Properties

**Things** cannot be in two places at once. If my cat, Precious, is in my living room, she can’t at exactly the same time also be in YOUR living room!

But, **properties** aren’t like that. If I have something with the property ‘circular’ in my living room, you CAN also have something in yours that is ALSO circular.

I can take a pizza and slice it up and put PART of it in the kitchen, PART of it in the bathroom, and so on, but the entire pizza can never be WHOLLY located in many places at once. But, properties CAN be wholly and completely located in many places at once. This is the problem of ‘the one and the many’. It seems that there is just ONE property of circularity, but that this property is wholly instantiated in MANY different objects.

Circularity is everywhere! As are properties like ‘redness’, ‘heaviness’, and so on, as well as relations such as ‘taller than’, ‘next to’, etc. But, now, consider these two items:

Are they similar in some way? It sure seems so. We can easily recognize that they are both red. Now ask: *Is there something (i.e., some THING) that they have in common?*

If **no**: Then it seems that they could not really be similar.
If **yes**: Then properties like ‘redness’ are THINGS.
Intuitively, (1) **properties are THINGS**. In philosophy, we call them **universals**. For instance, the universal ‘redness’ is just that thing which the tomato and the rose above share in common.

Furthermore, it seems that (2) **properties exist, whether or not they are instantiated**. Imagine that someone went around and destroyed ALL of the red things, or ALL of the circular things in the universe. It seems reasonable to say that, somehow, circularity would still exist. But, where? And in what way?

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato believed that universals existed in a sort of heavenly realm called the realm of the Forms. All actual circles are just imperfect instantiations of the Form, Circularity. But, somewhere out there, in a supernatural realm, there exists the PERFECT CIRCLE. The FORM of circularity. While circularity needs objects to be instantiated in the actual world (for instance, one never finds circularity all by itself, but only circular THINGS—like circular tires, plates, coins, and so on), in the realm of the Forms, circularity exists immaterially, in some “abstract” way. So, really, our entire world is just contains mere shadows of the true realm of being (see his **Allegory of the Cave** for a neat story about this).

So, Plato accepted the existence of “abstract” entities. This might seem weird, but don’t you too? For instance, what are **numbers**? Ask: Is there a prime number greater than 10? “Yes”, you say. But, a-ha! You have just affirmed that such a thing DOES exist! And not merely the inky scratch that looks like ‘11’ or ‘13’ on a piece of paper. No, the numbers are something much more than the symbols we use to represent them (e.g., 11, eleven, xi, and so on). Numbers, therefore, seem to be an abstract things.

Similarly, propositions seem to exist in some abstract way. Compare these sentences, for instance:

(1) The cat is in the tree.
(2) El gato está en el árbol.
(3) Le chat est dans l'arbre.

The visual symbols marked out in (1), (2), and (3) are clearly different. Furthermore, the auditory symbols that we use to refer to them are also different (i.e., we’d VOCALIZE them differently when reading them). Nevertheless, (1), (2), and (3) all represent the same thing. Namely, they express the same **proposition**. But, where is this proposition? It too seems to be an abstract thing.

So too for things like justice, goodness, truth, possibilities, and so on.
Universals are abstract things. Justice is SOMETHING, but it is not a concrete, material something. It is an abstract something. Justice is something that all just deeds, states, actions and so on exhibit (and nothing else exhibits it). They all participate in or instantiate the nature or essence of justice. But, what IS justice? It does not seem to be wholly located in any one of its instances. Rather, it seems to be some abstract, unobservable thing that all of its instances share in common. As such, we call this sort of entity ‘abstract’ (as opposed to ‘concrete’).

Universals are not mind-dependent. Consider the universal that is the relational property ‘taller than’. Mt. Everest is taller than Mt. Fuji. But, many things can instantiate this relation. For, it is also the case that giraffes are taller than squirrels. And so on. But, surely, this would be true regardless of whether or not we were around to recognize it, or think it, or write it down, etc. So, universals exist independently of minds.

Universals exist timelessly. As Russell notes, justice “is not fleeting or changeable ... It is eternally itself, immutable and indestructible.” Similarly, the relation ‘taller than’ does not sometimes exist and sometimes not exist. Nor does its nature change over time. It just IS. As such, we say that these abstract entities are timeless and eternal.

This sounds a lot like Plato’s heavenly ‘Realm of the Forms’.

Problem: But, how do ordinary things like tomatoes and roses instantiate (interact with? participate in? exhibit the essence of?) some eternal, immaterial, unobservable universal entity like redness? In short, how are the concrete and the abstract realms related? Philosophers claim that red tomatoes “instantiate” the universal, redness, but ‘instantiation’ itself seems like a relational property (between the tomato and the universal, redness). But, then, how are the rose and Redness related to the universal, Instantiation? Why, they instantiate it, of course! And so on, to infinity, like this:

The bold words represent universals. The objection is that a theory of universals cannot explain how properties “instantiate” universals, since instantiation is either itself a relational property, or else unintelligible. An infinite regress ensues.
**Nominalism:** Some have rejected the existence of universals. There is no such THING as circularity (or redness, or heaviness, etc.). There are only objects, and some objects resemble each other in certain ways, while others do not. Terms like ‘redness’, ‘circularity’, and so on are just names (mere WORDS) for resemblances. ‘Redness’ is nothing more than the collection of red things. But, such a view still faces the following problem: Consider again the tomato and the rose. *Is there something* (i.e., *some THING*) *that they have in common?*

**If no:** Then it seems that they could not really be similar.
**If yes:** Then properties like ‘redness’ are THINGS.

What ARE these supposed “resemblances”? It is difficult to see how two things could “resemble” one another if they share nothing in common. Furthermore, properties simply cannot be mere bare resemblances. For instance, redness surely is not just “the resemblance between, e.g., tomatoes and roses”. For, often (always?), groups of objects will resemble one another in MORE THAN ONE WAY. Consider these objects:

![Objects](image)

The above objects resemble one another in MORE THAN ONE WAY (e.g., they are all both red AND round). But, if “Redness is just the resemblance between the objects above” we will have no way to distinguish redness from roundness. As such, we need some way to differentiate between these different types of resemblance. Unfortunately, as soon as one says that redness is one particular WAY in which these objects resemble, while roundness is another WAY—this sounds like an appeal to universals again.

Furthermore, according to nominalism, if we destroyed all of the red things, then redness itself would cease to exist. There would be no such thing. Is this plausible?

[Mumford notes that Aristotle (Plato’s student) took a middle ground. He said that redness was just the collection of all red things, **past, present, and future**, such that if no object ever instantiates some property, then there IS NO such thing as that property. So, we don’t get the realm of the Forms, but we also don’t get the conclusion that redness would cease to be a property if we destroyed all of the red things.]
On Redness

Most philosophers believe that not ALL of the properties we attribute to things really exist. There are perhaps a handful of REAL or BASIC properties, and all other properties are reducible to these. To see why, consider this question:

*If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?*

This is a question that a lot of people think philosophers sit around asking. They don’t, but that doesn’t mean it’s not philosophically interesting. For, it seems that in one sense the answer is “No”, while in another sense the answer is “Yes”. Consider:

**No:** If by “makes a sound” we mean “produces the sensation of hearing a sound”.

**Yes:** If by “makes a sound” we mean “produces physical vibrations in the air”.

Sometimes by sound we mean the SENSATION of sound. Other times, we mean the PHYSICAL ASPECT of sound.

But, in fact, all of your senses can be thought of in these two different ways. Let’s focus on sight. Consider color. Consider Redness:

Consider the sensation you’re having right now; that vivid, bright, red-y sensation. Now, the SENSATION of redness seems to only be in YOU (the perceiver). There is nothing like that sensation out there in the world. This has led philosophers to say that properties like ‘redness’ are only secondary properties. They are actually reducible to (i.e., nothing more than) some physical, primary (i.e., basic) properties out there in the world; for instance, redness is reducible or analyzable in terms of more fundamental (scientific, measurable) properties like sizes, shapes, motions, and so on, of atoms.
If that seems weird, consider: Is pain in a fire? Is tickling in a feather?

But, then, if colors are only in US, then OBJECTS OUT THERE are NOT colored.

Roses are red, violets are blue.
Wait, no they’re not. The red’s in YOU!

If the SENSATION of color is surely in us, how do we make sense of the intuition that objects OUT THERE (outside of our heads) are colored? What properties “out there” is redness reducible to? Answering that question is a tricky one.

So, what are some good candidates for reducing redness to such properties?

1. **Redness is a wavelength:** Some suggest that the redness “out there” is nothing more than a wavelength (between about 620 – 750 nanometers).

   But, consider a red tomato. Where is the tomato’s redness in this case? Not in the tomato! Nor in us! The wavelengths of light only exist AROUND the tomato. This doesn’t seem to capture our ordinary intuition that the TOMATO is red (not the air around it).

2. **Redness is a surface structure:** So, perhaps the tomato’s redness is just a certain atomic structure of its surface. Whatever sort of surface reflects red wavelengths is red.

   But, tomatoes only reflect that wavelength in certain conditions. For, if I shine various colored lights on a “red” tomato, it will reflect other wavelengths, like **GREEN** or **BLUE**.

   Furthermore, this seems problematic because whether or not an object is red seems to have nothing at all to do with perceivers. Ask yourself: In a world where every single perceiver saw THIS when they looked at any tomato, would tomatoes still be red?
2. Redness is a disposition to appear red: Maybe the redness of the tomato is just a
disposition—its redness has something to do with what it DOES (to us).

So, perhaps the redness of a tomato is just the tomato’s disposition (read as “property
of being disposed to ...”) to appear red (or, cause a red sensation) in perceivers.

But, then, are tomatoes no longer red when we turn out the lights? A tomato in a dimly
lit room is NOT disposed to appear red to a perceiver (rather, it appears grey).

So, maybe redness is a disposition to appear red **under certain specified conditions**
(for instance, in conditions that are well-lit).

But, then, what of humans who do not have red cones in their eyes? To them, tomatoes
won’t even appear red in well-list conditions.

So, maybe redness is a disposition to appear red **to a particular type of perceiver** AND
**under certain specified conditions**.

But now, our analysis of redness is getting very convoluted, and also seems to be too
human-centric. Whereas suggestion (2) was problematic because it seemed to have
NOTHING to do with how things APPEARED to perceivers, suggestion (2) seems
problematic because it is now redness has EVERYTHING to do with how things appear
to perceivers.

**Conclusion:** As you can see, providing an analysis of what redness IS proves to be more
difficult than one might expect. Nevertheless, we take it for granted every day that
objects are red (or blue, or green, or yellow, and so on).