# Philosophy in the Context of Our Time – II
# Universality and what is Individual

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**Synopsis**

*There are several classical (perennial) questions constantly recurring within philosophy and within all the disciplines. The relation between what is universal and individual occupies a central position amongst these questions (alongside questions concerning unity and diversity, constancy and dynamics, knowable and unknowable, finite and infinite, and so on). This article sets out to analyze the relation between universality and what is individual within the context of the substance concept, the distinction between law side and factual side, as well as the possibility to use modal (aspectual) terms both in a conceptual and a concept-transcending way. The traditional distinction between (objective) primary qualities and (subjective) secondary qualities is contrasted with the subject-object relation while particular attention is given to ambiguities in the views of Dooyeweerd regarding his idea of individuality structures.*

## 1. Orientation

Continuing the theoretical interest of his Ph.D. (on "modal universality" in 1995), Heinrich Alt more recently once again returned to the problem of universals (see Alt, 2006). Combined with the correlated problem concerning what is *individual* it indeed constitutes one of the classical philosophical problems that also had a profound influence on various academic disciplines. The author will argue that the most common way of presenting this problem, namely to speak of *universality* and *individuality*, is fundamentally flawed. Although certain historical considerations will be complemented with basic systematic distinctions and related to a few examples from special sciences, the main focus of this article will be on the way in which it was accounted for within the tradition of reformational philosophy.

## 2. Substance and knowledge

The dominant legacy of Western philosophy regarding knowledge is that knowledge is always dependent upon what is universal – i.e., on general universal traits or attributes. Aristotle commences his work *Categoriae* by postulating the existence of a *primary substance*, considered to be *purely individual*. It is supposed to lie at the basis of all the *accidental categories* – such as quantity, quality, place, relation, and so on. Yet with knowledge tied down to what is universal this purely individual primary substance was unknowable. Therefore the only way to secure knowledge was to introduce *universality* – and Aristotle did that by postulating a *secondary substance* as the universal substantial form of entities (see also Aristotle, *Categoriae* 1 ff.). An individual thing is seen as the combination of the secondary substance (its universal substantial form) and its matter.

One important consequence of this view is that all *accidentia* or *attributes* find their ultimate point of reference in the *substance* (unity of form and matter) as their *substratum*. The key question now is twofold:

(i) Are the attributes of an individual substance just as "individual" as the substance itself?
(ii) Can one "attribute" the *same* properties to different substances?

These two questions boil down to one single question: how do distinct individual things relate to each other? = i.e., what is the nature of the relationships existing between them?

Mainly in following the works of Aristotle, the history of philosophy distinguishes between primary (physical or material) qualities and secondary (sensory) qualities – also designated as "objective" and "subjective" qualities. Locke, for example, mentions as primary qualities – that are inseparable from (material) bodies – the following: "solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number" (Locke, 1690:112). As secondary qualities or "sensible qualities" Locke mentions the different ideas produced in us "of several colours, sounds, smells, tastes, etc." (Locke, 1690:117).

Consider for a moment these Lockian primary qualities in connection with the questions raised above with regard to the relationships existing between "bodies" exhibiting them. If "solidity" is interpreted as a *physical* quality, *motion or rest* as *kinematic* qualities,[1] *extension* and *figure* as *spatial* qualities and *number* as a *quantitative* quality, then it is clear that

1 In modern kinematics "rest" is a state of motion.

what Locke calls *primary qualities* are nothing but the *subject functions* of material entities within the first four aspects of reality – the numerical, spatial, kinematic and physical.[2]

In order to exceed the limitations of the traditional substance concept, it is imperative that these four aspects are acknowledged in what we may call their *modal universality*, for otherwise they will collapse into the *individual* attributes of an *individual substance*. The expression *modal universality* first of all refers to the idea of *functional aspects* of reality – as it has been developed by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, the founders of the tradition of reformational philosophy. They envisage the various aspects or modal functions as belonging to a distinct dimension of reality, accompanied by the idea that all concrete (natural and social) entities and processes in principle *function* within all aspects. In other words, regardless of what the nature of the distinct (natural and social) entities and processes is, none of them can escape from the "hold" of all modal aspects of reality.

The traditional distinction between primary and secondary properties proceeds from a dualism between them. A material entity is enclosed within its existence as an "object," whereas the sensitive (or secondary) qualities are considered to belong to the "subject." The idea of modal universality eliminates this dualism, because it subjects *both* the primary and secondary qualities to the universal modal structure of all the aspects of reality. The fact that the existence of a material body (a physical entity) is not exhausted by the above-mentioned four (subject-)functions follows from the fact that physical entities also have functions within all the post-physical aspects, such as within the biotic aspect (water, for example, as a "means of life"), within the sensitive aspect (the taste of the water), within the logical-analytical aspect (it is chemically identified by the formula $H_2O$), in the cultural-historical aspect (the historical significance of the "flood"), within the social aspect (the water needed by pools for swimming sport events), and so on.

Although the claim is that these functions of water (within post-physical aspects) structurally belong to water, making them manifest in each case depends upon the activity of a subject functioning actively within the aspect concerned. Without a living plant, animal or human being in need of water the *biotic object function* of water cannot be *disclosed* or *opened up*. Yet this

2 The phrase "subject function" refers to the active way in which an entity is subjected to the laws within a particular *law-sphere* and *modal aspect* of reality.

object function belongs to *water* and is not the creation of biotical subjects. Likewise the taste of water – its sensitive object function – can only be disclosed or *objectified* by an animal or a human being (as sentient creatures).

The over-arching role of the various modal aspects entails that they embrace both the subject functions and object functions of entities within them, liberating the entities concerned to be the "origin" of the modal aspects themselves. It is exactly the other way around: the *universal scope* of the modal aspects make possible all subject and object functions within them.

We may now briefly return to the two questions raised above, namely (i) if the attributes of an individual substance are just as "individual" as the substance itself, and (ii) if one can "attribute" the *same* properties to different substances? Our provisional answer to the first question is that the attributes of an entity are made possible by the universal modal structure of the aspect in which the entity concerned has its typical function. To the second question the answer is that from a modal structural perspective (i.e. the perspective of modal universality) different entities may exhibit *similar* properties insofar as they display the *same* modal functions.[3]

Furthermore, the alternative perspective of the modal subject-object relation side-steps the problems entailed in the substance concept as well as the dualism between primary and secondary qualities. An analysis of the relation between universality and what is individual has to reflect on the nature of the terms involved. Moreover, once this issue has been elucidated, we have to consider the denotata of what is individual and what is universal. These considerations will inevitably involve an account of the distinction between *law* and *factuality* on the one hand and of *law* and *lawfullness* (orderliness/law-conformity) on the other.

## 3. Conditions determining the terms universality and what is individual

Acknowledging the modal universality of each modal aspect made it possible to transcend the idea of a self-contained substance, enclosed within its subject functions. From a terminological perspective the question arises: what makes it possible to speak of universality and individuality in the first place?

3 For example, 2 chairs, both having 4 legs, indeed have the *same* numerical property. The universality of the numerical aspect entails that a specific quantitative property – such as having 4 legs – does not exhaust the "attributive" meaning of the arithmetical aspect. Multiple individually distinct chairs may display this (shared) numerical property.

In this context one may be tempted to contemplate the classical problem of the so-called "principle of individuation" (*principium individuationis*).[4] The underlying issue is what constitutes "individuality" or "what is individual" and what is intended when we speak of universality?

Shared properties cannot *cause* the *distinctness* of particular entities. We simply experience individual entities as distinct, even when they exhibit the same properties. If one cannot tell the difference between two superbly manufactured cars of the same make, they are still individually different – *this* one and *that* one. Their specifications are the *same* but they are different exemplars of those specifications. The key element in these remarks is given in the possibility to experience *distinct* entities. If entities are distinct they display a multiplicity that enables an enumeration of them, i.e., they exhibit a function within the quantitative aspect. From the perspective of the quantitative aspect it can be said that this aspect *co-conditions* the existence of concretely existing (multi-aspectual) entities. The word *co-condition* implies that no single modal aspect *fully* conditions or determines the existence of any concretely existing entity.

Clearly the awareness of the distinctness of entities cannot be divorced from the core meaning of the numerical aspect – *discrete quantity*. For an entity to be this *one* (and not that *one*) it has to have a subject function within this aspect, i.e. it must function *within the boundaries* of the arithmetical aspect. For that reason one can apply *numerals* (number symbols) that reflect an act of counting because one, another one, and so on belong to the concept of number. The assumption underlying this remark is that whatever presents itself within the boundaries of the numerical aspect allows for a conceptual grasp, makes possible the application of number concepts. Numerals are number-terms employed in a conceptual way. On a more general level one can say that modal terms derived from any other aspect, or presenting themselves within any other aspect, allow for a *conceptual* use of those terms.

However, the numerical property of being "one" – allowing for a conceptual use of this numerical term – is not the same as what is intended in die statement that this (one) entity is *distinct*. The accompanying idea is that it is *unique*, that it is an *individual* entity. What is individual and unique about a distinct entity *exceeds* its function within the numerical aspect, for it comes to expression in *all* its aspects! Therefore, although the

4 Aristotle introduced *matter* as the *principium individuationis* because he claimed that *all things that are many in number have matter* (*Metaph*. 1074 a 33-34).

*being distinct* of an entity does appeal to our basic intuition of discrete quantity, the way in which it explores the core meaning of number is to stretch this awareness beyond the limits or boundaries of the quantitative aspect. As an equivalent of the statement that one can employ numerical terms in a conceptual manner, namely when they relate to what appears within the boundaries of this aspect, one can say that one can also employ numerical terms in a way that stretches them beyond the limits of the numerical aspect, in other words numerical terms may also be used in a *concept-transcending way* – i.e. in the context of *idea-knowledge*. Strictly speaking we therefore do not have a *concept* of what is individual, but solely an *idea* – in the sense of concept-transcending knowledge.

Thus far we have explained the contours for an understanding of the conditions making possible the way in which we address the uniqueness and distinctness of what is individual, advancing two basic perspectives: (i) the fact that our idea of the distinctness of an entity cannot side-step the core meaning of the numerical aspect, and (ii) the fact that this very idea exceeds the limits of a conceptual use of modal numerical terms because it uses numerical terms in a concept-transcending way.

Contemporary works on metaphysics engage in a discussion of these issues without contemplating the distinction between conceptual knowledge and concept-transcending knowledge. Loux, for example, writes: "Thus every thing that belongs to the kind *being human* is marked out as a discrete individual, as one human being countably distinct and separate both from other human beings and from things of other kinds" (Loux, 2002:24). The *discrete countability* of human beings represent their function within the boundaries of the numerical aspect and therefore demonstrates a conceptual use of these terms. However, as we have argued, in being distinct (being individual), referring to human beings in this mode of speech explores the numerical intuition of discrete quantity beyond the limits of the arithmetical aspect – and for that reason it constitutes a concept-transcending use of our basic numerical awareness.

What is the situation with the term universality? This term is derived from the core meaning of space, for it calls forth the intuition of place, but not just this or that place (distinct places) – *every place*, wherever. This may still be a conceptual use of the spatial intuition of *place* or *position* – viewed from the perspective of space.[5]

5 Of course, from a numerical perspective the "all" of *all places* explores the number-idea of the *at once infinite*.

## 4. Individual entities

Every individual entity has a many-sided existence that expresses itself within all modal aspect of reality – either through subject functions or through subject-object relations and object functions. Dooyeweerd correctly emphasizes that the theoretical idea of an individual entity forms the transcendental presupposition of a theoretical analysis of its various modal aspects (Dooyeweerd, 1997-III:65). We have phrased this remark in our preceding analysis by stating that the many-sided (multi-aspectual) existence of concrete entities can never be exhausted by their function within any aspect. The basic idea of two distinct but mutually cohering dimensions of reality, that of modal aspects and of entities, differs both from what is known as a *bundle theory* and a *substratum theory* (see Loux, 2002:97 ff., Ouwendorp, 1994:31-38 and Alt, 2008:6-9). The conditioning role of modal aspects (modal universality) precludes the *substratum* view that we need a substance to be the bearer of its properties and the distinction between the two dimensions explains why an entity cannot be reduced to a combination (*bundle*) of its modal properties.

The main problem in connection with what is universal and individual arises as soon as we introduce the question: what is the relationship between (the universal) law and what is subjected to this law? Practically no-one has a problem with accepting that a law has to be universal.[6] But what about what is subjected to a law? Suppose we hold that what is subjected to law is individual while at the same time defending the position that law delimits and determines whatever is subjected to it. Does it then imply that this determining and delimiting role of universal laws are *individualized* in individual subjects? We may pursue this path further by asking whether or not universal and individual appear at the two ends of a continuum? If the answer is "yes" then it is meaningful to speak of "individualizing" what is universal, but if the answer is "no" this option collapses.

We commence our discussion of this issue by first reflecting on Dooyeweerd's views in this regard.

## 5. Ambiguities in Dooyeweerd's idea of individuality structures

What is particularly ambiguous in Dooyeweerd's thought is his mature conception of the law for individual things, captured in his use of the expression *individuality structures*. Already in 1931 the influence of

6 Of course it should be kept in mind that irrationalistic orientations elevate subjectivity to become the (individual) law.

nominalism is apparent in Dooyeweerd's thought, for at this stage of his intellectual development, he frequently straight-forwardly speaks of "individual structure" (beginning on the first page and continued throughout the work). Sometimes the idea of *meaning* is combined with the notion of an *individual* structure, for example when he refers to the "meaning-individual thing structure of organized human communities" (Dooyeweerd, 1931:111 ff.).

Insofar as Dooyeweerd does not use the term *structure* in the sense of construction (or what has been constructed), but in the sense of "law for", his aim is to account for the law for concretely existing individual things. Yet he does speak of an *individual structure* and sometimes of the 'construction' (Dutch: 'bouw' – see Dooyeweerd, 1936:41) of an entity (in English translated as 'structure' – see Dooyeweerd, 1997-III:60).[7] Yet, as soon as the factual side of reality is at stake, he employs the qualifier *individual* or expresses the conviction that an individual entity *individualizes* the universal meaning of modal aspects.

One particular meaning intended by the phrase *individuality structure* in Dooyeweerd's thought still echoes the mentioned initial (1931) terminology: *individual structure*. An individual(ity) structure may either be a universal law for an individual entity or it may be an "individual structure".[8] In the latter phrase the word 'structure', for Dooyeweerd, cannot designate something universal because it is explicitly qualified as an *individual* structure. For this reason this phrase "individual structure" creates an additional problem because it is truly meant to designate what is individual. However, if the term structure in the phrase "individual structure" is meant to refer to the law side of reality, then it must be universal. The alternative option is to hold that Dooyeweerd intends to use the phrase individuality structure to describe the above-mentioned (factual) construction of an individual entity. However, in this case he would still need to refer to the *structuredness* of such an individual entity – and we have seen that such a *structuredness* remains universal. Although it highlights being this or that (a universal trait), the ultimate qualification given by Dooyeweerd to the factual side is to say that it is individual.

The irony is that being-an-individual is a universal trait shared by *all* individuals, just like being-a-chair is a universal trait shared by all chairs or

7 The terms law, lawfulness, structure and individuality are causing similar ambiguities in the thought of Stafleu (see Stafleu, 1989:44 ff.)

8 We shall later on see that there is also a third option, namely that the term individuality designates a universal trait at the factual side of reality.

being-an-atom one shared by all atoms. This does not entail in any way that we have grasped what-is-individual in a concept, pointing at the necessity of arriving at concept-transcending knowledge in this regard. Because Dooyeweerd does not acknowledge universality at the factual side of reality (wet-matigheid), he constantly confuses what is *individual* with *individuality* – by not realizing that the latter is a universal feature shared by all individuals. One consequence of this confusion is, as mentioned, that Dooyeweerd holds that the (universal!) meaning of modal aspects are *individualized* – contrary to his claim that the functional structure of modal aspects is not affected by "modal individualizations" (Dooyeweerd, 1997-II:423-424). On page 423 (paragraph 3) Dooyeweerd commences by stating that "(M)odal meaning must be individualized" but then – just in the next paragraph – he explains that the "process of individualization, however, does not affect the fundamental functional structure of the modal aspect".

Still, the universal modal meaning of all the aspects cannot be individualized – they can only be *specified*. The reason given for this is that what is universal and what is individual are not two ends of a continuum. These two realities are irreducible. For that reason Dooyeweerd should have investigated instances of *modal specificity* and not of *modal individuality*. Note that Dooyeweerd does not deny law-conformity – he simply identifies it with the law side of reality – also seen in his habit to exchange these two expressions at will. What then about the term *individuality* (as contained in the expression individuality structure)? First we have to highlight once more the important difference between the (i) individual and (ii) individuality.

(i) Dooyeweerd consistently understands 'individual' to mean "strictly individual", i.e. without any discernable universal features.

(ii) From a systematic point of view, however, individuality refers to a trait shared by whatever is individual – which means that individuality is a *universal feature*. This implies that every individual entity displays this universal trait of "being individual" (= having individuality). Goethe realizes this quite clearly, for his answer to the question "what is unique?" is: "millions of instances" (see Von Weizsäcker, 2002:212).

Although Dooyeweerd did have the intention to deal with what is individual, he did not realize that his use of the term *individuality* entails universality. Discussing modal individuality also has the intention to account for concrete individual functions of individual entities within the modal aspects, but in fact it deals with concrete universal functions (because individuality is a universal trait of individual entities).

The ambiguity in Dooyeweerd's account is such that one can opt for two alternatives: either interprets the idea of individuality structures (i) as *structures for* what is individual or (ii) as *structures of* what is individual.

Re. (i): In this case the law is universal and the factual side individual.
Re. (ii): In this case it seems as if there are (universal) *structures of* at the factual side – contradicting his idea of the *individual* factual side.

The issue of what is universal and what is individual also permeated Dooyeweerd's view of the relationship between his "individuality structures" and the modal aspects of reality. The reason for this is that he (correctly!) defends the idea of modal universality, but incorrectly holds the view, as we saw, that the universal can be individualized. Modal laws are not limited to some or other group (or: type) of entities, for every entity in principle functions in all aspects (for that reason they are, strictly speaking, not merely aspects of things). Type laws, by contrast, only hold for a limited class of entities, such as atoms, states or mammals.

Dooyeweerd holds that transient individual entities ought to be distinguished from the *ordering types* to which they are subjected:

> The structural types of plants and animals as such are indeed not individual subjects that originate in the temporal process of becoming for much rather they are ordering types belonging to the law side and not the factual side of our empirical world. They can only realize themselves in transient individual living beings, but as ordering types they necessarily bear a constant and foundational character in the time order (Dooyeweerd, 1959:132); and
>
> Implicitly I have already pointed out earlier that the phyla (in the sense of the highest genotypes [stamtypen] of the realm of plants and animals) cannot come into being and pass away in the process of becoming because they are not themselves "living beings" but much rather order types of individual totalities (Dooyeweerd, 1959:141).

Dooyeweerd's own expression "individuality structure" may be interperted to approximate the simple systematic distinction between universal law and the universal side of individual things at the factual side of reality. However, as soon as Dooyeweerd attempts to account for something structural at the factual side, he reduces (or qualifies) it to be *individual*. For that reason he states what we referred to above, namely that the structural principle (individuality structure) of something (such as the linden tree), "individualizes the modal functions and groups them together in a typical way within the cadre of an individual whole" (Dooyeweerd, 1997-III:76). Elsewhere he writes: "Here we grasp reality in the typical totality-structures of individual things,

concrete events, concrete social relationships, etc., in which all modal aspects are typically individualized and integrated in unbroken coherence, grouped together as a whole without any analytical distinction between the modal aspects themselves" (Dooyeweerd, 1996:9). Also compare his qualification of 'subjectivity' by the use of the word 'individual': "The origin of Law and of individual subjectivity , ..." (Dooyeweerd, 1997-I:507).

Just like Dooyweeerd's notion of an individuality structure is burdened by the idea of an *individual structure* (the underlying issue of what is universal and what is individual), his view of the relation between an individuality structure and (universal) modal aspects gets entangled in the untenable view that the universal meaning of modal aspects can be individualized. The typical way in which an individual entity functions within the modal aspects solely specifies that meaning in accordance with the type law concerned. The simplest example of a modal function of an individual entity (therefore appreciated according to its concrete individual side), is that this (one) chair is not that (other) chair.

We may repeat the underlying issue once more succinctly: what is universal and what is individual are not the two ends of a continuum – for if they were, the distinction between them would collapse. Therefore, neither (universal) individuality structures nor (universal) modal aspects could be individualized. Yet, appearing at the factual side of reality, concrete entities function in a twofold way within modal aspects:

(i) In a concrete *individual* way (*this* entity and not *that* entity);
(ii) In a concrete *universal* way (this *type* of entity and not that *type* of entity).

Vollenhoven did realize that universality and what is individual both appear at the 'subject' side of reality. He also properly distinguishes between law and lawfulness (see Vollenhoven, 2005:16 and Strauss, 2006). Yet he did not develop an articulated idea of type laws. Dooyeweerd in turn does distinguish between modal laws and type laws but he blurred this distinction by accepting two untenable assumptions: (i) that whatever appears at the factual side of reality must be individual and – as a consequence of (i) – (ii) that law and lawfulness (law and law-conformity) are the same.

The explanation for this confusion is that Dooyeweerd did not escape from the influence of nominalism in this regard. Nominalism does not accept any universal trait outside the human mind – in reality there are solely individual entities, without any universal characteristics.

In passing it may be noted that Stafleu introduced a substitute for his former use of the phrase "typical laws" or the term "typicality" (see Stafleu,

1980:6,11). He now gives preference to the term "character" as a general designation of a "cluster of laws of similar things, events or their relations" (Stafleu, 2002:9). The only connotation that may help to strengthen the intuitive appeal of the term 'character', is given in its apparent implicit reference to the "nature" of things, allowing for classifying certain groups of things, distinct from other groups or classes of things.

Even so, Stafleu does not intend to introduce the term character as "the essence or nature of things" or processes, for he wants to emphasize that a cluster of laws determines the mutual relations between things and processes (Stafleu, 2002:9). It seems that Stafleu, in his fear for what he calls 'essentialism', underplays the thingness of things by focusing on *relations*. This emphasis comes dangerously close to *functionalism* – that ism that functionalizes entities (the opposite of hypostatization or reification – treating a function as if it were an entity, such as when biologists speak of the origin of 'life' instead of the origin of living things).

Both *modal terms* and *metaphors* fail to fully account for the dimensional uniqueness of (natural and social) entities and processes. For this reason, it is impossible to find a so-called *principium individuationis* (principle of individuation) within any modal aspect, such as the aspect of number. Things are not individual, because they are many – they are many because they are individually distinct. Naturally, being individual does not exclude the co-conditioning role of the quantitative aspect of reality, but it is always more than that**.**

## 6. Conclusion

It appeared that universality and what is individual relate both to the dimensions of aspects and entities and to the irreducibility of the numerical and spatial aspects, because these two aspects co-condition the conceptual and concept-transcending use that we make of numerical and spatial terms in our articulation of the nature of universality and what is individual. It also turned out that the widely used formulation of this problem is misguided, namely when universality and individuality are opposed, because individuality is a "universal" – being individual (displaying individuality) is a universal feature pertaining to every individual.[9]

9 Recall the view of Goethe in response to the question "what is unique?" His answer is: "millions of instances."

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