

**BUTCHVAROV: PHENOMENOLOGY, ONTOLOGY,
UNIVERSALS, AND GOODNESS**

JAN DEJNOŽKA

Panayot Butchvarov has been highly praised for his theory of universals as grounding ethical realism. First presented in his *Resemblance and Identity*, Butchvarov's theory of universals is based on phenomenological ontology in *Being Qua Being* and becomes the basis of ethics in *Skepticism in Ethics*.¹ The heart of Butchvarov's ethical realism is his theory that goodness is a highly generic universal. This improves on Moore's account of goodness as being a simple property like the color yellow, since no such specific property of goodness is presented. By grasping generic universals in a mode of generic awareness, we can know a priori that friendship is a good as easily as we can know a priori in a mode of specific awareness that yellow is a color.

Butchvarov profoundly synthesizes Continental phenomenology with analytic 'no entity without identity' theory to provide a late twentieth century, nontheocentric foundation for an ethical realism of universals reminiscent of Aristotle and Aquinas. Butchvarov follows Sartre in rejecting Husserl's transcendental ego and Husserl's hyle, thus purifying consciousness of subjectivity and making it totally objectual. Butchvarov applies this Sartrean general phenomenology to our ethical and moral consciousness and infers that it "may only be consciousness of ethical or moral objects or properties" (SE 57). Butchvarov then compares Sartre's theory of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness* to Moore's in "The Refutation of Idealism" and finds them virtually identical. For Sartre and Moore, consciousness is diaphanous, transparent, empty of any content of its own (SE 57). For Moore, the merest sense-datum is existentially independent of our consciousness of it, and this beards the idealist lion in its own den. Butchvarov's ethic is intended to be Sartrean and Moorean in just this realist sense. In fact, Butchvarov says he

may be thought of as “bringing Sartre’s theory to its logical conclusion (which I have no doubt he would find distasteful)” (BQB 252n).

An “object” is not a British sense-datum, but an intentional object of perception or thought developed from the Brentano-Meinong-Husserl-Sartre tradition. An object is anything that may be singled out. It is nonrecurrent, and so can be singled out only once. Thus each object is private, and not even the same observer can single one object out twice.² Like the 1914–18 Russell’s sense-data, objects are mind-independent. But unlike sense-data, an object is as it seems in that if you think it has a backside, it has a backside – probably a rather indeterminate backside. Also unlike sense-data, objects as such are nonexistent. An object, as such, has only a “formal identity,” that is, a phenomenologically uninformative identity. There can be no surprises about the identity of an object as such, since when it is given it is wholly given, and it can never be given again.

An informative “material identity” obtains if two objects “are” the same “entity,” i.e. existent, yet appear as distinct objects. An object’s “being” an entity (or existent) is an asymmetric *sui generis* relation. An entity conversely ‘is’ indefinitely many materially identical objects. An ordinary table or chair is an entity which conversely ‘is’ many objects, some of which are singled out by people. A hallucinated pink rat is a mere object or at most a very few mere objects, not enough to be an entity. This is Butchvarov’s phenomenological rendition of the analytic theme of ‘no entity without identity’. Among the great analysts it comes closest to the 1914–18 Russell’s analysis of an ordinary thing into a temporal series of classes of sensed and unsensed sensibilia. However, Russell deems an ordinary thing a logical fiction, while Butchvarov makes it an entity. Russell’s sensibilia are two-dimensional and physically real, while Butchvarov’s objects have backsides and – qua objects – do not exist.

Strictly speaking, objects are ‘particular qualities’ such as this shade of green or that round shape. Like Wittgenstein’s objects in the *Tractatus*, Butchvarov’s objects hang together like the links of a chain – for Butchvarov, into “clusters” of particular qualities, e.g. this hue, this brightness, this saturation, and this shape (BQB 220, 246–47). It is really clusters which may seem to have backsides, and which thus may have backsides.

Butchvarov admits two types of entities: individuals and universals. He admits two types of universals: specific and generic. Materially identical clusters of particular qualities 'are' individuals such as tables and humans (following Hume, no self can be singled out in introspection). Exactly similar objects 'are' specific universals, such as a certain shade of yellow. Generically similar objects 'are' generic universals, such as yellow or color. All similarities are assayed as universal identities. The existence of generic universals resembles the existence of specific universals, which in turn resembles the existence of individuals. Similarly for the kinds of identity concerned, and for our kinds of awareness of these entities. Individuals are paradigms in ordinary language for existence and identity and awareness, even though individuals are analyzed as materially identical clusters of quality-objects. Thus the way in which we say generic universals exist and have identity is by an analogy twice removed from individuals, our paradigm existents. Thus "exists" and "identical" are multivocal. Specific universals are predicated of individuals. Generic universals are predicated of specific (or less generic) universals.

Distinctions among objects, entities, individuals, specific universals, and generic universals are distinctions of reason. The fundamental concepts of existence, material identity, and formal identity stand for nothing in the world. But all entities are real and in the world. This realism is justified by a neo-Cartesian epistemology on which the general phenomenology is veridical, at least for the phenomenological world (SE 137–60). Thus, as a highly generic universal, goodness is just as real as the generic universals color and shape.

Perhaps Butchvarov's greatest achievement is this. In his first book, *Resemblance and Identity*, he spoke of the "probably insuperable difficulty of giving sense to the distinction between being intellectually aware of an uninstantiated universal and being intellectually aware of an instance of that quality" (RI 190–91). In *Being Qua Being*, he succeeded in doing so in virtue of his deeper distinction between objects and entities, more specifically between the intentional consciousness of an object and the nonintentional consciousness or 'conception' of an entity. He saw that entities in general face the difficulty, since individuals face it just as much as universals do. For there are individuals of which we have only an intellectual awareness. We do not, for instance, literally single out atoms on the television screen of an electron microscope.

We single out only their images. Worse, for theoretical reasons sub-atomic events cannot even be so imaged. Butchvarov's solution is that our awareness of entities as such is analogous to our awareness of objects as such.

Perhaps the deepest difficulty is this. A Butchvarovian entity is many, not one. It has a merely conceptual unity, not a real unity. Its unity is indistinguishable from that of a Russellian logical fiction. A Russellian logical fiction is a temporal series of classes of given and giveable particulars. It is the result of a conceptual classification. Likewise, a Butchvarovian entity is the result of a "conceptual... transition to a domain of entities from" the domain of objects (BQB 39). Nor is it a whole having objects as parts or components, as we shall see. Therefore a Butchvarovian entity is not an entity.

I proceed to the principal argument which Butchvarov uses to show that universals, even generic universals, are entities. The argument is not based on quantification over properties, but instead modernizes the classic analogical argument for universals. (Since Butchvarov admits Lejewskian quantification over mere objects which lack any sort of being, he obviously rejects Quine's thesis that to be is to be the value of a variable.) The argument assumes that goodness is a highly generic property and aims to show that generic properties are a kind of entity. Butchvarov says that specific identity is:

defensible only by arguing that it is more like the paradigmatic case of identity, that of [ordinary language] individual identity,...than it is like anything else. And since it is the analogical notion of specific identity that grounds the notion of a specific universal, the latter is a notion of something that can be regarded as a single entity only analogically.

Now the notion of a generic universal is grounded in the notion of generic identity....Clearly, this notion is twice removed from the paradigmatic notion of identity, that of individual identity....But generic identity is still more like identity than like anything else. And the generic property is more like a single entity than like anything else; for example, it is much less like a mere collection of entities....(SE 67)

Butchvarov says, "The obvious analogue to qualitative identity is the identity of an individual thing through time" (RI 24; compare SE 67). But

Butchvarov makes individuals and universals mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories. He has nothing like Frege's senses or forces to provide another alternative.³ What then is there left for identity of universals to resemble among kinds of identity, besides individual identity? Identity of relations? Identity of numbers? For Butchvarov, these are kinds of identity of universals (RI 3–5; relations are rejected in BQB 239–47). We can hardly explicate the identity of universals as resembling itself, or even as resembling a sub-kind of itself. This, of course, includes both specific and generic identity as sub-kinds. Thus the degree of resemblance of any universal identity to individual identity is impossible to assess. If we could say that "Universal identity resembles individual identity more than individual identity resembles A," individual identity and A both being kinds of identity, then we could say without doubt that universal identity is a kind of identity. (See RI 115; the notion of comparative resemblance used is due to D. J. O'Connor.) But the way Butchvarov has set up his individual-universal dichotomy, he has nothing left to be A. Of course, we may let A be a rock or a tree, or even the relation of exact similarity. But this is not enough to show that universal identity is a kind of identity, as opposed to approaching identity asymptotically. What we want is to bracket universal identity between two kinds of identity, just as we might bracket brick between crimson and rust, thus showing that brick is a kind of red. But only one kind of identity, individual identity, seems available to serve as a bracket.

Of course, there is the formal identity of objects qua objects and of entities qua entities for universal entities' material identity to resemble. So perhaps Butchvarov might appeal to the truth of the statements, "Universal material identity resembles individual material identity more than individual material identity resembles individual formal identity," and "Universal formal identity resembles individual formal identity more than individual formal identity resembles individual material identity." Thus we seem to have found adequate candidates for A. And no doubt "we tend to regard formal identity as paradigmatic" (BQB 46). But formal identity seems "a limiting case of material identity" (BQB 47; compare the more suggestive BQB 35, calling formal identity statements "at best degenerate statements;" however, this suggestion is part of a view Butchvarov does not fully accept). Thus the two given kinds of identity, individual formal and individual material identity, do not seem

sufficiently distinct from each other to be able to bracket universal material identity between them. Besides, it may be that specific universal material identity and specific universal formal identity resemble each other more than anything else. The sole difference is in number of locations: two for the former and one for the latter (see BQB 191–92, 218).

Of course, Butchvarov makes universal existence and identity much more like individual existence and identity than like the existence and identity of ‘mere collections’ (SE 67). And this is right, if properties are universals. But assuming that begs the question against the resemblance theory of properties. For if the resemblance theory is right, then the identity of a property is more like the identity of a mere collection than it is like the identity of an individual. Someone might reply that it is the mere bracketing that shows that universal identity is a kind of identity. What is important is that individual identity and collectional identity are both kinds of identity, and that universal identity lies somewhere between them. But assuming that begs the question against nominalism. And we cannot show that universal identity is a kind of identity until we show that collections do have identities. Now, the ascription of identity to collections would entail that either collections are entities or else ‘no entity without identity’ is a false theory. Perhaps Butchvarov would say that collections are not entities, but, like heaps of sand, do exist. But then perhaps universals are not entities either, but like collections, merely exist. Thus it hardly matters how much like individuals universals are. If our only argument is that universals are more like individuals than heaps are, then the admission of universals as entities will be precluded until we show that heaps are entities. Thus the bracketing approach seems unfruitful for establishing realism for properties.

Could Butchvarov argue for realism by analogy? Arguments by analogy proceed by specifying significant respects of resemblance. We can scarcely argue without circularity that universal identity resembles individual identity in respect of being a kind of identity, and therefore is a kind of identity. But it seems hard to find a significant respect of resemblance that strongly suggests universal identity is a kind of identity without similarly begging the question in the end.

But what about Butchvarov’s formula R, “x resembles y more than x resembles anything else”? I think that formula R is not sufficient to establish

in general that x is a kind of y or that y is a kind of x . Formula R can show at most that x and y have some respect of resemblance in common (compare SE 199). Now, an analogical argument cannot deductively prove that specific identity and generic identity are kinds of identity. But even an analogical argument should not have so many counterexamples. Before the Fall, the mightiest angel and God resembled each other than anything else. But Lucifer was not a god and God was not a kind of angel. (I assume a strict monotheism.) Czechs resemble Slovaks more than anything else. But Czechs are not a kind of Slovak. Germans resemble Austrians more than anything else. But Germans are not a kind of Austrian. Humans resemble chimpanzees more than anything else, but they are not a kind of chimpanzee. One student's B+ may resemble an A more than anything else, but this does not make it a kind of A. Among properties, right-handedness may resemble left-handedness more than anything else, but it is not a kind of left-handedness. Among symmetrical relations (and identity is a symmetrical relation), consider: being equally inside and being equally outside; being brothers and being sisters; and being identical and being more like each other than like anything else. This last pair of relations may be more like each other than like anything else, but this does not make the latter a kind of identity. *Mutatis mutandis*, if universal identity resembles individual identity more than it resembles anything else, this does not show that universal identity is a kind of individual identity—or even any kind of identity at all. (The mere verbal label of “identity” is not enough for this.) Nor does this show that universal identity is so much like individual identity that not to call it identity “would be grossly misleading” (SE 70). It is not grossly misleading to refrain from calling humans chimpanzees. It is grossly misleading to call humans chimpanzees, or God an angel, or a B+ an A.

Formula R probably cannot be used to show that universal identity is a kind of identity even adding any significant respects of resemblance. Some respects are very relevant: having identity conditions (which is very different from being a kind of identity relation) closely resembling those of individual identity, having some kind of presumptive nature, being the presumptive logical subjects of true or false assertions, being presumptive subjects of Quinean existential quantification. But unfortunately, this group of respects also obtains in every case in which ontological elimination as a fiction is plausible. Butchvarov himself does not accept this group, in that identity, and relations

generally, though they closely resemble entities in just these respects, are not kinds of entities for him. Thus the formula R approach seems no more help than bracketing or respects of resemblance.

Besides, if Butchvarov uses formula R, ought he not to argue that protometaphysical concepts are more like highly generic universals in kind than they are like anything else, and that therefore such concepts are a kind of property after all? – a kind further removed from individual entities than are even generic universals, perhaps? Here Butchvarov does not accept his own Formula R argument for the existence of universals, but allows another argument to overrule it. This other argument is that protometaphysical concepts must be the foundation of the existence of everything, and therefore they cannot be the foundation of their own existence without circularity (SE 74). This dilemma for Butchvarov is best removed by impaling ourselves on its second horn. For it is not clear to me what is viciously circular about existence's existing or about identity's having identity conditions. Frege had no problems about either of these being the case. And Butchvarov's own thesis that to exist is to be materially identical is itself a generic material identity of existence with material identity which shows on its own authority that existence is an entity, in contradiction to Butchvarov's theory of existence as a protometaphysical concept that stands for nothing.

But Butchvarov might be glossed as arguing as follows: First, individual entities are paradigmatically real in virtue of the sort of material identity they have. Second, specific properties are enough like individual entities in their 'specific identity' that they, too, are real. Third, generic properties are enough like specific properties, and by extension individual entities, in their 'generic identity' that they, too, are real. Thus goodness, as a generic property, is real. The argument is carefully developed, very illuminating, and seemingly convincing. We have not used Formula R, "is more real than," or "is analogically real." We have not even assumed that so-called 'specific identity' and 'generic identity' are kinds of identity.

However, even this recasting of Butchvarov's argument is problematic. Butchvarov himself presents the most immediate difficulty. In his essay "The Limits of Ontological Analysis," Butchvarov gives a general theory of analogy which he applies there only to the whole-part relation. But the theory should apply to the notion of entity equally well. If it should not, he has not shown

why not. Let us apply, then, Butchvarov's general theory of analogy to his own generic properties considered as analogous to entities: "[T]o find a concept which, though not straightforwardly applicable to *x* is nevertheless more suitable than any other available concept, is to find that *x* is more like the paradigmatic objects of the application of that concept than it is like the paradigmatic objects of the application of any other concept, though not so much like them that we should be willing to include it among them [*italics mine*]" (LOA 21). Just as we should treat features and circumstances of objects which are not "literally parts" or even "intelligibly regarded as parts" of the object as "only analogous to parts of the object" (LOA 26–27), we should treat generic goodness as in "no literal sense" (LOA 30) an entity but as similar to an entity. And baptizing specific and generic properties 'entities' in "special senses, namely, ontological senses, would...be obfuscating" (LOA 29–30). Thus on this general theory of analogy, realism is not achieved for universals. Only something analogous to realism is achieved at best. After all, can we consistently accept analogous kinds of identity and reject analogous kinds of parts? Observe that the very properties which Butchvarov affirms as having genuine universal identities analogous to individual identities (SE 114) are denied by him to be genuine parts of individuals analogous to individual parts of individuals (LOA 26–27). And if generic identity is merely analogous to identity, then Butchvarov's ethic is merely analogous to ethical realism.

Butchvarov seems aware of the problem. He appeals to the notion of degree or fundamentality of analogy to show how his general theory of analogy can support his analogical argument (SE 98–101). But in light of this notion's potential for question-begging, this is like trying to squeeze whey from a stone. Thus it seems that Butchvarov needs a new, different general theory of analogy to justify his analogical argument. But he has not provided one. Such a theory must not be question-begging. It must be based on independent grounds, such as our intuitions concerning parts. Yet the theory must make it likely that goodness is real.

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN
USA

NOTES

- ¹ References to Butchvarov's books *Skepticism in Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), *Being Qua Being: A Theory of Identity, Existence, and Prediction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), *Resemblance and Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966) and *The Concept of Knowledge* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970) and to his essay "The Limits of Ontological Analysis," in M. S. Gram and E. D. Klemke, eds., *The Ontological Turn* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1974) are respectively prefixed by "SE," "BQB," "RI," "CK," and "LOA." Butchvarov summarizes his philosophy in "The Untruth and the Truth of Skepticism," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 67/4 (1994), pp. 41–61. His most recent book, *Skepticism about the External World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), further develops his phenomenology and ontology, but changes nothing in the present paper.
- ² Both conjuncts seem exceptions to the general rule that objects are as they seem, since many objects I single out seem to be public, and also seem to be objects I have singled out before. Making objects actually public if they seem to be public would be more in keeping with the tradition of Heidegger and Sartre.
- ³ I omit Butchvarov's concepts, which are surely generically identical universals as opposed to individuals. He always speaks of "the" concept of existence as if you and I have the same concept of existence. It is not as if you have one concept of existence and I have a numerically different one. For a critique of Butchvarov's concepts, see my *The Ontology of the Analytic Tradition and Its Origins: Realism and Identity in Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Quine* (Lanham, Maryland: Littlefield Adams, 1996), ch. 4.