# *Distinguishing universals from particulars*

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The topic of this paper is the universal/particular distinction. A traditional way of distinguishing universals from particulars gives the former, but not the latter, the capacity for multiple spatial locations. Some philosophers, however, have objected to this formulation, arguing that there could be multiply located particulars. The relevant cases involve either time-travelling enduring particulars or spatially 'partless' particulars (MacBride 1998: 203–27). Modifications of this 'multiply locatable' formulation have been proposed that make it compatible with these cases. The upshot of these modifications gives universals, but not particulars, a capacity for

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multiple locations unrestricted by external relations between those locations or their contents. I argue that the multiple location formulation as revised is itself explainable by way of an *alternative* formulation of the distinction – that of D. C. Williams, which should, thus, be ranked as a more fundamental way of distinguishing universals from particulars.

Under the unrevised spatial formulation, the capacity for being wholly present at more than one place at the same time is necessary and sufficient for being a universal, and the absence of this capacity is necessary and sufficient for being a particular. The universal 'being a chair' can be wholly present in two places at the same time, but no particular chair can be in two places at the same time. Universals are repeatable across space at the same time, but particulars are not. This way of drawing the distinction does not preclude singularly located universals or spatially extended particulars. A universal that has only one instance, but *could* have more instances, does not violate this traditional characterization. Only the *capacity* for multiple location, not actual multiple location, is required. In addition, particulars with spatial parts in more than one location do not violate this distinction since they are only *partly* present in more than one place. Proposed counterexamples to the particular side of this formulation include the following two cases:

> *Case 1: Spatially extended, but spatially partless particulars.* If it is possible for there to exist spatially extended particulars that lacked all manner of spatial parts, then there could exist a particular that was multiply located, present at each location it occupied, but not be so present by way of a spatial (proper) part.
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> *Case 2: Time-travelling, but temporally partless (enduring) particulars.* If time-travelling particulars, without temporal parts, are possible, then since persistence for such particulars is not a matter of relations between temporal parts, it would be possible for a particular to be multiply located (wholly present at different locations) at some time *t*. That would be the case if a particular travelled backward in time to meet its earlier self.

The admission of either possibility would violate the traditional distinction since the particulars involved satisfy the characterization of *universals*. I will not attempt to argue for either possibility, neither of which is uncontroversial. Instead, I will consider reinterpretations of the capacity for multiple locations that leave room for them. Consider the following two restrictions that have been suggested on the capacity for multiple locations of particulars, each inspired by one of these cases.

*Restriction 1:* There is a spatial limitation on Case 1 pointed out by Fraser MacBride: 'For whilst, supposedly, indivisible shaped atoms can,

like universals, be wholly present at more than one place at a time, they can only be wholly present in *contiguous* places at the same time. Universals ... are capable of being present at many spatially discontinuous locations at a time' (1998: 221). Assuming that the particular in question is not a self-meeting time traveller, there cannot be a spatially partless particular that occupies *disjoint* spatial locations $l$ and $l'$ at the same time such that there is no series of spatially contiguous locations linking $l$ and $l'$ where that particular also (wholly) occupies those locations. Whatever might motivate positing an extended (non-time-travelling) spatially partless particular will never be enough to motivate positing one that is disjointly located. Spatial contiguity is required.

*Restriction 2:* In the time-travel case, there is no such spatial limitation. The self-meeting time traveller might be spatially disjoint at the time of meeting.[1] Cody Gilmore suggests that one possible 'way to distinguish universals from particulars is to note that a universal can be wholly present in distinct spacetime regions R and R* *even if there is no causal relation holding between the contents of these regions*, whereas this does not seem to be the case for particulars' (2003: 427). This formulation is certainly compatible with our time-travel case since the self-meeting, simultaneous incarnations of the particular are, arguably, causally connected by way of their later incarnations.

What these cases have in common, then, is that there is some external relation holding between the multiply located particulars – a different one in each case – without which we would not posit a single, multiply located particular. A multiply located particular, $x$ at $l$ and $x$ at $l'$, must either (wholly) occupy spatially contiguous locations or $x$ at $l$ and $x$ at $l'$ must be causally connected. (The first disjunct is included because we cannot presume that the 'sides' of the object are causally connected in Case 1.) On the other hand, universal $U$ at $l$ at $t$ and $U$ at $l'$ at $t$ may be identical even if they are not spatially contiguous or causally connected, or, more generally, independently of any external relations between them. Something is a universal just in case it has a capacity for multiple location that is independent of external relations and a particular otherwise. In neither

[1] MacBride notes a different restriction: 'So whilst time travel cases show how one particular can be wholly present at two places at the same external time, what these cases do not show is how one particular can be wholly present at two places at the same personal time. There seems no reason however that universals could not be capable of this latter feat' (1998: 223). My misgiving about this observation is that I am unsure that the concept of personal time applies to universals, since they do not endure in the sense that particulars do. In any case, he suggests a refinement to the 'spatial' formulation: the capacity for particulars to be wholly present in distinct places at the same time 'is restricted, by contrast to universals, to moments of external time' (1998: 223).

Case 1 nor Case 2 do we find a particular that is multiply located in a spatially disjoint, causally unconnected fashion.

This new formulation, however, raises a new issue. Why do particulars not have, but universals have, a capacity for multiple locations unrestricted by external relations? Is there not some further difference that accounts for this difference? If there is, then the universal/particular distinction is better characterized philosophically by this more fundamental difference. Pursuing such an explanation leads to Williams's formulation. Before, however, getting to Williams let's consider one implication of the revised multiple location formulation. So far we have noted that

> Universals can be identical, but particulars cannot, across different locations – wholly present at different locations – even if there is no causal relation holding between them/their instantiations and they/their instantiations are not spatially contiguous.

We have also put this somewhat more generally as follows:

> Universals can be identical, but particulars cannot, across different locations independently of any external relations that may or may not hold between them/their instantiations.

One implication of this revised spatial account seems to be the following:

> There are conditions sufficient for the identity of universals, but not particulars, across different locations that are *independent of any external relations that may or may not hold between them/their instantiations*.

A natural question, then, becomes what these conditions might be. One can speculate that since these sufficient conditions are independent of any external relations that they involve internal relations between universals across different locations. As we shall see, pursuing an account of what these conditions are, as well as trying to determine why universals have, but particulars do not, a capacity for multiple locations unrestricted by external relations leads to Williams's formulation.

Now let's consider Williams. Williams distinguishes universals from particulars by way of a principle of the identity of indiscernibles, claiming that universals, but not particulars, satisfy this principle. The principle itself is that *a* and *b* are identical if they share all their inherent properties (inherent properties being those a thing has no matter what the rest of the world is like).

> ... particular entities are those which do not conform to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, which is that identity of kind entails identity of case; that is, particulars are entities which may be exactly similar and yet not only distinct but discrete. (Williams 1986: 3)

Exact similarity is sufficient for identity for universals, but not for particulars. As Keith Campbell puts Williams's point, 'where particulars are concerned, matching of inherent properties is not sufficient for identity. ... universals' identity is guaranteed by inherent matching' (1990: 44). Armstrong makes similar comments (1989: 105).

It might be objected, at this point, that no particular could have an exactly similar, but numerically distinct, duplicate on the supposed grounds that every particular *x* must differ inherently from every other particular in that *x* will have the property of 'being identical with *x*' lacking in these other particulars. In response, we can sidestep any discussion of whether there is such a property and simply require less of exact duplicates. *x* is an exact duplicate of *y* just in case they are numerically distinct, but share all their inherent properties leaving out of account the properties that might correspond to predicates such as 'being identical with *x*/*y*' if there are such. We will also have to exclude properties that correspond to predicates such as 'the property of being distinct from everything that is not identical to *x*' that are logical constructions from the property of being identical to *x*/*y*. Properties such as 'being the only daughter of Hilary Clinton' and the like are excluded since they are not inherent. *x* is a universal just in case it is identical to any *y* that shares its inherent properties/nature, leaving out of account the property of 'being identical to *x*/*y*' (and logical constructions thereof), and, otherwise, it is a particular.

I will now suggest that Williams's formulation and the revised spatial formulation are importantly related: the Williams formulation specifies the sufficient conditions for identity of universals left unspecified by the revised spatial account and explains the revised spatial formulation. First, recall that one implication of the revised spatial account was that there are conditions sufficient for the identity of universals, but not particulars, across different locations that are *independent of any external relations that may or may not hold between them/their instantiations*. We speculated that those sufficient conditions might involve internal relations. On Williams's account that is the case and the relevant internal relation is specified: inherent exact similarity. Second, the Williams formulation explains why it is that universals have a capacity for multiple locations unrestricted by external relations. Inherently exactly similar universals are identical *no matter how they are related spatially or causally (or temporally)*. They need not be spatially continuous or causally connected. Since inherent exact similarity can hold independently of any particular external relations, unrestricted multiple locations are possible for universals. Furthermore, under Williams's formulation, objects that are particulars do not satisfy this same identity condition. Inherent exact similarity is not sufficient for identity for particulars. Hence, objects cannot claim a capac-

ity for multiple locations, unrestricted by external relations, on the basis of this identity condition, as can universals. In addition, it is highly doubtful that objects satisfy some *other* identity condition that would supply an independent grounding and explanation for a capacity for multiple locations unrestricted by external relations.[2]

The Williams formulation also explains why the revised spatial formulation is right to treat a self-meeting time-travelling object *not* as a universal, though it is multiply located. The time traveller is a particular because it could fail to be identical to something that was exactly like it. There *could be* an exactly similar entity at that same time that was *not* identical to that time traveller. The capacity for non-identity despite exact inherent similarity marks it off as a particular. The same thing explains why the spatially partless particular is a particular, not a universal.[3]

It is also worth noting that Williams's account is immune to another set of possible counter-examples to the multiple location formulation, supposed universals that can only have one location such as haecceities and properties like 'being the tallest man'. For the sake of discussion let's suppose that there could be necessarily singly-located universals, a far from uncontroversial assumption. Take the universal 'being the tallest man'. (To guarantee that this property can only be instantiated in one location at a time we must also assume, for the sake of argument, that no

[2] The Williams's formulation also explains why universals lack the capacity not to be located where their exact duplicates are located. In addition, since particulars have the capacity *not* to be identical to indiscernibles, they have the capacity not to be located where exactly similar things are located. An added advantage of the Williams formulation is that it would apply to non-spatial universals and particulars, if there were any.

[3] Williams's formulation should also extend to the distinction between tropes and universals. The traditional way of distinguishing between tropes and universals is to say that universals can, but tropes cannot, be in two places at the same time. This way of distinguishing tropes from universals will fail to be perfectly general if either there can be enduring time-travelling tropes (say, belonging to a self-meeting time-travelling object) or tropes of spatially partless objects (a spatially partless object that is uniformly white, for example, will possess a white trope that is also be wholly present at each of that object's locations). Although the traditional spatial formulation will, then, fail, the revised spatial formulation will work. But now we have the same question we had earlier: what explains this difference in capacity. The Williams formulation provides the answer. To see how, we must first be a bit clearer about the notion of a duplicate trope. Tropes are duplicates (inherently exactly similar) if and only if they share all their higher-order inherent properties, if they have any, and are exactly similar in their first-order inherent natures (which, strictly speaking, are not 'had' by the trope but are the trope). Why do universals have this unrestricted capacity, but tropes do not? The answer is that for universals, but not tropes, inherent exact similarity is sufficient for identity, and there is no other grounding for tropes to possess such an unrestricted capacity.

man can be in two places at once contrary to the time-travel possibility (MacBride 1998: 214).) For this supposed universal to constitute a counter-example to the Williams formulation, it must be possible for there to exist an individual who has a property *P* exactly similar to being the tallest man such that *P* is not identical to the property of being the tallest man. That, however, does not seem possible. Clearly, if Jones is the tallest man, Jones cannot be that individual: he cannot both have the property of being the tallest man and another exactly similar property that is not that property. What about another individual? For any other individual, either that person will be the same height as Jones or he will not. If he is the same height as Jones, then Jones does not have the property of being the tallest man, and, hence, it will not be the case that that other individual has a property exactly similar to the property of being the tallest man possessed by Jones, since Jones does not possess that property (the same is true if that individual is taller than Jones). On the other hand, if he is shorter than Jones then with respect to height he does not have a property that is exactly similar to the property of being the tallest man possessed by Jones. More generally, for properties such as 'being the tallest man' it will not be possible to find cases that violate the Williams principle, cases in which exactly similar properties are non-identical.[4]

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