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International conference on Ontology

*The problem of universals in contemporary philosophy**

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Overview

The three-day conference opened in the afternoon of July, 5 and, after taking a quick look at the programme and the names of the important thinkers standing out on it, one could have expected to find a crowded audience room. Actually that was not quite the case.

What I could afford to follow and am going to write about here is only the first day of the conference. The debate started right on time, after a short introduction given by Gabriele Galluzzo, both organizer of the conference and member of the scientific board. I would actually like to underline the word *debate*: each speech (about 40 minutes) was immediately followed by a short discussion of the issues introduced by the proponent. Unfortunately, despite of the accurate and punctual speeches, the little time dedicated to each is what most penalized the conference, in my opinion: this inevitably obliged both the speakers and the audience to be plunged *in medias res*, without standing too much on ceremonies.

I take this to be 'penalizing', considering the debate on universals is a very wide one and composed by an incredibly great number of positions which can sometimes start from opposite sides and some other times depart at some specific middle point of one single theory of properties and relations. Moreover, most (if not all) of them entail a certain number of other metaphysical themes from which the specific problematics of universals cannot be cut off.

As Armstrong (1992) would put it: «we have here a sort of metaphysician's paradise in which philosophers can wander, arguing». For the sake of clearness (hopefully), I try to illustrate the positions of the prominent philosophers and fill in some gaps, whereas I considered a notional and/or an explanatory content (even though sometimes blandly summarized) was demanded.

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*Coherently with the language spoken during the conference, this paper is written in English, as requested by the Scientific Direction of the journal.

Michael Loux
An exercise in Constituent Ontology

The first presentation is the one by Michael Loux, professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame (IN).

The discussion is grounded on a particular ontological strategy whose efforts are those of defining, in a prescriptive or descriptive way, the ontological structure of objects: in other words how the parts of an object, in a loose, though non-mereological sense, *constitute* the object itself and, of course, the question falls back to which of those parts and which of those *fundamental* relations should be taken into consideration as constituents, modelling the objects of reality.

The point Loux tried to show, and which can be traced back in Loux (2005) and Loux (2006), is that the traditional Aristotelian ontological approach, the very first theory of substance in the history of philosophy, can be certainly identified as a constituent one and, above all, better replys to some common objections towards other contemporary constituent approaches.

The comparison starts with the consideration of the traditional *bundle theory* (here as BT) which acknowledges familiar particulars to be constituted simply by bundles of properties and relations between them, without any inherence to a substance that's separated from them and which is supposed to bear those properties.[1]

This particular constituent approach, that was historically intended to avoid the implication of metaphysical obscure entities like "substances", eventually leads to some common objections and the following are those exemplified by Loux:

1. BT entails the Identity of Indiscernibles,[2] which has been proved to be problematical, if not false;[3]

2. BT entails an extreme form of essentialism, first and foremost since constituency is recognized in all of the properties that compose a particular object and, secondly, for the same reason

3. BT supporters could be in trouble if they are to explain how things persist through change;

4. Since Bundle theorists acknowledge only properties in their base ontology, they're supposed to give an explanation about concrete particulars (that is, bundles of properties) which *possess* those properties, that is, how properties are put and kept together to constitute such objects.

Loux showed how different responses have been given to such objections, resulting in different constituent approaches, some of which step out of BT. For example, within an *ante rem* view of universals, some realists' efforts, both supporting BT and acknowledging properties *as* universals, fall back to the necessity of defining a 'property–bearer' – resulting from a hypothetical 'suspension' of the entire set of properties which constitute a concrete particular[4] – whose function is also that of granting the identity of an object through time. But this certainly recalls the problematics entailed by the notion of "substance" and, above all, somehow demonstrates the incompatibility of BT with realism.

On the other hand, from a nominalist point of view, there are those who bring the approach of BT to extreme consequences, enriching it with the theory of *tropes*;[5] in such a case, we recognize properties not as universals but as *post rem* «abstract particulars»[6] themselves, which are kept together by a certain relation[7] to form bundles of tropes, thus exemplified by particular concrete objects. Nevertheless, this approach doesn't seem to give a good response to objections concerning essentialism and the problematics of concretizing abstract entities, in terms of selection of properties and relations which come and constitute a concrete particular that's predicated to be 'such and such'.

For these and other problems (and possible solutions that Loux doesn't seem to support), Loux thus suggests to rehabilitate the Aristotelian approach which seems to be more successful, supporting a sort of *in re* conception of universals.

In terms of universals and concrete particulars, the base of the Aristotelian constituent strategy Loux traces within Aristotle's work is defined by the two traditional kinds of *accidental composites*, both of which are predicative structures referring to the distinction of *subject* and *predicate*:[8]

1. the first kind comprehends matter and the substantial form (the *constituting universal*) predicated of it which result in the definition of familiar substance-kinds (e.g. horses, human beings, . . .); that is, there is something material which is subject to something else that occurs to it, resulting in this or that family of individuals, endowed with those properties pertaining to it.

2. the second kind entails the first and can be linked to the category of accidentals: the product of such a concatenation is what Aristotle calls «coincidentals» (e.g. 'the musical man', in which 'man' is the constituent substance to which 'musical', an appropriate accidental constituent, inheres).[9]

The constituent character of Aristotle's theory can be rightly pinpointed thanks to the accidental character of both kinds of predications, the constituents can exist without necessarily constituting the whole and the only form of essentialism we can derive from this theory, according to Loux, is a weak one.

On behalf of this and the problems of identity, in the one case, the contingent mark of some prime matter constituent being characterized in a way or another by the constituting universal (thus defining a particular kind of substances) *is* what grants the existence of this or that universal, that is, *iff* exemplified by this or that particular group of existing individuals (here stands the appeal to *in re* universals). Moreover, once we join this to the second kind of composition, this or that particular individual (i.e. substance of a certain kind) is also subject to the contingent predication of being accidentally 'such and such'.

The appeal to this weak use of the notion of "substance" as defined within "kinds" is also what both explains the persistence of an object through change at the variation of accidental properties (and, in this passage, Loux refers to the second kind of composites, since a substance, although primarily determined contingently, cannot change its kind) and justifies the appeal to the particular *Principle of Constituent Identity* (read note 2) without involving contradictory cases of the sort of numerically distinct individuals which have all their properties in common.

Peter van Inwagen
Relational versus Constituent Ontologies

Peter van Inwagen, professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, is the second proponent. In response to the presentation of the constituent approach, Van Inwagen introduced the opposite kind of ontological strategy, namely, the *relational* one.

Particularly, such an approach sets out a specific goal that is the consideration and individuation of the relation that holds between ordinary objects and their properties, *without* acknowledging constituency for such properties and relations.

To give an example of the aforementioned definition, we could consider the sentence: "The apple is green". which constituent ontologists would interpret as expressing that 'being green' is a property *had by* the apple (entailing the debates and theories whose goal is that of characterizing that "*had by*", considered as a constituent relation in some non-mereological sense), while relational ontologists would consider 'being green' (or the colour green) as a sort of subpart of *that* particular object which merely *composes* it, entertaining particular relations with other parts and the final concrete object itself. Another example Van Inwagen provides is that of a clock which is composed by a certain number of finite objectual parts related in a certain way to one another. In other words, this or that particular whole coincides with the sum of its parts or features *and* the further organization of these that is recognized and predicated of those parts in terms of properties and relations.

Properties and relations which are to be intended, according to him, as included within the specific category of abstract entities, abstract as much as the predication of an object to be 'such and such'. Such a view is, ammittedly, defined as a nominalist one, in the case of Van Inwagen. He himself, both during the presentation and, for example, in van Inwagen (2004),[10] claims to hold to a nominalist position on properties, conceived as belonging to the specific ontological category of abstract entities, even though in a very particular way.
More specifically, properties are what Van Inwagen refers to as *assertibles* of this or that thing and which, for this reason, cannot certainly be constitutive of an object but, on the contrary, in a particular *instantiation relation* to it. Moreover, properties can be seen literally as *blobs*[11] without a structure, that is to say, since our predication of an object to be 'such and such' corresponds to an external relation we instantiate between that object and what is predicated of it, we have literally no direct access to what could be defined as a "constituent" of it, we simply relate to it by predication, be it ordinary, rigorously scientific or even contradictory. Hence here can be seen the character of necessity of the existence of properties Van Inwagen supports, since properties *are* those ordinary objects we relate to, as well as the complete lack of necessity for estambilishing a constituency relation and/or characterization to what is predicated of an object, hence resulting in unstructured blobs.

Besides of that, Van Inwagen's intent is to show arguments (common-sense counter argumentations, in reality) for preferring the relational approach instead of the constituent one and, particularly, for repudiating the idea of "ontological structure". For example, to support Van Inwagen's base hypotheses could entail the support of the theory of tropes. But this would not only result in a methodological mistake (i.e. falling back to a constituent approach), but also in a categorial mistake.

Let us consider the property: "having a diameter of 10 centimeters" and let us suppose

that two distinct objects have that property; if tropes are to be considered as abstract particulars, each object will have its own property of "having a diameter of 10 centimeters" and we are committed to admitting at the same time that the general property is one, although had in two different ways (i.e. within two different objects). But, apart from such problematics, according to Van Inwagen, we would in no way mean that there are two ways of having a diameter of 10 centimeters, but in reality that the diameter of both objects is the same. And that is what *we* instantiate externally from the two 'actual' objects, this is an abstract external correlation that *we* perform (naturally not in a psychological-conceptual sense).

Dean Zimmerman
Rehabilitating David Lewis's Argument from Temporary Intrinsics

The third presentation focuses on a specific problem and somehow detaches from the meta-ontological debate pertaining to the methods of approaching "what there is". Dean Zimmerman, professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University (NJ), actually discusses and intends to show the position Lewis (1986) holds in *On the Plurality of Worlds*, particularly on behalf of the problematics of *temporary intrinsics*[12] and the persistence of an object through time, though reconsidering it from a *presentist* point of view.

Zimmerman first supplies what can be defined as a standard distinction between two metaphysical theories of time, as they were identified by McTaggart (1908):

A-theory: There are objective distinctions between what is present, what is past and what is future. In order to give a complete account of time, one should appeal to *A-properties*: "being present", "being past" and "being future" (i.e. a 'tensed' conception of time).

B-theory: There are just relative distinctions between past, present and future. What can be actually said of time must be expressed in terms of temporal relations, namely, *B-relations*: "being earlier than", "being later than", "being simultaneous with" (i.e. an 'untensed' conception of time).

A presentist *A-theory*, a tensed theory which acknowledges only present entities as existing, is what Zimmerman defends and he supports it by showing that Lewis's perdurantist argument of temporary intrinsics and temporal parts actually does not directly commit a philosopher either to reject *presentism* or to reject *endurantism*, as Lewis holds.[13] In fact, it still holds A-theory (but also B-theory) at least as possible.

Lewis's temporary intrinsics could be explained as follows: whenever we associate a property to an object – for example: "X is now sitting" – that marks a change from a supposed previous physical «shape» 'X' had – like: "X is now standing up" – we are talking about an intrinsic property pertaining to a temporal part of that object that has changed. *Intrinsic*, Zimmerman explains, in two different senses:

1. such property is *had by* that object and does in no way entail an external relation whatsoever (as, for example, in "being at a distance of n meters from ..."). It is a *monadic* property;

2. such property is *naturally* had by that object, that is to say that natural properties are those to be held responsible for the cases of fundamental resemblance of an object to another.

So, individuals are made up of temporal parts and temporary intrinsics are properties of these parts. Temporary, since such properties change through time. Hence, according to Lewis, the only way we can conceive of things as changing is by holding to a perdurantist position.

Basically, if (2) were not contemplated within the definition of 'intrinsic', there would be no chance of considering resemblance as granting some sort of objectual continuity. Zimmerman seems to go on on this line and puts more meat on the grill by assuming that fundamental intrinsics wouldn't certainly be acknoledgeable as 'fundamental' if they were not responsible

for the causal regularities we observe, so it should be advisable that fundamental intrinsics were considered as properties which *cause* a certain kind of basic interaction with other objects (not only concerning different objects present in different places, but also objects, or the same object [and this is the case], present at different times).

If this assumption is held to be true, then:

1. we could still wonder whether the objects that have such intrinsics are:

   a_1 short-lived, hence their intrinsic properties are simple and imply uniformity in the causal powers of the objects that have them;

   b_1 long-lived, hence their intrinsic properties are complex and imply different causal behaviours at different times.

2. then a would entail two possible consequences:

   a_2 it is (short-lived) temporal parts that have such intrinsics (and this is compatible with Lewis's view of acknowledging the existence of temporal parts);

   b_2 it is a combination of 'an enduring object' plus 'a brief space-time region' that have such intrinsics (and this is the identification of an enduring slice of space-time).

   Hence:

3. If b_1 is true, a presentist A-theory is false, but then fundamental intrinsics would not be causally fundamental at all. But this contradicts the primary assumption, so trivially A-theory is true (and from this point, Zimmerman derives *whatever else* he can derive).

4. From 2 and 3, either A-theory is true, or a_2 is true, or b_2 is true.

Notes

[1]The birth of this theory can be dated back to Hume (1739-1740) who refused the notion of "substance", also in response to Locke (1690) and his definition of a bare substratum as «a supposed, I know not what, to support those ideas, we call accidents [...]».

[2]In this case, since BT is a constituent approach, it entails the *Principle of Constituent Identity*: if any two objects are made of all the same constituent parts, they are the same object.

[3]For example, Black (1952) raises a counterexample in terms of objects as being numerically distinct although having the same 'qualifing' properties.

[4]And in such cases we have the recognition of what Russell (1912b) called «*bare particulars*».

[5]See Williams (1953) and Campbell (1990)

[6]See Campbell (1990). Here 'abstract' shouldn't be strictly intended as an ontological category but more as category of language, coherently with the nominalistic assumption. Tropes have nevertheless been defined in a multitude of ways and this is one of the reasons Loux doesn't seem to be at ease with the theory of tropes, namely, because of the problems concerning the individuation of a trope. Read more: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/tropes/.

[7]Some ontologists would refer to a relation of *compresence*, but there are multiple solutions and points of view.

[8]Aristotle (3b)

[9]See also (Loux, 2006, pp. 212–213)

[10]In this essay Van Inwagen argues for a sort of *indispensability argument* concerning properties, resembling the one by Putnam and Quine for mathematical realism [Putnam (1971)].

[11]See (Armstrong, 1989a, p. 66)

[12](Lewis, 1986, pp. 198–209).

[13](Lewis, 1986, p. 204).

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