**THE RE-APPLICABILITY OF GENERAL TERMS**

ABSTRACT- In this paper my aim is to concentrate on the concepts like predicate, properties and classes; with an aim to understand the reason behind the re-applicability of general terms. It must also be noted that here general terms are supposed to be found in the predicate place of a proposition as properties and how they are ascribed to objects which may be mentioned in the subject place. This paper harps on the issue of; what acts as a deciding factor behind such act of classification. A clear effort has been made as to the reason behind our grouping of objects and what we actually search for while choosing an object under a class. I have tried to make my point on the issue that at most we can call our act of classification as natural instead of calling a class as natural. For this I have particularly chosen an article of Anthony Quinton namely, ‘Properties and Classes’ (1958 vol-58, Issue 1, 1st June *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*).

Key words-

1. Properties- Properties are adjectives or qualities ascribed to an object. Predicates of a proposition refer to properties.
2. General terms- This indicates classes under which objects are classified as possessing a common property.
3. Act of classification- This is an act by way of which we consciously group objects on the basis of their being alike in some one respect or in more than one respect as in case of family resemblance.
4. Re-applicability of general terms- This is an act which is actually based on the act of classification. The same general term is applied for many a times to indicate a common usage.
5. Natural class- A class with objects having similar properties.

***I. General terms and Properties***

Predicates in a proposition refer to properties assigned and ascribed to the objects of this world. It is found that one predicate may be ascribed to an indefinite number of objects of this world. Predicates thus I suppose never gets exhausted as far as their application or their function as having an abstract reference is concerned. Whichever objects they are assigned to and for how many a time, whether the proposition in that case has an objective reference or not; predicates blindly performs the function of adjectifying the object. So predicates actually refer to properties of objects and the truth functional value of a proposition is no bar for a predicate to refer to properties. Quinton has pointed out many observations on predicates, properties and classes in his paper ‘Properties and Classes’. One prime question that was addressed was on the re-applicability of general terms. Based on the re-applicability or rather the reason behind such re-applicability Quinton is of the opinion that there may be natural and arbitrary classes. Now it is good to notice that re-applicability actually is related with abstract reference of the general terms which are considered as predicates and hence refer to properties. So first thing that must be considered is, the concept of abstract reference is actually a concept related to properties. Again the eligibility of objects to be grouped under a specific general term or a class thereafter depends upon the objects projecting similar properties so that it be at all ascribed the general term or the predicate. Quinton rightly points out that, (*P-38,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society)* ‘What creates the problem is simply re-applicability; the fact that predicative terms can apply to an indefinitely large number of individual things’. This can be exemplified with the help of an example. We can take the example of the color white which is predicated to innumerable objects. All objects are classified as white if they possess the property of being white in color. Now it is obvious that there are several objects or locus where we can find white as a property. It can be a white chalk, a white paper, a white pen or even a dirty piece of white cloth. It is easy for us to identify the chalk, the paper, the pen as white. In case of the dirty piece of white cloth we might hesitate and we ultimately call it a dirty piece of cloth which may be white at some point of time but which has turned to be dirty now. The ‘classificatory activity’ as Quinton points out is a part of the ‘psychological theses’ in case of re-applicability of general terms (*P-45,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society)* helps us in a few cases like a white chalk etc. In a stringent and border- line cases like that of a dirty piece of white cloth, we fail to decide whether only calling an object as projecting the property ‘being a dirty white’ or re-applying the general term white as in the other cases would be apt or not. The question is, what is the reason behind the re-application of a general term or a predicate like white without any problem in the classificatory activity in some cases while what is the reason in some case where we fail to take decision. Is it decision making, when we apply general terms as predicates to objects, or is it our habit of classifying things under classes and giving a name to the classes with the help of general terms to make our language more workable or is it the same problem of universals which perplex us as usual on the issue whether the properties existed prior to the classifying mind and its classificatory activity. Quinton has pointed out the cases of the similarity theorist and the resemblance theorist on the issue of re-applicability of general terms. It has been rightly brought under the discussion of re-applicability of general terms since similarity theorist replace the possessing of common properties for objects so that general terms may be re-applied several terms which in a way help in classification. The similarity theorist, as has been pointed out by Quinton only replaces common properties with points of similarity or for that case degree of similarity. The Resemblance theorist on the other hand poses a theory which philosophers like Hampshire (this view was supported by Quinton as well) calls ‘vacuous’. Quinton puts Hampshire’s reason thus; (*P-43,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society)* ‘His reason for saying this is that to call two things similar without implying any respect of resemblance is simply vacuous, since with sufficient ingenuity we can always find some respect or other in which they are alike’

***II. A Few Relevant questions***

Now as far as my observation goes; it is true that both similarity theorist and the resemblance theorist admit of degrees of similarity and degrees of resemblance. It is also true that we cannot disown a few questions regarding the issue of re-applicability of general terms. They may be enumerated as follows:-

1. What do we actually observe or find or seek for in an object when we classify things or objects?
2. Is this observation or finding natural or is there a purpose and we willingly do so?
3. Is it not a conscious decision of us that we at several times in course of our classificatory activity make compromises on the issue; that to what extent (both in degree or in number) must the objects classified be similar or must they resemble?
4. Is it not the case that there is actually no measuring criterion or standard which a set of objects classified must hit so that they rightfully acquire the name as a member of a class or we rightfully can assign and ascribe them the class character and consider them as being a member of a class?

The answer to all these questions may be that our classificatory activity does have a purpose and it is to a great extent our conscious decision that governs our classificatory activity. I am comfortable with the solution that philosophers like Plato suggests regarding the common properties being existent independent of a thinking mind but as far as the classification or the act of classification of objects as per their common properties are concerned which again explains the re-applicability of general terms, I think it is we who make the general words quipped so that they can be re-applied or they be applicable repeatedly. It is my request at this point that lets not the point on abstract reference perplex us anymore because it is a fact even the act of abstraction is guided by a purpose. So it might be claimed that we try to bring the general word, its reference to a property exemplified by way of a predicate and the gathering or classifying of objects under such predicates in one line. This very complex yet very utilitarian mode of execution of an act stands behind when we actually prepare ourselves to classify objects. It might seem to be quite complex and cumbersome or even artificial but then I thought of it after I went through Quinton’s explanation on ‘family resemblance’ and ‘negative properties’ (*P-47-49,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society).* Quintonputs forward the case of family resemblance propagated by Wittgenstein and negative properties by Ayer and Ramsey but does not agree as far as it might seem that either family resemblance or negative properties can provide a better explanation on issues of similarity or the classificatory act of choosing which general word would be more apt to which set of objects or things. Quinton points out at the implication of the expression ‘family resemblance’ which characterizes the similarities that are found amongst games according to Wittgenstein. Quinton points out, (*P-48,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society)* ‘He is recognizing here the important fact that is, as we have seen, at least a good excuse for the similarity theory, that the collections of things to which general terms apply are not all constituted in the same way and, in particular they do not all hang together in as simple and obvious a fashion as pins and roses do’. The answer that Quinton provides at the end of the article; ‘Properties and Classes’ (1958 vol-58, Issue 1, 1st June *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*) points precisely at our act of learning to recognize some classes of objects more easily than others. It goes something like this, (*P-58,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society)* ‘To say that pins have a common property games have only a family resemblance is to say that the class of pins is more natural than the class of games, that we can learn to recognize pins more surely and more rapidly than we learn to recognize games’.

***III. My Answer***

It is now that I am more comfortable in giving the answer to the first question that I have raised (in the previous section), namely, what do we actually observe or find or seek for in an object when we classify things or objects?

It is clear to us all that; whether it is the recognition of pins or that of games we seek for similarity. In other words both in case of the application of a general term like pins or that of games we try to recognize similarity. The difference is that in some cases we recognize the similarity faster and more easily as in case of pins while in other cases we can’t as in case of games. The reason put forward may be that in some cases the similarity is a single property which reigns supreme while in other cases as that of games it is an entangled similarity and we find it difficult which one of the several twined similarities should have the rightful claim. Amongst all such explanations I think what we run after is a naturally occurring class which even Quinton calls a natural class and other classes as arbitrary class. The reason why I call it a ‘naturally occurring class’ is; though it is the case that the properties which lay beyond the thinking mind may well be considered as natural but the classes formed or the act which defines classification of objects into classes cannot claim to give us natural classes. At most we can call the classificatory act as natural, since for all cases as it is true that we are always in search of similarity, it is also true that we base this similarity on the prime defining function of the object concerned which needs to be classified by the use of a general term. It will be easy to understand if we use examples. If I take the example used by Quinton, namely that of pins, it becomes clear that it is easy to recognize the predicate which is the meaning of the general term ‘pin’ since here the defining function is a clear, many a times used to classify similar things and without which an object would not be the same object any more. This defining function of a pin may be the function of, ‘holding things in one position’ be it on a wall or on a soft board etc. The material or the place on which it is used (wall or soft board) is quite a contingent factor while the one prime function of ‘holding things in one position’ gains strength. This serves the purpose of easy learning as well as easy application and re-application of the same general term namely ‘pin’. Another important point which needs to be mentioned here is that this defining function is not an alternative to the common point of similarity as projected by the similarity theorist since our classificatory act, our conscious decision of grouping things and our ability to re-apply a general term all are repetitive actions which help in learning language[[1]](#footnote-2), so perhaps we owe more to the defining function than to the common property of the similarity theorist. Now the same search for similarity does not prove this much easy in case of games. The reason is the confused a mixed state of similarity which actually makes us opportunist in the sense that we choose the point of similarity as per our choice or else try to accommodate all the twined and overlapping similarities and hence the application of the general term is better supposed to be due to resemblance rather than as due to similarity. It is also noticeable a fact that resemblance is actually similarity with degrees. So the question of approximation may persist. The point is that we nevertheless use the general term ‘games’ with quite a bit of brevity. So isn’t it not the case that the classificatory act also maintains a degree of aptness, interest of the user etc. It can also be mentioned that all words do not initiate the same number of manifestations or exemplifications or usage. The general term games have more manifestations than the general term pins. In other words we have more options to think and apply the general term games than we do have for pins[[2]](#footnote-3). So since the general term games makes us think more, we perhaps become more conscious in choosing the point of similarity amongst its various manifestations and wrongly try to find any one point of resemblance. Instead we in such cases must admit and consider of the variations in usage as per the function of such words as games. It might very well be the case that we might need to change our way to achieve the answer to our search for similarity. I hope we must do this in case of application and re-application of the general term games.

In case of negative properties Quinton points out the explanation of Ayer as, (*P-48,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society)* ‘Ayer has asked how we decide which of a pair of complementary predicates-“blue” and “not-blue”, say, which each apply to all and only those things to which the other does not apply- is the negative one’. Quinton also points out the case as has been pointed by Ramsey, where if we reverse the order of predicates so that we can get the complementary class; for example ‘blue’ and ‘eulb’ then too we can at most say that not being blue; is a property which is no less natural than the property of being blue. The property of being blue in color or having blue as a property, an object may be a true instance of the universal blue which it exemplifies. Ramsey is of the opinion that the property of not being blue or the property of eulbness is possessed by all things that are not blue. Quinton puts a possible explanation which is hard for him to accept. Quinton’s point is, (*P-49,* 1957 vol58, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society)* ‘Blue things, then, have more in common or are more alike than eulb things but how are we to account for this difference in community or likeness?’

The point here is, each of the universals which falls under the complementary class of blue, that is to say the class or classes of things which are not blue exemplify a universal. Each of the universal has instances or if I go by the temperament of my present paper; then each of the general terms, like red, green or for that matter scarlet refers to a property and the classificatory activity is the reason of the re-application of each of these general terms. Now this should be clear that each of the universal presupposes it’s complementary along with its instances. If we talk of the class of all red things, then we are obviously not talking of the class of all green things at the same time or we in fact mutually exclude the talk of all classes other than the class of red things when we talk of the class of red things. Again being true to the spirit of my paper I must point out that we actually seek for deciding to re-apply the general term ‘red’ or ‘blue’ by way of an act of classification which may be termed as natural every time we do so.

**REFERENCES**

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1. A prominent way of learning a language is by imitation. Imitation may include actions and gestures. But the repetitive use of language is for the most cases easy accessibility. This accessibility is again for many a times a looking inside, since it is perhaps true that there is a whole book of meaning within which actually helps us. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A general term having more manifestations and making us think more simply indicates that class framed by its repetitive usage has a wide range. The reason may be even the metaphorical use of such a word has quite extensive. The mind needs to decide every time prior to its application and re-application whether the use be direct or metaphorical. Hence it makes us think more. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)