Universals: A Conceptualist Approach
Bob Clarke – July 2017

1. Preliminary

Universals are *general* terms or concepts like:

red, redness, colour, sweet, wise, wisdom, Wisdom, English, language, music, species, name, natural kind, they, law, Law, quickly, obscurity, obscurely, walking, Christendom, The Good, Human, Society, Class (in politics), love, Love, etc.

They stand apart from *particular* terms, things or concepts, like:

Julius Caesar, The First World War, Kensington, Venus (either the planet or the goddess), my pal Fred, 3.00 pm on 23rd July 2017, The Big Bang, *this* pen (pointing to it), *her* name, etc.

The *relationship* between Universals (U) and Particulars (P) is expressed in various ways:

- e.g. in terms of *Types* (U) and *Tokens* (P)
  - *Wholes* (U) and *Parts* (P)
  - *Groups or Collectives* (U) and *Members* (P)
  - *Particulars* being ‘examples of’ their Universal
  - *Particulars* ‘participating in’ their Universal

As can be seen from the examples above, *Universals* can be *substantives, things, nouns, adjectives, properties, pronouns, adverbs, abstractions, collectives, ... and maybe many other ...... well, other what? ... other ‘things’ or other ‘properties’ or other ‘actions’, or other ‘concepts’, or ...?*

The so-called philosophical ‘*Problem of Universals*’ has been the problem of just *what*, ontologically, Universals are. What do they have in common?²

Expressed differently: just in what way, if at all, do they ‘exist’?

*Are they ‘Real’?* Do they, or at least some of them, *exist* as a perfect Platonic *Ideal Form* a Platonic *World of Forms*?² Whether or not such a World exists, do they, nevertheless, really *exist in themselves*, independently of our human understanding of them? Do they form an *Ontologically Real* category that exists *in addition to* the Particulars that we perceive in the world? Medieval ‘*Realists*’ claimed that indeed they *do* exist in such a way!

*Are they just our convenient names for collectives, general terms, etc?* Medieval ‘*Nominalists*’ claimed that that is all that they were.

*Are they Human Concepts?* Philosophical ‘*Conceptualists*’ claim that that is what they are.

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¹ As I did not have a written text for my talk at Piggotts on this occasion, Frank asked me to supply my notes. I felt it necessary to ‘work them up’ a bit & they rather transformed into this ‘brain dump’ on the topic of Universals! This is a series of notes, propositions, aphorisms, reflections and anecdotes aimed at getting my thoughts straight on the topic. Apologies for its length and the excessive use of bold, underlining and *Italics*, etc!!

² Ontology deals with philosophical claims about *existence*. Just what, at root, really *exists* in the world, and in what *form*?

³ See Bob Stone’s talk. I gather that Plato was very selective about just which Universals he would welcome into his *World of Forms*. As Peter pointed out, he was reluctant to include a Perfect Form of Mud! I was taken to task in my philosophy class about 40 years ago for suggesting that there might be a Perfect Form of A Dog with a Wooden Leg!
This presentation advocates the Conceptualist approach and claims that (with a little bit of help from Immanuel Kant), Conceptualism dissolves the ‘Problem of Universals’. The main claims are:

(1) Universals are, first and foremost, Human Concepts
(2) Acceptance of (1) dissolves the ‘Problem of Universals’
(3) The direction of explanation of these Concepts is invariably from the Natural to the Abstract - not, as is claimed in Platonism, from the Abstract to the Natural. i.e. Natural terms have given rise to more Abstract terms as our thinking about the world has become more developed.

2. Conceptualism – An Introduction

When evaluating Universals, Conceptualists will promote the following principle:

A Universal is, first and foremost, a human concept that is predicated of many different subjects.

Conceptualism is sometimes seen as an intermediate position between (Medieval) Realism and Nominalism. Here I’m taking the rather different line that Conceptualism and Nominalism are quite closely allied and both are best understood as Anti-Realist positions on Universals. Nevertheless, Conceptualism is not the same as Nominalism: it is more comprehensive, I find it a much easier position to defend than simple Nominalism, and it is far more informative!

Human Engagement with The World

It is fruitful to examine just how the Conceptualist line fares in relation to three Spheres of Human Engagement with our World: The Transcendent, The Natural and The Public

(1) With ‘The Transcendent’ sphere, I’m referring to the Supernatural and, more specifically in the present context, to Western Medieval (essentially Roman Catholic) religious doctrines about supernatural ontologies.

(2) With ‘The Natural’ sphere, I’m referring to the Natural World: the world we wake up to every day: the world that even Atheists believe in!

(3) With ‘The Public’ sphere, I’m referring to our social, political and scientific affairs and activities: they are areas of public interaction where we invent potential Universals, negotiate them and occasionally instantiate them, so that they become ‘real’.

The performance of Conceptualism with respect to these three spheres of human engagement will be discussed respectively in Sections 4, 6 & 7 below.

Historical Contexts

4 i.e. ‘dissolves’ the problem in the Wittgensteinian way: you realise there was never a problem there in the first place!
5 Or some close variation of this principle.
7 I’m making no commitment as to whether (or not) ‘The Supernatural’ actually ‘exists’ in any sense of the word. For Conceptualists, the important point is that many people (religious, spiritualist, mystic, etc) conceive that it exists and it is their conceived concepts that work so powerfully for them, see Section 4 below.
8 It is unnecessary here to adopt a materialist, physicalist or, e.g., idealist dogma about the fundamental nature of the Natural World. We need only recognise that it is here for us (i.e. ‘given’), and that it contains both physical and mental phenomena. Worrying about the deep ontology behind these phenomena is a topic for another day.
We can benefit greatly by placing our appreciation of Contemporary Conceptualism into its own **Historical Context**, which is at the end of two-and-a-half millennia of debates on Universals! A number of leading philosophical and scientific thinkers have made very important contributions to Conceptualism: **Aristotle, William of Ockham, Immanuel Kant**, perhaps **Charles Darwin** (though he was probably not aware that he was making this contribution), and indeed, **Wittgenstein**.9

**First**, we should recall that it was Aristotle who brought Plato's *Ideals* and *Forms* down to Earth: he argued that they are constituents of 'what things are' in a very worldly way.10 In this context, we may care to remember Raphael's 'School of Athens' fresco in the Vatican (1509-11) in which Plato is pointing to the Heavens above, where, metaphorically, the *World of Forms* (containing its *Universals*) resides, while Aristotle is holding his hand out level, palm down, saying (I suggest): 'Look to the Natural World'! The Conceptualist approach advocated here very much follows this Aristotelian line.11

A **Second** very important historical thought is that, while Aristotle and William of Ockham (and his contemporaries) made extremely important contributions to Conceptualism, all of their ideas need to be *revised* in our *post-Kantian* world. The same may be said of our *post-Darwinian* and *post-Wittgensteinian* philosophical perspectives, but I will argue that Kant made the *greatest contribution* to the resolution of the so-called 'Problem of Universals' and that he provided the strongest arguments as to why we should be Conceptualists. More of this below, see Section 5.

A **Third** important historical point is that while Aristotle, William of Ockham and Kant greatly *inform* and *inspire* the account of Conceptualism that is being promoted here, my account does not *correspond* with any one of their own doctrines regarding Universals. But, in all cases, it is *close in spirit* to them.


One of the aims of this presentation is to *deflate* the ‘Problem of Universals’, hereinafter ‘PoU’! My basic claim is that there is no philosophical problem that is *specific* to and that *relates only* to Universals: i.e. there is no philosophical problem that *only* Universals present to us.

That is *not* to say that there are ‘no problems’ associated with Universals!! There certainly are, but they are shared with other philosophical concepts.

And it is *certainly not* to say that Universals, *in themselves*, are unimportant! They are *extremely* important for human affairs, as argued in Section 7 below.

As a small *concession*, I might admit that *it was formerly thought* that there was a PoU! But once philosophical problems have been solved, resolved or dissolved, they no longer exist! The *progress of philosophy* removes them. If such a problem ever existed, I would argue that Kant removed it (with a little help from others)!

**Anti-PoU Arguments – Visit 1:**

9 There are almost certainly important contributions from others I’ve overlooked. I certainly recognise the arguments that Neil Webb put forward on Piggotts’ Awayday regarding Wittgenstein’s contribution to the philosophy of Universals.

10 Aristotle on *Forms & Universals*: see his *Categories, De Interpretatione, Physics* and *Metaphysics*, also *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online) entry on ‘Form vs. Matter’ and Stanisland, pp. 9 – 27.

11 Note that ‘Forms’ for a Conceptualist, whatever form they take (Platonic or Aristotelian), are a form of Concept!!
Starting with the Conceptualist Principle that Universals are ‘first and foremost Concepts that are predicated of many different subjects’ (or, more loosely, of many different ‘objects’ or ‘things’ or ‘actions’, etc.), let us see if we can find a problem that only arises with Universals.\(^\text{12}\)

The basic argument I follow here is that:

There are certainly philosophical problems associated with Universals by virtue of the fact that they are concepts, but not by virtue of their multiple predication.

That claim is rather abstract, so I will illuminate it with examples:

(1) There are certainly philosophical problems associated with Universals by virtue of the fact that they are concepts.

Thus, we have the problem of delimitation or demarcation of Universal concepts. Consider the Universal concepts ‘green’ or ‘greenness’ or, perhaps, of ‘participating in the Platonic Form of Greenness’. Even if we restrict ourselves to the Electromagnetic Spectrum, we have the problem of just where ‘green’ turns to ‘yellowy green’ or ‘bluey green’ or perhaps ‘turquoise’. Does it even make pragmatic sense to demand an exact boundary in terms of the frequency of the light waves involved? These are typical problems of delimitation or demarcation for ‘green’ & its associated concepts.

But the same delimitation problems apply to Particulars! Consider the particular concept of the particular person Julius Caesar – born in 100 BCE, died on 15\(^{th}\) March 44 BCE – on The Ides of March! But where does the concept of Julius Caesar start and end? Does it start at biological conception or at birth? There are some Utilitarians who argue that a human child does not become a person until the age of 5 or 6!\(^\text{13}\) At least we know when he died – i.e. when he stopped being a living particular example of homo sapiens. But where in time does the concept ‘Julius Caesar’ end? His assassination immediately engendered a dreadful civil war in his name! German and Russian Emperors were named after him well into the 20\(^{th}\) Century! Dreadfully, controversially, do some poor persons who suffer from dementia cease to exist as persons whilst still biologically alive as human beings? Or, as Derek Parfitt used to ask, is any one of us really the same person that we were 50, or even 20, years ago?

The problem of delimitation or demarcation, i.e. of defining conceptual boundaries, is clearly not unique to Universals, so that cannot be the \textit{PoU}!

(2) So, if Universals do not give rise to a \textit{PoU} by virtue of their being Concepts, might they nevertheless give rise to a \textit{PoU} via their \textit{predication}?

The simple answer is ‘No’. Where problems arise with predication, they can generally be resolved pragmatically, ostensively: e.g. – by pointing: ‘this’, ‘that’ or ‘that other’ surface is green. To be sure, philosophers delight in finding philosophical problems with predication! Thus, those folk in former ages who thought that the heavenly objects Phosphorus and Hesperus (respectively, the ‘Morning’ and ‘Evening’ Stars) were different objects, were mistaken, as we now know. Their mistake can be

\(^{12}\) The justification for ‘first and foremost’, is given in Section 6. Not much is really lost at this point of the argument by ignoring this qualification.

\(^{13}\) This is extremely controversial! See Alberto Giubilini & Francesca Minerva ‘After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?’, \textit{Journal of Medical Ethics} (BMJ), http://jme.bmj.com/content/39/5/261 (2012), also http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2011-100411.
resolved by pointing out (to them, and convincing them, and ourselves) that both are the same heavenly object and that they are both, in fact, the Planet Venus! Resolved problems cease to be problems. But, far more importantly, these are not problems associated with Universals - they are problems associated with Particles - they cannot be blamed on Universals.

(3) Perhaps the putative problem (the PoU) has not to do with mere predication, but with the multiple predication that is required of Universals?

The best way to deflate this particular proposition is to consider that there are some grouping terms that are predicated of just a few subjects. A ‘particular’ term is predicated of just one subject, which is itself a particular (e.g. Julius Caesar). But we also have ‘The Smiths’ (Mr & Mrs Smith) predicated of just two subjects. Perhaps we can invent a pseudo-Platonic Form of ‘Day-of-the-Week-hood’, which is predicated of just seven entities?! Well, these two examples are rather poor (not to say silly). But consider the concept ‘Season’ (referring to a time of year): there are just four of them, but mythographers and artists have treated them in much the same way in which they have treated bona-fide Universals. One such Universal is ‘Wisdom’. It has been derived conceptually (as we Conceptualists would claim) from the adjective - ‘wise’, via an abstract noun - ‘wisdom’, and an Ideal - ‘Wisdom’, to an Attribute of God. Thus, Hagia Sophia, Justinian’s great church in Constantinople, is The Church of the Holy Wisdom, and, if we were pagans, Sophia (Greek for Wisdom) would be a goddess, and of course, we philosophers would form her fan club, as we are Philo-Sophia! Once personified into a tutelary deity or spirit, artists are readily able to depict Universal concepts. We can note that they have done much the same with the Four Seasons (which, however, are generally depicted as spirits, nymphs & the like, rather than deities).

The point of this (rather strange) argument is that there is no deep difference in kind between a Universal concept and a Particular concept: they merely lie at either end of a numerical spectrum of concepts that are predicated of just 1, or 2, or 3, ... 4 ... 7 ... 12 ... up to an indefinite number of subjects. A very important example of this type of numerical argument relating to the Number 3 will be discussed in Section 4. In this context, i.e. thinking numerically, it’s also worthwhile reflecting about the Universal species ‘Swan’. The sum total of swans in the world starting from a time, deep in the past, when the first swans evolved, and running forward to some point in the future where they cease to exist, is going to be finite. Universals do not have to refer to infinite sets of entities.14

(4) Perhaps the putative problem (PoU) has not to do with multiple predication but rather with indefinite predication? We don’t know how many entities we wish to apply our Universal to.

Well, there is nothing unique to Universals about this situation! Not knowing things is the human lot! - endemic to human nature! So that can’t be the PoU!

So - starting with the Conceptualist Principle, we have not yet identified any unique ‘Problem of Universals’ (PoU). We consider the issue further in Sections 4 & 5.

4. Conceptualism and The Transcendent Sphere15

14 Sadly, the very last quagga (a kind of zebra, q.v.) died in Amsterdam in 1883. Prior to its death, wasn’t this particular quagga pragmatically, conceptually equivalent to the Universal extant species ‘Quagga’? Particulars can be Universals!
15 ‘Transcendent’ here just means ‘Transcending the Natural World’ (i.e. Super-Natural - see Section 6 for ‘Natural’). Not to be confused with ‘The Kantian Transcendental’ (see Section 5), which is something very different!
I’m referring here to the various Supernatural conceptions of Universals, and the arguments against them, that arose in Medieval times. I’m focussing on Western Latin Christianity, essentially Roman Catholicism, rather than Eastern Orthodoxy, as it was in the West of Europe that most of the debates took place.16

Early Western Medieval philosophical theological thought (7th – 11th centuries CE) was dominated by neo-Platonic philosophy via late Classical thinkers such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Augustine and Boethius. Vicissitudes of fate had removed significant access to Aristotelian writings.17

Medieval Christian thinkers were committed by their very Faith to an Ontology of Transcendent Entities. These included God, Heaven, the Communion of Saints, the Souls of the Dead, Angels (Thrones, Dominations, Cherubim & Seraphim, etc.) - perhaps also the Devil & Hell!18

But they were also ‘set-up’ by Late Antiquity to have to deal with intellectual problems associated with Wholes, Parts and Universals.19 For example:

Explaining The Doctrine of the Trinity required the theologians to hone their intellectual skills on issues associated with Parts and Wholes (very relevant to Universals). How could an Integral Unity be Tripartite?20

More explicitly associated with a Universal was the Augustinian Doctrine of The Fall of Man!21 :-

How could one particular man, Adam, bring about The Fall of Man, i.e. of Mankind – A Universal – and, how could another particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, come along and Redeem us from The Fall?

Various intellectual answers to such puzzles associated with Universals (& their related concepts) were proffered. Some (depending upon one’s religious sect) became orthodox doctrines, while others were declared heretical. But that is not the issue here: what interests us is that there were very prominent philosophical problems associated with Universals that needed to be solved!

In a Neo-Platonic atmosphere in which putative Platonist solutions were readily available, and in which there was already a religious commitment to an infinitely large Supernatural ontology (God & Heaven being infinitely large!), a Supernatural solution to the issues of Universals (and Wholes and Parts) hardly presented a huge intellectual overhead! The result was Early Medieval Realism: Universals were Ontologically Real!

Of course, such a historical account is to some extent putting the cart before the horse: Platonism preceded Christianity by some 400 years! The very idea of a Christian Heaven – a perfect Supernatural World - was very

16 See the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on ’The Medieval Problem of Universals’, (online) for details here: it was all very complicated. I’ve taken part of this summary from there.
17 Actually, only one of Plato’s own books was accessible (i.e. translated into Latin) throughout the whole Middle Ages: Plato’s Timaeus (hardly a typical text of his!), and, then, only a portion of this book had been translated into Latin! But commentaries on Plato and neo-Platonic writings, especially from Boethius & Augustine were widely available.
18 I want to make it clear here (speaking as an agnostic) that even Atheists should not disparage the intellectual efforts of these thinkers: they had very real problems to solve and their philosophical works are of relevance today!
19 E.g. Boethius formulated one dilemma over Universals: is a Universal one single thing or is it many? See Tweedale p. 9.
20 Tweedale, p. 10. See Section 3, above, on ’small-number’ predication: a Threefold entity is of the essence here! Another problem with The Trinity was the ’filioque’ issue (q.v.)! Yet, another numerical problem is that of Apostolicity! The RC Church claims to be ’Apostolic’ (as does the C of E), i.e. all priests have been ordained by a continuous legitimate serial exercise of ‘laying on of hands’ (i.e. ordinations) all the way back to The Apostles. But how many of them were there? Presumably Judas Iscariot is excluded, but St Paul claimed to be an Apostle, even though he had never met Jesus ...
21 The Fall was a Western, Latin, concept advocated by Augustine. Greek Orthodoxy could never make much sense of it!
much inspired by Plato's *World of Perfect Forms*. But what matters here is that *Medieval Realism* was a natural consequence of the Early Medieval Intellectual *Zeitgeist*.

From roughly the 12th Century CE, *Aristotelian texts* began to be available to Latin Scholarship. Aristotle became *The Philosopher*, 

Platonic thought became 'old-fashioned', and *Forms* and *Ideas* were *brought down to Earth* by Aristotelian scholarship. Arguments about Universals continued, of course - but the idea that opinions became *polarised* into a 'Via Antiqua' *Realism* and a 'Via Nova' *Nominalism* is totally wrong: there was a *whole spectrum of opinions* in between (and off to both sides as well!)

It is all very confusing, so it's best to take up the historical story again with *William of Ockham*: (1287-1347), who by taking Aristotelian notions as far as they could go (much further than Aristotle himself would have countenanced!) managed to define a position which was also just about as far from *Realism* as the Middle Ages could offer! His so-called 'Intelectio' position was essentially a form of *Conceptualism*. A key quote from Ockham is:

"no universal is a substance existing outside of the mind,"

Ockham, like Aristotle, and just like Conceptualists in our own age, held that Universals are themselves *particulars*, but particulars *predicated of many things*. Tweedale argues that Ockham goes beyond Aristotle: 'He de-ontologised much of Aristotelian logic in favour of a theory of signification'.

Moving forward through the centuries, via *Renaissance Humanism*, we find that *Enlightenment anti-Scholasticism* rejected even Aristotelianism (actually, a mannered, degenerate form of Aristotelianism!) and ultimately engendered the *Scepticism*, *Agnosticism* and *Atheism* (not to say *Cynicism*) of our own Age. These

22 Translations from the Arabic came via Spain and from Greece itself after the *Fourth Crusade* and The Fall of Constantinople (1204 CE) to Latin Western warlords – "Crusaders"! They were followed by Latin scholars who researched Aristotelian texts in Greek Orthodox monasteries. Aristotle's thought became increasingly available to Latin Christianity.

23 Referred to as such by Thomas Aquinas & his followers and by Arab philosophers before him.

24 See Stanford, 'The Medieval Problem of Universals' again. Spade, 'Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals', p. viii, makes some very interesting observations here: ‘...the realists have always had the most explaining to do in metaphysics ... the nominalists have always had the most explaining to do in epistemology. ... Nominalists have no special difficulty with metaphysics, their ontology is lean and trim. Their problem is in explaining how we can know the world is the way they say it is. By contrast, the realists have no special difficulty with epistemology; if universals are real, they are available to provide a basis for general knowledge. Their problem is in explaining how the world can be the way they say they know it is ... ’ I argue in Section 5 that Kant resolved these issues.

25 Tweedale's book (in two volumes) appears to be the most comprehensive available for anyone interested in Ockham's position on Universals. It's as much about Duns Scotus (a weak Realist and Ockham's Franciscan mentor) as about Ockham. It translates the Medieval texts for us but it has as much elucidatory commentary as it has source text! And it is specifically written as much for modern philosophical scholars as it is for Medievalists. The books by Klima *et al* and Spade also add useful information and perspective.

26 Ockham’s *Intelectio*-theory is explained in Klima *et al*. p. 229 ff. He also quotes Ockham (in translation): ‘... any universal, even, a most general genus, is truly a singular thing existing as a thing in a determinate genus. Yet it is universal through predication, not for itself but for the thing it signifies’

27 Tweedale, p. 10. It’s worthwhile noting, with the *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on William of Ockham, p. 4, that Ockham, famous for *using*, but certainly not *inventing*, the so-called *Ockham's Razor*, did *not* use his Razor to argue against Medieval Realism! *We* might want to use it thus: why invent a new category - that of 'Real Universals', when we can get by without it? Keep things simple! This seems like quite a good argument! But Ockham *did not* use it! Why not? Because he knew, better than anyone else, that ‘Ockham's Razor’ is merely a heuristic, rhetorical tool: it can occasionally go wrong and lead one onto a false track (e.g. ‘planetary orbits, being heavenly, must be simple & so must be circular’ – sadly wrong). Ockham did not use ‘Ockham's Razor’ against *Realism* because he thought he had *much better, definitive, clinching* arguments against it! See Stanford, Section 4.2. He thought (to use anachronistic metaphor) that *Realism* was 'Nonsense on Stilts'!!! Incidentally, anyone really interested in 'Ockham's Razor' should read William M Thornburn: *The Myth of Occam's Razor*, *Mind*, New Series, 27, No. 107 (Jul 1918), pp 345-353, available online: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Myth_of_Occam’s_Razor](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Myth_of_Occam’s_Razor).
latter positions have no pre-commitment to Transcendent, Supernatural worlds. Huge intellectual overheads are required these days if one is to posit a Platonic World of Forms, and/or the Reality of Universal Forms. Conceptualism, based in the every-day Natural World, is a much more plausible position – even for Believers.

And yet, ... can Ockham really be right when he says, "no universal is a substance existing outside of the mind"? In the Natural World, don’t we encounter ‘real’ Biological Species and Natural Kinds? Don’t they exist outside of our thoughts? After all, many living species on Earth came into being long before Homo Sapiens!

I will leave a discussion on these issues to Section 6. First, we revisit ‘The Problem of Universals’ (PoU) and consider deeper metaphysical issues.


Two Problems: I want to raise two, very different, potential problems for Conceptualism at this point:

(1) Moving forward from Ockham up to the late 17th Century, we find John Locke asking the question:

"Since all things that exist are merely particulars, how come we by general terms?" 28

Ahah! ... Maybe that is the ‘The Problem of Universals’ (PoU)! Locke, as an Empiricist, with a tabula rasa view of the infant mind, wants to know how we come by Universal concepts, if all we ever see is Particulars.

(2) A metaphysical question: can ‘Concepts’ really be Primitive enough to form the basis for a valid theory of Universals? Can they qualify? We have already noted in Section 2 that Concepts can be ill-defined and problem-laden - in fact we can say that most of them are! Don’t we really want to explain complex things (Universals in this case) in terms of simple things (sometimes called Simples)?

Moving on roughly another 100 years from Locke, I would argue that the answer to both of these problems was provided by Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason (‘CPR’ or ‘The First Critique’). 29

Kant:

The CPR covers many different philosophical topics but we are most concerned here with the issue: ‘How can Human Beings know about Nature?’, or, as he put it, ‘How is Nature Possible?’. 30 His solution, which he metaphorically called his own ‘Copernican Revolution’, was that the Objects of Nature, for us, must conform to our own ‘Understanding’. 31 The Understanding can ‘know’ only its own Conceptual Creatures! To be sure, we receive ‘sense data’ from the outside world - Kant (roughly) called these ‘Intuitions’ - but the Intuitions must be assimilated with the Concepts that our Understanding projects out onto the World. 32 Perception of

29 Immanuel Kant, ‘Critique of Pure Reason’, (‘CPR’ - 1781 & 1787). I tend to use the translation by Norman Kemp Smith, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1929, reprinted many times), but the Cambridge University Press and Pluhar (Hackett) editions are more recent, have later scholarship, & are very good.
31 See e.g. Kant, CPR Bxivii
32 CPR B75, A51. One major problem with recounting even a part of Kant’s philosophy is Kantian Terminology!!!! To stick with Kantian terms here would require a lot of explanation!! I’m avoiding most of them & using roughly similar terms that we are more familiar with instead. Kantian ‘intuition’ does not quite equate to ‘sense data’, and Kant’s term ‘Transcendental’ has a very different meaning to the word ‘Transcendent’ as used in Section 3! Transcendental philosophy à la Kant is concerned with the metaphysical pre-requisites for our ‘Understanding’ to engage with the
the Natural World is not (as some Empiricists might have argued) a passive reception of data, it is a proactive putting together of our Concepts with incoming Intuitions. As Kant famously said:

"Thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."
Kant: Critique of Pure Reason, A51, B 75.

The most basic concepts that we apply to the world - we can think of them as meta-concepts - are Kant's Categories, without which we could have no rational relationship with the world at all! Kant's Categories are our basic way (as rational creatures) of engaging in the World, they are endemic to our very Being!33

To illustrate: among Kant's Categories we find Causality, 'Cause' and 'Effect'. according to Kant, are not wholly "Out There". No! Rather, we - as rational creatures - impose them upon the World.34

**On Universals:** Among Kant's Categories are those of Unity, Plurality and Totality35

Totalities are Plurality of Unities. This, I submit, is Kant's way of saying that Parts and Wholes, Particulars and Universals are Primitives, and, in fact, a priori for any rational creature.36

Kant claims that, by virtue of their being Categories, these meta-concepts just are Primitive - in fact, more than that: they are a priori. Essentially Part/Whole, Type-Token, Particular/Universal distinctions are Primitive to our Very Being in the World! Without them we can have no rational relationship with the World at all! Without them – Nothing.37

They, along with other Categories are 'Transcendental': Kant's way of saying that Universals, along with Particulars, are primitive pre-requisites for our making any sense of the World at all!

So, it is not, as the Empiricists thought, that we need to derive our Universal concepts from instances of observation of Particulars. No - we start with the Concepts of both Particulars and Universals already in our Understanding; they are endemic to our way of being in the world. **Without our Categorical Concepts we could have no Relationship with the World at all!**

Another perspective on Kant's Categories is this: that, as meta-concepts, they provide us with a generating template for all of the more day-to-day concepts that we use to order our life in the world. They also enable us to generate those far more formal concepts that we use in our philosophies and logical systems.

**So!** - No conceptual Tabula Rasa for human beings: we don’t each have to invent (discover?) the meta-concept 'Universal' for ourselves during our own lifetimes, as might be implied from Empiricist philosophies:

World at all! They include Kant's 'Categories'. Also, by 'The Understanding' Kant means something closer to what other philosophers call 'Reason'. But Kant uses the word 'Reason' to mean something else, see CPR (passim) & Warnock, Imagination, p. 42 ff !.

33 Kant, CPR A76, B102 ff
34 Of course, many scientists (those who are not 'into' philosophy, I would suggest) would disagree vehemently with this proposition! But I am prepared to defend Kant here - though that is a topic for another day!
35 Kant, CPR A80, B106 & B114 ff.
36 I must come clean: Kant himself may not have seen it quite like this! His own Conceptualist view of Universals was rather more complex & compromised. But Great Revolutionaries, like Kant, being in the thick of things, cannot always see the consequences of their own brilliant revolutionary ideas! Perhaps their followers, once things have settled down, can appreciate the consequences all the more clearly!
37 See Warnock, Imagination, p. 27: ‘the aim of his whole critical philosophy is to lay bare the features which our experience must have, if it is to be the experience of the world as we know it’.
the concept ‘Universal’ is already there for us when we find ourselves in the world. Locke’s problem never existed!

A couple of extra Kantian points which will be relevant below:

According to Kant, the human capacity that we use to couple our Intuitions ( ~ ‘sense-data’) to our Categories to provide understanding of the world, is our imagination. Imagination is thus, also, a fundamental capability required for our very existence in the world - another sine qua non. It is very far from being an ‘add-on’ to our lives, an ‘optional extra’ that we call on when we want to be creative or invent fictions! Among the Concepts that we imagine are Universals!

The fact that we couple our Intuitions (sense-data) to our Categories to provide understanding of the world, means that the Natural World is, for us, a Phenomenal World. Phenomena are perceived by the Senses and are enabled by our Concepts and Categories.

But ...

Is Kant right here? Does his ‘Copernican Revolution’ solve or dissolve many previously conceived philosophical problems, including the PoU? Well, clearly, I think ‘Yes’! To argue otherwise, one must take on the CPR! Clearly, again, this is not the place to do so - it would take months to get anywhere! So, instead, we can take on another, distinct, but corroborating argument. We can move forward another 80 years or so from Kant to the time of Darwin and adopt an Evolutionary Argument to the effect that Universals are indeed Primitive to our way of being in the World.

An Evolutionary Argument.

If we are walking through a field in the English countryside, communing with Nature, what do we see? A field! Very attractive, maybe & it may revitalise our souls, etc. ... but ... it remains a field! Not so, for the Hawk hovering 300 metres above the field: it sees the mouse in one corner of the field, swoops down and nabs it! For the Hawk ‘mouse’ is a very important Universal Category! ‘Mouse’ is ‘Food’! The Hawk sees a ‘mouse pattern’ that we are insensitive to. Pattern Recognition is a primitive, essential part of Being for all animals. It parses the World into Universals and Particulars. As animals, we are most sensitive to those patterns that are most salient for our way of life.

Likewise, go back a few million years to our hunter-gatherer ancestors. For them to confuse, e.g., Deadly Nightshade berries with Blackcurrents would have had dire consequences! Whilst out hunting, the sighting of a tiger would give rise to a shout ‘Tiger!’ - and not to any laid-back philosophical discussion as to whether that imposing stripy creature with alarming fangs might, or might not, perhaps?, be a token of some...
Universal Species!! A tiger-sighting would require a rapid gathering-together of the hunters into a protective band for defence!! One just had to distinguish harmful from harmless animal species - as we still do. Recognition of Universal Types was, and remains, a requirement essential to survival: a primitive sine-qua-non Instinct for one’s continuing to exist in the World at all!

Another example: walk down the road with a dog on a lead. It walks along nonchalantly, until it sees another dog! Then it becomes excited, pulls on the lead, & tries to have a sniff (or worse)! It’s clear from their behaviour that the class of entities that dogs take to be dogs, corresponds pretty closely to our Universal Concept: The Species ‘Dog’. More generally, all animals must recognise their own kind in order to procreate! The point here is not to claim that animals have Universal ‘Concepts’ of Natural Kinds and Species, it is rather to say that they have instinctual recognition of what we take to be Universal Concepts: The Species ‘Dog’. More generally, all animals must recognise their own kind in order to procreate! Some Species, including Homo Sapiens and, possibly, primates, killer whales & dolphins, have the additional mental ability to turn these instincts into concepts.

The fact that we, as a species, have taken the path from Instincts to Concepts requires us to acknowledge that, once we acquired the Intellectual Wherewithal to start asking ‘What are Universals?’ we must already have developed philosophical Conceptualism!

The two arguments above: the Kantian Transcendental argument and the Evolutionary argument are formally distinct, but they are complementary and perhaps they form part of a ‘Virtuous Circle’ or a Coherence Theory about Universals. Their point is that the Empiricist question of how we can derive Universals from Particulars never comes into play. They come together, as a package as part of our way of being in the world.

With all this under our belt, we can now return to the issue of how Conceptualism fares in the Natural World.

6. Conceptualism and The Natural World

Natural Substantives (Species, Natural Kinds, etc.)

I have already been talking about Species as if they are in some sense ‘Real’ – i.e. instantiated in the Natural World. Certainly, scientists appear to take them as ‘Real’! They have a whole hierarchical taxonomy of biological types (‘taxons’):


So, surely, Species and Natural Kinds actually exist!

Well yes, indeed! The account I’m giving here is Realist account of the Natural World. There is plenty of jolly good evidence that our Universe existed for ~13.7 billion years before any Concepts arose in the Biosphere of Planet Earth!! What price, then, Conceptualism?

If Biological types did not exist ten billion years ago, then surely, at least, Physical types did: electrons, protons, quarks, gluons, photons, etc! Again, scientists have pretty good evidence that indeed they did! But there was no-one around then to have concepts of them! What price Conceptualism?

Well, the answer to these questions again comes from Kant. There is a world of difference (literally!) between claims about ‘Reality’ in the Transcendent, Supernatural World and claims about ‘Reality’ in the

45 Kant’s argument is metaphysical (part of his own Transcendental metaphysics), it does not make use of evolutionary arguments (&, indeed, it preceded Darwin’s publications by some 80 years). Evolutionary arguments are scientific and therefore deal with the phenomenal world. The two arguments work on two different philosophical levels.
**Natural World.** The Supernatural Ontologies discussed in Section 4 are meant, by their believers, to be ‘Really Real’: God and Heaven really do exist, though, as is often recognised, in ways we cannot understand. They are somehow (Platonically!) meant to be More Real as ‘Beings’ in a World of Being than the creatures we see in our Natural World; i.e. in our world of imperfect, incessant Becoming! They are meant to be, in Kantian terms ‘Things-in-Themselves’ (‘Dinge an sich’ in German). We cannot know them, but we can have faith in them. But the ontology of our Natural World is wholly Phenomenal and as explained in Section 5, all Phenomena, for us, are an admixture of Intuitions (~ ‘Sense Data’) and the Concepts that we impose upon the world. The ‘Reality’ of entities in the Natural World, whether Particulars or Universals, is essentially Conceptual. Concepts are a sine qua non of their phenomenal reality.

When we Conceptualists say that Universals are ‘first and foremost’ concepts, we are keeping the door open to the possibility that they may also be instantiated in the World in some way - ‘Species’ may well be such a case. But, there are plenty of historical examples to show that our conceived entities are not always instantiated in the Natural World (e.g. phlogiston, unicorns). But, in all cases, it is the Concepts that we engage in and commit ourselves to that work for us: if we believe in them, we pursue the consequences of that belief.

Note, in this context, that there are ongoing scientific conceptual debates about Biological Taxonomy. Do Bacteria form a Domain or a Kingdom? This is not agreed, there remains much argument about the exact relationships. Again, some scientists argue that it is not useful to classify Bacteria, with their ready exchange of DNA, into Species because they can take on a whole spectrum of properties.

Thus, ‘Species’ are not ‘present’ in a simplistic way in the world. They arise, first, in animal instincts and, once we come to discuss them philosophically, our instinctual predilections for Species become Concepts. They may have Natural Correlates, and so be instantiated in the Natural Word, but the correlation can never be ‘exact’.

**The Holon**

While discussing Substantives in the Natural World, we should not pass up a further opportunity to deflate the supposed ‘special’ status of Universals, at least in relation to Parts and Wholes, by drawing attention to Arthur Koestler’s concept of The Holon. Koestler noted that in the Natural World very few entities are solely Particulars (Parts) or solely Collectives (Wholes); most of them are both. Thus, in the Hierarchy of Life we have many holons: organelles in cells, biological cells, bodily organs, human bodies, human groups, society, culture, the biosphere ... perhaps, Gaia! (James Lovelock). They are each functionally whole (semi-autonomous), but each play a role in a larger organic whole. Each is made up of smaller holons, and each forms part of a larger holon. Think of social insects. Ants are particular holons but their ant-hill is a social holon. Likewise, for bees & beehives. Likewise, for humans and our societies! There is no need here to elevate

46 See, e.g., the writings of Nicolas of Cusa, or The Cloud of Unknowing, etc.
47 See e.g. CPR [Bxxvi], but passim throughout the CPR.
48 Some might want to say that they are (again to use a Kantian term) ‘Noumenal’- but this classification is not particularly helpful. Noumenal is a term coined by Kant which actually gives away his essential Conceptualism! Noumenal things are implied by the Mind (Nous in Greek) as opposed to Phenomenal things that are perceived by the senses, see Kant CPR A149! As I say, there is a world of difference - but not the one that is implied by those who take the word ‘Noumenal’ to mean ‘really real’, it’s best to use the term ‘Dinge an sich’ for supposed ‘really real’ entities.
49 See Wikipedia on biological taxonomy.
51 One cannot align a phenomenon (= concept + intuitions) with just a concept.
53 Except at the very top & bottom of the hierarchy.
any one of these *holonic collectives* to a higher plane as some kind of *Ideal Universal*! All are perfectly at home in the *Natural World*.

**Natural Qualities, Properties and Adjectives:**

We can move on from *Substantives* in the Natural World to *Properties* in the Natural World.

One of the positions that I am defending here is that our Universal concepts *start* from our experiences in the Natural World but may *become* more abstract over time as we choose to make them more *precise*, *better defined* and more ‘*perfect*’, as we hone them into forms that we can *do more with*. The *direction of explanation is from the Natural to the Abstract*, not (as in Platonism) from the (perfect) *Abstract* to the (imperfect) *Natural*.

This is well illustrated by the historical treatment we have given to our *words* for *Qualities*, *Properties* and *Adjectives*. The history of the *coining*, *development and usage* of words is covered by the science of *Etymology*, and, of course, the *history of words* is a *guide* to the *history of human concepts*. Etymologists these days have access to over 4000 years of written language, starting with the earliest Mesopotamian clay tablets and inscriptions. What they have found, essentially, is that *words* (and hence their *concepts*) *start* in the *Natural World* but may be *worked-up over time to find more abstract uses*.54

Thus, we only need consider a few *colour* words to understand their *Natural origin*: *orange*, *olive*, *violet*, *silver* ... (fruit, flowers, metal ...) - even *claret & burgundy* (wine) are very close to *Nature*.55

In many languages, the word for ‘*red*’ is etymologically connected with the word for ‘*blood*’ ... as in the Semitic languages where *dam*, ‘*blood*’, is the source for *Adam* because he was fashioned by God from of the *red* earth.56

In English, the word ‘*green*’ is etymologically connected with the verb ‘*to grow*’. *Green* is the colour of *growing* things and of *grown* vegetable matter.57 The application of the word to imply *immaturity and lack of experience* has always been associated with ‘*green*’ because *mature* fruits (e.g. tomatoes) often take on another colour.58

We should also remember in this context that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson wrote two books which argued that much of our language starts from *Bodily Metaphor: Philosophy in the Flesh*’ and ‘*Metaphors We Live By*’: we are *embodied* creatures and we have *embodied* minds.59 So, Lakoff & Johnson are also arguing that the direction of *Linguistic* (and so *Conceptual*) development is from the *Natural* to the *Abstract*.

54 One example, in addition to the colour words given here, is the use of the phrase ‘*going to*’ to indicate a *future* activity – essentially as an *auxiliary* to denote a *future tense*. Historically, this started when people would say something like *‘I’m going to find out for myself’*, where there is a *literal* ‘*going*’ followed (hopefully) by a future ‘*finding out*’. With repeated uses of such linguistic forms, we’ve ended up with sentences such as: *‘I’m going to stay here’, which makes no literal sense at all!*[], but in which ‘*going to*’ has become an auxiliary for a future tense. See Deutscher, *The Unfolding of Language*, (2005) (pp. 146-156). He points out that this terminology is gradually becoming *‘gonna’* – a single word auxiliary.

55 Deutscher, p. 236
56 Deutscher p. 237
57 Ibid. See also the *Oxford English Dictionary* on ‘green’. Note also ‘grün’ in German, whose pronunciation is – half-way between our ‘*grown*’ and ‘*green*’!
58 We may also note that the *scientific* understanding of colour, embedded in the *Natural World*, as it is, has been far more *fruitful* than the Notion of the *Platonic Ideal of ‘Redness’*! Through it, we can now understand *colour-blindness* and can make dynamic *colour displays* (computer screens, TVs, etc). Wow!
59 Lakoff & Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) and ‘*Metaphors We Live By*’ (2003). See also Deutscher, p. 138, and contemporary philosophical works on the ‘*Embodied Mind*’. 
7. Conceptualism and The Public Sphere:

In the sphere of public engagement, I'll argue that our Universal Concepts are explicitly invented by us to solve our problems. We use our Imagination to do this. We then negotiate them, modify them ... as a result of which, some of them become inter-subjectively accepted, and so become socially instantiated, and so, in a sense, become 'real'.

To illustrate these claims, I'll look at two very different areas of public conceptual creativity: (1) The generation of Axiomatic Systems and Scientific Theories, and (2) Politics.

Axiomatic Systems and Scientific Theories

My assertion that Axiomatic Systems and Scientific Theories originate in the Public Domain may well be challenged! After all, one must be something of an expert to make original contributions in these fields! On the other hand, copious publications in these fields are in the public domain and even amateur philosophers can have access to them! Their concepts are negotiated openly in ways that are far from 'secret' and new Systems and Theories become accepted, or rejected, via Intersubjective Consensus. Even as outsiders, looking in, we can still appreciate these processes and the import of what the experts are doing.

Axiomatic Systems are sophisticated Conceptual Systems which contain not just concepts but also rules of implication (e.g. modus ponens, modus tollens in classical logic) that enable us to generate new legitimate concepts ('legitimate' within each System, that is). The Axioms for each system are its basic Assumptions, which themselves cannot be proved, but are just taken to be "The Case". The first fully-fledged axiomatic system that we know of was that devised by Euclid for Geometry in ~300 BCE. It then took the human species until the 19th Century CE to come up with new axiomatic systems for logic and arithmetic. However, having discovered how to do it, many more axiomatic systems have since been invented! They are being generated by logicians, mathematicians and scientists all of the time these days. All of these systems have been invented by our fellow humans to improve our understanding of the World - i.e. with the intention of clarifying our Concepts and what we can derive from them - so as to be useful in our world.

Rule-following is an activity of major philosophical significance - it excited Wittgenstein's interest. But much empirical evidence shows that, pragmatically, we can actually do it quite well (as in games like chess, as well as in axiomatic systems) and we can also teach machines (e.g. computers) to follow our invented rules! Rule following is tremendously important in cooking and computer programming, where a rational series of instructions is set up to achieve our ends. They are referred to as recipes and as algorithms, respectively.

60 Originally, in Ancient Greek times, the term 'axiom' implied that these assumptions were in some sense 'obvious'. These days, we think that the word 'obvious' should not be used in philosophical discourses, as so many 'obvious' principles have been found to be wrong! An 'Axiom' these days is, therefore, just an 'assumed' principle.
61 By people like Frege, Peirce, Dedekind, Peano, q.v.
63 A quote from a contemporary scientist, referring to Alan Turing and logic, which makes a related point (and an anti-Platonic point to boot!): 'Turing’s great contribution to logic can be thought of as the rejection of logic as a Platonic ideal, and the redefinition of logic as a process. Turing’s famous paper of 1936, ‘On Computable Numbers with an application to the Entscheidungsproblem’ showed that the process of performing Boolean logic could be implemented by an abstract machine', Seth Lloyd, 'The Universe as a Quantum Computer’, arXiv:1312.4455v1 [quant-ph], 16 Dec 2013, p. 5.
64 The rigidity of rule-following differs from one discipline to another: in cooking: loose; in logic: determinative.
Scientific Theories are a form of axiomatic system. Their 'axioms' are usually called 'postulates', and, as they are somewhat more loosely framed than formal logical and mathematical systems, they are often referred to as 'hypotheses', or just 'formulations', as well as 'theories'. As they are scientific conceptual systems, the predictions made through them must be rigorously tested empirically to discover if the theory can be useful for us, whereas many invented axiomatic systems in philosophy, logic and maths are just created for the fun and excitement of doing it!  

Having said all that, what does any of this have to do with Universals?  

Here are a few observations about Axiomatic Systems that demonstrate their relevance for understanding the philosophy of Universals. 

(1) First, a point that counts against General Platonism (i.e. extends beyond Universals, but includes them). These axiomatic systems are 'tidied up' systems which have had the imprecisions of ordinary everyday speech removed from them. Foundation Students in Logic are taught to strip away the irrelevances of everyday language and reveal the basic concepts and processes of implication that underlie a good argument. The structure of the argument is rendered symbolically and made context free and therefore more general. Such stripped-down systems appear more perfect than the Natural World because we make them as simple as possible (following Ockham's Razor), only retaining what is necessary for correct general understanding. Similar points can be made in all cases where we abstract from the Natural World. For example, we abstract from natural triangles to the general concept of 'ideal' triangle, which thereby becomes a rudimentary scientific model, which (we think) tells us what all triangles are like. Likewise, when walking in unfamiliar terrain, an abstracted map, which records only salient features, is often more useful for our finding our way than just being there! Without the map, we can get lost because we 'can't see the wood for the trees'! The simplified map is far more pragmatically useful for us. The map is pragmatically better than the terrain and therefore can come across as being more 'perfect'. But we made it. The Idealised Map did not produce the 'imperfect' terrain!! The point is that the appearance of perfection or simplicity here is something that we have to work at conceptually to create, as we abstract from the world. The direction of explanation is, as ever, from the Natural World to the Abstract Ideal Concept, not the other way around. So it is with Universals! 

(2) First Order Predicate Logic is an axiomatic system that was created to capture (as far as possible) how we reason logically in the world and also to enable us and to teach us how to make our (often) faulty day-to-day reasoning more formally correct. It does this by the processes mentioned in (1): formalisation, abstraction, use of symbolism to provide context-freedom and rigorous compliance with fixed rules of implication. But, in so doing, it provides us with yet another demonstration that the Universals are Primitive to our way of being in the world. The 'Universal Quantifier', $\forall$: 'For all ...', has to be provided as a Primitive of the logical formalism, it is not derived as a theorem. Insofar as First Order Predicate Logic aims to capture our intuitive logic (albeit in a partially perfected form) the primitive (Categorical) nature of our Universal concepts is again demonstrated.

65 In Section 6, above, in speaking of scientific theories on Species and Biological Taxonomy we have already been discussing examples of how these theories work for us conceptually. 
66 Note that the Platonic and Euclidean model of an 'Ideal' Triangle, was, in the late 19th Century, found to be wanting: it is only valid for triangles in Flat Euclidean Space, not in Curved Spaces! 
67 E.g. In the statement "For all x [\(\forall x\), if x is a man, x is mortal", we recognize that there is a Universal, 'man', of which there are probably (at least) a few particular instances. Only Universals can be preceded by the primitive Universal Quantifier, $\forall$! Note, also, the symbol '€' - 'belongs to' is also common in symbolic logic and is also an irreducible concept which demonstrates the primitivity of Universals. We can learn much more about our ways of thinking from this kind of formalism. For example, the primitivity of the Existential Quantifier, $\exists$, is also central to the formalism: it demonstrates that 'existence' is not a predicate (thereby undermining the Ontological Argument for God's existence!!).
(3) In some respects, First Order Predicate Logic fails to capture some of our intuitive understanding of the world. Logicians have therefore proceeded to develop many other logics as axiomatic systems: paraconsistent logics, quantum logics, fuzzy logics, not to mention modal logics. Likewise, we have many axiomatic systems that provide different formal Mathematical systems. Some people wish to situate Mathematics in a Platonic World. They are called Mathematical Platonists. My question is this: just which mathematics, based on just which axiomatic system does one wish to elevate in this way? All of them? There are potentially an infinite number of such systems (though, so far, only a finite number of them have been invented)!!!

(4) A similar point relates to Science. Theoretical physicists who are trying to solve the problem of Quantum Gravity invent many speculative conceptual ontologies: some based on String Theory, some on Loop Quantum Gravity, some on Causal Set Theory, etc., etc. ... There are so many bright young physicists these days working in this area that Quantum Ontologies are nowadays two a penny! Even in the case of ‘elementary’ Quantum Mechanics (as taught to undergraduates), which Quantum Ontology are we going to elevate to be the ‘really real’ ’Dinge-an-sich’ ontology? We literally cannot tell, because they are meant to make exactly the same phenomenological predictions, so that we cannot distinguish between them empirically! So why elevate any of them to a different Platonic Plane, when they are so clearly our own invented conceptual systems?

(5) Karl Popper came up with the concept of ‘World 3’ which does a better job of accounting for the facts when it comes to Abstractions (whether they are Systems, Universals, Concepts or whatever ...) than does Platonism. For Popper, World 1 is the physical world, World 2 is the mental world, but World 3 is a world of creations and inventions that, once we have created them, become in a sense, autonomous. A good example is the game of chess. Humans invented it, but, once invented, all possible individual games of chess are, in a conceptual sense, implied or defined by the rules - they have become autonomous: there’s nothing we can do to get rid of them, so to speak. We might change the rules of chess, but then it would no longer be the chess we started with! The main distinction between the Platonic Ideal World of Forms and Popper’s World 3 is that the former is meant to be Fundamental and Prior to the Natural World (‘prior’ both logically and temporally because Ideal Platonic entities have ‘always been there’, or, rather, they exist eternally), whereas World 3 entities emerge from the Natural World and have a starting point in time.

Politics:

Politics demonstrates just how important Universals can be for us.

We can illustrate this via Mrs Thatcher’s apocryphal statement that ‘There is no such thing as Society’. i.e. she denies the existence of a particular Universal. This position (even if the statement were only meant to be metaphorical hyperbole - not to be taken too literally) is not too surprising coming from a Right-Wing politician. The Right-Wing has always preferred to work at the level of the human Individual, whereas the Left-Wing is prone to analyse politics at the level of Universals: Society, Class, etc. In a philosophical tradition...
stemming from Hegel and Marx, one can find statements from the Left that actually deny personal initiative in favour of explanations at the level of Human Collectives. On the other hand, the ‘Right’ may praise ‘The Nation’, while the ‘Left’ may praise ‘The State’. We see that important debates in politics relate to the prioritisation and denigration of particular Universals. One would like to think that such debates proceed honestly, morally and rationally (and there is certainly a role for philosophers to advise here), but in the hands of unscrupulous politicians they can proceed eristically to promote cynical self-interest!

Moving to contemporary political issues: do those of us who live in England in 2017 owe our allegiance to England, Britain or to Europe or any combination of these three Universals? Since last year we find that we are required (by some politicians and political groups in our society) to relinquish allegiance to Europe! Attitudes to such Universals can be very changeable and fickle!! This is captured in the joke that for an English tennis fan, Andy Murray is British when he is winning, but Scottish when he is losing! We use The Law - another Universal - to try to tie these issues down and settle debates.

But note that England, Britain and the Europe of the EU are all invented Universal Concepts: invented to solve particular problems. The concept of England was invented as a concept by Alfred the Great and his ministers to counter the Danish (Viking) threat in the 9th Century CE, but not actually instantiated for another two generations (under his grandson Athelstan). The concept of Great Britain was invented by James VI & 1st at the start of the 17th Century to unify his two kingdoms, but was not fully instantiated until the start of the 18th Century. The Concept of the European Union was invented after World War II, partly as a way of preventing the perennial – ceaseless - wars that had scarred people’s lives in the European continent ever since Roman times .......  

Within a given polity we invent Universals in the form of Human Collectives, e.g. Limited Companies, Corporations, Societies, Clubs, Political Parties, etc., again, so as to solve problems. We negotiate their existence and some of them become instantiated and so become ‘real’: we embody their reality through The Law. One last example: scholars and their students who first settled in towns like Oxford in Medieval times needed peace and quiet and autonomy from local power brokers and politics so as to progress with their studies. They were able to set up legal self-governing Corporations (Latin: Universitas) of Masters and Students in order to achieve this. Universities are Universals (the clue is in the name).

Note the direction of explanation here: from a political or social problem in the Natural World to an invented Universal as a putative solution. There is no doubt that William of Ockham recognised this kind of Universal-formation. Here is a fuller version of the Ockham quote from page 7:

I do hold this: No universal – unless perhaps it is a universal through voluntary institution – is anything existing in any way outside the soul. Rather everything that is a universal predicable from its nature to several is in the mind, either subjectively or objectively. No universal belongs to the essence or quiddity of any substance. 75 [My underlining]

72 See, for example, John Pickard, Behind the Myths, (Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2013), p. 36: a Marxist historian speaks of the early Israelites and their religion: ‘It doesn’t matter what the early Israelites themselves thought were their motives or their driving ideology ... their ideology reflected a material social force.’ See also this statement by Hegel: ‘A history which aspires to traverse long periods of time, or to be universal, must indeed forgo the attempt to give individual representations of the past as it actually existed. It must foreshorten its pictures by abstractions; and this includes not merely the omission of events and deeds, but whatever is involved in the fact that Thought is, after all, the most trenchant epitomist'; quote from Hegel’s Science of Logic, trans. A V Miller (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 82, taken from Peter Charles Hoffer, Clio among the Muses (New York University Press), 2013, p. 28.

73 ‘Universals’ because Englishness, Britishness or European-ness can be predicated of many particular people.

74 Given that the problems that the Universals ‘England’ and ‘Great Britain’ were meant to solve are no longer with us, one might ask, philosophically, whether these two Universals continue to serve a purpose! Perhaps we can come up with better options these days, like, e.g. a European Union! But perhaps that is getting a little too political!
8. Summary

Do we base our philosophies on Abstractions or on Nature? – i.e. on our given Natural World? A few years ago, on returning from a philosophy weekend in Oxford on the topic of Hegel, I told a friend of mine, Sarah Reilly, ‘Hey, Hegel says that the fundamental category is Being’. She replied ‘No – The fundamental category is Food’!

I’ve been arguing here that, historically, conceptually, we have always started with Nature and that it is from our Nature that we derive our ability to conceive Universals. Human concepts come to us naturally and Universals are human concepts. Let us accept the empirical evidence (some of which is described above) which shows, overwhelmingly, that our human ability to conceive Universals originates in the Natural World, and proceeds therefrom. To be sure, we find it important in our lives to move towards abstractions to sharpen up fuzzy concepts and to test them: this is the job of philosophy and science – we benefit from doing so. We are pretty adept at doing this! So good, in fact, that that our abstractions (axiomatic systems, right-angled triangles, etc.) look more perfect than the Natural World they are derived from. They are so good, in fact, that they deceived Plato into thinking that they are more ‘Real’ than our Natural World. There is no empirical evidence for this. This is my reason for adopting an Aristotelian rather than a Platonic approach.

We can summarise our observations with respect to our three ‘Spheres’ of human engagement in the world as follows:

In the Natural Sphere we can, perhaps, find ‘real’ instantiated phenomenal correlates of our Universal Concepts, though the correlation is never exact.

In the Public Sphere, we set up Universal Concepts to solve our problems and with any luck they become ‘real’. We invent them and negotiate them through social, public and political activities.

Regarding the Transcendent, Supernatural Sphere: the atheist, the sceptic, the humanist, or even an agnostic may entertain the daring notion that there are no ‘real’ correlates of our Universal Concepts in this domain - no instantiation of them – and that we have only the Universal Concepts supplied by our own minds. But it is those concepts that matter for us and that work for us in this domain.

Lastly, our historical perspective has shown that what once appeared to be a philosophical problem, specifically the so-called ‘Problem of Universals’ (PoU, if it ever existed), has been dissolved by the progress of philosophy. We have given three independent arguments to this effect, though, in each case, precisely via the argument that Universals are conceptually endemic to our way of being the World: (1), The Kantian Transcendental Argument (pp. 8-9), (2) The Evolutionary Argument (pp. 10-11), and (3), the Argument from First Order Predicate Logic (p. 15)!!

75 Klima, p. 230. Note that this is a different translation into English from the original Latin. Klima translates ‘anima’ as ‘soul’ rather than ‘mind’

76 The largest economic sector in the UK is Food! I must point out here that I draw a clear distinction between Kant’s Categories, that literally tie us into the Natural World, and ‘Categories’ as ultra-abstractions, whether they be from Plato or Hegel or other Idealist philosophers, that work to found our thought in something more ethereal.

77 Of course, there is no clinching evidence either way (how could there be?), only huge amounts of circumstantial evidence in favour of Naturalism.
Bibliography

See, at least, The Categories, De Interpretatione … .


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