

Chapter 1

Introduction

The concept of universal and the problem arising out of it form one of the most fundamental and debated topics of Indian as well as of Western Philosophy. It is a very common, subtle and difficult topic of philosophical controversy. It arises directly from our reflection upon experience, thought and language. In metaphysics, the term universal is applied to substance, properties, and relations. Moreover, it also has a role in comprehending the meaning of a word. The problem of universal is in fact a problem of knowledge. It is a perennial problem of philosophy. And it is the business of philosophy to throw light on the nature of the universe and determine the place of individuals in this universe. When we know an object, the question naturally arises regarding the nature and identity of the object. And to answer this, two aspects of the object may be discussed '*that aspect*' and '*what aspect*' that is we must first be aware of the object, '*that it is an object*' and secondly '*what is that object*'. The first deals with the particular nature of the object and the second with the universal nature of the same. For example, when we

say - '*This is a chair*', then '*this chair*' is a particular instance of the concept '*chairness*' the problem now is - *what do we mean by the term 'chairness'*? That is, *what is universal*?

Almost all systems of thought in Indian as well as in western philosophy have made important contributions in order to answer this question. There are three different views concerning universal in Indian Philosophy:

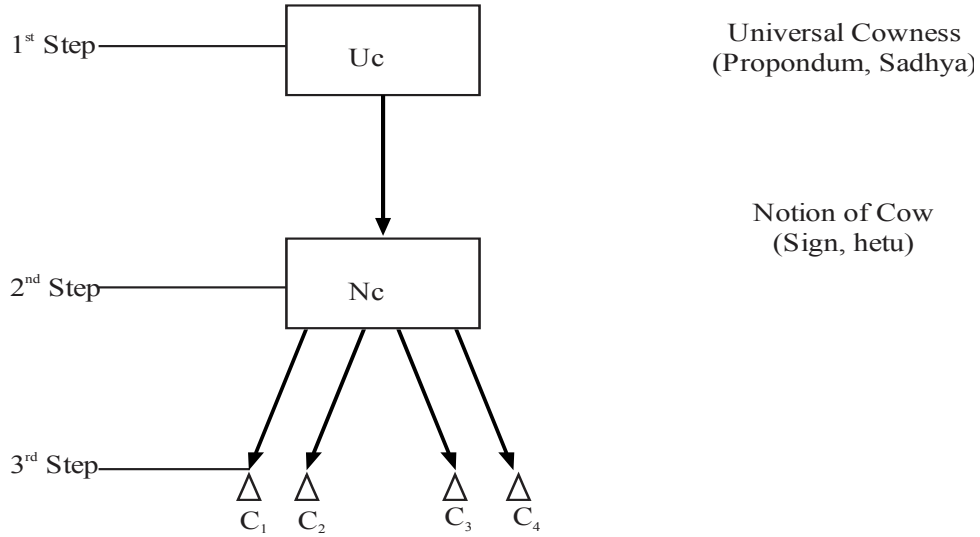
- I. **Nominalism:** According to this, universal is no essential quality but merely a name, which gives similarity to the beings belonging to its class and distinguishes it from other classes only by virtue of this name. This view was accepted by Buddhist schools.
- II. **Conceptualism:** According to this, there are no universals in the outside world; they are merely concepts in the human mind. The conceptualists agree with the nominalists in refusing to give universals a place in the objective reality, but they insist that they cannot be merely a matter of nomenclature, which might be quite arbitrary. The universals, they argue must at any rate be concepts in minds that use the words. It is for these universal concepts and not for any universals external to the mind using them that the words stand. That is, there is an objective basis for universal concepts in the mind. This view was accepted by Advaita systems.

III. Realism: It has two forms, one asserting that universals are entities different from particulars having a being of their own and in the same way related to particulars and the other asserting that universals are only common features of particulars having no being apart from the latter. The former is known as extreme realism (propounded by Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā) and later as moderate realism (propounded by Jaina systems).

But, now the question is: Why do we need Universal in our language or discourse?

According to Realist, in order to answer two general questions, namely, (1) *why are things what they are?* And (2) *why are we able to name things as we do?* We need Universal, that is, the existence of universal in our language is necessary. A realist says - A thing is called by a certain name because it instantiates a certain universal, that is, we call all individual cows as 'cow' because they possess universal 'cowness'. In other words, it means in a cognitive process, a single bases (universal 'cowness') is that source of the notion of cow in diverse cows. This can be described through a diagram:

A Cognitive Process has 3 Steps



(Diverse individual Cows)

But, according to Buddhists, we call all individual cows as 'cow' because they perform the same function of differentiating cow from non-cow (*ekavyāvṛtyā*) and not because they possess universal cowness as realist believes. That is, notion of cow (commonality) in diverse individual cows is established no doubt, but the source of this common notion is not 'universal cowness' as an external ontological reality but, it is because of (*ekavyāvṛtyā*) performing similar function by all cows which are things in general. Moreover, the cows, for the Buddhists, are not the same, but only similar which is the result of non-apprehension of difference among individual cows (*bhedāgraha*).

Now, let us consider an important question - *what is the status of Universals?*

This problem of the status of universals will be examined through a triple approach, namely: ontology, philosophy of language, and epistemology, in other words, it means, Universal plays triple roles- ontological, semantic and epistemological.

I. Ontological Role

According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika realist, ontologically, universals are real entities, which are located in individuals through the relation of inherence (*samavāya*). In general realists assert the reality of general entities such as properties and classes, although they may disagree on how to explain this reality. Consequently these thinkers hold that the world is not reducible to individuals but contains properties as well. Whereas, Buddhist reject this reification of commonality and hold that the world is made of individuals.

II. Semantic Role

Ontology is not the only way to consider universals. Indian Philosophy insists on understanding universals in relation to their semantic role as well. According to realist, an important feature of language, that is, its general applicability is made possible only when words are connected with universals. Words are adequate expression of reality and the knowledge arises from it. If words acquired their meaning only in relation to individual things, then language would be just a nomenclature of sound events or written signs pointing directly to a given object. At the same time, each

object cannot be given a separate name, they all classified under categories and classes, which are natural and not man made. So it is necessary to posit a time neutral element that allows people to understand utterances as something more than referential noise. Whereas according to Buddhist words are the expressions of illusory construction of thought, which itself is subjective and conventional in nature. Language is not a separate source of knowledge or does it describes reality, which is in flux.

III. Epistemological Role

Indian Philosophers maintain that universals play an epistemological role also. Universals derive importance from their connection with knowledge, a connection understood differently by competing schools. For realist, the role of universals extends to all forms of knowledge. Even perception, they argue requires the presence of universal. Without them, perception would boil down to a meaningless encounter with bare reality. It would be unable to bring about the categorization that practical activities require. But, Buddhist disagrees with this point; they accept the role of universal in inferential or conventional knowledge only, without assigning any ontological status to it.

Now, if there are Universals, as Realist believes, then of course we need a language capable of talking about them. This is an objection raised against the realist.

This can be answered in the form of a dilemma, in the following manner:

- (1) If one accepts nominalist theory of language, then one is not certain about universals, properties, relations, and abstract terms; and if one accepts realist theory of language then there is a certainty of universals, properties, relations and abstract terms.
- (2) Either it is a case that one accepts nominalist theory of language or it is a case that one adopts realist theory of language.
- (3) Therefore, either it is a case that one is not certain about universals properties, relations, and abstract terms or it is the case that one is certain about them.

Apart from this dilemma, one can even show that universal has a role in comprehending the meaning of a word. In this regard there are four distinct kinds of theories advocated by the Realist:

Theories	Import of words	Upholders
1. Individualist Theory (vyāktivāda)	Individual	Sāṃkhya
2. Configurationalist Theory (ākṛtivāda)	Configuration	Jainas
3. Universalist Theory (jātivāda)	Universal	Mīmāṃsā
4. Theory of Composite Denotation (vyāktyākṛtijātivāda)	All three i.e. individual, universal, and configuration	Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika

But Buddhist denies all these theories and substitutes for universal their double negation theory i.e. '*Apohavāda*' because they do not accept the reality of universal. According to them, only eventual entity (*svalakṣaṇa*) is real, whereas universal which is a derived notion from the empirical realities (*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*) which are mental constructions. Thus universals are unreal and have no objective reality. Therefore, they developed a unique semantic theory, according to which, word has no direct reference to any real entity whether specific or universal. The function of a word is to exclude that to which the word does not apply. In other words, 'cow' means "exclusion of non-cow" (*anyavyāvṛtti*), or cow=notnon-cow. This view is known as '*Apohavāda*'. This method is devised to deny ontological status of universal.