

Is reality purely qualitative? An analysis of individualistic and qualitative explanations of the nature of individuals and the structure of reality

Abstract for the general public

This project deals with the philosophical problem of the nature and existence of individual objects. Intuitively, we are convinced that there are individuals in the world such as particular people, animals, artifacts, and atoms. Of course, we can argue in some cases as to whether or not individuals of a given type exist, such as whether there are numbers, gods, fictional objects, or holes. However, it is not controversial to assume that there are *some* individuals in the world. It seems impossible to doubt the existence of all individuals. After all, some of them causally affect us and are objects of our statements, thoughts, and sense experiences. Individuals also seem to be indispensable in the scientific description of the world, for example, numbers in mathematics, elementary particles in physics, and organisms in biology. In this project, by individualism I mean a position that assumes the existence of individuals and facts about them (e.g., the fact that Socrates is a human being). However, some philosophers doubt the existence of individuals and facts about them, and they claim instead that the whole of reality is purely qualitative and general. I call such a position qualitativism. The scientific goal of the project is to investigate the best way to characterize both views and to determine, on the basis of our best arguments and currently available data, which one is a more promising explanation of the metaphysical structure of reality.

First, I am going to analyze two different approaches to individualism and qualitativism.

Since the Middle Ages, philosophers have wondered about the general nature of individuals, including what constitutes their principle of individuation, i.e., what are the metaphysical grounds for distinguishing one individual from another. One of the approaches to individualism and qualitativism that I will look at in the project sees both theories as opposing explanations of the principle of individuation of individuals. According to individualism, the principle of individuation of individuals must be at least partly non-qualitative (e.g., Socrates' principle of individuation may be a property of being identical to Socrates, which is exemplified by Socrates), while according to qualitativism, the principle of individuation is purely qualitative (e.g., the property of having a certain mass or spatiotemporal location). In the project, I intend to show that this approach to both theories faces a number of problems and that there is a much more fruitful approach to both views that does not concern the issue of individuality at all, according to which individualism and qualitativism are opposing views on the fundamental structure of reality. According to the first view, the world is such that it contains irreducible facts about individual objects, while according to the second view, the world is such that all facts are general or are reducible to general facts.

However, there are many possible characterizations of individualism and qualitativism understood structurally. According to one of my hypotheses, we should distinguish two different kinds of individualist and qualitativist views: those which make a distinction between the fundamental (e.g., physical description) and the non-fundamental (e.g., the description of our mental states) layers of reality, and those which do not make such a distinction. Positions that make such a distinction, however, must also explain the relationship between the fundamental and the non-fundamental layers of reality. Does the non-fundamental depend on the fundamental? If so, how? In this project, I intend to consider various possible positions on this issue. I am going to argue that the most promising formulations of individualism and qualitativism are those that are committed to the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental layers of reality, and which introduce a relation of metaphysical explanation between those layers. Under such an approach, individualism is the view that facts about individual objects exist on the fundamental layers, the non-fundamental layers, or on both, and those facts are independent from any general facts on any layer. Qualitativism, on the other hand, turns out to be the view that facts about individual objects exist at the fundamental layers, the non-fundamental layers, or on both layers, and that they depend on some general facts (e.g., the facts about Socrates could depend on general physical facts about his body). In the project, I shall also investigate which of the views is more promising. I am going to show that it is individualism.