The Problem of Universals and the limits of conceptual analysis

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1. In my article "What is the Problem of Universals?" (2000) I defended an interpretation of the Problem of Universals according to which it is a problem about truthmakers. The Problem of Universals I focused on is the traditional problem also known as the 'One over Many', that is, 'how can different things be of the same type?'. Thus this problem demands an answer in terms of the truthmakers of sentences (or propositions) saying that certain things are of the same type, like the following:

(1) *a* is **F** and *b* is **F**

Since the truthmakers of a conjunction like (1) are the truthmakers of its conjuncts, a solution to the Problem of Universals is concerned with the truthmakers of sentences like (2) and (3) below:

(2) *a* is **F**

(3) *b* is **F**

But if the solution to the One over Many demands an account of the truthmakers of simple sentences like (2) and (3), then the One over Many vanishes into a more basic problem, that I call the *Many over One*, namely "how can the same thing be of different types?", like sentences (2) and (4) say:

(2) *a* is **F**

(4) *a* is **G**

The Many over One is solved, I argued, by giving the truthmakers of simple sentences like (2), (3) and (4).

But in the course of arguing that the One over Many demands a solution in terms of truthmakers I rejected two alternative lines of thought according to which the One over Many demands a solution in terms of conceptual analysis and in terms of the ontological commitment of sentences like (1). In his article, MacBride claims that truth-maker theory – at least when taken in isolation – cannot resolve the One over Many or the Many over One (MacBride 2002, this issue). He also claims that conceptual analysis, and in particular the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity, can solve both difficulties. In this paper I shall show why the solutions needed by these difficulties must be in terms of truthmakers and that the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity is not sufficient to solve them.

2. Before addressing the issue of truthmaking versus conceptual analysis I would like to consider another point made by MacBride. He says that there are many Problems of Universals, for example, How is it possible for one object to resemble another? In what sense are we acquainted with properties? What accounts for the fact that a single predicate may truly apply to distinct things? Is a higher order logic that purports to quantify over properties genuinely intelligible? (MacBride 2002, p. 27). MacBride says that there is no reason to think that these problems are issues about truthmakers of any sentences. And he suggests that I have argued that the Problem of Universals can and should be reduced to an issue about truthmaking.

This suggestion, in the context in which it is made, is misleading. No doubt there are many issues that can go under the name "The Problem of Universals", and some of them are the issues mentioned by MacBride. And no doubt these issues and problems are related to the one I focused on in my paper. And no doubt some of these issues may not need to be resolved by invoking truthmakers. But mi intention was not to reduce all issues that could go under the name "The Problem of Universals" to one. My intention was just to discuss one of those issues, which has traditionally gone under the name "The Problem of Universals" and also under the name "The One over Many", and argue that that problem is one to be solved by giving the truthmakers of certain sentences.

3. The truthmakers of a sentence are those entities in virtue of which it is true. A truthmaker typically necessitates or entails the truth of the sentence which it makes

true.[1] MacBride argues that invoking truthmakers will not solve the One over Many. For if we worry about how a sentence like (1) can be true, such worry will also apply to the existence of entities that entail the truth of the sentence. For if there is a worry about how things can be the same and yet different there ought also to be a worry about how there could be any entities whose existence entailed that things were the same yet different. Thus MacBride concludes that truth-maker theory is incapable – at least when taken in isolation – of resolving the One over Many.

In contrast, MacBride claims, conceptual analysis is sufficient to solve the One over Many. For the worry that some sort of incompatibility is generated by affirming sentences like (1) is met "by distinguishing between the different respects – qualitative and numerical – in which things may be said to be the same or different. When we say that numerically different things are qualitatively the same, the respect in which we say they are the same is not identical to the respect in which we say they are different. Consequently, no incompatibly is generated by saying that things may in such a manner be the same yet different" (2002, p. 31) That is, *a* and *b* can be both different and the same because they are the same qualitatively and different numerically.

Similarly, MacBride argues, for the Many over One. For him the difficulty in understanding how both '*a* is **F**' and '*a* is **G**' can be true is the same as the difficulty in understanding how '*a* is **F** and *b* is **F**' can be true. These difficulties arise from ignoring the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity. When the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity is available then it is apparent that there is no incompatibility generated by '*a* is **F**' and '*a* is **G**': they just say that numerically the same thing exhibits different properties. For MacBride then the problems of the One over Many and the Many over One are resolved by conceptual analysis, in particular by 'distinguishing between the concepts of numerical and qualitative identity presupposed by (1)' (2002, p. 32).

4. But can the One over Many and the Many over One really be solved by drawing the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity? Can the problem of how

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[1] Some may prefer 'necessitates' to 'entails' because they may want to reserve the word 'entailment' for a relation whose relata can only be truthbearers. Anyway, no harm is done if we use 'entails', as I shall do, and bear in mind that this means that it is not possible that the truthmaker exists and the sentence it makes true be false. In other words, if *e* makes 'S' true, then '*e* exists' entails 'S'.

different things can be the same be solved just by saying that the sense (or respect) in which they are the same is different from the sense in which they are different?

As I explained in my (2000), the One over Many is the problem of explaining how different things can be the same, like when *a* and *b* are **F**. Similarly, the Many over One is the problem of explaining how a thing can be different, in spite of being the same, like when *a* is **F** and **G**. These are problems because sameness and difference apparently exclude each other. To solve either problem one has to show that the exclusion between sameness and difference is *merely* apparent. But *merely* saying that the sense in which different things are the same is different from the sense in which they are different amounts to merely saying that sameness and difference only apparently exclude each other. Without an account of what numerical and qualitative identity consist in no explanation has been provided. For if we don't know what qualitative identity and difference are, we don't know how qualitative identity is possible – or how it is compatible with numerical difference.

Thus merely invoking the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity does not explain how a thing can be different in spite of being the same, nor does it explain how different things can be the same. It just says that they can.

Consider the following "Problem of Free Will": how can we have *free* will if everything is causally *determined*? Could we solve this problem by merely pointing out that there is a distinction between being free and not being determined? True, if we have free will and everything is causally determined then being free is not being not-determined in the causal sense, and so there must be a distinction between the non-determination of free will and causal non-determination. But merely pointing out that there is (or there must be) such a distinction is not even near the solution to the problem.

No doubt the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity and difference must be acknowledged by any solutions to the One over Many and the Many over One. Consider, again, for the sake of example, (1). If it is true, then there must be a distinction between numerical and qualitative identity. That is, (1) entails the difference between numerical and qualitative identity. For if (1) is true, and so *a* and *b* are both the same and different, then the incompatibility between sameness and difference must be only apparent. Which means that the sense or respect in which *a* and *b* are different, numerically, is not the same as the respect or sense in which they are the same, qualitatively. But merely invoking the distinction does not explain how

(1) can be true. The distinction is presupposed by the truth of (1), and so it cannot be what explains its truth.

For if we don't know how both *a* and *b* can be **F**, we no more know how *a* and *b* can be numerically different yet qualitatively the same. So pointing out that there is a distinction between numerical and qualitative identity does not help to explain how both *a* and *b* can be **F**. We need as much an explanation of how *a* and *b* can be numerically different yet qualitatively the same as we need an explanation of how both *a* and *b* can be **F**. Thus MacBride's idea that accounting for the truth of a sentence like (1) can be done by distinguishing between the concepts of numerical and qualitative identity is wrong. Conceptual analysis and, in particular, the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity, is insufficient to resolve the problems of the One over Many and the Many over One.

5. So even after drawing a conceptual distinction between numerical and qualitative identity we still need to account for how can both *a* and *b* be **F** and how can *a* be both **F** and **G**. And this, as I argued in my (2000), is done by giving the truthmakers of '*a* is **F**', '*b* is **F**' and '*a* is **G**'.

Thus, for example, the view I favour, Resemblance Nominalism, will say that what makes true '*a* is **F**' is that *a* resembles certain other things, namely the **F**-things; similarly, what makes '*b* is **F**' true is that *b* resembles certain other things, namely the **F**-things. And what makes '*a* is **F**' and '*b* is **F**' true is what makes (1) above, '*a* is **F** and *b* is **F**', true. Thus, in general, what makes it possible that different things be of the same type is that they resemble the same things. This is, briefly put, Resemblance Nominalism's solution to the One over Many. Similarly, what makes '*a* is **G**' true is that *a* resembles certain other things, the **G**-things. So, in general, what makes it possible that the same thing be of different types is that it resembles different things. This is, in a nutshell, Resemblance Nominalism's solution to the Many over One.[2] The facts that *a* resembles the **F**-things, that *b* resembles the **F**-things, and that *a* resembles the **G**-things entail, respectively, the truth of '*a* is **F**', '*b* is **F**', and '*a* is **G**'. So these facts are adequate, in the context of Resemblance Nominalism, to play the role of truthmakers of the respective truths.

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[2] I fully develop Resemblance Nominalism in my *Resemblance Nominalism. A solution to the Problem of Universals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Resemblance Nominalism, of course, is not the only solution to the Problem of Universals. A currently much favoured view, Universalism, postulates universals and says that different things, like *a* and *b*, can both be **F** by instantiating the same universal, namely **F**-ness. Similarly, this view has it that the same thing, for example *a*, can be both **F** and **G** by instantiating two different universals, **F**-ness and **G**-ness. Again, the facts that *a* instantiates **F**-ness, that *b* instantiates **F**-ness, and that *a* instantiates **G**-ness entail, respectively, the truth of '*a* is **F**', '*b* is **F**', and '*a* is **G**'. So these facts are adequate, in the context of Universalism, to play the role of truthmakers of the respective truths.

But MacBride, as we have already noted, thinks that truthmakers cannot explain how a sentence like (1) can be true, for if there is a worry about how things can be the same and yet different there ought also to be a worry about how there could be any entities whose existence entailed that things were the same yet different.

But since the truth of a sentence like (1) entails a difference between numerical and qualitative identity, any explanation of how the sentence can be true will thereby entail the corresponding difference. This is clear in the case of the two solutions described above. For if two things can resemble the same things then there is a distinction between numerical and qualitative identity, as numerically different things can be the same qualitatively. Similarly, if two things can instantiate the same universal then there is a distinction between numerical and qualitative identity, as numerically different things can be qualitatively identical. Not only do these solutions to the Problem of Universals entail the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity, but they also explain how it is possible for different things to be qualitatively identical and for the same thing to be qualitatively different or multiple. In the case of Resemblance Nominalism, what makes it possible for different things to be qualitatively identical is that they can resemble the same things, and what makes it possible for the same thing to be qualitatively different or multiple is that it can resemble different things. In the case of Universalism, what makes it possible for different things to be qualitatively identical is that they can instantiate the same universal(s), and what makes it possible for the same thing to be qualitatively different or multiple is that it can instantiate different universals.

By explaining how both *a* and *b* can be **F**, and how *a* can be both **F** and **G**, these explanations remove any worry about how *a* and *b* can be different and yet the same, or how *a* can be the same and yet different. This is why and how an account of

the truthmakers of the relevant sentences is sufficient to solve the One over Many and the Many over One.

But this does not mean that it is possible to give the truthmakers of the relevant sentences in the absence of a distinction between numerical and qualitative identity. Thus MacBride is right when he says that "the provision of truth-makers for sentences like (1) fail to resolve the difficulties raised by [the One over Many] in the absence of a distinction between numerical and qualitative identity" (2002, p. 32). Yes, but this is because the provision of truthmakers – or at least of those provided by the main solutions to the problem of universals – entails the distinction. For the provision of truthmakers is the provision of something that entails the truth of the sentence and thereby entails the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity, since this distinction is entailed by the truth of the sentences in question.

6. MacBride, in passing, doubts that the One over Many vanishes into or is reduced to the Many over One. Thus, he says: 'Even if it can be secured that a sentence like '*a* is **F** and *b* is **F**' is truthmaker equivalent to the conjunction of sentences '*a* is **F**' and '*b* is **F**' it does not follow that [the One over Many] is reduced to the [Many over One]' (2002, p. 34). He does not say why he thinks the reduction fails. But even so, let me briefly say why, and in what sense, one problem reduces to the other.

As I said, the One over Many is the problem of explaining how different things can be of the same type. It is the problem of how can there be oneness in the multiplicity. Hence the name 'One over Many'. This problem, I argued is solved by giving the truthmakers of sentences like (1) above, which consists in giving the truthmakers of sentences like (2) and (3). But, as I argued in my (2000, p. 267-9), the truthmakers of sentences like (2) and (3) cannot be just *a* and *b* respectively. For *a* is not only **F**, but also **G**, **H**, etc. Similarly for *b*. In general, things are of many different types, or, as I prefer to say, they have many different properties. So *a* alone cannot be the truthmaker of '*a* is **F**' for, by parity, *a* would also have to be the truthmaker of '*a* is **G**', '*a* is **H**', etc. But this cannot be so. For what makes something **F** (say, red) cannot be what makes it **G** (say, square), or **H** (say, hot). So what needs explaining is how a single thing can be of many different types or have many different properties. And this is the Many over One. So the One over Many vanishes into the Many over One in the sense that a solution to the latter straightforwardly gives us a solution to the former, and that a solution to the latter logically precedes a solution to the former.

I did not use the word 'reduction' in my (2000); but if there is any sense in which the One over Many reduces to the Many over One, then it is this one.[3]

References

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