Plato, Aristotle, and the Problem of Universals

Christopher L. Holland

February 13, 2025

Before we look at epistemology in contemporary philosophy we will take a quick look at a related question in metaphysics.

# 1. Background (Some Quick Ancient Metaphysics)

## 1.1 Plato and Platonic Realism

* Theory of the Forms (Eternal Ideas)
	+ How can there be many of one kind of thing?
		- What do red things have in common? Their form: Redness.
		- What do trees have in common? Their form: Treeness.
		- What do human beings have in common? Their form: Humanness.
		- What do all good things have in common? Their form: Goodness.
	+ Plato’s answer: Particular things (this red thing, this tree, etc.) “participate in” the Forms (redness, treeness, etc.)
		- Particular things change
		- Forms do not. They are
			* Eternal
			* Unchanging
	+ Neoplatonic Interpretation: The Forms are the most *real* things; particular things are less real than the Forms
	+ Alternative Interpretation: Forms and particulars are equally real. The Forms are good objects of knowledge (because they do not change). Particulars are bad objects of knowledge (because they can change).
* Innate Ideas: Knowing as Remembering
	+ Plato held that learning is really a recollecting of what we learned in a previous existence.
	+ Later Platonists suggest that we were created with these ideas.
* Implications
	+ Knowledge is only about things that do not change
	+ Truth does not change
	+ But, mere belief/opinion is
		- about changing things
		- about appearances

## 1.2 Aristotle and Aristotelian Realism

* Rejected Plato’s Theory of the Forms
* Forms are merely the way that particular things exist
* *Hylomorphism*
	+ Particular things are made up of *matter* and *form*
	+ matter gives a thing “potentiality”
	+ form gives a thing “actuality”
	+ Example:
		- the same wood can be a tree and later a chair
		- the matter (wood) is the same but the form (tree then chair) changes
* Abstraction: A process of the mind that separates *form* from *matter*

# 2. Scott Berman’s Flow Chart for Universals

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 1: Flow chart based on the appendix to Scott Berman, *Platonism and the Objects of Science* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). |