

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

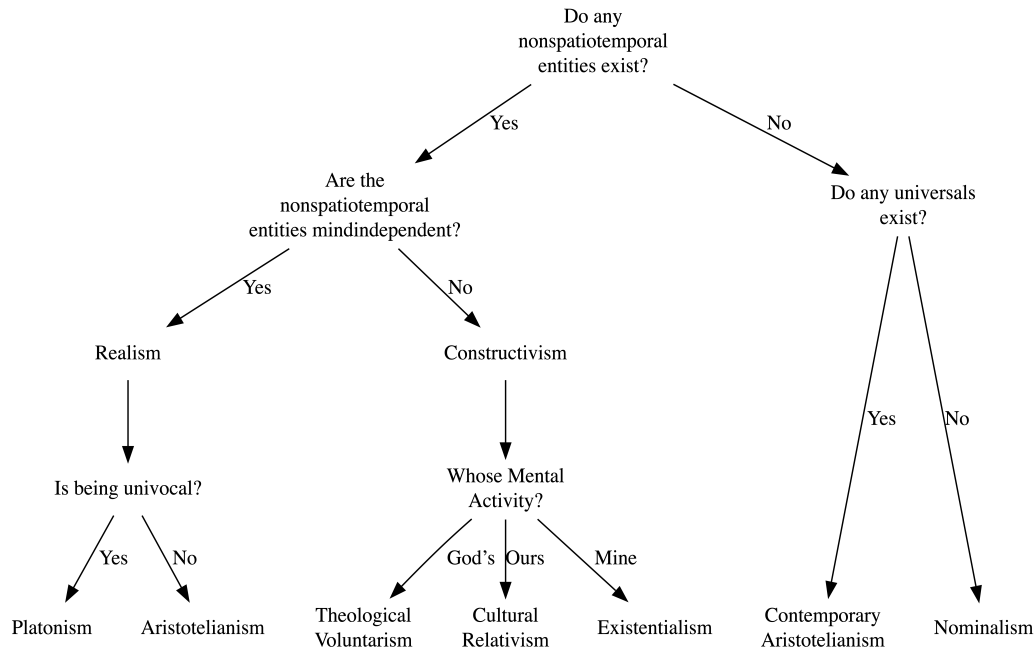


Figure 1: Flow chart based on the appendix to Scott Berman, *Platonism and the Objects of Science* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).