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Universals and their Implications on Sexuality, Gender, Race, and Species

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Abstract: One of the greatest philosophical and theological debates in history has been over the existence of universals. These multiply instantiable entities are used to explain the structure of reality as well as undergird knowledge. Many, even within Christian circles, reject the existence of such entities and embrace nominalism: that only particulars exist. I contend that nominalism has implications on anthropology that are not consistent with a biblical understanding of the concept. Christians, therefore, should reject nominalism and embrace universals.

It is little surprising to see the issue of universals reemerge recently within religious circles, particularly Christian circles. Universals have been connected to religion ever since Plato first devised the theory.¹ The theory has also enjoyed a long history within Christian philosophical theology: most famously from Augustine who approved of Platonic philosophy.²

¹ Plato states that reality is divided into two realms. There is the eternal realm of the unchanging abstract and the realm of the physical. The physical realm must have a cause since it is a finite thing. Consequently, there is a divine craftsman who is the cause of the universe. This divine craftsman uses the eternal realm as his pattern for form and function in order to create the physical realm. See Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 27d-30b.

² See Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodd (New York: Random House, 2000), 8.5-6, and *Eighty-three Questions, The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 70, trans. David Mosher (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 79-81; see also Augustine's *De Trinitate*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 18, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 9.6.9-11: 278-81, 12.14.22-3: 363-66, 12.15.24: 366-67, and *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 2.13: 67-69, 2.8.: 53-57. For other Christian positions on universals, see Nathan A. Jacobs, "On the Metaphysics of God and Creatures in the Eastern Pro-Nicenes," *Philosophy & Theology* 28(1) (2016): 3-42; Richard Cross, "Gregory of Nyssa on Universals," *Vigiliae Christianae* 56 (2002): 372-410; Anna Zhyrkova, "John Damascene's Notion of Being: Essence vs. Hypostical Existence," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010): 85-105; Anselm, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings, The Monologion*, trans. S. N.

Whether or not abstract entities like universals are compatible with a Christian worldview is still a hotly debated topic. Some Christian philosophers (as will be seen below) are convinced that such entities are not compatible with Christianity and that metaphysical nominalism, with its rejection of universals, is the correct approach. I believe that there are some troubling issues that nominalism raises specifically concerning biblical anthropology. After briefly explaining the metaphysics of universals and the current debate over God and universals, I outline how a rejection of universals affects one's understanding of biblical anthropology regarding sexuality, gender, race (i.e. ethnic heritage), and species. After considering and rejecting a potential nominalist response, I recommend a rejection of nominalism for a Christian worldview.

The Metaphysics of Universals

Universals have long and storied philosophical history. They have been suggested as a way of explaining the existence and sharing of properties among objects. Objects are said to exemplify these abstract entities in various ways so as to give the object structure. The existence of such entities is supported by their ability to explain the predication of one property among two objects, the empirical resemblance of properties between objects, and abstract reference to certain properties that appear necessary but might not be physical-material in nature. Thus, universals are a philosophically powerful tool metaphysically and epistemologically. They help explain the way that reality is structured as well as our perception and knowledge of it.³

Universals have a long history in Christian theology. While not the founder of the view, Augustine is famous for equating universals with divine ideas, and the Scholastics followed suit.⁴ Modern philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, Greg Welty, and Stephen Parrish, have continued to defend this

Deane (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1968), IX-X, XII-XIV, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 1a.15.1-2: 62-69; 1a.16.1: 76-77; 1a.16.2: 80-81; 1a.16.5: 88-89; 1a.16.7: 92-93; 1a.16.8: 96-97, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.60-62: 204-08; Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 1.2: 11; 1.4: 17-18; 1.7: 35-36; 1.8: 38-39; 3.1: 138, 140, 3.2: 148, and Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, trans. C. E. Holt (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940), 5.1-10: 131-43. For a history on the theory of the divine ideas in Catholic thought, see Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, book 1, vol.2 (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985), 59-60, 136-55.

³ J. P. Moreland, *Universals* (Chesham, UK: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2001), 1, 4-6.

⁴ See footnote 2. See also William Lane Craig, *God Over All* (New York: Oxford, 2016), 21-23.

tradition.⁵ A modern sister theory to the divine ideas is Theistic Activism, which argues that universals are necessary creations of God that exist separate from the divine being. God, however, is an Aristotelian substance whose properties are *a se* and not dependent on these universals for their existence. Thus, Theistic Activism can do all that the theory of divine ideas can do.⁶

While universals are philosophical appealing in various ways, many find the notion of universals to be unappealing particularly because of the ontological commitments they engender and lean towards nominalism: the rejection of universals. As Michael Loux explains, the central motivation behind nominalism is theoretical simplicity. According to this notion, if given two explanations, the explanation with the least amount of theoretical entities is to be preferred. Nominalist believe that they can give an account of attribute agreement, subject-predicate discourse, and abstract reference without abstract entities like universals making for a simpler theory.⁷ This claim does not mean that there are no other reasons nominalist point to in order to support their position, but simplicity seems to be the driving force behind their position. As Loux points out, some nominalists argue that the notion of multiple exemplification by universals leads to incoherence. One ends up saying that numerically one abstract entity occupies non-overlapping regions of space. In other word, it occupies two places at once, which is incoherent.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "How to be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1) 1982: 68-70, and "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist* 75 (3) (1992): 291-320; Greg Welty, "Truth as Divine Ideas: A Theistic Theory of the Property 'Truth'," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 47(1) (2004): 55-69; and Greg Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism," in *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul Gould (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 81-96; Stephen Parrish, "Defending Theistic Conceptualism," *Philosophia Christi* 20(1) (2018): 101-118.

⁶ See Paul Gould and Richard Davis. See Paul Gould, "The Problem of God and Abstract Objects," *Philosophia Christi* 13(2) (2011): 255-274, "Theistic Activism: A New Problem and a New Solution," *Philosophia Christi* 13(1) (2011): 127-39, "Can God Create Abstract Objects? A Reply to Van Inwagen," *Sophia* 53(1) (2014): 99-112, and "Theistic Activism and the Doctrine of Creation," *Philosophia Christi* 16(2) (2014): 283-96; Richard Davis, "God and the Platonic Horde: a Defense of Limited Conceptualism," *Philosophia Christi* 13(2) (2011): 289-303; Richard Davis, *The Metaphysics of Theism and Modality*. NY: Peter Land, 2001; Paul Gould and Richard Davis, "Modified Theistic Activism." In *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul Gould, p. 51-64. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014; Paul Gould and Richard Davis, "Where the Bootstrapping Problem Really Lies: A Neo-Aristotelian Reply to Panchuk," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57(4) (2017): 415-28.

⁷ Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 3rd ed. (NY: Routledge, 2006), 46.

Other nominalists contend that one cannot determine identity conditions between universals so as to distinguish them from one another.

Universals are supposed to be different, but one cannot state how they are different without appealing to more abstract entities which circuitously implies what is trying to be demonstrated. Further, some nominalists claim that an appeal to abstract entities like universals is viciously regressive in that one must always explain property exemplification with further instances of property exemplification, and universals endanger epistemology by introducing entities to which one supposedly has no cognitive access because they are not physical-material entities. Best to not appeal to such entities. Since there are cogent replies to these criticisms, theoretical simplicity seems to be the biggest motivator for the nominalist.⁸

This simplicity leads nominalists to conclude that reality consists only of particulars. There are no universals to be exemplified in multiple places, and there are no shared properties across particulars. All particulars are completely unique from each other freeing one from the incoherence of shared identity. Particulars are merely similar to each other. This contention has given rise to a number of nominalist theories, but all of these theories agree that the only entities that exist are particulars, typically concrete and mental. Thus, the nominalist contends that he can explain the world with an ontologically simpler theory, which is to be preferred.

The Theological Challenge to Universals

Some Christian philosophers argue that there is another major reason besides ontological parsimony to reject abstract entities like universals, which is that such entities are incompatible with the existence of God. William Lane Craig has recently argued that abstract entities like universals are dangerous and destructive of theism.⁹ He argues that a core tenet of theism is that only God is *a se* and all else is *ab alio* (dependent on him for existence). If abstract entities like universals exist, then this claim is false. God would depend on universals to provide the structure for his being as well as the content of his knowledge making him dependent on entities that exist outside his being and outside of his control.¹⁰ The result is that God is not completely sovereign and, therefore, cannot be counted as truly divine.

⁸ Ibid., 47-51.

⁹ For his extensive treatment of the subject, see Craig's *God Over All*.

¹⁰ William Lane Craig, "A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects," *Philosophia Christi* 13:2 (2011): 305-06, and "Anti-Platonism," in *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul Gould (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 113.

As Craig argues, God is the sole ultimate reality. Everything that exists does so because of his creative power. Nothing besides God exists apart from that power. Philosophers and theologians who support universals must restrict their understanding of reality created by God so that universals fall outside of God's creative domain. The correct question is did the biblical writers intend for the domain of God's creation to be restricted or unrestricted. Craig says no. Judaism of the time of the biblical writers was unique from other religions in that it posited one creator God of all things who is sovereign over all things. There is a distinct line between God and everything else. The answer to the question is found in the doctrine of God rather than a consideration of what objects exist.¹¹ Craig claims that the same viewpoint is found in the Nicene Creed. The Church Fathers all believed that God alone is uncreated, that nothing is coeternal with God, and that eternity implies deity.

There is nothing beyond God. The Church Fathers knew of Greek philosophy and its use of abstract entities like universals, and they identified anything without creation or origin with God; otherwise, they knew that the theological doctrines of the aseity of God and creation *ex nihilo* would be compromised.¹² Thus, Craig argues that nominalism about abstract entities including universals is a better metaphysical theory not just because it is simpler but because it is consistent with Christian doctrine. Abstract entities like universals, he claims, are not.

Nominalism and Anthropology

Much has already been debated over theology and abstract entities like universals, so I shall not rehearse it here.¹³ What I am more interested in are the implications nominalism has on anthropology particularly as it involves sexuality, gender, race (i.e. ethnic heritage), and species and how that affects Christian theology. In the current culture, positions such as homosexuality, trans-genderism, trans-racism, and trans-speciesism have risen to the forefront of political, social, and moral awareness. These positions all reject the

¹¹ Craig, "God and Abstract Objects," *Philosophia Christi* 17:2 (2015): 269-70.

¹² Craig, "God and Abstract Objects," 271-73, and "Anti-Platonism," 113-15.

¹³ For more, see Paul Gould, ed. *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Entities*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, "Symposium on God and Abstract Entities," in *Philosophia Christi* 13(2) (2011): 255-320, and "Three Views on Creation, Causality, and Abstracta," in *Philosophia Christi* 17(2) (2015): 267-314. See also R. Scott Smith, "Craig, Anti-Platonism, and Objective Morality." *Philosophia Christi* 19(2) (2017): 331-43, "William Lane Craig's Nominalism, Essences, and Implications for Our Knowledge of Reality." *Philosophia Christi* 15(2) (2013): 365-82, and "Craig's Nominalism and the High Cost of Preserving Divine Aseity." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9(1) (2017): 87-107.

traditional and biological understandings of sex, gender, race, and species. Homosexuality denies that sex is only between men and women. One's sexuality could be different from biological implications with men preferring men and women preferring women as sexual partners. Trans-genderism denies that one's gender corresponds with one's biological genetics. A person can believe that they are the opposite gender from what their genetics indicate, that they are some completely new gender, or no gender at all. Trans-racism rejects that a person belongs to a certain racial or ethnic group based on genetics. A person is whatever race they experience themselves to be. Lastly, trans-speciesism argues that one's status as a certain kind of organism is not bound by genetics. Again, a person is whatever species he experiences himself to be.

These positions appear to be an outgrowth of existentialism. While existentialism does not deny basic scientific concepts (like matter, causation, function, organism, and development), it does claim that human beings are not fully understood by these terms or even by moral ones. A further set of categories governed by the norm *authenticity* is needed. Existentialism protest the strict application of reason and science to understanding humanity hence a denial of a shared human nature. The slogan "existence precedes essence" provides the distinctive idea of existentialism: that no true account of what it means to be human can be given, since that meaning is decided in and through existing itself. Existence is something that is made by the individual and is not fixed by the individual's type whether natural or cultural. This process can lead a person to feel alienated from himself through shame or his culture through rejection and ultimately to search for an authentic existence where meaning is created.¹⁴ As a result, homosexuals, trans-genders, trans-racists, and trans-speciesists all assert that what it means to be a human being or even a certain kind of organism is fluid and not reducible to any logical, scientific, or even religious definition as such definitions deny an authentic life. How one exists determines what they are.

Orthodox Christianity rejects a fluid conception of human nature. This rejection is based in the doctrine of creation as well as the doctrine of the *imago dei*. God not only created human beings but created them in a specific way: as male and female and in the "image" of God.¹⁵ Consequently, they function in specific ways as expressed in the command to "be fruitful and multiply" in Gen

¹⁴ Steven Crowell, "Existentialism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/existentialism/>, accessed August 28, 2018.

¹⁵ For more on the doctrine of the *imago dei*, see David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: SCM Press, 1952), and Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986).

1:28. God even separated humanity into its various ethnic tribes and nations as expressed in Deut. 32:8 and Acts 17:26. Human beings, therefore, have a specific sexuality, gender, race, and species based on the properties they biologically possess as given them by God. Notice also that these properties are shared amongst humanity. Sexuality, gender, race, and species are properties not limited to just one individual.

The issue that should now become clear is that this understanding of humanity is not compatible with a nominalist metaphysic. As noted, nominalism denies that properties can be shared amongst particulars. Only individual and unique particulars exist; therefore, it is impossible for one and the same property to be shared by two or more particulars. If I have the property of *being masculine*, then no other object can possess that exact same property. Others may have something similar, but it is not the same. If I have the property of *being human*, then only I have that property. No one else shares it. If I have the property of *being made in the divine image*, then only I am made in the divine image.¹⁶ In fact, properties such as masculinity, humanity, and the *imago dei* might be just names (i.e. *nomen*) that are applied to particulars. These names do not describe or represent anything in reality because such particulars do not exist. If they did, then there would be shared properties, which nominalism rejects. As a result, one cannot be designated as a certain sexuality, gender, race, or species. People are whatever they name themselves based on their lived experiences (i.e. their existence).

This conclusion is contrary to an orthodox understanding of Christian anthropology. One's sexuality, gender, race, and species are not a matter of choice. They are established by God via the structure of creation. The Christian nominalist, however, might respond to this issue by appealing to the notion of sets. Concrete particulars are members of certain sets. For example, I belong to the human set and the male set. Subsequently, I cannot be part of the dog set or the female set. I also share a relationship with the other members of these sets not because I share a property or group of properties with them but simply because of our mutual membership in the set. Lastly, these sets reside as brute concepts within the eternal, omniscient mind of God as his means of categorizing and classifying particulars.¹⁷ Such an explanation

¹⁶ For more on the connection between the *imago dei* and universals, see Graham Floyd, "Imago Dei: Why Christians Should Believe in Abstract Entities," Evangelical Philosophical Society: <http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/Graham%20Floyd-imago%20dei%20note%20final.pdf>; accessed August 30, 2018.

¹⁷ Brian Leftow argues for something similar to this position. See his "God and the Problem of Universals," in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, ed. Dean Zimmerman, vol. 2 (New York: University of Oxford Press, 2006) 325-356.

would allow particulars to be related to each other without the need of shared properties. It could also render the homosexual, transgender, transracial, and trans-species sets null if no particulars can be categorized in these manners since particulars cannot change the sets to which they belong. As a result, human nature would not be fluid, and it would not be due to shared properties amongst particulars

This reply, however, is inadequate. First, the categorizing of particulars into various sets appears arbitrary and *ad hoc*. Why do I belong to the human and male sets? I just do. The nominalist's response provides no compelling explanation as to why certain particulars belong to certain sets and are classified as they are making the response seem contrived so as to avoid an unpleasant problem. Shared properties, however, do provide a compelling explanation for set membership and classification. I belong to the human and male sets because I possess the properties of *being human* and *being male* as do the other members of these sets. Thus, universals are a far more compelling explanation as to why certain concrete particulars are connected to each other.

Second, the nominalist's response raises a further problem with anthropology as well as a problem with Christian orthodoxy. While I belong to the human and male set, it is still true that I and the other members of this set are not human or male in reality. We do not possess any property or essence that makes us these things; otherwise, we would need universals to explain our shared ontological natures. We are merely members of a set. Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza, however, recognizes an issue this nominalist worldview would raise. Spinoza notes that substances (i.e. particulars) and attributes (i.e. properties) are unique having nothing in common with each other (i.e. nominalism); therefore, all substances must be in themselves and conceived in themselves.¹⁸ As a result, one substance cannot be the cause or source of other substances; therefore, every substance must be infinite (i.e. eternal) in existence.¹⁹

For example, I, my wife, and my child are all unique substances/particulars who do not share a common nature or common attributes. While it may seem that my wife and I are the causal source of our child and that our child shares many attributes with both of us, this claim must be false. My child bears no connection to me or his mother other than by

¹⁸ Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. W. H. White (London: Wordsworth, 2001), 1. prop. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1. prop. 4-8, 10. Spinoza's reasons for this conclusion follow from the fact that substance cannot be divided. If it could be, then the new substance would have the same nature as the one from which it came. Further, any divided substance would cease to exist once divided since it has lost something of itself. See Spinoza, 1. prop. 12-15.

sharing membership in various sets. In fact, my wife and I should not even be able to produce a child since we do not share a common nature and common attributes by which to interact and cause his existence. Such a conclusion is absurd because it seems that substances bring other substances into existence as well as go out of existence all the time. The only explanation for this phenomena Spinoza claims is that a single substance must have multiple or even infinite attributes. All substances and attributes need to be subsumed into one necessary and primary substance possessing all attributes called “God.”²⁰ Hence, pantheism is born as all things are identified with “God,” and all things are merely “modes” of the one substance rather than separate substances. In other words, I, my wife, and my son are identical explaining causation and attribute possession. This implication would also mean that all things share all attributes since everything including attributes are identical with each other. As a result, organisms, including human beings, are homosexual, transgendered, transracial, and trans-species since they would possess these attributes as part of the one substance of reality that possesses all attributes.

It should be quite evident that pantheism is incompatible with Christian orthodoxy and anthropology. As noted above, Christian anthropology does not support the homosexual, transgender, transracial, and trans-species position. Further, God is a separate and distinct entity from the rest of creation, and the various entities within creation are separate and distinct from each other. Only God is infinite (i.e. eternal) and uncaused in his existence. All other particulars are finite and caused to exist. Unless God is the direct cause of all existing entities, Christian philosophical theology requires entities other than God that can cause the existence of other entities and to keep properties distinct, and it seems implausible that God is the direct cause of all existing entities.²¹ Unless finite entities are like God and have the power of creation *ex*

²⁰ Ibid., 1. prop. 10-11.

²¹ The position that God is the direct cause of all things including events is called occasionalism. God is the sole source of efficient causation. It is argued that this position not only goes against our common perception of reality but also directly involves God in evil making it unorthodox. See Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore, Pakistan: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), 185-86; Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, trans. Morris Ginsberg (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1923), 130, 189-90, and *The Search After Truth and Elucidations of the Search After Truth*, trans. Thomas Lennon and Paul Olscamp (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 222-24, 446-50; Katherine Rogers. See her “What’s Wrong with Occasionalism,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75(3) (2001): 345-69; Oliver Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin*. Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2005, and *Jonathan Edwards among the Theologians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015) 170-71, 177-79.

*nihil*o, there must be shared natures and attributes between these entities so that the causal process may take place and that Christian anthropology may be maintained. Christian theology indicates that only God has the power of creation *ex nihil*o; therefore, universals are required to explain the causal process and Christian anthropology.

As a result, the nominalist response to the anthropological problem raised above is inadequate. God created humanity in his image possessing specific properties demarcating humanity from all other species as well as creating properties demarcating individuals within humanity from one another. Men are men, and women are women. Jews are Jews, Africans are Africans, and Chinese are Chinese. Lastly, he created properties that demarcate how humanity is to function (reproduce and subdue the earth) in which all people are commanded to participate. These things seem impossible without shared properties amongst human beings; therefore, universals are necessary to a proper understanding of biblical anthropology. In spite of the concerns, nominalism should not be part of a Christian worldview.

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