Universals Are Not Immanent and Constructors

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Abstract

A modern and influential Aristotelian conception of universals combines two ideas: that a universal is immanent in its instantiations, and that its instantiations are partly constructed by this universal. I argue that these two ideas are inconsistent on weaker assumptions than previously recognized.

There is an ancient dispute over universals: Platonists take a universal's instantiation to be irrelevant to its existence, whereas Aristotelians do not. A modern and influential version of Aristotelianism combines two ideas: that a universal is immanent in its instantiations, and that its instantiations are partly constructed by this universal (Armstrong [1989,1997]). It is not my aim to consider these ideas individually. My focus is on what follows from their

combination. Their combination is fraught, as some have recognized (including, among others: Alvarado [2020], Costa [2021], Raven [2022a], and Costa and Giordani [2024]). I will argue that the combination is inconsistent on even weaker assumptions than previously recognized.

What is immanence and what is construction? Two first-pass answers immediately come to mind. A universal is *immanent* if its existence depends on its being instantiated. A universal is a *constructor* if its instantiation by a particular depends on its existence.

These first-pass characterizations of immanence and construction raise an initial problem. Immanence implies that a universal's existence depends on its being instantiated, whereas construction implies that its being instantiated depends on its existence. This looks like a cycle of dependence. And yet it is often assumed that dependence excludes such cycles.

There are different strategies for defusing the problem. One is to argue that dependence allows for cycles. A second is to argue that there is no cycle because the notion of dependence in immanence is not the notion in construction. It is not my aim to survey these strategies. My focus will be on one version of the second.

There are different notions of dependence. I will not assume that the notion for immanence is the same as the notion for construction. But even if they are not the same, they may share a consequence. My focus will be on what is often regarded as such a shared consequence (see especially Costa [2021], Raven [2022a], and Costa and Giordani [2024]). Others have already defended this consequence. So, I will focus only on what follows from it.

The shared consequence concerns the notion of *ground.* If the existence of an item depends on something being thus-and-so, then its being thus-and-so *grounds* the item's existence. And if something's being thus-and-so depends on the existence of an item, then its being thus-and-so *is grounded* in the item's existence. In at least these ways, dependence implies ground. Maybe dependence implies ground in other ways too. Or, conversely (and less plausibly), maybe ground implies dependence. Others have explored questions like these about how dependence and ground relate (Rydhén [2021]; Schnieder [2020]). But our present purposes do not require answering them.

The notion of ground I have in mind is familiar in the literature (see the papers in Raven [2022b]). It is, in particular, the notion of

partial ground. Using '≺' for partial ground, 'A ≺ C' says that A helps ground C. I make two orthodox assumptions about partial ground.

First, I assume that partial ground is *factive*: if A ≺ C, then A and C. In assuming factivity, I do not exclude a nonfactive notion of partial ground. But if A factively grounds C, A nonfactively grounds C (Fine [2012: 49]). So, any cycle of factive ground will entail a corresponding cycle of nonfactive ground. This means that, with some complicating adjustments, the discussion could be reframed in terms of nonfactive ground. But I will focus on the simpler framing in terms of the more familiar factive notion.

Second, I assume that partial ground is *asymmetric*:

Asymmetry. If A ≺ C, then C ⊀ A.

Some controversies over **Asymmetry** have been discussed in the literature. But they are, I believe, irrelevant in the present context.

A natural (but not the only) formulation of immanence is:[1]

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[1] Costa and Giordani [2024: 11] briefly discuss **Immanence** (they call it 'Immanence*'). But they do so only in the context of interpreting me (Raven [2022a]) and dismiss **Immanence** as irrelevant for that dialectical purpose. Because this paper supersedes Raven [2022a], I will not pursue that dialectical issue here.

Immanence. If U exists, then ∃x(Ux ≺ U exists)

This must be distinguished from a more familiar formulation in the literature:

Existential Immanence. If U exists, then ∃xUx ≺ U exists

Existential Immanence says that U's existence is partly grounded in the existentially quantified fact that something instantiates U. By contrast, **Immanence** says that if a universal U exists, then there is some particular whose instantiation of U helps ground U's existence. This allows but does not require that the existentially quantified fact helps ground U's existence. So, **Immanence** does not imply **Existential Immanence**. By contrast, on plausible assumptions, **Existential Immanence** implies **Immanence**.[2] So, **Immanence** is the

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[2] The first assumption is that ∀y(if Uy then Uy ≺ ∃xUx). This is plausible on its own. It may also be derived from the principle: ∀y(if φ(y) then φ(y) ≺ ∃xφ(x)). The second assumption is that ≺ is transitive. Now, suppose the antecedent of **Immanence**: U exists. The Aristotelian believes that U will then have an instance. Without loss of generality, suppose that it is Up. By Up and the first assumption:

Up ≺ ∃xUx

By **Existential Immanence**, it follows that:

∃xUx ≺ U exists

Given that ≺ is transitive, the previous two results chain to get:

Up ≺ U exists

And by ∃-introduction, we get the consequent of **Immanence**:

∃x(Ux ≺ U exists)

weaker principle. It is of interest that the weaker principle will be enough for the inconsistency of immanence and construction.

And a natural (but not the only) formulation of construction is:

Construction. $\forall x$(If Ux, then U exists $\prec$ Ux)

This says that if a particular instantiates a universal U, then U's existence helps ground that particular's instantiation of U. The instantiation of a universal by a particular is sometimes called a 'fact' or 'state of affairs' (Armstrong [1997]). In that lingo, **Construction** says that when a particular instantiates a universal, that universal's existence helps ground the fact, or the state of affairs, of its being so instantiated.

The argument takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* on the supposition that some universal U exists:

Granted, there is some controversy in the literature over whether $\prec$ is transitive. Even if it is not, it is unclear on what basis the Aristotelian might plausibly object to this particular case of chaining Up $\prec$ $\exists$xUx and $\exists$xUx $\prec$ U exists to get Up $\prec$ U exists.

1. U exists		(supposition for *reductio*)
2. ∃x(Ux ≺ U exists)		(**Immanence** 1)
3.	Up ≺ U exists	(supposition for ∃-elim)
4.	Up	(≺-factivity 3)
5.	∀x(If Ux, then U exists ≺ Ux)	(**Construction**)
6.	If Up, then U exists ≺ Up	(∀-elim 5)
7.	U exists ≺ Up	(→-elim 4,6)
8.	⊥	(**Asymmetry** 3,7)
9. ⊥		(∃-elim 2,3-8)
10. ¬(U exists)		(*reductio* 1-9)

The argument uses some logical rules: *reductio*, ∃-elimination, ∀-elimination, and →-elimination. Whatever challenges there may be to their validity seem irrelevant here. So, the argument appears valid. It shows that the supposition of the existence of a universal is, on our assumptions, inconsistent. If so, Aristotelian universals cannot exist.

Others have given similar arguments (Alvarado [2020]; Costa [2021]; Raven [2022a]; Costa and Giordani [2024]). These rely on different assumptions. To illustrate, consider two recent ones.

I sketched a somewhat similar argument (Raven [2022a]). Costa and Giordani [2024] argued that it relied on a principle about the grounds of existential generalizations as well as the transitivity of partial ground.[3] The present argument, however, uses neither of these principles. And so I regard it as superseding the earlier argument and rendering the evaluation of its merits obsolete.

Costa and Giordani [2024] also give an argument that assumes neither. Instead, it relies on a new principle:

Strong Immanence. $\forall x$(If Ux, then Ux $\prec$ U exists)

This says that for every particular instantiating universal U, the existence of U is partly grounded in *each* particular's instantiating U. As Costa and Giordani [2024: 12] observe, **Strong Immanence** implies **Immanence**. But the converse implication fails. **Immanence** allows that *some but not all* instantiations of a universal help ground its existence. An odd Aristotelian may accept this, reject **Strong Immanence,** and dismiss Costa and Giordani's argument as irrelevant. But they could not evade our argument in this way. Our

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[3] Thes are mentioned in the argument in footnote 2.

argument therefore has the advantage of revealing the inconsistency of immanence and construction on weaker premises.

This advantage, however, may seem facile. **Strong Immanence** captures what we may call the "uniformity thesis": that *every* instantiation of a universal contributes uniformly to helping grounds its existence. As Costa and Giordani [2024: 12] observe (in a point they attribute to Joshua Babic), it is unclear how an Aristotelian might plausibly reject the uniformity thesis. So, even though **Immanence** is compatible with rejecting it in principle (as the odd Aristotelian above does), Aristotelians will presumably *not* do so in practice. And so the alleged advantage of our argument seems to vanish. But the advantage reappears when we reflect on what the Platonist opposes. They oppose the very idea that a universal's existence could depend on its being instantiated. In their view, the uniformity thesis just compounds this erroneous idea. But the error was already made by taking *even a single* instantiation of a universal to help ground its existence. The proper denial of Platonism, then, is that *some* instantiation of a universal helps ground its existence. **Immanence** therefore not only closes a logical gap between **Strong Immanence**

and Platonism, but also has the better claim to capturing the core of the Aristotelian approach.[4]

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