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## The Problem of Universals: Contrasting Plato's Metaphysical Realism with David Lewis' Class Nominalism

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### Abstract

In this paper, my aim is to discuss the problem of universals, based on some relevant works of Plato and David Lewis. Using a critical, analytic approach, I shall opt for Plato's Metaphysical realism, and then argue that despite the seeming persuasiveness of the nominalist (David Lewis') perspective, there are still substantive reasons to reject it, given its inadequacy both in grounding our epistemic claims, and in giving an account of how we come to know whatever we may know. My conclusion will consist in asking the class nominalist to reconsider, and possibly revise his presuppositions, conceptual schemes and discursive framework, in order to contribute more constructively, to the discussion on the problem of universals.

**Keywords:** Metaphysical realism, Class nominalism, Universals, Plato, David Lewis.

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### 1. Introduction

I consider the problem of universals to be the problem of determining how different and many things, can be founded on one thing, based on some features of similarity which the different things (particulars) exhibit in relation to the "one thing" (universal) which they instantiate. The "particulars" in this case are the specific sensible, and concrete phenomena; while the "one thing" would be some independent, extra-mental, non-spatial and non-temporal entity, to which the particulars are related. Whereas the Platonic realist who supports the priority of the *One over the Many*, would argue that the forms have a certain ascendancy over their particulars (from which the particulars derive their existence), the nominalist claims that the particulars exist on their own right and do not need the forms as a basis for their being. Since Plato considers "being" as univocal, he thinks that the forms are just as real as the perceptibles (particulars), that is, he considers the forms as existing in a primary sense.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the forms have a unique identity of their own, while the sensible things do not.

### 2. Plato's Solution to the Problem of Universals

Plato's theory of forms (*eidos*), was his solution to the problem of universals. The Platonic theory of Forms is presented as a hypothesis for which a proof is sought by abductive arguments (inference to the best explanation).<sup>2</sup> For Plato, reality is one, but this one reality has two dimensions: that which contains spatio-temporal objects, and that which does not. He maintained

that forms exist in the metaphysical realm as objects distinct in kind from the things of experience. As a metaphysical realist, Plato's efforts were aimed at using the universals to explain instances of attribute agreement, predication and abstract reference.

Within Platonism, universals are considered as abstract objects which are non-spatiotemporal, non-mental, unchanging and entirely causally inert (i.e they cannot be involved in a cause-and-effect relationship with other objects). For the Platonist, abstract objects include Mathematical objects (for example numbers); properties, and propositions. The Platonists regard "properties" and "relations" as belonging to a broader category of abstract objects, (the category of universals), but while properties are one-place universals (that is, they are instantiated by single objects), the relations are instantiated by ordered pairs of objects, which could be two-place relations or more.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, the aforementioned are not the only things that are considered as abstract objects, for some Platonists also commit themselves to the belief that linguistic objects (like sentences), possible worlds, logical objects and fictional characters, are also abstract objects. Thus, it is possible to be a Platonist in a given case, and not in another.<sup>4</sup> Basically, Plato claimed that the sensibles stand in a certain relationship to the forms (universals) through *participation*,<sup>5</sup> (Cf. *Meno*, 72a-73c; *Phaedo*, 100d-2a; *Greater Hippias*, 287c-294c; *Republic*, 596a-597d). For Plato, the Forms are immutable, whereas sensible things are mutable. In Book I of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle claims (987a30-987b11) that Plato had a "system" to the effect that "the many sensibles which have the same name, exist by participating in the corresponding Forms."<sup>6</sup> Plato held this position, Aristotle claims, because he believed the doctrine of Heraclitus that sensible things are always in a state of flux, so that no science of them exists. Plato followed Socrates in seeking definitions, but since he supposed there could be no definitions of sensible things, Plato claimed it is the forms rather than the sensible things that are our objects of knowledge. In any case it remains an open question whether or not Aristotle is right in his interpretation of Plato and his understanding of why Plato postulated the Theory of Forms. In the *Parmenides*, there is a summary of the basis for the theory of Forms, and Socrates uses this as his response to Zeno's argument on Eleaticism:

I think that you think that each Form is one for this reason: whenever it appears to you that there is some given number of large things, it perhaps appears to you that in looking at all of these, there is some one Idea whence you think that Largeness is one thing.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Loux in his work *Metaphysics: A contemporary Introduction*, poses some questions which are important in understanding the Platonic doctrine of Forms and their implications for the problem of universals: Suppose it to be a fact that certain objects agree in attribute; they are all, say yellow. Is there some fact more basic or fundamental than this fact, such that it is because and only because the more fundamental fact holds of these objects that they are all yellow? And if there is, is it possible to generalize from this case? That is, is there a very general type or form of fact such that, given any case of attribute agreement, that case obtains because and only because some fact of the relevant very general type or form obtains?<sup>8</sup> However, he offers a response to the above questions in the words of Plato, as expressed in his *Parmenides*: "There exist certain Forms of which these other things come to partake and so to be called after their names; by coming

to partake of Likeness or Largeness or Beauty or Justice, they become like or large or beautiful or just”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in *Greater Hippias* (287a - 287d), Socrates argues that, there must be attributes separate from the things which have them and it is by virtue of the things that have them that they are what they are. Nothing can ever be something by virtue of nothing. Something is beautiful in virtue of beauty, green by virtue of Greenness, P, by virtue of P-ness, etc.

Also, in *Phaedo* (96a - 102a) Plato has Socrates argue that the theory of forms is used as a hypothesis to explain certain features of how we understand the world, and some inter-relationships in the world, especially such features which are not merely physical or mechanical processes, (for example the Mathematical relations).<sup>10</sup> The forms therefore provide the rational explanation we need to grapple with considering these sorts of relations in the world.<sup>11</sup> Paul Rezendez says that there are two ways, *inter alia*, that forms fulfill this role: First, the forms explain certain features of things that necessarily follow from their having a form (for example the form of three implies the form of odd; the form of snow implies the form of cold, and the form of fire implies the form of heat). Secondly the forms offer *an explanation of how particulars participate in their forms*. The main point here is that, we are able to recognize particulars in their attributes, because we can recognize their Forms. In the *Phaedo* 73a- 76c, Plato offers the argument from recollection to explain how our knowledge is by way of reminiscence, since our soul, in its previous life, had already known the Forms, whose particulars we presently perceive.

The argument is this: when people are interrogated in the right manner, they would give the right response which in itself is dependent on some residual knowledge that they have. This knowledge is based on recollection, according to Socrates, and not on any form of training or reasoning.<sup>12</sup> This recollected knowledge can be brought about by our visual contact with similar things as well as dissimilar things. When it is caused by similar things, then it is something that must necessarily be experienced. However, it makes no difference, for as long as the sight of one thing makes one think of another, whether it is similar or dissimilar, thus must of necessity be recollection. From seeing a variety of equal things (for example, some equal sticks and stones), we are led to the knowledge of the Equal itself, which was already in us before birth. Thus, Plato presents Socrates assertion in the following words:

Therefore, if we had this knowledge, we knew before birth and immediately after not only the Equal, but the Greater and the Smaller and all such things, for our present argument is no more about the Equal than about the Beautiful itself, the Good itself, the Just, the Pious and, as I say, about all those things which we mark with the seal of “what it is” both when we are putting questions and answering them. So we must have acquired knowledge of all of them before we were born (*Phaedo*, 76d).

In the *Cratylus* 439b - 440d) as well as (*Parmenides* 135b - c), (*Timaeus* 51b-e) and the Eleatic visitor (*Sophist* 249b-c), Plato has Socrates argue that the Forms provide stable basis of knowledge and contemplation, unlike the perceptibles that are constantly in a state of becoming.

Perhaps it might be useful to present Plato’s argument in the *Timaeus* (52a-53a and 27d-

28a). In the *Timaeus* (27d-28a), Plato makes a distinction between “that which always is” and “that which becomes”, in the following manner:

- (a) “That which always is”, is unchanging, it is eternal.
- (b) It is grasped by understanding, and involves a reasoned account.

The implication of these two qualifications is that “that which always is” is not transcient. This provides a basis for knowledge, since our understanding is able to premise its epistemic claims on it. Without a secure basis for knowledge, we would never be sure of what we know. Also, if our knowledge were to keep changing, it would be difficult to learn anything and retain it. This has implications for truth, which is the quest of the philosopher. How would we know “truth” if it is not something stable and objective?

For Plato, “that which always is” is not destructible, and neither enters into anything else anywhere, nor receives into itself anything else. It is one thing. Secondly, that which we know with certainty is known through a careful reasoning process. It is something we can give an account of. If we do not know the nature of a thing, it would be difficult to account for it, and to distinguish it from all other things that might be similar to it. Regarding “that which becomes” Plato says that it is:

- (a) Grasped by opinion
- (b) It involves unceasing sense perceptions
- © It comes to be and passes away, but never really is

For Plato, opinion is not knowledge, for in holding an opinion we are unable to offer a justification for what we think we know. There are as many opinions regarding a thing as there are people who hold those opinions. So, opinion fails as a basis for knowledge, for it is based on unceasing sense perceptions, and sense perceptions are in constant flux, never stable. Things that are “in a state of becoming” are perpetually in potency, and never in actuality (using Aristotle’s distinction). Hence, as soon as they approach the possibility of attaining actuality, potency ensues again, and the whole cycle is repeated. They come into existence and pass out of existence. Plato says that “that which comes to be” does so by the agency of some cause. He speaks about the “craftsman” whose work of creation is based on the model of the “unchanging” rather than the changing things around us. By so doing, there is beauty in the work of creation. But, if the craftsman were to use the changing things as his model, his work would lack beauty (28b). For Plato, that which is eternal and unchanging (“that which always is”) needs no generative principle, since its existence is self-contained. Its existence is not contingent, but necessary. But “that which becomes” since it is begotten, needs a principle other than itself to bring it into existence for its existence is not necessary, but contingent. Forms, then, are offered by Plato as the theoretical basis for our recognizing things in the world as something or other; the basis for recognizing the many as being similar, and the basis for reasoning about the interrelations among things. Some forms blend, and some do not, but knowledge of how the forms blend and in what permissible combinations, is considered the most important form of philosophical knowledge (*Sophist* 251d - 253c). Apart from providing reasons for the necessity of an intelligible world, the forms also explain certain features of things that necessarily follow from their having a form. For example, the form of three

implies the form of odd; the form of snow implies the form of cold, and the form of fire implies the form of heat.

In discussing the problem of universals, many questions arise, with which one must constantly grapple: How do we explain the claim that general properties or abstract objects are related to the world; how do they exist in or in relation to individual objects, and how is that we know them when experience only seems to reveal individual things? In other words, how can there be identity in the midst of difference, or oneness in multiplicity?<sup>13</sup> In the *Timaeus*, (51D3-52A4), Plato's argument for the existence of Forms turns on a distinction that he makes between understanding and true opinion, when he said:

If understanding and true opinion are two kinds, then these [things] - Forms which are imperceptible by us and intelligible only – exist by themselves. If, though, as it appears to some, true opinion does not differ at all from understanding, then all that we perceive through the body should be taken as the things, which are most stable. Now we must affirm that they are two kinds because we can have one without the other and because they are not the same: one comes about through instruction; the other from persuasion; the first always involves a true account, whereas the second has no account; the first remains unmoved by persuasion, the second can be overturned by persuasion; and whereas it must be said that all men have a share of the second, only gods and a small group of persons have a share of understanding. Given this, we should agree that that which always has its own Form, which is ungenerable and indestructible, which neither receives anything into itself from anywhere else, nor itself enters into anything else anywhere, is one thing. It is invisible and otherwise imperceptible and it is the role of understanding to study it.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, one might say that Plato's theory about the forms, (universals) and his attempt to grapple with their implications, is divided into four different arguments, (although this division might be more or less), depending on what further distinctions one wishes to make: First, the epistemological argument in which he maintains that knowledge implies the mind's grasping (fairly literally) of some truth, and that which is not stable, cannot be grasped properly. Since sensible things are not stable, any knowledge based on them is also unstable. But, since knowledge is supposed to have a certain consistency about it, the stable Forms provide the possibility of sound and reliable knowledge, rather than the mutable perceptibles. Perhaps the following argument structure provides a schematic presentation of the points I have just made regarding the *epistemological argument*:

- (1) The Form of P is a property.
- (2) x is P iff it has this property
- (3) If P = G, then all and only G-things must be P-things.

(4) For any sensible property G, some G things will be P and some G things will be not – P.  
Hence, P is not equal to G.

(5) Hence, Forms are not sensible properties.

(6) But, Forms are necessary for knowledge.

Hence, no knowledge is granted by sensibles.

The second is the *One Over Many* in which Universals are taken as what certain adjectives (like good, beautiful, small, etc) stand for. Here the argument turns on that of the “ontological status” or “reality” that such universals (goodness, beauty, smallness, etc.) could have. Although these universals appear to be real, and are considered as having independent existence, they are non-physical objects. The third argument is based on *realism about mathematics* (where numbers and shapes in mathematics are taken as objects of some non-sensible kind). Thus, the Forms are considered as non-sensible objects with real existence, like the objects in mathematics. But ultimately, the entire Platonic argument regarding universals seems to turn on an inference to the best explanation. This is to say that if there is no other better explanation regarding a given fact (for example the fact of resemblance among properties), then there are justifiable reasons for believing in properties. This position has been challenged, on grounds of inadequate justificatory foundations.

### 3. David Lewis’ Solution to the Problem of Universals

Contrary to Plato, who attempted to solve the problem of universals by appealing the notion of participation between universals and their particulars, (the notion of the One over Many), David Lewis understood the problem of universals differently (the Many over One). David Lewis understood the problem of universals in terms of “properties-sharing.”<sup>15</sup> For him, there is a distinction between “sparse” and “abundant” properties. The “sparse or natural properties are those which are shared if and only if the particulars which resemble each other and which suffice to characterize particulars do so completely and without redundancy”.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, the “non-sparse or abundant properties, may be as extrinsic as gruesomely gerrymandered, as miscellaneous disjunctive as one pleases.”<sup>17</sup> Lewis believes that “perfectly natural properties correspond one-one with universals and sets<sup>18</sup> of duplicate tropes”.<sup>19</sup> In his “On the Plurality of Worlds” Lewis claims that universals are immanent, and that they involve two aspects: *mereological* and *spatiotemporal*. To say that universals are mereological is to imply that they are parts of their instances, (thus particulars that exemplify any given universal tend to overlap, since they share that universal as a common part), and to claim that they are spatio-temporal is to imply that the universals are located precisely where their instances are located.<sup>20</sup> In other words, universals are not to be seen as existing in a different realm, apart from their particulars, but only within the context of the particulars that exemplify or instantiate them. This position seems to re-echo the immanent realism of Aristotle.<sup>21</sup> In his essay, “New work for a theory of Universals” he distinguishes universals from properties in two ways. First, in terms of their “instantiation”, and secondly in terms of their abundance.<sup>22</sup> For him, whereas, a “universal is supposed to be wholly

present wherever it is instantiated, as a constituent part (not a spatio-temporal part) of each property that has it, a property by contrast is spread around.”<sup>23</sup> Regarding “abundance” Lewis says that whereas universals are sparse, properties are abundant. But, despite the abundance of properties, “they do not account for or capture facts of resemblance, nor the causal powers of things, unlike the universals”<sup>24</sup> For him, “an elite minority of special properties” (natural properties), can account for what abundant properties cannot, since its members are all and only those things that share some one universal”<sup>25</sup> However, he does not see the need to postulate both properties and universals. He thinks properties fulfill some role (“that of providing an adequate supply of semantic values for linguistic expressions”), and that universals are ill-suited for this role. He construes properties in terms of class of things, and this is significant in highlighting his commitment to class nominalism, for he thinks that any class of things can be considered a property be it superfluous, miscellaneous, indescribable in thought and language, or gerrymandered.<sup>26</sup>

As a class nominalist, Lewis sees properties as identifiable with classes of particulars. Thus property Q is the class of all and only Q-particulars (the property class of Qs). Hence, for a particular to have a given property, that particular must belong to a given property class. Although Lewis grants that Armstrong’s postulation of shared universals (One over Many), which takes the Moorean fact of sameness of type as primitive, is impressive, he also feels that an adequate nominalism<sup>27</sup> can as well achieve that, since it also sees the Moorean fact as unanalyzable in terms of anything more basic. He considers the giving of an account as involving three possible aspects, each of which is independent and sufficient on its own. First, an outright denial; second, an analysis of the claim made, and third, considering the basis of one’s claims as primitive. He therefore thinks that to insist on giving an analysis as the only approach to Armstrong’s compulsory question, weakens the force of the requirement, rendering it a non-compulsory question.<sup>28</sup> He thinks that this requirement commits both realist and nominalist theories alike to “relation regress” since in the effort to analyze further predications, more predicates are used, which “cannot on pain of circularity be analyzed along with the rest.”<sup>29</sup> He asserts his uneasiness regarding the “analysis requirement” in the following words:

Doing away with all unanalyzed predication is an unattainable aim, and so an unreasonable aim. No theory is to be faulted for failing to achieve it. For how could there be a theory that names entities, or quantifies over them in the course of its sentences, and yet altogether avoids primitive predication? Artificial tricks aside, the thing cannot be done.<sup>30</sup>

I would like to give some attention to the issue of “unanalyzed predication”, since I consider it pivotal to the exchange between David Lewis and David Armstrong (an Aristotelian realist about universals). It was Armstrong’s claim that nominalists ought to offer a conceptual analysis of the scheme “a has a property F”, which in itself would be a reductive one. But Lewis says that this requirement is not attainable if he is to give (for any instance of the scheme), another sentence which captures its content.<sup>31</sup> But the notion of “capturing content” is unclear in this case, (as Alex Oliver has maintained, and I see some sense in this as well). Suppose this is understood in terms of “material equivalence”, then this would be too weak; and if it turns on a requirement for “strict

synonymy”, this would be too strong. Also, “necessary equivalence” would be too weak since if “Q is necessarily equivalent to P, then so is Q & R, where R is any necessary truth (it does not matter whether we consider narrow logical necessity or the broader metaphysical necessity).”<sup>32</sup> A number of questions seem to arise in this case: First, is the demand for unanalyzed predication a reasonable demand? Lewis argues that it this is an unreasonable requirement, since it does not amount to a piecemeal analysis of each instance in which “a has the property F” but a general one, which would apply to every instance of the scheme as well as its relational analogues.<sup>33</sup> Lewis is unsure if there could be a theory which names entities, or quantifies over such entities (in the course of its sentences) while avoiding primitive predication.<sup>34</sup> Thus, since any general analysis will ultimately employ certain primitive notions (or predicates), it will not be considered a general analysis, in the strict sense. Lewis also feels that Armstrong’s theory commits him also to the use of primitive predicates, thus nullifying his charge against him (Lewis).<sup>35</sup> Secondly, should primitive predicates be considered as prior in the order of understanding? This is difficult to ascertain, since the notion of conceptual priority itself, could be very elusive.

Thirdly, what additional constraints should be placed on the primitive predicates? David Lewis, in his “New Work for a theory of Universals [1983, p. 353] had argued that primitive predicates should neither be “unduly mysterious” nor “unduly complicated”, but this in itself is not very clear, and it seems to raise more questions, on what such qualification entail. Alex Oliver has suggested that even if we attempt to offer a conceptual analysis by using two-place predicate, eg. “x exactly resembles y”, and then understand this to mean: “x and y share all their properties”, the issue of defining the resemblance predicate would still remain unresolved, since a resemblance relation presented as names of properties would still be contained in the definiens.<sup>36</sup> Thus, a conceptual analysis of resemblance predicates in terms of “shared properties”, remains a difficult task for the nominalist, particularly a class nominalist like David Lewis, he would be unwilling to countenance any extra entities (especially abstract entities) in his ontology, in order to explain the resemblance relation.

#### **4. Possible Platonic Objections to David Lewis’ Class Nominalism and Possible Responses from Lewis and Lewisians**

**(A) On Predicative Facts:** Plato or a Platonist regarding universals, might ask David Lewis to account for a given predicative fact (e.g the table is green) without appealing to the property of “greenness”, or the truth of sentences of the form “a is F” without appealing to a property of “F-ness”. As a nominalist about properties, David could claim that while there are green tables or green books, there is no such thing as the property of “greenness” over and above the particular green tables and books, to avoid the introduction of abstract, and additional entities into his ontology.<sup>37</sup>

However, I think that the property of “F-ness” for instance, despite its seeming introduction of more entities into the Platonic framework, need not be rejected, given its explanatory value in accounting for how certain things could share a common property, “F-ness”. The point here is that, using universal notions like “F-ness” is probably the best way (inference to the best explanation) of explaining the sharing of common property among things. The alternative to this



would be to regard the relation of “properties-sharing” as primitive, and this would be absurd, for it does not seem to lead us any further.

**(B) On set-theory:** Plato, or a Platonist regarding universals might ask Lewis to explain how his set theory address the branches of mathematics dealing with concepts and properties that are not instantiated in the physical world. Suppose the nominalist about sets claims that there are infinity of sets which are meant to accommodate a variety of set-theoretic issues, the Platonist can respond by saying that physicalistic view are not compatible with the notion of infinity of sets. The point here is that since Lewis does not accept the fact that abstract entities are relevant in explaining the notion of “property-sharing”, and since material entities are finite, it is difficult to see how sets, which are presented in materialistic (or physicalistic terms by Lewis, since he talks of properties as sets of actual and possible parts of classes. The nominalist might argue as well, based on the renunciation of infinity that although classical arithmetic presupposes an infinite realm of numbers, acceptance of such a theory would lead to the postulation of additional entities other than physical ones.<sup>38</sup>

© **On the naturalness of properties:** A Platonist might ask Lewis to explain what accounts for the “naturalness of properties”. To this question, Lewis might answer that naturalness is determined by the complexity or length of definition in terms of perfectly natural properties, as he says in his work, *On the Plurality of Worlds*: “Some few properties are perfectly natural. Others are at least somewhat natural in a derivative way, to the extent that they can be reached by not-too-complicated chains of definability from the perfectly natural properties.<sup>39</sup> To make this clearer, David Lewis adds that “colours” for example, are inferior in naturalness, when compared to perfectly natural properties such as mass or charge; also grue and bleen are considered inferior to colours.<sup>40</sup>

## **5. Possible Objections to Platonism from David Lewis, And Possible Responses from Plato and Platonists**

### **5.1 Argument from Causal Impotency (or inertness) of Universals:**

David Lewis might argue that the transcendent universals of Plato are “causally impotent” or inert, (that is, do not engage in causal action), and are by that fact irrelevant.

To this objection, a Platonist might answer that the theoretic benefits of postulating causally inert entities, outweighs its costs. For example, in mathematics, since it is legitimate to postulate sets to make sense out of mathematics, it is equally legitimate to postulate propositions, properties, possible worlds, transcendent universals, etc., to make sense of various data. Hence, abstract objects are postulated for their non-causal explanatory value or worth.<sup>41</sup> But then, it could be argued that causal relations only hold between events (regions of space-time). This might pose a great challenge to the Platonist about universals, except there is a persuasive way of explaining how “events”, might be understood in an alternative sense that permits the inclusion of transcendent universals.

### **5.2 On our knowledge of Abstract Numbers in Mathematics:**

David Lewis might argue (using an epistemological argument) that mathematical knowledge being abstract is outside the realm of space-time. Now, since humans belong to the realm of space

time, it is unlikely that they have access to what is outside their realm. To claim that they do is false, hence Platonism which makes this claim regarding mathematical objects is equally false. The Platonist might respond by claiming that our immaterial souls acquired the knowledge of abstract objects before we were born and that mathematical learning is really just a process of coming to remember what we knew before we were born.<sup>42</sup> A nominalist about numbers might claim that while there may be five sticks, or five books, or five bottles etc., there is no such thing as the number “5”. However, Godel (a famous mathematician), has argued that we acquire knowledge of abstract objects in the same way that we acquire knowledge of concrete physical objects. Through our sensory faculties we receive information about physical objects, and through the faculty of mathematical intuition we can acquire information about abstract objects.<sup>43</sup>

However, the idea of an immaterial mind receiving information from an abstract object seems just as mysterious and confused as the idea of a physical brain receiving information from an abstract object. Secondly, the Platonist might simply claim that it is possible to acquire mathematical knowledge by normal perceptual means. But this position has been attacked.<sup>44</sup> For example Philip Kitcher in his article, “The Plight of the Platonist”, presents some difficulties that accompany the approach to universals in Platonism. The Platonic thesis he addresses is the claim that “arithmetic is true in virtue of the structural features of the world and in virtue of the properties of abstract objects”<sup>45</sup>

The trouble comes when the Platonist attempts to provide abstract objects embodying the structure that renders Mathematics true. A Platonist may also claim that human beings do not have any direct contact with abstract objects, but then explain how they gain access to abstract objects. For example, it could be explained that our mathematical theories are true, despite our lack of direct contact with mathematical objects because such theories are embedded in our empirical theories, and such empirical theories (including their mathematical parts), have been confirmed by empirical evidence, and we could claim that there are truly abstract mathematical objects. The main issue here is that the Platonist, given his commitment to the reality of abstract objects, will demand that the explanation for the existence of numbers, which are not perceptible, can only be rendered in abstract terms by appeal to certain axioms, which are regarded as basic in some way, and cannot be explained in terms of anything more basic.

## **6. Comparing Plato’s Realism with David Lewis’ Nominalism**

Nominalism claims that "universals" (general concepts representing the common elements belonging to individuals of the same genus or species) are empty concepts that have no reality independent of their existence in the thought of an individual. In contrast to Platonic realism, which maintains that universals have a separate existence apart from the individual object, nominalism insists that reality is found only in the objects themselves.

Whereas nominalism adopts a reductionist method in addressing the problem of universals, Platonism defends an ontological framework in which things such as properties, kinds, relations, propositions, sets and states of affairs are regarded as primitive and irreducible. The attempt of the nominalist is to show that our discourse about abstract entities is resolvable or analyzable in terms of discourse about familiar concrete particulars. Nominalists object to the claim that

“numerically different particulars exemplify one and the same universal” and they see it as incoherent.<sup>46</sup> Their argument is that “since the different particulars that allegedly exemplify a given universal at any point in time, occupy distinct and discontinuous or non-overlapping regions of space at that time, their jointly exemplifying the universal presupposes that numerically one and the same entity is wholly and completely present in non-overlapping regions of space at a single time.”<sup>47</sup> For them, such multiple localizations are impossible. Sometimes, the nominalist objection turns on the claim that it is never possible to give a non-circular account of the identity conditions for things like properties, kinds and relations.<sup>48</sup> Also, nominalists criticize metaphysical realism on the basis of its infinite regress argument, and that in an attempt to explain attribute agreement, or predication by reference, to exemplifications of properties, kinds and relations, the realists commit themselves to a vicious infinite regress. They also claim that if metaphysical realism were correct, it would be impossible to give an account of how concrete beings like ourselves (humans), in concrete existence, can ever have cognitive access to properties, kinds and relations.<sup>49</sup>

## 7. Concluding Reflections

In this part of my work, I want to offer reasons why I have opted for metaphysical realism, rather than class nominalism. In the light of what has been presented so far, my inclination is to identify with the Metaphysical realism of Plato, against the Class Nominalism of David Lewis. I accept Metaphysical Realism for two reasons:

**7.1 Epistemological Reasons:** Plato had maintained that we know the forms intellectually, and cannot learn them from the perception of sensible things, thus the substantive reality around us is only a reflection of the higher truth. That truth, Plato claims, consists in the forms of things. Thus, Platonic epistemology turns on the belief that knowledge is innate and need to be brought to birth through the midwife-like guidance of an interrogator (*elenchus*). Plato’s Socrates makes it very clear in the Apology that “an unexamined life is not worth living” (Apology 38).

I am of the view that since knowledge should be based on something stable, regular and consistent, mere sensible data, are scarcely sufficient to provide a secure basis for our epistemic claims. This is where the form of Plato seem to play an important role. Although Plato believed that reality was one, the whole controversy between Plato and his opponents to turns on the claim that there are two dimensions to the one reality: one being material, and the other spiritual and intelligible, and that this latter dimension is both independent of the material realm as well as the ultimate origin of existence and values. The point here is that, if we are to be able to justify our epistemic claims in a manner that is not superficial, then we need to seek a good basis for it. This seems to be the source of the disputation between rationalists and anti-rationalists on the issue of “a priori” justification in epistemology.<sup>50</sup> Although Plato lived before the age of rationalism, we can observe some element of Platonism in it (in terms of its emphasis on justification that is independent of the sensory modalities). Quine’s “naturalized epistemology” for instance, was completely against the notion of “a priori” justification, for he denied the existence of such a form of justification.<sup>51</sup>

Given the realization that observational claims cannot go beyond the immediate and sensible observations we have to include certain claims transcending direct experience (e.g. claims about the future, unobserved past, etc),<sup>52</sup> without any commitment to “a priori” knowledge, I think there is a good reason why “a priori” justification, and truth should be countenanced, as a secure foundation for knowledge<sup>53</sup>. Plato’s epistemology is made clear in his treatment of the *divided line*, (*Republic* 509d-511e), in which he distinguishes the *sensible world* from the *world of forms*. While the sensible world has things and the images of things, the world of Forms has the mathematical forms and the higher forms. The entire Platonic epistemology seems to turn on the fact that we can only attain certainty when we are able to grasp the higher forms through our understanding.

**7.2 Religious Reasons:** In trying to enculturate the Christian Gospel in Greek and Roman culture, the early Fathers of the Church found the spirituality of Platonism a better medium, than the materialism of the stoic and the epicureans. In Platonism, there is an attempt to raise our consciousness to the realm of the spirits, or to focus on the super- sensuous world (the realm of abstract entities). The Christian religion in particular, (and indeed some other monotheistic religions like Judaism, Islam, etc.).

Some of the early Fathers of the Church (for example, St. Augustine, St. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, etc), also attempted to explain the resemblance between Platonic Philosophy and the Christian belief in the reality of a spiritual world (or realm) called *heaven* (the abode of God and the blessed), where the souls return, after their separation from the body through death.<sup>54</sup> Hence, while the body is destroyed at death, the soul is not. Christian theology is supportive of a “non-spatio-temporal”<sup>55</sup> notion of the heavenly realm, considering it as eternal and immutable, just like the Platonic forms (universals). Plato insists that the soul is both superior to the body and prior to it, not simply as it exists in the being of God, but in every order of existence.<sup>56</sup> In the *Phaedo* 73-76, he uses the notion of the pre-existence of the human soul to argue for its immortality. He says that the soul is able to understand (apprehend) the eternal and unchangeable ideas (forms), and can commune with non-perceptible things or realities (*Phaedo*, 79); that the soul is non-composite (or uncompounded), and so cannot experience dissolution (*Phaedo*, 78); that the soul leads and rules the body, thereby resembling the immortal gods (*Phaedo*, 80).<sup>57</sup>

It is obvious that the intuitions expressed by Plato in the cited dialogues, are consistent with what Christian religion upholds, in its teachings regarding the dignity of the human soul. Plato’s philosophy emphasizes a teleology (final causality), and is therefore eschatological (that is it discusses what happens at the end of all human endeavour).<sup>58</sup> For example, the *Phaedo* 98, Plato maintains that final causes, alongside with their rational and spiritual agencies, are the causes that deserve the attention of the philosopher. Related to the religious element in Plato’s philosophy is the ethical element, as a basis for union with the *one* (Good).<sup>59</sup>

In the *Crito*, 49, Plato’s Socrates insists on the duty of non-retaliation and non-resistance. He also argues that “what is important is not just life, but the good life” (*Crito*, 48). So, in Plato, one can find a wonderful blending of the spiritual and the ethical dimensions of human life, which are considered as congenial to the Christian spirituality. Perhaps, this is why many of the early Fathers

of the Church, especially St. Augustine, decided to cast the message of Christianity in a Platonic mould. Important Christian teachings such as the doctrine of the *trinity*, that of divine illumination and even that of the *Logos*, have largely been dependent on a Platonic analysis coming from the Greek Fathers of the Church (eg. St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil the Great, etc.).

Even in our own time, there are still some traces of Platonism to be found in Catholic thought, (especially in the Franciscan tradition - coming from St. Augustine), unlike the Aristotelian anti-dualism that is evident in the Dominican School represented by St. Thomas Aquinas. The discussion so far provides religious reasons why I consider the Platonic treatment of universals a wonderful effort. Taking transcendent realism seriously (despite some of its alleged weaknesses), has the advantage of explaining how many and different things can share some common features or common natures. I therefore submit that it is possible to have non-self-exemplifying, but really existing universals, (i.e. structural universals) whose ontological value outweighs that of the particulars that instantiate them, contrary to the claims of David Lewis, and that of the entire nominalist camp.

<sup>1</sup> I just wish to say that this is an aspect of Plato's theory that has attracted criticism. Plato gives the impression that the Forms exist in a *substantial way*, as real things, rather than qualities. Understanding the Forms in this way, poses a problem, since our pre-philosophical intuitions do not readily appreciate the Forms in this way, except after careful intellectual reflection. Plato ends up with a robust ontology, but since he lacks a theory of logical types to mitigate (or reduce) such an ontology, there is a seemingly nothing he can do, but recourse to abduction, by using an inference to the best explanation. It might also be argued that Plato's theory of Forms involves both an ontological and epistemological regress, depending on what one wishes to highlight, apart from the fact that Plato did not believe in literal self-predication. He presented the Forms as "thises" (as heceities) rather than "suches" (as qualities).

<sup>2</sup> An inference to the best explanation turns on the fact that given a particular phenomenon in question, we advance a certain explanation which when compared to other possible explanations of the same phenomenon, ranks better or best. It is a theory regarding the evaluation of a given hypothesis, in terms of the logic of justification. An inference to the best explanation argument may take the following form:

(1) It is reasonable to believe the best available decent explanation of a surprising fact.

(2) F is a surprising fact

(3) T is a decent explanation of F

(4) T is better than any other available explanation of F

Therefore, it is reasonable to believe T.

It must be admitted that it takes a lot of effort to know which explanation is to be considered best, in any given situation, for there are some requirements to be fulfilled. Issues like causal plausibility (i.e whether or not the explanation is a causal one as distinguished from magical and mysterious ones); simplicity of the explanation (that is whether or not the theory postulates too many entities that are unnecessary); Consistency and truth of the explanation (i.e whether or not the explanation agrees with our intuitive knowledge about things as they are in the world); the adequacy of the explanation (it has to be shown that the explanation offered is sufficient in a given case. It must be pointed out that although a given situation may force us to choose the best explanation we can afford to have, it might not force us to believe that the best we have is true.

<sup>3</sup> This entry is from "Platonism in Metaphysics" in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/>, pp. 2-3

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> "The theory of participation was Plato's own way of "explaining how the same universal term can refer to so many particular things or events. The word justice, for example, can be applied to hundreds of particular acts because these acts have something in common, namely, their resemblance to, or participation in, the Form "justice." An individual is human to the extent that he or she resembles or participates in the Form "humanness." If "humanness" is defined in terms of being a rational animal, then an individual is human to the extent that he or she is rational. A particular act is courageous or cowardly to the extent that it participates in its Form. An object is beautiful to the extent that it participates in the Idea, or Form, of beauty. Everything in the world of space and time

is what it is by virtue of its resemblance to, or participation in, its universal Form. The ability to define the universal term is evidence that one has grasped the Form to which that universal refers. Plato conceived the Forms as arranged hierarchically; the supreme Form is the Form of the Good, which, like the sun in the myth of the cave, illuminates all the other Ideas. There is a sense in which the Form of the Good represents Plato's movement in the direction of an ultimate principle of explanation. Ultimately, the theory of Forms is intended to explain how one comes to know and also how things have come to be as they are. In philosophical language, Plato's theory of Forms is both an epistemological (theory of knowledge) and an ontological (theory of being) thesis.} available on-line at: <http://www.crystalinks.com/plato.html>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Plato's *Parmenides*, 132A 1-4

<sup>8</sup> Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A contemporary Introduction*, (London and New York: Routledge 2002), p. 21

<sup>9</sup> *Parmenides* 130E-131A in Hamilton and Cairns, (quoted in Michael Loux *Op. Cit.*, p.22)

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 4

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4ff

<sup>12</sup> I recall here Plato's discussion of recollection in the *Meno*, in which Meno's slave is carefully guided through the *Socratic elenchus*, to be able to solve some geometrical problems through knowledge by reminiscence. This argument has been challenged, but it can still be appreciated as an inference to the best explanation of how an untutored slave could ever give any answers to intricate geometrical puzzles. The alternative is to claim that Meno's slave was involved in "logical reasoning" (by carefully relating the observable geometrical figures to certain ideas).

<sup>13</sup> This entry is from "Meaning and the Problem of Universals, A Kant-Friesian Approach", available at: <http://www.friesian.com/universal.htm>, p.1

<sup>14</sup> Plato's *Timaeus*, 51D3-52A4

<sup>15</sup> The "sharing of properties" (precisely the natural properties), refers to the intrinsic similarity which obtains between members of a given set, in terms of their natural properties. Hence, "two properties conceived as sets of actual and possible particulars, are identical iff they have the same actual and possible particulars as instances or are co-extensive (according to some notion of metaphysical necessity). The property of "trilaterality" and "triangularity", for example turn out to be necessarily co-extensive, when identified with the sets of all their actual and possible instances. [Alex Oliver, "The Metaphysics of Properties" *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 105, No. 417 (Jan., 1996), p. 23]

<sup>16</sup> David Lewis, "New Work for a Theory of Universals" in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61, (1983): pp. 342-77, (cited in Rodriguez-Pereyra, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4)

<sup>17</sup> David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.59

<sup>18</sup> Since I intend to raise an objection to David Lewis' theory of sets from a Platonic perspective, I consider it appropriate to discuss that theory here briefly. David Lewis in his *On the Plurality of Worlds*, claims that the need to quantify over properties is undeniable. Hence, we could consider properties as sets of their instances. In speaking about sets, Lewis makes an important point that is worth noting. He says: "I say 'sets' not 'class'. The reason is that I do not want to restrict myself to properties of individuals alone; properties themselves have properties. Properties must therefore be sets so that they may be members of other sets." The Properties constitute a "function from worlds to sets of things, giving for each world the things that have the property relative to that world". So, the property of being a donkey for instance, would refer to the set of all donkeys of other worlds along with the donkeys of our own world. He thinks that it is wrong to claim that if a property were a set, then it would have all its instances or members, essentially. But they may appear to be so, if the other-worldly instances are ignored. Of course, this claim is based on Lewis' "counterpart theory" which claims that the things in the actual world have counterparts in the possible world. He asserts that properties have the same instances simpliciter (simply), even if they do not have the same this-worldly instances [David Lewis *On the Plurality of Worlds*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), pp. 51-53]

<sup>19</sup> Alex Oliver, "The Metaphysics of Properties" p. 43. A set of duplicate tropes would refer to a class of tropes sharing a certain resemblance relation.

<sup>20</sup> David Lewis *On the Plurality of Worlds*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), p. 64).

<sup>21</sup> In the Immanent Realism of Aristotle, (in rebus realism) the particulars exemplify their universals, and the universals are fully present wherever their instances are. Hence, there are no un-exemplified universals.

<sup>22</sup> David Lewis, "New Work for a theory of Universals" in *Properties*, edited by D. H. Mellor and Alex Oliver, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 190-191

<sup>23</sup> David Lewis, *Op. Cit.* p. 190

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 192

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 192

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191

<sup>27</sup> For Lewis, "an adequate nominalism is one which predicates mutual resemblance of things which are apparently of the same type; or it predicates naturalness of some property that they all share, i.e that has them all as members; and it declines to analyse these predications any further." (*ibid.* p 198)

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 198-199

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 199

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 199

<sup>31</sup> Alex Oliver, *The Metaphysics of Properties*, *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 105, No. 417 (Jan. 1996), pp. 50-51

<sup>32</sup> Alex Oliver, *The Metaphysics of Properties*, p. 51

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

- <sup>34</sup> David Lewis, "New Work for a Theory of Universals" in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61, (1983): p. 353 (quoted in Alex Oliver, *The Metaphysics of Properties*, p. 51)
- <sup>35</sup> Alex Oliver, *The Metaphysics of Properties*, p. 51
- <sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 53. The "definiens" here is a reference to the word or words serving to define another word or expression.
- <sup>37</sup> Entry is from *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Platonism in Metaphysics" available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/>, pp. 14-20
- <sup>38</sup> Nelson Goodman and W.V. Quine, "steps towards a constructive Nominalism" in *The Journal of Symbolic Logic* Vol. 12, No. 4, Dec. 1947], p. 107. Here, I am also thinking about the famous principle of parsimony in Ockham, which says that we should not postulate more entities than are necessary, in our ontology. David Lewis being a nominalist, is certainly not oblivious of this principle.
- <sup>39</sup> David Lewis *On the Plurality of Worlds*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), p. 61
- <sup>40</sup> David Lewis *On the Plurality of Worlds*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), p. 61
- <sup>41</sup> Ted Sider, "Sparseness, Immanence and Naturalness", *Nois* 29 (1995): 360-377. Available at: [fas-philosophy.rutgers.edu/~sider/papers/univ\\_nat.pdf](http://fas-philosophy.rutgers.edu/~sider/papers/univ_nat.pdf) p. 23.
- <sup>42</sup> Entry is from *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Platonism in Metaphysics" available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/>, p. 47
- <sup>43</sup> K. Goedel, "What is Cantor's Continuum Problem?" reprinted in Benacerraf and Putnam (1983), 470-85, cited in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Platonism in Metaphysics", Op. Cit.
- <sup>44</sup> *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Platonism in Metaphysics" available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/>, pp. 47-48
- <sup>45</sup> Philip Kitcher, "The Plight of the Platonist", *Nous*, 12 (1978): pp. 119-136
- <sup>46</sup> Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A contemporary Introduction*, (London and New York: Routledge 2002), P.55
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid.* p. 55
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56
- <sup>50</sup> A thorough discussion of the justification for "a priori knowledge" is certainly beyond the scope of my paper. I am simply alluding to it as an issue that has implications for the Platonic theory of universals.
- <sup>51</sup> Laurence Bonjour, "" Priori Knowledge and Justification, recent work on". In Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, London: Routledge. Retrieved April 28, 2005, from <http://www.rep.com/article/P060SECT2>
- <sup>52</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>53</sup> I am aware that a nominalist may wish to argue that our supposed knowledge of the Platonic forms does not give any satisfactory explanation for the possibility of "a priori knowledge", since whatever explanation it gives is at best mysterious. To such an objection, I would like to respond by saying that given the relativism associated with the human sensory modalities, objective truth upon which knowledge is based, cannot be derived, for knowledge can only be premised on something that is stable and consistent, (reason) and not the fleeting things of the senses.
- <sup>54</sup> W. S. Tyler, "Platonism and Christianity," Philip Shaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopaedia or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Vol. 3. (Toronto, New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1894), pp. 1850-1853, available on-line at: <http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/platonism-tyler.html>
- <sup>55</sup> It might be argued that while the Christian notion of heaven seems to fit in very well with the idea of the "non-spatial", it does not fit in well with that of the "non-temporal." I must say that I neither know what might inform this distinction, nor what the distinction itself amounts to. The Christian notion of heaven turns on the understanding that heaven is a state of union with God and the blessed. The notion of a "place" even when used, is simply allegorical, (and is not meant to be understood in a literal sense), since it is a human way of speaking about a transcendent reality. So, I submit that the notion of space and time is excluded from the Christian interpretation of heaven. Even in Patristic and medieval thought, the direct experience of God in heaven is understood intellectually rather than visually. And even when phrases such as "see God" are employed, they are only used metaphorically as a reference to non-sensory "spiritual" awareness of God. The claim that the kingdom of God (heaven) dwells among us, and is in some way present in time and space, is not to be confused with the notion of heaven as a spiritual realm quite different from the physical world. As long as this distinction is made, I think the likelihood of confusion will be highly minimized.
- <sup>56</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>58</sup> *ibid.*
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- 18) Plato's *Republic*, 596a-597d
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