of the atomist view is, after all, the explicit target of the paper and so Ramsey can to some extent bracket a defence of the relevant assumptions which would require a defence of a metaphysical position outwith the bounds of Ramsey's concerns in the essay.

Although I have provided an explanation for why Ramsey does not defend his atomistic assumptions this is only to note the practical reasons for his omission and not to vindicate the assumptions themselves or deny that a defence of them is necessary for the success of his argument. In this sense the thesis takes no stance on whether the incomprehensible trinity argument is ultimately successful. Instead it merely exposes the fact that in order to be successful the argument requires there to be a correspondence between symbols and the objects they name and for this to be true in such a way that only a simple naming relationship between them could give us reason to infer from the incompleteness of a symbol an incompleteness in the

object that it names. These are, of course, unobvious assumptions based on a contentious metaphysical view. The success of the incomprehensible trinity argument is therefore dependent on the extent to which one is committed to these atomistic assumptions.

Rather than a direct defence of Ramsey's argument, then, this thesis is intended to be an exercise in demonstrating that being sensitive to the context of Ramsey's argument reveals a much underestimated position. For, if we are to argue that the argument is unsuccessful it must not be on the grounds that it conflates features of analysis with features of decomposition; to do so would be to attack a straw Ramsey. Instead, we must challenge the assumptions of his atomism and in particular, I think, ask whether there is any reason to hold that there cannot be complex names so that the correspondence of incompleteness between symbol and object at the atomic level extends to some complex terms (i.e. those that are not Russell-incomplete symbols). This involves investigating whether the assumptions of Russell's logical atomism that Ramsey's argument employs can be made tenable outside of this particular metaphysical view.

Taking this approach, therefore, reveal's Ramsey's incomprehensible trinity argument to be a much stronger argument that it has been made out to be by its

commentators and most importantly brings back to the fore the real contentions of Ramsey's *Universals*.[10]

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