

Leśniewski against universals (fragments of his texts)

“It is characteristic of the above mentioned conceptions of 'universal objects' or 'general objects' that they sometimes induce even extremely powerful minds to indulge in misleading and aimless 'speculations'. Surveying the numerous critiques of such conceptions, we come across various theoretical missives, aimed by different authors at different forms of 'universal objects'. To mention only: Berkeley's 'classical' polemic with 'realism'; or Husserl's polemic with Locke's 'conceptualistic' idea of 'general triangles' and also with Prof. Twardowski's 'objects of general representations'; or Marty's polemic with 'universal objects' in Husserl's 'idealistic' conceptions. Since from all arguments against 'general objects' familiar to me I could not extract any *proof* of the fact that no object is such a 'general object', I shall attempt to present here such a proof. Considering the large variety of the existing conceptions of 'general objects' - I shall try to formulate my reasoning in a form so general that it can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to different variants of the conceptions in question. 'General objects', according to the various authors dealing with them, possess a single characteristic property and that irrespective of particular forms assumed by those objects it) the different systems iii which they exist either as e.g.: 'notions' in the sense of ancient and medieval 'realism', or Locke's 'general ideas', or Twardowski's objects of general representations', or Husserl's 'ideal' objects existing 'outside time'. This property consists in this that the object which is allegedly 'general' with respect to a group of 'individual' objects can possess only those properties which are common to all corresponding 'individual' objects. If any property does not belong to all 'individual' objects of a certain group but only to some of them, then the 'general' object corresponding to a given group of 'individual' objects cannot possess this property. For example, the 'realists' 'notion of triangle', Locke's 'general idea of triangle', Prof. Twardowski's 'object of general representation of triangle', Husserl's 'ideal' 'triangle in general' - possess the property of triangularity which is common to all 'individual' triangles, but do not possess, for instance, the property of being equilateral or isosceles, which does not belong to all triangles but only to some of them. In order to prove the thesis that no object is 'general', I shall argue by *reductio ad absurdum*. I assume that there is an object P_k which is 'general' and it corresponds to 'individual objects' $P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots, P_n$; for every 'individual object' P_k , one can always find certain property c_k which is not common to all 'individual' objects $P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots, P_n$. On the basis of the above the 'general object' P_k does not possess the property c_k (I). The 'individual' object P_k possessing the property c_k does not possess the property of not possessing the property c_k . It is so because if it possessed the property of not possessing the property c_k , i.e. if it was not possessed of the property c_k , then it would be contradictory since it would be an object both possessing and not possessing the property c_k . The property of not possessing the property c_k is not common to all 'individual' objects $P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots, P_n$ because any 'individual' object P_k possesses the property c_k . Consequently the 'general' object P_k cannot possess the property of not possessing the property c_k , therefore it is not possessed of the property c_k , *ergo* it possesses the property c_k (II). From the comparison of the theses (I) and (II) it follows that the assumption that any object P_k is 'general' leads to contradiction because it implies that this object both possesses the property c_k (I) and does not possess it (II). We conclude that the assumption that any object is 'general' is false. I believe that the above reasoning demonstrates that no object is a universal or a general object. I shall now apply this form of reasoning to a particular case mentioned above: I assume that any objects P_k, P_l, P_m, P_n fall under 'concept of triangle' in the realistic sense; or the 'object of general idea of triangle' of Locke, or 'the object of the general representation of a triangle' of Twardowski, or the 'ideal triangle' in Husserl's sense. The objects P_k, P_l, P_m, P_n do not possess the property of being equilateral (III) because this property is not common to all 'individual' triangles. For the same reason, the objects P_k, P_l, P_m, P_n do not possess the property of not possessing the property of being equilateral, i.e. are not not-possessed of the property of being equilateral, i.e. are possessed of the property of being equilateral, i.e. possess the property of being equilateral (IV). The comparison of the theses (III) and (IV) shows that the assumption that any objects P_k, P_l, P_m, P_n are the 'concept of a triangle' in 'realists' sense, the 'general idea of triangle' in Locke's sense, the 'object of general representation of triangle' in Twardowski's sense, the 'ideal triangle' in Husserl's sense - leads to the contradiction because the assumption implies that these objects both do not possess the property of being equilateral (III) and possess it (IV). Hence I arrive at a conclusion that the assumption that some objects are the 'concept of a triangle', the 'general idea of triangle', the 'object of general

representation of triangle', or the 'ideal triangle' - is false. If my present reasoning proves to be correct, it would amount to a proof-based 'death sentence' on 'realism', 'conceptualism', Twardowski's theory of 'general representation', Husserl's 'idealism', and similar theories."

"I devoted a passage of the work entitled 'The Critique of the Logical Principle of the Excluded Middle' to a critique of the concepts of the 'general objects'. Attempting to prove that 'no object is a 'general' object', I stated in that passage that regardless of the specific forms which the 'general object' takes according to various thinkers and which appears in different systems either as 'concept' in the meaning of the ancient or 'medieval' 'realism', or - as 'general ideas' of Locke or 'representative general objects' of Professor Twardowski, or again - as 'ideal' objects of Husserl existing 'beyond time' - those objects possess, for such authors, a certain characteristic peculiarity consisting in this, that 'the object', which is allegedly a 'general object' with respect to some group of 'individual' objects, can possess only those features which are common to all the 'individual' objects corresponding to them. At the time I wrote that passage I believed that there are in existence in this world so called features and so called relations, as two special kinds of objects, and I felt no scruples about using the expressions 'feature' and 'relations'. It is a long time since I believed in the existence of objects which are features, or in the existence of objects which are relations and now nothing induces me to believe in the existence of such objects [...] and in situations of a more 'delicate' character I do not use the expressions 'feature' and 'relation' without the application of various extensive precautions and circumlocutions. I also have no inclination at present - considering the possibility of various interpretational misunderstandings - to ascribe this or that opinion on the question of 'general objects' to the authors mentioned in the passage quoted above. However, in connection with that passage and with reference to all those who, by reason of the meaning they give to expressions of the type 'general object with respect to objects a , are inclined to state the proposition 'if X is a general object with respect to objects a , X is b , and Y is a , then Y is b ', I wish to state here that this proposition entails the proposition 'if there exist at least two different a , then a general object with respect to objects a does not exist', in accordance with the following schema:

- (1) if X is a general object with respect to objects a , X is b , also Y is a , then Y is b . (assumption)
from (1) it result, that
- (2) if X is a general object with respect to objects a , X is different from Z , and Z is a , then Z is different from Z , and
- (3) if X is a general object with respect to objects a , X is identical with Z , and Y is a , then Y is identical with Z ; from (2) it follows, that
- (4) if X is a general object with respect to objects a , and Z is a , then X is identical with Z ,
from (4) however, that,
- (5) if X is a general object with respect to objects a , Z is a , and Y is a , then (X is a general object with respect to objects a , X is identical with Z , and Y is a); from (5) and (3) it follows, that,
- (6) if X is a general object with respect to objects a , Z is a , and Y is a , then Y is identical with Z ,

from (6) however, that, if there exist at least two different a , then a general object with respect to objects a , does not exist. (This schema would retain value, *mutatis mutandis*, if instead of expressions of the type e.g., 'general object with respect to objects a ' one used in an analogous way some other expressions of the type 'the general object a ' or expressions of the type 'the general object concept a '). I regard my treatment as the result of a careful formulation of theoretical tendencies involved, more or less explicitly, in the argumentation of opponents of the different kinds of 'universals' in various phases of their 'disputes' about them. If one takes the position that this assertion is a banal one, I would cite in defense the circumstance that exponents of 'philosophy' defend, regrettably often, positions at variance with banal assertions."