

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALISATION

#### 1. The problem of universalisation introduced

Now that the theoretical framework inside which the present work is set has been spelled out we are in a position to formulate and attempt to solve two very fundamental problems for trope theory. Tropes, it is assumed, must be able at least to fulfil their basic function as truth-makers. But the existence of singular tropes does not seem sufficient to provide for the truth of every kind of atomic proposition. Tropes are particular, but in some cases the truth-makers required to account for truth appear to be *universal*. Tropes are abstract, but in some cases the truth-makers required to account for truth appear to be *concrete*.

In the following two chapters of this book I will attempt to construct, first the required universality, and then the required concreteness from tropes. I begin here with the first of these constructive tasks: that of constructing universality from tropes. I label this problem the ‘problem of universalisation’, and I choose this non-standard label in order to distinguish this problem properly from what I take to be a somewhat different problem: ‘the (classical) problem of universals’. In the next section I explain why I take the problem of universalisation to differ from the classical problem of universals. Thereafter I attempt to further delineate the problem of universalisation by expanding on a few of the points made in the section on tropes as truth-makers above. In particular I argue that (what I here call) the A-question (i.e. ‘What makes it true that *a* is F?’) must be clearly distinguished from the B-question (i.e. ‘What makes it true that *a* and *b* are the same F?’). In the remainder of this chapter I investigate two leading approaches to the problem of universalisation, one according to which universality is provided by primitive classes of tropes, and the other according to which it is provided by exact similarity classes of tropes.

#### 1.1 Two problems distinguished

For some true atomic propositions it is as if that which makes them true must be universal. This becomes a problem (the problem of universalisation) as soon as a theory positing tropes and only tropes is adopted. The problem is basically this: how can there be anything universal when all that exists is particular? As I will now try to show, the problem of universalisation is not identical to the classical problem of universals (at least, not as I understand it).

The classical problem of universals is due to a phenomenon found in both language and experience, at times referred to as that of the 'One over Many'.<sup>110</sup> The phenomenon of the One over Many is this: experience and thought unfold to us, not only particular things or particular cases of qualities, but also samenesses or even identities that seem to exist, so to speak, over and above these distinct and particular entities. The world, that is, not only appears particularised (as many) but also, in some sense of the word, generalised or classified (as one). Language mirrors this phenomenon in providing us with a distinction between a kind of word — the singular term — whose function it seems to be to point to, or refer to, particular individuals; and another kind of word — the predicate — whose function it seems to be to point to, or refer to, those communal things that particular individuals share. It is this 'unity in manifold' which gives rise to the classical problem of universals. The problem is this: how can distinct particulars all have what appears to be *the same* nature?

There is of course a fundamental sense in which the classical problem of universals and the problem of universalisation deal with the same issue. They are both problems that emerge from a need to explain, or ground, the phenomenon of universality. Yet the problems remain distinct, and their distinctness is due mainly to two factors: (1) the problem's origin, or that which gives rise to the queries, is different in each case. (2) That for which a solution to these problems may reasonably be expected to be able to account is likewise different.

That the two problems differ in origin is demonstrated by the fact that the problem of universalisation does not immediately arise when the phenomenon of apparent identity in difference, in language and experience, has been detected. Yet, it is this very phenomenon which constitutes the problem of universals. In fact it is possible that the existence of sameness in difference — of apparent universality — in *no* case requires universality to be constructed from tropes, at least as long as trope theory is developed within a truth-maker theoretical framework. As will be argued later for instance, simple predications such as '*a* is *F*' do not give rise to the problem of universalisation, whereas it may be (and has been) argued that in including both singular and general terms, these predications are part of what gives rise to the classical problem of universals. So the fact that the predicate '*F*' communicates generality does not necessarily imply that this generality must be accounted for when an answer to the problem of universalisation is

<sup>110</sup> The label ('One over Many') is usually said to have its origin in some comments on the Forms provided by Plato. Mainly in *Republic*, 1941. Conford, F. M., trans., Oxford University Press: Oxford, 596b. Here Plato lets Socrates ask, "Shall we proceed as usual and begin by assuming the existence of a single essential nature or Form for every set of things which we call by the same name?". D. M. Armstrong repeatedly identifies the problem of universals with the problem of the One over Many. Mainly in *Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. 1.

provided. Yet any solution to the classical problem of universals would have to deliver just such an account. In the case of the problem of universalisation it is not the One over Many phenomenon that gives rise to the problem. It is the existence of atomic propositions that require universal truth-makers. The demands of truth-maker theory rather than everyday experiences or linguistic meaning justify us in whatever dealings we engage in.

As a consequence of this first difference, we must also expect different things from a solution to the problem of universalisation than we expect from a solution to the classical problem of universals. Simply put, a solution to the classical problem of universals must be able to explain our experiences of unity in manifold. A solution to the problem of universalisation will not necessarily do this. Adopting truth-maker theory means breaking the close tie between the way things seem and the way they are (just as it means breaking the close tie between the basic structure of language and the basic structure of the world). This means that an account of universalisation for the truth-makers of atomic propositions may be provided even though the way things seem to us is left completely unexplained.

## 1.2 What the problem is and what it is not

There is an important and often overlooked structural difference between trope theory and all the classical accounts of properties, and this must be taken into account in order for us to understand where the problem of universalisation arises for a theory of tropes.

As Campbell says, we can ask two very different questions about, say, red things: “We can take *one* single red object and ask of it: what is it about this thing in virtue of which it is red?” and “we can ask of any *two* red things: what is it about these two things in virtue of which they are both red (share *the same nature*)?”<sup>11</sup> The first of these questions Campbell labels the ‘A-question’ and the second, the ‘B-question’. The A- and the B-question may now be reformulated in language better suited to our present theoretical needs:

The A-question: What makes it true that ‘*a* is F’?

The B-question: What makes it true that ‘*a* and *b* are the same F’?

Classical theories of properties (including universal-realism, and concept-, class- and predicate-nominalism) have invariably assumed that the A-question

<sup>11</sup> Campbell: *Abstract Particulars*, p. 29. Campbell uses the colour-example for purposes of illustration and he does so hypothetically (“Let us suppose, for purposes of illustration, that if there are any universals, the colours are among them, and that if there are any tropes, cases of the various shades of colour are among them.”). Likewise, I will use examples of different kinds of tropes (colour- and other) throughout this book without thereby committing myself to the existence of that particular kind of trope.

and the B-question ought to receive parallel answers. Worse, at times the fact that the two questions have been answered in the same way has led to the impression that they are one and the same question. If one considers the basic structure of more or less all classical property-accounts it is easier to understand why the distinction between the two questions has, in this way, often been overlooked.

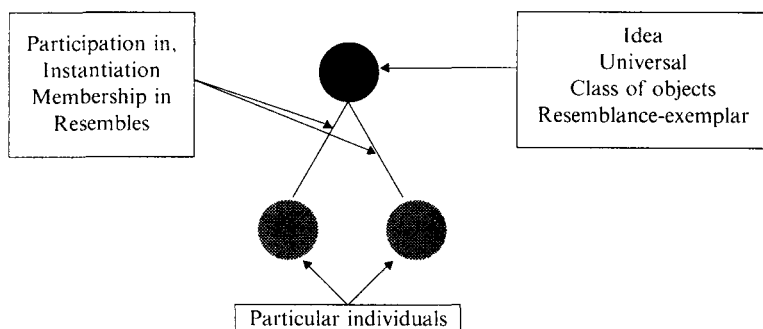


Fig. 1

As illustrated above, all, or almost all, of the classical property-accounts, answer both the A- and the B-question by postulating either an Idea, or a universal, or a class of objects, or a resemblance-exemplar. That is, *the same* (in a strict sense) 'entity' will, for each of these positions, answer *both* the A-question and the B-question. For example, to the question: 'In virtue of what is this particular individual red?' the universal-realist answers: 'In virtue of this particular individual instantiating the universal Redness.' And to the question: 'In virtue of what are these two particulars both red?' he or she answers: 'In virtue of these particulars instantiating *the same* universal Redness'. Trope-theory, on the other hand, has a different basic structure:

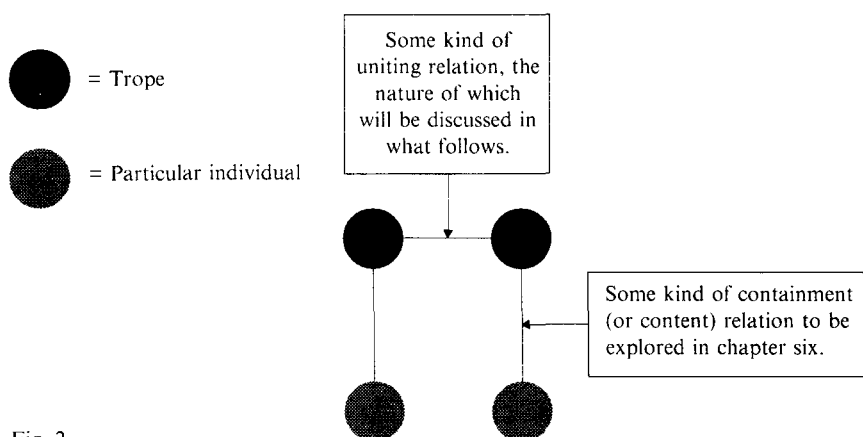


Fig. 2

Since tropes are inherently particular that which explains why, or says in virtue of what, one red object is red cannot be strictly the same as that which explains why, or says in virtue of what, *another* object is *also* red. Given trope theory, each particular red object is red in virtue of its *very own* particular red-trope. It is this circumstance which more or less forces the trope theorist to distinguish clearly between the question of what makes it true that '*a* is F' and the question of what makes it true that '*a* and *b* are the same F'. To answer the latter (i.e. the B-question) the existence of distinct tropes — one belonging to *a* and one belonging to *b* — is surely required, but it is not enough. An adequate answer to the B-question also requires some account of the special relation in which these two tropes stand — something that is not required if the question is of the A-type. In this way the distinction between the A- and the B-question is rendered highly relevant by the very structure of trope-theory.

For trope theory, therefore, it is the B-question and not the A-question that generates the need for an account of universalisation. 'What makes it true that *a* and *b* are the same F?' is, in other words, the question accounts of universalisation attempt to answer. One further observation must now be made. So far the B-question has been expressed as a question about what makes it true that two *objects* (i.e. concrete, complex individuals) instantiate the same property. But fundamentally the B-question, which turns into the problem of universalisation for trope theory, arises one step further up the abstraction-ladder. The foremost problem for trope theory is not the shared nature of *objects* (this is a derivative problem) but rather the shared nature of *tropes*. To reflect this, we can now reinterpret the B-question. Treating '*a*' and '*b*' as names of tropes, and not of concrete things, we can put the basic universalisation-requiring question for trope theory as follows: 'What makes it true that *a* and *b* are the same F?'

As will, I hope, be made clear in what follows quite a few of the objections that trope theory has had to face have stemmed from a refusal to accept and acknowledge that the problem of universalisation arises as soon as one attempts to answer the B-question, but *not* when one attempts to answer the A-question. Basically, to answer the A-question ('what makes it true that trope *a*<sub>1</sub> is red?') no more than the existence of trope *a*<sub>1</sub> is required. For, although this trope is connected (as I will later argue, by exact similarity) to all other tropes that are just like it, this is *not constitutive of what it is*. A red-trope is red, not because it is a member of a class of red tropes, or because it is somehow connected to all other tropes of the same kind. Rather, it is a member of the class of red tropes *because* it is red. As noticed by Campbell:<sup>112</sup>

It is critical to the trope vision of the world that particulars can be natures, that something can just *be* a case of charge, or colour, or whatever. Philosophers are rightly suspicious of tautological-

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 30. The quote from Plato comes from *Phaedo*, 105C.



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