History of Philosophy
23 Problem of Universals
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Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Arthur Holmes examines the **problem of universals** in medieval philosophy, focusing on whether general categories like species and genera possess real existence. He outlines four primary historical positions: **exaggerated realism**, which views forms as transcendent realities; **indifferentism**, which sees them as immanent within particulars; **nominalism**, which rejects real universals in favor of mere names; and **conceptualism**, which treats universals as mental abstractions. The discussion highlights how these metaphysical debates influenced crucial theological doctrines, such as the **Trinity**, original sin, and the nature of the church. Holmes further explains how **Thomas Aquinas** synthesized these views by integrating Aristotelian logic with Augustinian **exemplarism**. This middle ground suggests that while universals exist as archetypes in the **divine mind**, they are also manifested as individual natures within a purposeful, created order.

Briefing Document:

The Problem of Universals in Early Medieval Philosophy

Executive Summary

This briefing document analyzes the historical development of the "Problem of Universals," a central metaphysical debate in early medieval philosophy that shaped the foundations of Western theology, ethics, and logic. Originating with Boethius' 10th-century formulation, the debate centers on whether general categories (genera and species) possess objective reality or are merely mental constructs.

The discourse evolved through four primary positions: **Extreme Realism**, which posits that forms exist independently of particulars; **Indifferentism**, a modified realism focusing on immanent forms; **Nominalism**, which rejects the reality of

universals entirely; and **Conceptualism**, which acknowledges universal concepts as mental abstractions without extra-mental reality. These philosophical distinctions carried immense weight, directly impacting doctrines such as the Trinity, original sin, and the existence of natural moral law. The debate reached a peak in the synthesis provided by Thomas Aquinas, who integrated Aristotelian metaphysics with Augustinian exemplarism to argue that universals exist as archetypes in the mind of God (the Logos).

Boethius' Foundational Framework

The medieval discussion of universals was structured by four pivotal questions posed by Boethius:

1. **Existential Reality:** Do genera and species exist in nature (outside the mind), or are they merely mental constructs?

2. **Nature of Reality:** If they are realities, are they material or immaterial (transcendent Platonic forms vs. immanent Aristotelian forms)?

3. **Location:** Do they exist apart from particulars or within them?

4. **Cognitive Abstraction:** Can universal concepts be thought of separately from particulars (abstract general ideas), or do we always reference a specific mental image or example?

The Four Primary Philosophical Positions

The following table summarizes the key schools of thought regarding the reality of universals and universal concepts:

Position	Real Universals Exist?	Universal Concepts Exist?	Key Figures
Extreme Realism	Yes (Transcendent)	Yes	John Scotus Erigena, Anselm, William of Champeau

Indifferentism	Yes (Immanent)	Yes	William of Champeau (later view)
Nominalism	No	No	Roscelin, William of Ockham
Conceptualism	No	Yes	Peter Abelard

1. Extreme (Exaggerated) Realism

Proponents like Erigena argued that the forms of species and genera exist in reality separately from particulars.

- **Mechanism:** Every particular participates in one and the same numerically identical form.

- **Individuation:** Individual differences are viewed as degrees of "privation"—a failure to fully participate in the ideal form.

- **Epistemology:** These forms are known through dialectic and the "illumination of the mind by the divine logos."

2. Indifferentism

A tactical retreat from extreme realism, Indifferentism suggests that forms exist only within particulars.

- **Essential Equality:** All members of a species "indifferently" participate in the same form.

- **Distinction:** Members differ in their "accidents" (individual variations) but are identical in their "essence."

- **Epistemology:** Forms are known through the abstraction of recurrent similarities across a class.

3. Nominalism

Nominalism represents a radical departure from the Greek metaphysical tradition.

- **The "Flatus Vocis":** Nominalists like Roscelin argued that universals are merely "names" or words (particular sounds) used to refer to a class of particulars.

- **Rejection of Abstraction:** They deny the existence of abstract general ideas. Thinking "human" is simply using a specific sign to refer to every member of a class indiscriminately.

- **Impact:** This view undermines the metaphysical substructure of the orderliness of nature and cosmic justice.

4. Conceptualism

Peter Abelard proposed a middle ground, agreeing with Nominalists that no real forms exist outside the mind, but insisting that the human mind can generate universal concepts.

- **Abstract General Ideas:** The mind can conceive of principles or species separately from specific mental images of particulars.

- **Function:** This makes mathematics, theology, and theoretical science possible without requiring a corresponding extra-mental "real form."

Theological and Ethical Implications

The problem of universals was not merely an academic exercise; it provided the metaphysical scheme for core Christian doctrines:

- **The Trinity:** Realism allowed for three "personal subsistences" within the essence of one Godhead. Nominalism, conversely, led to accusations of **Tritheism** (three separate gods).

- **Original Sin:** Realism posited a common human nature corrupted in Adam, in which all individuals participate.

- **The Church:** Realists viewed the Church as a "universal" entity (the Body of Christ); Nominalists viewed it as an empirical generalization of a particular collection of individuals.

- **Transubstantiation:** Realism explained how the "accidents" (taste/smell) of bread remain while the "essence" (underlying reality) changes.

- **Natural Moral Law:** Realism provided for universal moral obligations based on a shared human nature. Nominalism's rejection of universals often led

to **Divine Command Theory** (ethics based on God's specific commands) or **Empiricism** (ethics based on consequences or subjective sentiments).

The Aquinas-Bonaventure Synthesis

Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure sought to resolve the conflicts between Aristotelian science and Christian doctrine, particularly in response to "Averroism" (the Islamic interpretation of Aristotle that denied individual immortality).

Bonaventure's Archetypes

Bonaventure argued that forms are "archetypes" or "exemplars" within the mind of God (the Logos). By thinking about these exemplars, God is able to know and create individuals, not just general categories.

Aquinas' Modifications to Aristotle

Aquinas "doctored up" Aristotelian metaphysics by adding three key elements:

1. **Exemplarism:** Forms are archetypes in the Logos. God is the "Highest Good" and the ultimate exemplar for all creation.

2. **Creation Ex Nihilo:** God brings things into existence from "prime matter" (mere possibility) by imparting form. This contradicts the Aristotelian view of eternal matter.

3. **Hierarchy of Being:**

   ○ **Prime Matter:** The lowest level of being; pure potentiality.

   ○ **Signate Matter:** Matter designated with form.

   ○ **Proximate Ends:** Every individual thing has its own nature and purpose designed to glorify God.

   ○ **Ultimate End:** The whole of creation, in its diverse hierarchy, imitates and glorifies God.

Conclusion of the Synthesis

For Aquinas, a universal statement is not just a generalization of particulars; it reflects a God-given nature. By knowing the forms (exemplars), God knows every

individual creature he has created or will create. This synthesis preserved the necessity of universals for order and morality while acknowledging the reality of individual existence.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Problem of Universals in Medieval Philosophy

This study guide examines the historical development of the problem of universals, focusing on the period leading up to Thomas Aquinas. It covers the four primary philosophical responses to the existence of general categories (genera and species) and explores how these metaphysical views influenced medieval theology and ethics.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. What were the three primary questions Boethius posed regarding universals?

2. How does "extreme realism" explain the relationship between a universal form and individual particulars?

3. Why was realism historically attractive to medieval theologians regarding the doctrine of the Trinity?

4. What transition did William of Champeau make from extreme realism to "indifferentism"?

5. According to the nominalist position, what is the nature of a universal term like "human" or "square"?

6. How does "conceptualism" differ from both nominalism and realism?

7. What are the philosophical consequences of nominalism regarding natural moral law?

8. How does Thomas Aquinas modify Aristotle's conception of God using Augustinian "exemplarism"?

9. In Aquinas's metaphysics, what is the distinction between "prime matter" and "signate matter"?

10. What is the difference between a "proximate end" and the "ultimate end" of creation in Aquinas's view?

Part II: Answer Key

1. **What were the three primary questions Boethius posed regarding universals?** Boethius asked if genera and species exist in nature (outside the mind) or are merely mental constructs. If they are realities, he questioned whether they are material or immaterial, and whether they exist separately from particulars or within them.

2. **How does "extreme realism" explain the relationship between a universal form and individual particulars?** Extreme realism posits that universal forms exist in reality separately from particulars, with each particular participating in the same numerically one form. Individual differences are viewed not as essential changes but as degrees of "privation" or a failure to fully participate in the ideal form.

3. **Why was realism historically attractive to medieval theologians regarding the doctrine of the Trinity?** Realism provided a metaphysical framework where three distinct particulars could participate in the essence of one single form. This allowed theologians to articulate how three personal subsistences (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) could exist within the single essence of one Godhead.

4. **What transition did William of Champeau make from extreme realism to "indifferentism"?** Under criticism from Abelard and Roscellinus, William of Champeau moved from a transcendent realism to an immanent realism. In this "indifferentism," he argued that forms exist only within particulars, where

all members of a species are "indifferent" (identical) in their essentials but different in their accidental properties.

5. **According to the nominalist position, what is the nature of a universal term like "human" or "square"?** For a nominalist, there are no real forms or abstract universal concepts; instead, the only thing "universal" is the name or term itself. A word is a particular sound or written sign used to refer indiscriminately to a whole class of particular things.

6. **How does "conceptualism" differ from both nominalism and realism?** Conceptualism agrees with nominalism that no real universal forms exist in reality, either transcendently or immanently. However, it disagrees with nominalism by asserting that we do possess universal concepts and abstract general ideas within our minds which we use to think separately from particulars.

7. **What are the philosophical consequences of nominalism regarding natural moral law?** Nominalism denies the existence of a universal human nature or essence, which effectively destroys the basis for natural moral law. Without a universal form to provide essential intentions or purposes, morality often shifts toward divine command theory or empirical consequentialism.

8. **How does Thomas Aquinas modify Aristotle's conception of God using Augustinian "exemplarism"?** Aquinas incorporates the view that forms are archetypes or "exemplars" existing within the mind of the Logos (God). Unlike Aristotle's God, who only thinks about his own thinking, Aquinas's God knows all possible individual creatures by understanding the archetypes and possibilities within his own wisdom.

9. **In Aquinas's metaphysics, what is the distinction between "prime matter" and "signate matter"?** Prime matter is primary matter considered apart from any form, representing pure formless possibility or potentiality. Signate matter, or "designated matter," is matter that has already been combined with a specific form to create a particular substance.

10. **What is the difference between a "proximate end" and the "ultimate end" of creation in Aquinas's view?** A "proximate end" is the specific goal or fulfillment of an individual thing's particular nature. The "ultimate end" of the

entire creation is to be like God and to glorify God by achieving those individual goods within a perfect hierarchy of being.

Part III: Essay Questions

1. **Comparative Metaphysics:** Compare and contrast the four major views on universals (Exaggerated Realism, Indifferentism, Conceptualism, and Nominalism). In your discussion, explain how each view answers Boethius's questions regarding the location and reality of genera and species.

2. **Theological Intersections:** Discuss the role of realism in medieval theology. How did the debate over universals affect the interpretation of the Trinity, the Church universal, original sin, and the Eucharist (transubstantiation)?

3. **The Critique of Nominalism:** Analyze why nominalism was considered a "radically revolutionary" and potentially dangerous view in the 11th century. How did it challenge the "metaphysical substructure" of Greek and medieval thought regarding natural law and cosmic justice?

4. **Aquinas's Synthesis:** Explain how Thomas Aquinas attempted to "doctor up" Aristotle's metaphysics to make it compatible with Christian doctrine. How did his inclusion of the Logos and exemplarism solve the problems posed by Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle?

5. **The Ethics of Universals:** Explore the relationship between a philosopher's view on universals and their ethical system. How does the rejection of real universals lead to alternative ethical frameworks such as Divine Command Theory, utilitarianism, or subjectivism?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Accidents	In Aristotelian terminology, the non-essential, individualizing properties of a thing that can change without changing the thing's essential nature.

Conceptualism

The view that while universals do not exist in reality, they do exist as abstract general ideas or universal concepts within the mind.

Dialectic

A method of reasoning or discussion used in the Platonic tradition to come to know the universal forms.

Divine Command Theory

An ethical framework, often associated with nominalism, where moral obligations are derived solely from God's specific commands rather than a natural law.

Exemplarism

The Augustinian doctrine that the universal forms are archetypes or ideas existing eternally within the mind of God (the Logos).

Exaggerated Realism

The "extreme" view that universal forms of species and genera exist in reality separately from particulars, and that particulars participate in these transcendent forms.

Indifferentism

A form of immanent realism where members of a species are "indifferent" (identical) in their essential nature while differing only in their accidental properties.

Logos

In Christianized philosophy, the mind of God containing the eternal wisdom and archetypal ideas (forms) used to create the universe.

Nominalism

The theory that there are no real universals in nature or as concepts in the mind; "universality" is merely a property of names or words used to refer to classes of particulars.

Prime Matter

In Aquinas's metaphysics, the formless potentiality from which God actualizes particular beings; it is the "nothing" from which things are created "ex nihilo."

Privation

The concept used in realism to explain individuality; it is the degree to which a particular fails to fully participate in or reflect its ideal universal form.

Proximate End   The specific purpose or "telos" inherent in an individual thing's God-given nature.

Signate Matter   Matter that has been "designated" or combined with a specific form, as opposed to the pure potentiality of prime matter.

Transubstantiation   A theological doctrine involving the change of the "essence" of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ while the "accidents" (taste, appearance) remain the same.

Universals   General categories, such as genera (e.g., animal) and species (e.g., human), that can be applied to many different individual particulars.