

# An Argument Against Aristotelian Universals

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**Abstract.** I provide an argument against the Aristotelian view of universals, according to which universals depend for their existence on their exemplifiers. The argument consists in a set of five jointly inconsistent assumptions. As such, the argument can be used to argue in favour of other conclusions, such as that exemplification is no relation or that plausible principles concerning ontological dependence or grounding do not hold.

Some philosophers believe in Aristotelian universals. Such philosophers are realists – they believe that universals exist. Yet they are realists of a certain sort, for they believe universals depend for their existence on their exemplifiers: the existence of a universal is grounded in its being exemplified by something<sup>1</sup>. For example, if this chair is red then redness exists because this chair, among other things, is red.

This so-called Aristotelian view of universals is widespread among realists. For example, Jonathan Lowe writes

[A universal's] manner of existing is, in a perfectly good sense, 'immanent' (rather than 'transcendent'), inasmuch as it exists only 'in' or 'through' its particular instances, precisely insofar as they instantiate it. We can insist, thus, that there can be no *uninstantiated* universals and that particulars enjoy a kind of ontological priority over universals, just as Aristotle believed (Lowe 2006, 25).

And Fabrice Correia writes

Under an Aristotelian conception, universals are taken to be generically dependent entities: they generically depend on their exemplifiers (...), existing Aristotelian

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<sup>1</sup> For recent discussion about the relationship between grounding and dependence, see Schnieder (2017).

universals really arise from the fact that some existents exemplify them (Correia 2005, 99-101).

Thus, the Aristotelian holds that an existential fact – the fact that a given universal exists – is grounded in a relational fact of a certain sort – the fact that something exemplifies that universal. But when this aspect of the view is properly spelled out, it becomes clear that the view is open to objection. For relational facts depend for their existence on their relata: the fact that  $x$  and  $y$  are related in some way is grounded in the facts that  $x$  and that  $y$  exist, given that no relation can hold between some terms if the terms do not exist in the first place<sup>2</sup>.

More precisely, the argument can be presented as arising from the set of the following five assumptions – here and in what follows, unless otherwise specified, I am using the disjunctive, operational, notion of full or partial ground (Correia 2005, Correia 2010, Fine 2012):

#### **The Aristotelian view (AV).**

If a universal  $U$  exists, then  $U$  exists *is grounded in* Something exemplifies  $U$ .

#### **The relata first principle.**

$R(x, y, \dots)$  *is grounded in*  $x$  exists,  $y$  exists, ...

#### **The instances first principle.**

Instances ground existential quantifications: Something is  $F$  *is grounded in*  $F(a)$ <sup>3</sup>.

#### **The transitivity of grounding.**

If  $\varphi$  *is grounded in*  $\psi$ , and  $\psi$  *is grounded in*  $\omega$ , then  $\varphi$  *is grounded in*  $\omega$ .

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<sup>2</sup> The principle that relations are grounded in their relata should be clearly distinguished from the principle that relations are existence entailing: if  $aRb$ , then both  $a$  and  $b$  exist.

<sup>3</sup> As regards this principle and the next two ones, see Bolzano (1810), Correia (2005), Rosen (2010), Schnieder (2011).

### The irreflexivity of grounding.

It is not the case that  $\varphi$  is grounded in itself.

The Aristotelian view is just the view that was previously described while the other assumptions express other common metaphysical principles about exemplification and grounding. Now to the argument. Take again universal redness and this red chair. By the Aristotelian view,

(1) (Redness exists) is grounded in (Something exemplifies redness)<sup>4</sup>

Indeed,

(2) This chair exemplifies redness

and by the instances first principle, we get

(3) (Something exemplifies redness) is grounded in (This chair exemplifies redness),

for the latter is an instance of the former. By the relata first principle, we get

(4) (This chair exemplifies redness) is grounded in (Redness exists).

By applying transitivity twice to (1), (3) and (4), we then get

(5) (Redness exists) is grounded in (Redness exists),

which contradicts the irreflexivity of grounding

(6) It is not the case that ((Redness exists) is grounded in (Redness exists)).

I expect some Aristotelians to respond by saying that the first assumption does not faithfully capture their view. For example, they may believe that Aristotelianism is not a thesis about grounding. Instead, they may think their view to be the simple material equivalence according to which:

**AV<sup>M</sup>** Universal  $U$  exists iff it is exemplified by something,

or its necessitation. Such Aristotelians might look with interest at the present argument, for they may use it to argue that their version of the Aristotelian view is superior to the one in terms of grounding, the latter not being subject to the argument here proposed.

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<sup>4</sup> Brackets are here introduced for ease of reading.

What should we say about such an Aristotelian? On the one hand, it is true that in the past the Aristotelian view has been seen as the simple claim that there are no unexemplified universals. On the other hand, it is also true that since grounding has become known and popular in contemporary metaphysics, the Aristotelian view is usually characterized in grounding terms (Correia 2005, Bennett 2011, Koslicki 2012, Azzouni 2012, Cameron 2014). Literature apart, the reason why I am not convinced that this is the correct conclusion that we should draw from the argument lies in several arguments offered by Fine (1982) and Correia (2005) to the effect that modality is not enough to capture the spirit of the dispute between Aristotelians and Platonists. Presumably, a Platonist believes that all universals are Platonic, i.e. that no universal depends for its existence on its exemplifiers. And yet under  $AV^M$  there are some universals such that under Platonism necessarily, they exist iff they are exemplified, such as being self-identical or being universal, and more generally all universals that exemplify themselves or are necessarily exemplified. Take for example self-identity. Regardless of whether Platonism or Aristotelianism is true, it is true that if self-identity exists, it is self-identical, and if identity is self-identical, it exists. Hence such universals turn out to be Aristotelian universals, even if Platonism is true. For those that are persuaded by such arguments, the grounding version of Aristotelianism is superior in that it allows the Platonist to say that such universals are Platonic after all. For even if they exist iff they are exemplified, they do not exist *because* they are exemplified.

Other Aristotelians may agree that universals depend on their exemplifiers and yet believe that this kind of ontological dependence should not be captured in terms of operational notion of grounding that we have been using so far. For example, one may believe that the Aristotelian view should rather be captured in terms of a binary relation of dependence (Cameron 2008, Schaffer 2009) between the universal and each of its exemplifiers. Moreover, one may believe this binary relation to be definable in terms of essence, along, for instance, the following lines:  $x$  depends on  $y$  iff  $y$  is involved in a proposition that is true in virtue of the essence of  $x$  (Fine 1982). Do such alternative versions of the Aristotelian view make any difference with respect to the argument presented before? The answer to this question hangs on the further question of what the relation between dependence, essence, and operational grounding is. One might think that essence is fundamentally distinct from operational grounding (Fine 2009) or, more generally, that claims of dependence should not be defined in terms of operational grounding, but rather taken as primitive (Cameron 2008, Schaffer 2009). And, once again, Aristotelians of this kind might want to make use of the argument

presented before to argue that their version of the Aristotelian view is superior to the one in terms of operational grounding. While the debate is still ongoing<sup>5</sup>, I am rather persuaded by scholars who take the systematic correlations between dependence and operational grounding to be evidence that the latter should be defined in terms of the former (Correia 2005, Schnieder 2004, 2006, 2017). Hence, if a universal depends for its existence on its exemplifiers, it follows that the existence of the universal is grounded in something about the exemplifiers (that ‘something’ being, plausibly, that the latter exemplify the former).

I also expect some Aristotelians to believe that exemplification is no relation, and to believe that if exemplification is no relation, the argument might somehow be resisted. But if exemplification is no relation, what is it? And how does this help us resisting the argument? First, some Aristotelians believe that exemplification is no relation, but rather a ‘non-relational tie’ akin to, but importantly different from, full-fledged relations (Strawson 1959). I am not persuaded that this view about exemplification really helps us resisting the argument. After all, the principle on which the argument rests is that  $R(x, y, \dots)$  is grounded in  $x$  exists,  $y$  exists,  $\dots$ . As long as ‘non-relational ties’ are expressed by relational predicates, the argument would still go through. The Aristotelian might say that the principle holds only if full-fledged relations are involved and does not hold in the case of ‘non-relational ties’. However, such an Aristotelian would have to explain why a principle of a different letter but of the same spirit from the relata first principle for full-fledged relations does not apply to all ‘ties’, regardless of whether they are relational or not. It seems that, *mutatis mutandis*, the reasons that motivate the principle in the case of full-fledged relations apply to anything that looks like a polyadic tie (more on this later). Second, Aristotelians might believe that there is no such thing as exemplification, regardless of whether it is supposed to be a relational or non-relational tie (Frege 1891, Wittgenstein 1922, Orilia 2016). If an Aristotelian adopts this view, she might believe that her view has here been mischaracterized. Indeed, Aristotelianism has here been characterized in terms of exemplification: if a universal  $U$  exists, then  $(U$  exists) is grounded in (Something exemplifies  $U$ ). This kind of Aristotelian might claim that there is a crucial difference between Something is  $U$  and Something exemplifies  $U$ , and that her view is better expressed in terms of the latter: if a universal  $U$  exists, then  $(U$  exists) is grounded in (Something is  $U$ )<sup>6</sup>. Once again, I am not persuaded that this view about exemplification -

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<sup>5</sup> See Schnieder (2017) and Rydén (2018).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Mulligan (2006) holds that (This chair exemplifies redness) is grounded in (This chair is red).

regardless of the other difficulties which it faces<sup>7</sup> - really helps us resisting the argument. After all, an Aristotelian realist who holds such a view would still believe that the existence of redness is grounded in a fact involving both the chair and universal redness. The latter fact would still be grounded in the existence of the chair and in the existence of the universal redness, as long as facts owe their existence to their constituents (Fine 1982b, Textor 2012, pace Rayo 2017).

Some Aristotelians might be tempted to resort to non-standard views about grounding in order to resist this argument. For example, they may take this argument as a proof that grounding is not transitive or is not irreflexive, or that existentially quantified facts are not grounded in their instances. All such conclusions have been argued for on independent grounds (see, for example, Schaffer 2012, Litland 2013, Lowe 1998, Fine 2010, 2012, Krämer 2013, Bliss 2018). In this particular case, the plausibility of the former principles seems to me to outweigh the plausibility of the claim that the existence of universals is grounded in their being exemplified by something.

An Aristotelian might take this argument as a proof that the *relata* first principle is to be rejected. Within the contemporary analytic tradition, the *relata* first principle traces back at least to Meinong. Russell, commenting on Meinong, writes

Among objects, there are some that have an intrinsic lack of independence; thus diversity, for example, can only be thought of in relation to differing terms. Such objects are based on others as indispensable presuppositions: Meinong calls them "objects of higher order," and the presupposed objects he calls *inferiora*, in respect to which they (the objects of higher order) are *superiora*. An object which can have an *inferius* must have one; but an object which can have a *superius* need not have one (Russell 1899, 190).

The same principle will be dear not only to an Aristotelian about universals, but also to any metaphysician of Aristotelian inspiration. Indeed, one of Aristotle's main theses has been that of the ontological primacy of substances: entities of any other categories owe their being to the being of substances in which they exist (*Metaphysics* VII, 1). History and metaphysical sympathies aside, one reason to hold that principle has already been alluded to at the beginning of this paper (and may be what Meinong had in mind). No *x* and *y* could ever be

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<sup>7</sup> See Vallicella (2002) and Orilia (2016) for a discussion of such difficulties.

related in any way if they did not exist in the first place. And here the phrase ‘in the first place’ must express a sort of ontological priority, for it does not indicate causation or temporal precedence (indeed, some relational facts hold as soon as the relata exist – two material objects will be at a certain spatial distance as soon as they both exist).

I conclude by discussing two possible worries concerning the relata first principle. The first worry comes from the idea that the existence of the universal and its exemplifier is often not enough to necessitate that the former is exemplified by the latter. Take redness and the chair again. Plausibly, redness and the chair might both exist without the former being exemplified by the latter. An Aristotelian might be tempted to take this as evidence that exemplification falsifies the relata first principle, for the alleged grounding facts are “not enough” for the alleged grounded fact to hold. Such an objection would presumably go as follows. Suppose that

(2) This chair exemplifies redness

By the relata first principle,

(7) (This chair exemplifies redness) *is grounded in* (Redness exists, This chair exists)

Moreover, the argument relies on a form of necessitarianism about grounding (Correia 2005):

(8) If  $p$  is *fully grounded in*  $q, r, \dots$  then  $q, r, \dots$  *necessitate*  $p$

which, together with (7), implies that

(9) (Redness exists, This chair exists) *necessitate that* (This chair exemplifies redness).

Given the falsity of (9), the Aristotelian might take the argument as a reductio of the relata first principle. Let us remark that (8) involves the notion of full ground while, so far, we have used the disjunctive notion of full or partial ground. (8) can here be applied only if exemplification is *fully* grounded in the existence of the relata. Is it? In our particular case, we have:

(A) Redness exists

(B) This chair exists

and

(C) This chair exemplifies redness

Is (C) *fully* grounded in (A, B)? It depends on our conception of full ground. On the one hand, we may understand a full ground as a ground that necessitates the grounded fact. In that case, since (A) and (B) taken together seem not to necessitate (C), they can at best be a partial ground of (C). In that case, the objection does not go through, for (8) cannot be applied anymore. On the other hand, we may understand a full ground as a ground such that no further partial ground contributes in grounding the grounded fact together with the proposed grounds. If nothing else contributes in grounding (C) together with (A) and (B), (C) will turn out to be fully grounded in (A) and (B) taken together. This option conforms to the classical definition of a partial ground, according to which a partial ground is part of full ground, and hence for any partial ground there must also be a full ground (Fine 2012). However, both grounding necessitarianism (Skiles 2015) and the view that for any partial ground there is a full ground (Leuenberger ms.) have been put into question, and the case of the principle that relations are grounded in their relata may provide an additional reason to put such views about grounding into question. Hence, in both cases, it seems that the friend of the relata first principle has material to meet the worry.

The second worry concerning the relata first principle comes from cases in which it seems that one of the relata plays a special role in bringing about the relational fact. Take for example the fact that Socrates is member of its singleton. We should distinguish:

- (D) Socrates exists
- (E) {Socrates} exists
- (F) Socrates  $\in$  {Socrates}

In a sense, (D) alone seems already enough to offer a full grounding base for (F), for the singleton exists in virtue of Socrates, and if Socrates and its singleton exist, nothing else is required to make it the case that Socrates  $\in$  {Socrates}. Cameron (2014), drawing on Bennett (2011), calls ‘superinternal’ relations such as this one, whereby the existence of one relatum is a full ground for the existence of the other relatum and of the relational fact. And here is the worry: in some cases, a relational fact is fully grounded in the existence of one of its relata taken alone. And since it is already fully grounded in the existence of one of its relata taken alone, it is not also fully grounded in the existence of all its relata, and the relata first principle should be rejected. However, there is at least one reason for which this objection fails. The argument seems to rest on the assumption that a fact can have at most one full ground. And



the assumption is false. Here are two cases in which the assumption seems to fail. The first case is the case of disjunctions. Suppose that both  $p$  and  $q$  are true. Then  $p \vee q$  is both fully grounded in  $p$  and fully grounded in  $q$  (Fine 2012). The second case concerns parts and wholes. Let us suppose that the existence of composed words is fully grounded in the existence of their parts and their arrangement. Take for example “Plato”. Its existence is fully grounded in the existence and arrangement of its two syllables, but also fully grounded in the existence and arrangement of the five letters taken together. Hence, a relational fact being fully grounded in the existence of one of its relata seems not to be incompatible with its being fully grounded in the existence of all its relata taken together<sup>8</sup>.

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