

FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE LVOV-WARSAW SCHOOL

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2. ON THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT UNIVERSALS

2.1

The main problem of the controversy about universals is their ontic status. Solutions to the controversy that have been advanced depend on the ontological positions held by participants in the controversy and on top of this these solutions influence the semiotic standpoints of the thinkers involved.

Participants in the controversy, especially in ancient times, have very seldom made clear how they understand the word “universal”. However, one can conclude from their various utterances that they would agree with the following definition:

U is a universal in relation to all particular objects R that possess a complex of common properties C *iff* U is an object determined by a complex of properties C common to all particular objects R .

“A complex of properties C common to all particular objects R ” is meant here as “a complex of properties C shared by every particular object R ”. It is ambiguous whether or not U is determined solely by the mentioned complex C . The phrase “to be determined by a complex of common properties” is understood in various ways, according to an accepted solution to the matter of the ontological status of universals.

2.2

The views of the participants in the controversy vary on the question of whether or not there are objects other than particular objects, i.e. individuals. The latter are considered to be spatio-temporal (i.e. real), separate (i.e. concrete) and autonomic (i.e. objective). So the question is whether or not there are non-spatio-temporal (i.e. ideal objects or, in

short, ideas) that are non-separate (i.e. abstract objects or abstracts) and non-autonomic (i.e. subjective objects or subjectives).

The most frequent points of view are those that admit individuals (e.g. Jan Sobieski) as well as ideas (e.g. man in general), abstracts (e.g. Jan Sobieski's sunburn, Jan Sobieski's being older than Kara Mustafa, the class of Turks defeated by Jan Sobieski's troops during the battle of Vienna) and subjectives (e.g. Jan Sobieski's thought of victory) or some of these categories (in various combinations). But some thinkers recognise ideas or abstracts or subjectives while refusing individuals the status of an ontological category.

Particular positions in the controversy are in general justified by an appeal to epistemological criteria. The difference springs from various estimations of human cognitive activity: perception, generalisation (or ideation), and abstraction. Some of the thinkers accept the validity of all these kinds of activity, other thinkers only some of them, and some others reject the validity of all human cognitive activity and recognise it only as a fully creative activity, i.e. on a level with fantasy.

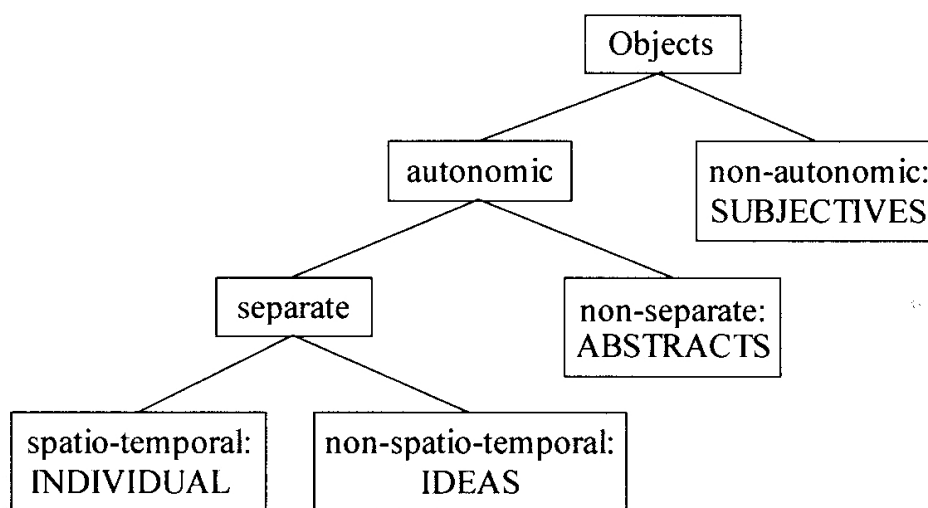


Fig. 1. Categories of objects

2.3

There are four main views concerning the ontic status of universals.

According to the first view — realism — universals are ideas (*universalia ante res, universalia separata*). The phrase “to be determined by a

complex of common properties” which is a part of the *definiens* of the general definition of *universal* means here the same as “to be constituted by a complex of common properties”. It means that the universal (i.e. idea) in relation to all particular objects (i.e. individuals) *R* possesses the complex of properties *C* common to all particular objects *R*. Thus, for example, the complex of properties common to all men (Jan Sobieski, Kara Mustafa, etc.) is vested in the idea of Man.

According to the second view — conformism — universals are abstracts (*universalia a parte rei, universalia in rebus*), i.e. properties or sets in particular. The phrase “to be determined by a complex of common properties” means here the same as “to be identical with complex of common properties” or “to be identical with all particular objects possessing a complex of common properties”. So the universal (i.e. abstract) in relation to all individuals *R* either is identical with the complex of properties *C* common to all individuals *R* or is identical with all of them, i.e., with a set of all individuals *R*. Then the abstract of Man is the complex of properties common to all particular men or simply a set of all particular men.

According to the third standpoint — conceptualism — universals are subjectives (*universalia post res*), i.e. conceptions or notions. The phrase “to be determined by a complex of common properties” means here the same as “to have attributed a complex of common properties” or “to be identical with an attributed complex of common properties”. So the universal (i.e. subjective) in relation to all individuals *R* either possesses the attributed complex of properties *C* common to all the individuals *R* or is identical with this attributed complex of properties *C*. The subjective of Man either is, for instance, the object to which the complex of properties common all particular men is attributed — i.e. it is the conception of man in general — or it is identical with this attributed complex — i.e. it is the notion of man in general.

Finally, according to the fourth view — nominalism — universals are individuals (*res*), i.e. names. The phrase “to be determined by a complex of common properties” means here the same as “to connote a complex of common properties”. Thus, the universal (i.e. individual) in relation to all individuals *R* — thanks to its connotation — denotes all individuals *R*. The individual (i.e. name) of Man denotes all particular men.

2.4

Admitting a certain ontic status to universals implies a definite solution to the problem of semantic categories of expressions, semantic categories of names in particular. In the controversy about universals, three semantic functions of names are mentioned. Names can designate a referent, i.e. a *designatum*, connote a content, i.e. a *conotatum*, and denote an extension, i.e. a *denotatum*.

For a long time there have been differences of opinion concerning the questions of whether names perform all the above-mentioned semantic functions and whether these functions are performed by all names. Some philosophers grant that names — or universal names at least — perform all indicated semantic functions. They contend that the referents of universal names are individuals, and the referents of abstract names are abstracts. Then they identify the extension with an abstract (i.e. a set), and the content either with an abstract (i.e. a complex of properties) or a subjective (a conception or a notion).

Some semioticians think that we can fully describe the role that names play without attributing to them the function of connoting a content. They take it for granted that names (universal names at least) perform only the function of designating and denoting. They contend that the referents of singular names are individuals and those of abstract names are abstracts. According to this opinion, extensions of universal names are either individuals (i.e. collectives) or abstracts (i.e. distributives). Thus, all terms concerning a content (i.e. a sense) of the name can be replaced by expressions without the term *content*. For instance, one can say that a certain name N_1 is synonymous with a certain name N_2 instead of saying that a certain name N_1 connotes a certain defined content.

According to another view, names perform one semiotic function only, namely the function of predicating, identified with designating. Then again, some semioticians divide names into two semantic categories: referents of singular names have to be individuals and those of universal names have to be universals — *viz.* ideas or subjectives (i.e. conceptions). Other semioticians take it for granted that there is just one category of names. They claim that the referents of all names are individuals but names can be used to designate many individuals one after another.

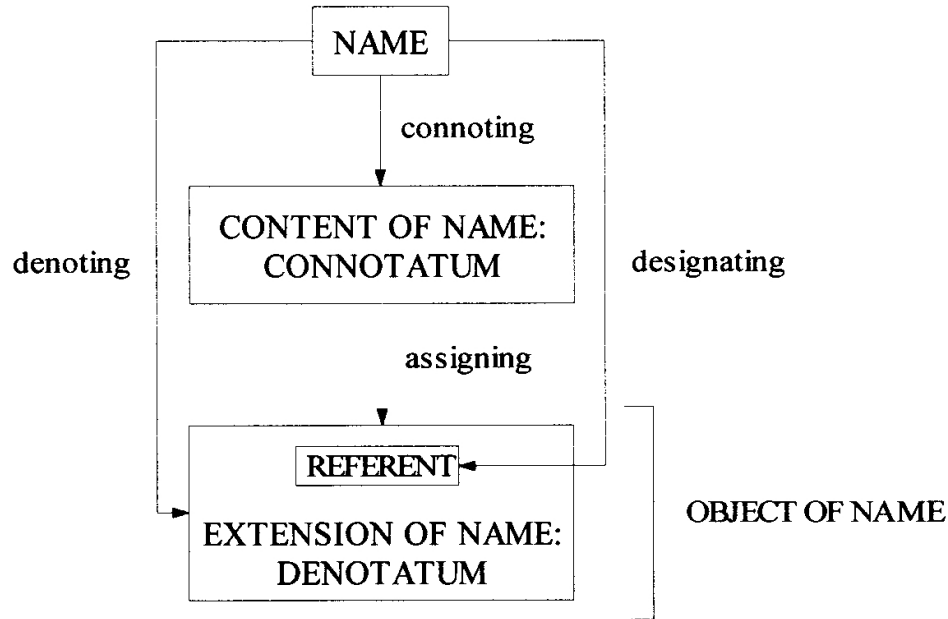


Fig. 2. Semantic functions of names

2.5

The controversy has been so enduring due to the fact that many participants have not: (1) tried to construct a logically correct definition of a *universal*; (2) been aware of the ontological premises that underlie particular views; (3) known how to separate semiotic problems involved in the controversy from ontological ones; and (4) made distinctions among particular semantic functions of names. For these reasons, the correct formulation of the views pronounced by participants in the controversy requires an operation of explication, with all its limitations and consequences.