Plato, Aristotle, and the Problem of Universals

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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

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