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**Fraser
MacBride**

On The Genealogy Of Universals

**The Metaphysical
Origins of Analytic
Philosophy**

MacBride

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The concepts of particular and universal have grown so familiar that their significance has become difficult to discern, like coins that have been passed back and forth too many times, worn smooth so their values can no longer be read. *On the Genealogy of Universals* seeks to overcome our sense of over-familiarity with these concepts by providing a case study of their evolution during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a study that shows how the history of these concepts is bound up with the origins and development of analytic philosophy itself. Understanding how these concepts were taken up, transfigured, and given up by the early analytic philosophers, enables us to recover and reanimate the debate amongst them that otherwise remains Delphic. This book begins from the early, originating texts of analytic philosophy that have hitherto baffled commentators, including Moore's early papers, and engages afresh with the neglected contributions of philosophical figures that historians of analytic philosophy have mostly since forgotten, including Stout and Whitehead. This sheds new light upon the relationships of Moore to Russell, Russell to Wittgenstein, and Wittgenstein to Ramsey.

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Introduction

Should we not distrust the jaunty assurance with which every age prides itself that it at last has hit upon the ultimate concepts in which all that happens can be formulated? (A.N. Whitehead, *Concept of Nature*, 1921)

This is a new history and a new kind of history of early analytic philosophy. It provides an original perspective upon the origins and development of our subject by examining hitherto neglected texts and figures that have been pushed out of the limelight into the shadows, text and figures that have previously been ignored or dismissed as weak or even as unintelligible, explaining their arguments and revealing their insights. These texts and figures aren't interpreted in isolation from one another. There's an unfolding narrative, the reconstruction of a thirty-year span of dispute and dialogue amongst the most luminous and enterprising philosophers of their day, a narrative whose uniting theme is the understanding and evolution of the intertwined concepts of universal and particular and the distinction between them. This also makes it the first ever history of these concepts in early analytic philosophy. And it's exceptional as a contribution to the history of analytic philosophy, or even analytic philosophy, because it's meant as a *real* genealogy, in a sense Nietzsche would have recognized, rather than a fictional one, as most philosophical genealogies have been. The actual historical account of the concepts of particular and universal is used to reveal that it was far from inevitable that philosophy today should have come to take the particular-universal distinction for granted as a piece of first philosophy.

G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell are usually credited with being the founding fathers of analytic philosophy—Moore coming first, Russell following closely in his footsteps. But Moore's founding works from the late 1890s are typically overlooked or dismissed as confused or incomprehensible. So even though Russell is supposed to have started from behind, the prevailing impression is that Russell soon overtook Moore, as Wittgenstein was later to overtake Russell. But this is all mistaken. We shouldn't let Russell overshadow Moore in our appreciation, anymore than we should

allow Wittgenstein to overshadow Russell. This book provides an account of Moore's early work as perfectly cogent but rejecting the distinction between particular and universal. Of course the famous image of Russell following closely in Moore's footsteps comes from Russell's own intellectual autobiography but he only came up with it six decades later (1959: 42). It would have been more accurate for Russell to say that he and Moore danced together. Sometimes one led, sometimes the other, on occasion they stepped upon one another's toes. This book goes deeper than ever before into the philosophical as well as historical intricacies of Moore and Russell's dance. It also delivers a new account of the relationship between Russell and Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein is typically cast as having devastated Russell with his criticisms of the multiple relation theory of judgement. But Wittgenstein's criticisms weren't compelling and the picture theory of the *Tractatus* is explained in this book as emerging out of one of Russell's own suggestions.

Whilst Moore and Russell are usually credited with parentage, it's Frege that is usually accorded the honorific 'grandfather of analytic philosophy'.¹ This book builds a novel case that it was an engagement with Kant that lay behind the early efforts of Moore and Russell, so it's Kant rather than Frege that stands behind analytic philosophy as it emerged in the late 1890s. The case isn't merely that at the time they had read Kant but hadn't read Frege, although this is certainly true. What this book brings to light is the fact that Kant himself had problematized the concepts of particular and universal in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as Hume has problematized the concept of causation in the *Treatise*. Otherwise inscrutable passages of Moore and Russell are then made intelligible for the first time as a reaction to Kant's critical treatment of the particular-universal distinction. The real grandfathers of analytic philosophy were A.N. Whitehead and G.F. Stout. Moore and Russell didn't only read them but Whitehead taught Russell and Stout taught both Moore and Russell. So there's no need for an invisible hand explanation to account for the influence of Stout and Whitehead. Their now neglected efforts to undermine the particular-universal distinction are expounded and given their due place here.

The period this book primarily explores and illuminates runs up until 1926, the year that H.W.B. Joseph, F.P. Ramsey, and R. Braithwaite contributed to an

¹ See Dummett 1994: 26 and Burge 2005: 1.

Aristotelian Society symposium on ‘Universals and the “Method of Analysis”’. Their subject was Ramsey’s paper ‘Universals’, published the previous year in *Mind*. In ‘Universals’ Ramsey had argued against the a priori division of what exists into two classes, particulars and universals.² His paper beguiled and baffled its readers straightaway but nobody really doubted it was an important and challenging paper. Subsequently ‘Universals’ earned inclusion in the analytic philosophical canon. But what exactly did Ramsey mean? There has been no consensus amongst his commentators. But this is because trying to understand Ramsey’s ‘Universals’ in isolation is like trying to understand the significance of the last few lines of a telephone conversation you’ve overheard, but only from one end when you don’t know what went before. This book approaches ‘Universals’ in an unprecedented fashion, explaining ‘Universals’ as the closing stage of a conversation that had been going on since the emergence of analytic philosophy in the late 1890s, a conversation inspired by Kant.

The development of the early analytic philosophers’ thinking about particulars and universals, I will argue, has the contours of an unfolding Hegelian dialectic. It’s well known that they advocated ontological pluralism, affirming the existence of many things; they set themselves against ontological monism, the doctrine that there is only one thing. But what’s almost invariably overlooked is that the early analytic philosophers experimented and seriously entertained different answers to the question: how many *categories* of things are there? By ‘categorical dualism’ I will mean the a priori doctrine that there are exactly two categories of things, particulars and universals—where ‘thing’ means a constituent of a fact or a sub-factual ingredient of reality. But by ‘categorical monism’ I will mean not merely the a priori doctrine that there is only one category of thing. I will also mean, more radically, that the category recognized is neither the category of particular nor the category of universal but some category that supersedes them both. So by these lights, neither many varieties of nominalism nor many varieties of realism count as forms of categorical monism. They don’t because either they say that there are things to be found on one side of the particular-universal distinction but not the other or *vice versa*. By contrast, categorical monism rejects the distinction outright. By ‘categorical

² See MacBride 2005b for alternative arguments, different but complementary to Ramsey’s, in favour of scepticism about the particular–universal distinction.

pluralism' I will mean the doctrine that there are potentially many categories of thing, their character and number revealed a posteriori as nature is disclosed to us.

As analytic philosophy emerged and advanced *ventre á terre*, each of these doctrines was successively adopted.

Categorial Monism \Rightarrow *Categorial Dualism* \Rightarrow *Categorial Pluralism*

When Moore burst upon the scene with his 'New Philosophy' in the 1890s, he espoused categorial monism, his ontological inventory consisting solely of mind-independent concepts, where concepts are conceived by Moore to be neither particulars nor universals. After this initial revolutionary period, Moore and Russell took a reactionary turn, swinging back to embrace the traditional dualism of particular and universal, i.e. categorial dualism. But Moore had his doubts, backed up by Whitehead, and as the early decades of the twentieth century unfolded, analytic philosophy was pushed inexorably towards categorial pluralism, the doctrine that there are potentially many categories, not just one or two. The *Zeitgeist* came to rest with Wittgenstein and Ramsey. They denied the necessity of shoehorning a priori whatever there might turn out to be into any simple-minded onefold or twofold scheme (categorial monism or dualism).

In this book I undertake a task never undertaken before, that of expounding and explaining the intellectual processes whereby this dialectic unfolded. The New Philosophy had its origins in Moore's second Fellowship dissertation, *The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics*, and Russell's *An Analysis of Mathematical Reasoning*, both written in the summer of 1898, works in which Moore and Russell were still influenced by Kant. To set the stage for the emergence of the New Philosophy, I argue in chapter 1 that Kant conceived the particular-universal distinction to be a piece of synthetic a priori knowledge. As a piece of synthetic a priori knowledge Kant recognized that this distinction was no less epistemologically precarious than Hume had found the Principle of Causality to be or the Axioms of Euclidean geometry.³ I explain how Kant valiantly struggled, but failed, to vindicate the particular-universal distinction as a piece of synthetic a priori knowledge. In the *Metaphysical Deduction* Kant proposed to derive the categories from the general forms of judgement. But the *Metaphysical Deduction* wasn't fit for purpose, an especially visible weak spot in

³ See MacBride 1999 and 2005c for a contemporary working out of Humean scepticism about the particular-universal distinction independent of Kant's framework.

Kant's plan for vindicating the a priori status of the categories. This account of Kant isn't offered merely as a reconstruction of a neglected episode in the history of the theory of universals, although it is. Rather because the Metaphysical Deduction failed, the thought becomes available and salient that we cannot validly read off the categories from our familiar manners of thinking and talking about the world. It was recognition that Kant's transcendental idealism had this weakness that provided an important stimulus to the development of analytic philosophy.

Against this backdrop I provide an account of the genesis of the New Philosophy in terms of Moore's rejection of Kant's idealism. The resulting system, examined in chapter 2, emerged from Moore's work on his second dissertation and was published in his 'Nature of Judgment' (1899). In Moore's early system, the world is conceived as the totality of propositions, whether true or false, where propositions and their building blocks, called 'concepts' by Moore, are conceived as maximally mind independent. In Chapter 3, I argue that the concepts of Moore's early system are neither particulars nor universals. They aren't because Moore understood the categories of particular and universal as Kant had done, in terms of predication. But Moore doubted that the subject-predicate form belonged to the depth form of our descriptions of reality where concepts are expressed and conjured. As part of his rejection of the idealist outlook, Moore recognized a level of description underneath the level at which Kant applied the categories.

In his *Analysis of Mathematical Reasoning*, Russell had sought to update and extend Kant's classification of judgement forms to reflect the logical variety of mathematical judgements. Nonetheless the *Analysis* was a conservative work insofar as Russell continued in this work to hold onto a version of the particular-universal distinction, indeed putting forward arguments in its favour that were destined to subsequently sway both him and Moore. In chapter 4 I explain how Russell abandoned his Kantian outlook and became a convert to the New Philosophy Moore had put forward in 'The Nature of Judgment'. I show in the subtext to Russell's lectures on Leibniz, delivered in 1899 but published as *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (1900), how Russell developed his own arguments for categorial monism, significantly arguments based upon the inscrutability of particulars. Indeed his unpublished paper 'On the Classification of Relations' (1899) anticipates the most famous argument of Ramsey's 'Universals' against the particular-universal distinction.

But things didn't stand still—such was the restless energy of the innovators of the New Philosophy. In 1901 Moore reinvented the particular-universal distinction and so categorial dualism supplanted categorial monism as the official doctrine of the New Philosophy. Chapter 5 is devoted to an exposition and explanation of Moore's 'Identity', perhaps the darkest, most baffling paper in the early analytic corpus, the paper in which Moore argued for the categorial dualism he favoured in the early years of the twentieth century. But things didn't ossify there either. Doubts began to creep back into Moore's mind and before the decade was done Moore was wondering whether categorial dualism was really too crude a scheme to accommodate the logical variety of the judgements we truly make about reality. Meanwhile, Whitehead was en route from being a mathematician to being a metaphysician; the philosophy of nature Whitehead developed during the 1910s and 20s led him to a similar conclusion about the particular-universal distinction as Moore had already done in his lectures. For Whitehead, the particular-universal distinction was just a piece of *Weltanschauung*, a fragment of an Aristotelian mind-set that requires us to straitjacket what exists into a simple-minded division between particulars and universals, a binary division that cannot be adequate to the extraordinary manifold diversity nature exhibits. In chapter 6, I explain Moore's change of heart about categorial dualism, as evidenced in his 1910-11 lectures, and I chart the course of Whitehead's intellectual development towards categorial pluralism.

At the same time G.F. Stout was undertaking his own journey from being a psychologist and a philosopher of psychology in the 1890s to being a metaphysician in the 1920s. Like Moore in 'The Nature of Judgment' and Russell in *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, Stout was an opponent of categorial dualism. In the place of the categories of substance and attribute, Stout recommended a metaphysical scheme of abstract particulars or tropes, an alternative version of categorial monism. In chapter 7 I provide a novel account of Stout's pioneering arguments for this one-category scheme. In a famous exchange with Stout in 1923, Moore set himself against abstract particulars and tropes. Whilst Moore's case against Stout was found convincing by a generation of philosophers, it has recently become received wisdom that Moore failed even to grasp the basics of Stout's categorial monism. But I argue, against received wisdom, that Stout's version of categorial monism was crippled by its failure to account for predication in general, a flaw that Moore exposed in his exchange with Stout but Stout could not remedy.

Whilst Moore had come to be doubtful once more of categorial dualism by 1910, Russell continued to espouse categorial dualism in one form or other, advancing from a Kantian to a more Fregean orientation. In chapter 8, I explain how Russell's conception of the particular-universal distinction evolved and deepened as a result of tandem changes in his thinking about the nature of judgement and the nature of relations. This provides a new perspective upon the dispute between Russell and Wittgenstein about the multiple relation theory of judgement. Russell wasn't confounded by Wittgenstein's criticisms at all—as so many commentators suppose. In chapter 9, I explain how developing the picture theory out of a proto-version Russell had already conjured with in 1906 led Wittgenstein to embrace categorial pluralism in the *Tractatus* (1919/1922). As a consequence of his pictorial conception of representation, Wittgenstein was led to the conclusion that the general propositional form 'such and such is the case' marks the limit of what can be deduced a priori about what we say or judge. But if nothing less general about the form of propositions can be deduced then *a fortiori* we cannot deduce a priori any more specific forms of judgement. It's then a consequence of Wittgenstein's picture theory that we cannot determine a priori that our judgements will have the specific forms of judgements about particulars and universals. What specific forms our judgements take can only be revealed a posteriori. So Wittgenstein embraced categorial pluralism.

The culmination of this intellectual episode comes with Ramsey's 'Universals' (1925) and his subsequent elucidations in 'Universals and the "Method of Analysis"' (1926). 'Universals' has been almost invariably read in isolation. But 'Universals' is a refraction of so much of the philosophy that was cutting edge in 1920s Cambridge, the philosophy Ramsey had imbibed so much of during his remarkable hothousing education.⁴ As a result, Ramsey's critics, as well as philosophers who have thought themselves fellow travellers, have often failed to understand him, their reflections upon him beside the point. In chapter 10, I remedy the defect of reading 'Universals' in isolation. Ramsey's case for categorial pluralism is explained in terms of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Whitehead's philosophy of nature, and Russell's introduction to the 2nd edition of *Principia Mathematica* (1925).

⁴ See his sister, Margaret Paul's memoir of Ramsey (Paul 1912).

The perspective that emerges from Wittgenstein and Ramsey's complementary reflections is one whereby questions about what things exist and what categories of things there are cannot be answered separately. Rather, according to Wittgenstein and Ramsey, the existence of things and their categories are progressively revealed together, a posteriori, as the course of nature unfolds. So expressed, Wittgenstein and Ramsey embrace a naturalistic approach to ontology. Naturalism has a familiar ring to us, because we're intellectually downstream from Quine. Categorical pluralism sounds less familiar a doctrine. But if naturalism is congenial to us, should we not embrace Wittgenstein and Ramsey's outlook on ontology too? If we already embrace naturalism, shouldn't we bring our meta-ontology into harmony with our conception of meaning and mind?⁵ And if we're not already naturalists, an appreciation of Wittgenstein and Ramsey's arguments creates an epistemic context in which we cannot continue to accept categorical dualism as an article of metaphysical faith. This also raises a new and surprising question for the history of our discipline. How did analytic philosophy manage to get from the naturalistic perspective achieved in the early decades of the twentieth century to where we are now in the twenty-first, where so many of us take the particular-universal distinction to be a priori?

⁵ See MacBride 2014a and MacBride [and](#) Janssen-Lauret 2015 for arguments in favour of a naturalist outlook on the categories from a contemporary perspective.