

## J.P. MORELAND ON UNIVERSALS: A NEO-THOMISTIC CRITIQUE

### **Introduction**

In response to the naturalistic and skeptical philosophies of non-theists, J.P. Moreland has offered a bold defense of what he calls “traditional realism”. As an apologist and philosopher, he ably responds to these problematic philosophies. However, the underlying metaphysical commitments and methods of Dr. Moreland are somewhat problematic. One such metaphysical problem deals with the nature of universals. This paper will explain Dr. Moreland’s view of the nature of universals and evaluate his view from a neo-Thomistic standpoint.

However, before discussing Moreland’s view of universals, it is important to look at his general ontology. One’s view of universals is largely dependent on one’s notion of the nature of being. As it turns out, Dr. Moreland’s view of universals is intimately linked with his view of being, such that a critique of his view of universals must include a discussion of his view of being.

### **Moreland’s General Ontology**

#### ***Univocal Concept of Being***

At the heart of Dr. Moreland’s general ontology is the view that being is a *genus*. To say that being is a genus is to say that being is a broad category. In fact, being is the most broad and most general category. For those who hold this view, all things that may meaningfully be spoken of are in the category of “things that exist.” Further, when

existence is predicated of a thing, the same thing is always asserted about that thing: namely, that it exists. According to Moreland, if existence means one thing when said of a dog and another thing when said of a cat, then one would not be able to find out what existence is.<sup>1</sup> Consider the following statements:

(a.) My dog exists.

(b.) My cat exists.

In both statements “existence” is predicated of a subject. If the meaning of “exists” is different for statements *a* and *b*, then the term “exists” must be equivocal. In his book *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* Moreland rejects an equivocal view of being and points out, “When we contemplate all the things that do and do not exist, we seem to have a uniform notion we are using that characterizes the former group but not the latter.”<sup>2</sup> That is, in our experience, when existence is predicated of a subject, existence is used in the same way for all subjects. Thus Moreland denies an equivocal view of being in favor of a univocal view of being.

Moreland does, however, admit a third possibility. He presents a view called the “modes of being” view. His description of this view is as follows:

According to [the modes of being] view, being is a general category and existence is just one kind of mode of being. Things that actually exist (e.g., lions) have existence. Fictional objects like Pegasus do not have existence, nor do they not exist. Rather, they have being and thus are real in a lesser way than those entities that actually exist. Existence is just one kind of being, and nonexistent fictional objects have being even though they do not exist. On this view, there are degrees of reality and the type of being that Pegasus has is halfway between existing and not-existing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 188.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 188.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 192-93.

Moreland is quick to dismiss this view by noting that the view “violates the fundamental laws of logic applied to the being of things.”<sup>4</sup> According to Moreland, the modes of being view denies that something either exists or does not exist. Accordingly, he charges the view with denying the law of excluded middle as it is applied to things. Furthermore, he charges the “modes of being” view with an inadequate account of a things coming-to-be and perishing. He notes the absurdity of saying that something can have only half of its being.

### ***Moreland’s Theory of Existence***

As noted above, Moreland holds that a thing either exists or does not exist. Further, for a being to exist is for it to have properties. If a thing has properties, then it exists. If a thing does not have properties, then it does not exist. More formally, Moreland defines existence as “either the belonging of some property or the being belonged to by a property or, more simply, the entering into the nexus of exemplification.”<sup>5</sup> Briefly put, Moreland holds that three entities exist as ingredients of existence itself. Those ingredients are the universal, the bare particular, and the exemplification relation.

### **Moreland on the Nature of Universals**

Concerning the nature of universals, Dr. Moreland again places himself in the camp of the traditional realist. When discussing the nature of universals, the traditional realist concerns himself primarily with an assay of universals, property-instances and the relations that tie universals to property-instances. Since different realists understand these

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 193.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 188.

terms differently and give different accounts of what these ontological entities are, it is important to understand these terms as used by Dr. Moreland.

### *Universals and Property-Instances*

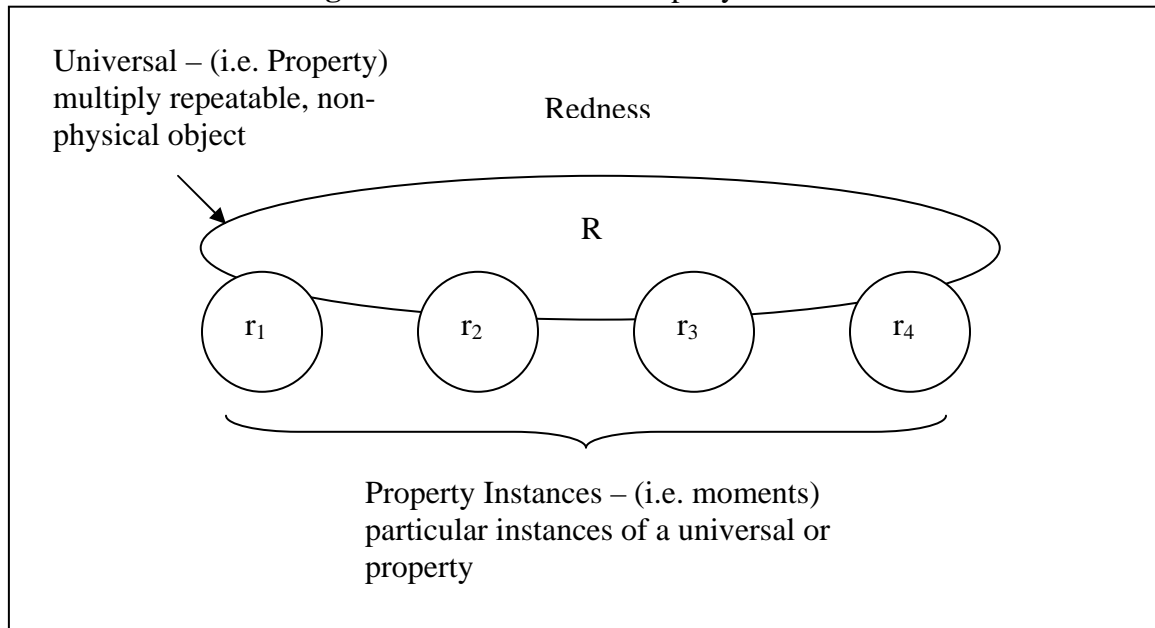
According to Dr. Moreland, two main ontological realities exist. First, there are the familiar *concrete particulars* that are known by everyone *via* the senses. Examples of concrete particulars are cars, ants, and rocks. Second, there are real entities known as abstract objects. An abstract object is “a real entity that is not in space or time.”<sup>6</sup> Examples of abstract objects would be things like universals, propositions, or states of affairs. These objects are not known by the senses; rather, they are known through a rigorous reasoning process. Dr. Moreland reasons from the fact of predication, attribute agreement, and abstract reference to the existence of universals.<sup>7</sup>

*Universals* are among the most fundamental abstract objects in the world of the traditional realist. These entities are abstract objects that can be *in* several different concrete particulars. One way that Dr. Moreland arrives at the existence of these entities is by observing that in the world, numerically different objects share an identical attribute. For example, four different objects may be red in color. To account for the fact that these different objects share an identical color, one must posit the existence of a multiply repeatable entity or universal. In figure 1 below, the universal redness is *exemplified by or had by* four different objects.

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<sup>6</sup>J.P. Moreland, *Universals* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-6.

**Figure 1.** Universals and Property-Instances

A more formal definition of a universal is given by Dr. Moreland in his book titled *Universals*. According to Dr. Moreland, a universal is “a multiply exemplifiable entity that is a numerically identical constituent in each of its instances.”<sup>8</sup> This definition includes more than a mere statement of what a universal is. Embedded within this definition is a statement of Moreland’s specific understanding of the relation between a universal and its given instances. A universal is a multiply exemplifiable entity that relates itself to its particular instances by entering into those instances.

*Property-instances* are the particular cases of a single abstract universal. They are the things which universals enter into. For example, the color red may be found in a table, in a ball, and in a truck. Each instance of red is a property-instance of the universal redness. In figure 1 above  $r_1$ ,  $r_2$ ,  $r_3$ , and  $r_4$  are illustrations of property-instances. It was noted earlier that universals are not spatiotemporal entities. Property-instances, on the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 98.

other hand, are the spatiotemporal instantiations of the non-spatiotemporal entities known as universals.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Relation between Universals and Property-Instances***

The relationship between a universal and its property-instance was briefly mentioned above. However, elaboration on the nature of this relationship is required if one is to differentiate Moreland's view from other contemporary views. Even those contemporary metaphysicians who hold that a universal is *in* its instances do not agree on the details of what it means for a universal to be *in* its property-instance.

For Moreland, there are at least two general ways of looking at the relationship between universals and their particular exemplifications. First, there is the "One-*over*-Many" view. According to this view, universals do not enter into the particulars that have them. Rather, a property-instance is a particular copy of the abstract universal. Second, there is the "One-*in*-Many" view. According to this view, the universal actually becomes a constituent of each of its property-instances. Rather than the property-instance merely being a copy of a universal, the universal is actually a part of the property-instance.<sup>10</sup>

The second view, or the "One-*in*-Many" view, is the position held by Dr. Moreland. His version of realism describes the relation between the universal and its property-instance as a "type/token," "genus/species," or "part/whole" relation. In other words, the universal is related to its property-instance as a whole is related to its parts, or as a genus is related to a species.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 7-12.

Moreland outlines three important features of this relationship that he considers vital to his view:

1. This relation (of predication) is one of essential predication. The universal is an essential constituent of its property instances.
2. An ontological ground must be given for both the universality and the particularity of an abstract particular.
3. While property-instances are spatiotemporal, the metaphysical components of those spatiotemporal entities are not themselves spatiotemporal. Neither universals, nor the exemplification relation that ties the universal to a bare particular are spatiotemporal.<sup>11</sup>

A form of realism that may be contrasted with Moreland's brand of realism is a view held by D.M. Armstrong. Moreland describes Armstrong's view as holding that "a universal is in the thing that exemplifies it and both the universal and the exemplification relation are spatiotemporal entities."<sup>12</sup> This appears to be a fair understanding of Armstrong. In his book *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, Armstrong reasons that it is unnecessary to suppose that universals are immaterial entities.<sup>13</sup> Yet his view of particularized natures places him in the category of realists.

### ***On the Complexity of Property-Instances***

In addition to defining and describing the relationship between universals and property-instances, one may also talk about whether a property-instance is simple or complex. The question here is whether or not a property-instance is composed of various metaphysical parts. Moreland emphatically answers that property-instances are

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>13</sup>D.M. Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 75-82.

composed. They are composed of a “universal, a non-spatiotemporal nexus of exemplification and an individuator.”<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Moreland gives a few arguments for a composite view of property-instances. First there is an argument from the genus/species relationship. On the realist account of universals, there are higher and lower order universals. Higher order universals are “inherent” in lower order universals. For example, the higher order universal “red” is inherent or contained in the lower order universal “color”. This being the case, any instance of “red” is necessarily composed of at least these two constituents.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the red object then, the property-instance may be said to contain both the higher order universal “red” and the lower order universal “color”.

A second argument is based on Edmund Husserl’s notion of *foundation*. According to this notion, there are certain property-instances that cannot be instantiated apart from each other. Moreland gives Husserl’s examples of “color” and “extension”.<sup>16</sup> One cannot have an instance of color without the accompanying instance of extension. When property-instances or “moments,” as they are also called, stand in this sort of relation to each other, they are standing in a relation of foundation. Since these kind of necessary relations exist, it is impossible to claim that all property-instances are simple.

### ***Bare Particulars as Individuators***

To this point, much has been said about universals and property-instances, but no ontological entity has been given to account for the existence of more than one instance

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<sup>14</sup>Moreland., 13.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 108-09.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 110.

of a universal. If universals account for the unity among property-instances, what accounts for numerical difference among particular property-instances? Or, more fundamentally, what accounts for the existence of any individual particulars whatever?

To answer this question, Moreland posits simple entities known as *bare particulars*. Bare particulars are entities without properties that exist for the sole purpose of being an ultimate individuator. They do not directly account for all cases of individuation, but are responsible for individuation of particulars on the most fundamental level.<sup>17</sup> They individuate *this* property-instance from *that* property-instance. Matter, for example, may be a higher order individuator which accounts for distinctions among the various objects that we see.

Bare particulars have a rather peculiar sort of existence. They exist, yet they do not have existence apart from the properties to which they are tied. They are always paired with some property so as to make a particular instantiation of a universal. However, if they have no existence of their own, and they have no properties (not even the property of being such that properties can inhere in them), then in what way could these entities be said to exist?

In order to maintain that existence is “the having or being had by a property” while affirming that entities without properties exist, Moreland must distinguish between two senses of the term “bare”. He must hold that bare particulars are not “bare” in the sense of being entirely without properties. If they were entirely without properties, Moreland’s own definition of existence would rule out the existence of bare particulars. Rather, in order to describe the sense in which he calls bare particulars “bare”, he makes

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 148-49.

an analogy between the relation a property has to a substance and the relation a property has to a bare particular.

Moreland briefly discusses how properties are “seated within” substances. He says that a property is “an expression of the ‘inner nature’ of the substance itself.”<sup>18</sup> According to Moreland, the similarity between substances and bare particulars deals with how these entities relate to properties. An asymmetrical relation exists in the way a substance relates to a property and in the way a bare particular relates to a property. Properties are *in* substances and *tied to* bare particulars. Moreland describes the sense in which he calls bare particulars “bare”:

A bare particular is called ‘bare’, not because it comes without properties, but in order to distinguish it from other particulars like substances and to distinguish the way it has a property (F is tied to x) from the way, say, a substance has a property (F is rooted within x). Since bare particulars are simples, there is no internal differentiation within them. When a property is exemplified by a bare particular, it is modified by being tied to that particular. Thus, bare particulars have a number of properties (e.g. being red) and they have some properties necessarily (e.g. particularity) in the sense that a bare particular can exist only if it has certain properties tied to it.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that Moreland does not hold that the distinction between bare particulars and properties is a distinction of reason. These entities are really distinct and account for the unity and diversity of the objects we know by common experience. There are several other issues that illuminate Moreland’s position on the nature of universals, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

In summary, Moreland holds that there are three important ontological entities that serve as constituents of particulars that are observed in the world. Particulars are

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 153.

composed of universals, bare particulars, and an exemplification tie that brings together and unifies all of the constituents. Thus, property-instances or quality-instances are complex entities whose existence is dependent on these constitutive entities.

### **A Neo-Thomistic Critique**

#### ***Moreland on Abstract Objects and Existence***

Moreland's view of abstract objects treats all aspects of a thing as though they are things in themselves. The red in a chair, for example, is itself a thing (property-instance) that is composed of other things. Hence, everything is composed of increasingly primitive things, and this continues until an ultimate primitive is discovered that accounts for the existence of itself and all other things. This may be likened to the materialist view of the world. While the materialist holds that the objects of our experience are composed of small fundamental units called atoms, Moreland holds that the objects of our experience are fundamentally composed of metaphysical things.

Once again, the primitive building blocks of existence are the universal, the bare particular and the exemplification relation which is both a constituent in the thing made and the unifier of that which is made. The most difficult entity to grasp is the exemplification relation. Difficulty in understanding this entity arises from the fact that it is supposedly a constituent *in* a property-instance, while simultaneously being a transcendent entity which brings the other two entities together. One may almost think of the exemplification relation as a sort of universal. For the ability to be *in* a thing and *above* a thing at the same time is exactly the function and character of a universal.

### *Existence as a Universal*

Moreland's view ultimately makes existence itself a universal. He strongly believes that being is a genus. For him, being must be a genus because when existence is predicated of a thing, it must mean the same thing in every predication.<sup>20</sup> His description of existence sounds very much like the description of a universal. On his account, being is identical with existence and existence as such is a multiply repeatable entity. What is more, existence is always the same thing in all of its instances and it is the entity which accounts for identity among numerically different instances. These descriptions are identical to his description of universals.

This is not an uncommon criticism of the contemporary realist's position. Nominalists sometimes claim that the realist notion of existence entails that it be a universal. They then point out that the realist has simply added another universal to account for existence. Realist's see that adding another universal to account for existence leads to a vicious infinite regress. There are several versions of infinite regress arguments. One of them deals with the fact that universals have no causal power. Universals require something else to instantiate them. If existence itself is a universal, it would require something else to instantiate it. However, the realist does not have any other ontological entities to account for existence. They simply posit a modified universal and argue that no vicious regress is necessary so long as the lowest order universal is self-exemplifying.

This tactic appears to fail. If existence is a universal, then existence as such is the lowest order universal. It is *like* all other lower order universals in that it contains higher

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<sup>20</sup>Moreland and Craig, 188.

order universals. On the other hand, existence is *unlike* other universals in that it is the only self-exemplifying universal. It must be self-exemplifying in order to avoid the infinite regress arguments leveled against contemporary realists. All other universals require existence in order to bring about concrete realities. Existence, however, does not require any other entity to account for its existence.

In this way, Moreland hopes to avoid not only the infinite regress problem, but also the problem posed by Immanuel Kant. Moreland agrees with Kant in thinking that existence cannot simply be a “normal property like redness”.<sup>21</sup> However, in his attempts to avoid Kant’s criticism he ultimately ends up describing existence in terms of its genus and specific difference. Existence for Moreland is a universal, but it is unlike other universals in that it is self-exemplifying. However, if existence is a “self-exemplifying universal”, then existence becomes a fully determinate being.<sup>22</sup> Existence as such is both that which is determinable and that which is determinate.

However, this leads to a contradictory state of affairs. It is contradictory to say that a being is both determinable and determinate at the same time and the same sense.<sup>23</sup> Moreland may respond by claiming that it is simply the nature of existence to be both *a thing in itself* and to be *in other things* as a constituent of them. However, this will not do. Unlike many contemporary criticisms of Moreland’s view, this criticism does not charge

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>22</sup>On the Thomistic account, to define a being’s genus and species is to define a determinate being.

<sup>23</sup>See George Klubertanz and Maurice Holloway’s book *Being and God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Being and to Natural Theology* chapter 2.

Moreland with a “strange” view of existence; rather it claims that the view is contradictory and therefore necessarily false.

### *Existence as a “What”*

Another problem arises when one holds that to be real is to be a thing. For this is what is entailed when Moreland describes existence as “the having of properties”. In their book *Being and God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Being and to Natural Theology*, George Klubertanz and Maurice Holloway explain the problem in construing existence in this way. If existence is the being this or that sort of thing, then “there is no effective way to distinguish between a real thing in the proper sense of the word and an essence or a possible thing.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, if all things “are” by virtue of their having properties, and if existence adds nothing to the “what” of a thing, then how does knowing what a thing is inform you of whether or not a thing is?

Moreland attempts to maintain a real difference between essence and existence. He also wants to maintain that a being is more than a sum of its properties. For him, existence is something a thing has in addition to its properties. However, this distinction is blurred by his definition of existence itself. This is because universals account for the “what” of a thing while existence accounts for the “fact” of a thing. However, if Moreland’s view of existence ultimately entails that to exist is to be a “what”, and if existence itself is ultimately a “what”, then the distinction between essence and existence is blurred at best and destroyed at worst.

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<sup>24</sup>George Klubertanz and Maurice Holloway, *Being and God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Being and to Natural Theology* (Wipf and Stock, 1963), 38.

### *No Need for Abstract Objects*

Even if the above criticisms are misplaced, one may still question the basis for the contemporary realist's need for abstract objects. Positing abstract objects to account for attribute agreement, predication, and abstract reference may be a better route to take than adopting some form of nominalism, but it may not be the best explanation available. Philosophers of the Existential Thomistic tradition would argue that they are able to account for these things without positing abstract objects. Nor are they reduced to thinking that language must be changed to reflect a nominalist account of the world. They offer another view which is rarely considered by contemporary metaphysicians.

### *A Brief Comparison of Thomistic Essences and Morelandian Properties*

On a Thomistic view, essences are sometimes thought to be a rough equivalent of universals in that they account for *what* a thing is. While it is the case the essences and properties both account for *what* a thing is, there are several notable differences between a Thomistic essence and a Morelandian property. First, for the Existential Thomist, essences in themselves are "devoid of being."<sup>25</sup> They are potencies to being and as such are dependent on the act of existence for their being. For Moreland, properties are necessary beings. It is impossible that properties not exist because they account for all non-necessary property-instances.

Second, essences may exist in different modes. Essences may exist in concrete particulars, or they may exist in minds. When an essence exists in the mind, it is universal. When an essence exists in a particular, it is particular. Thus, while the essence

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<sup>25</sup>Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, TX: Bruce Publishing Company, 1963), 134.

is the same thing in both cases, it exists differently in concrete particulars than it does when it is in minds. As Joseph Owens points out in his book *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, “An essence, then, is individual when existent in reality, universal when existent in the human intellect, but common and not existent when considered absolutely.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite Moreland’s characterization of the “modes of being” view, this form of the view does not hold that things have degrees of existence. On this “modes of being” view a thing either exists or it does not exist. However, a particular existent may exist in various ways or modes. For Moreland, beings have only one mode of existence. As such, the universal must exist in the same way when it is universal and when it is in a particular. Thus, for Moreland, universals exist as universal when they exist as such, and they exist as universal in their particular property-instances.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, J.P. Moreland is an able defender of the Christian faith. Students of Christian apologetics should read his works, as they will learn a great deal from him. However, with regard to his understanding of universals and the nature of existence, one is better off reading and adopting Thomism. Moreland’s form of Realism may be helpful in responding to naturalists, but ultimately it denies common sense notions about the world, leads to infinite regresses, and does not consider the Thomistic alternative.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 139.

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