Universal, Particular, and Indefinite Terms

I. Lesson

"Now of actual things some are universal, others particular (I call universal that which is by its nature predicated of a number of things, and particular that which is not; man, for instance, is a universal, Callias a particular)."

-Aristotle, *On Interpretation* (Barnes)

As we can see from this passage in *On Interpretation*, Aristotle uses the categories, "universal" and "particular" to divide terms into two groups. Today, philosophers have taken the ideas of Aristotle and have categorized terms into three groups:

- **Universal**: A *universal* is a term that clearly refers to *all* of the instances of a given thing in reality. For instance, "all humans," "every animal," or "each school."
- **Particular:** A *particular* is a term that clearly refers to a specific, singular thing in reality. For instance, "Martin Luther King Jr.," "that zebra," or "University of California, Berkeley."
- **Indefinite:** An *indefinite* refers to *at least some* of the instances of a given thing in reality. For instance, "some humans," "a few animals," "some schools" or "humans" If it refers to *at least some* of the relevant instances, it could refer to all instances (universal), or to only a subset (non-universal).

Let us stop for a moment and take a closer look at how these terms are formed. Often, a term succeeds in referring to a certain number of objects by appearing after a **quantifier**. A quantifier is a word that clarifies how many objects a term refers to. For instance, the term "all humans" features an **all-quantifier** ("all") which tells us that we are talking about all objects under the heading, "humans". Quantifiers also allow universal and indefinite terms to take a *negative form*, with words like "no" or "never" in universal judgments, or "few" in indefinite judgments. For example, the term "no dogs" is a universal term with a **no-quantifier**: the no-quantifier tells us that we are talking about all dogs, only such that something is *not* true of them (consider, "no dogs are purple", which says universally of *all* dogs that they are not purple).

Sometimes, however, we can tell when a term is universal, particular, or indefinite, even when no quantifier appears. For instance, if the subject of a proposition does not have a quantifier like "all," "no," or "some," then it is generally *indefinite*, as it refers to *at least some*, and perhaps *all* of a kind of thing. For example, if the claim "Galaxies are large" was made, the term "Galaxies" is indefinite because the claim might be that "Galaxies, *in general*, are large (and there are a few exceptions)" or that "Galaxies, *by nature*, are large" and thus that "*All* galaxies are large".

It is worth noting that there are some terms that are neither universal, particular, or indefinite. For instance, "exactly two of the hundreds of figs" is not universal, since it does not refer to all of the figs, and for the reason that it *cannot* refer to all of the figs, it is not indefinite. Finally, since it does not refer to a single fig, it is not particular. However, these kinds of terms are rare and will not be our concern in our exploration of logic.

I. Examples

(1) Take the proposition "All dogs are mammals." We can see that there are two terms in this proposition: "all dogs" and "mammals." We cannot determine whether "mammals" is universal just by its nature of being a predicate in a universal affirmative proposition (we will discuss this in the later lesson *Distributed Versus Undistributed*.) But we do know that we are talking about at least one mammal, if not all mammals. Therefore, "mammals" is an indefinite term. However, we can tell that "All dogs" is a universal term. It refers to all the dogs in reality.

(2) If we were to take a negative universal claim, we would see that we can understand more about the nature of its terms. For example, take the proposition "No humans are cats." In this proposition, we have two terms: "no humans" and "cats." If no humans are cats, then it follows that no cats are humans. Thus, we can see that we are involved in a claim that deals with *all* humans and *all* cats. Therefore, we may conclude that "No humans" is a universal term and that "cats" is a universal term.

(3) Suppose we have the proposition, "Some pigments are pretty colors." We once again have two terms: "some pigments" and "pretty colors." We are not explicitly claiming anything about *all* of the pretty colors necessarily, but it's certainly *possible* that all pretty colors are necessarily pigments. Thus, we say that "pretty colors" is indefinite. Likewise, we know that "some pigments" is indefinite, because it explicitly refers to at least some of the pigments in reality.

(4) Now if we had the proposition "Some pigments are not pretty colors," we would be saying something about all pretty colors. Specifically, that there aren't any pretty colors that describe "some pigments." Therefore, we see that "pretty colors" is a universal term, while "some pigments" is an indefinite one.

(5) Finally, take the proposition "Archie is a dog." We have two terms in this proposition: "Archie" and "a dog." Both of these refer to only a particular thing. Archie is a single thing, and a dog is a single thing. Thus, we see that both "Archie" and "a dog" are particular terms.

II. Exercises

Exercise 1

Let's say we have the following four Propositions (do not worry if they are true or false):

1) All zebras are animals.
2) No zebras are animals.
3) Some zebras are animals.
4) Some zebras are not animals.

Write down the terms in each proposition, and distinguish whether each term is universal, particular, or indefinite.

Exercise 2

Write whether the following terms, if they were to be used as the subject of a proposition, are universal, particular, or indefinite.

Ex) Many people; answer: indefinite

1.) Aristotle
2.) All birds
3.) Some trees
4.) No songs
5.) Every planet
6.) Few numbers
7.) Immanuel Kant
8.) None of all of the books
9.) A few of the board games

Exercise 3 (Challenge)

For each of the following propositions, determine the terms and write what they are. Then write whether they are universal, particular, or indefinite. Explain why this is the case.

Ex.) The sky is blue.

Answer: there are two terms in this proposition: "the sky" and "blue." "The sky" is a particular term because it only refers to a single sky. "Blue," however, is not referring to all instances of blueness necessarily, so it is indefinite (it is at least referring to some instance of blueness).

1.) The road is long.
2.) No humans are reptiles.
3.) Schools are exciting.
4.) Logic is great!
5.) Aristotle is Plato's student.
6.) Some people are not friendly.
7.) Philosophers love philosophy.
8.) This summer is hot.

III. Conclusion

It is important to understand whether a term is universal, particular, or indefinite to really understand the way that terms relate to one another. One must understand if a claim involves all (or none) of a given type of thing, one of a given type of thing, or some of a given type of thing. A misunderstanding of these ideas can lead to a myriad of logical fallacies where propositions are improperly converted. For instance, one might erroneously say that because "All humans are mammals," therefore "All mammals are humans." This invalid reasoning could arise if one does not understand that the first of the two claims does not necessarily refer to *all* mammals, whereas the second one does.

IV. Lesson Goals

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand the difference between universal, particular, and indefinite terms
- Understand the distinction between terms and their quantifiers
- Categorize a specific term just by examining its quantifier
- Understand how different types of propositions use different types of terms (more on this in units of the categorical propositions)

Answer Key:

Exercise 1

1.) The terms are “all zebras” and “animals.” “All zebras” is a universal term because it refers to all possible zebras. “Animals” is indefinite, because it could refer to all of the animals (universal) or only a subset of animals.
2.) The terms are “no zebras” and “animals.” Both “zebras” and “animals” are universal, because the claim refers to all zebras not being animals. Thus, it would be valid to say as a result that no animals are zebras.
3.) The terms are “some zebras” and “animals.” The term “some zebras” is indefinite because it refers to at least some (and perhaps all) zebras. “Animals” is indefinite, because it could refer to all of the animals (universal) or only a subset of animals.
4.) The terms are “some zebras” and “animals.” The term “some zebras” is indefinite because it refers to *at least* certain subset of zebras. On the other hand, “animals” is universal because the claim is that no animal could be described as being just those zebras referred to by the subject (since some zebras are not animals).

Exercise 2

1.) Particular
2.) Universal
3.) Indefinite
4.) Universal
5.) Universal
6.) Indefinite
7.) Particular
8.) Universal
9.) Indefinite

Exercise 3

1.) The two terms in this proposition are “the road” and “long.” The term “the road” is particular because it refers to a single road. On the other hand, “long” is indefinite because it refers to a at least a subset of instances of longness (it could be one instance or it could be all instances).
2.) The two terms in this proposition are “no humans” and “reptiles.” The term “no humans” is universal, because the claim negates all humans. “Reptiles” is also universal, because it follows that if no humans are reptiles, then no reptiles are humans. Thus, the claim negates all reptiles.

3.) The two terms in this proposition are "schools" and "exciting." The term "schools" is indefinite, because the absence of the modifiers "all," "no," or "some" means that the proposition could express that schools *generally* are exciting, or that *all* schools are exciting. "Exciting" is indefinite because the claim could be referring to some instance(s) of exciting things or all instances of exciting things.
4.) The two terms in this proposition are "logic" and "great." The term "logic" is particular, because it refers to the single subject, logic. "Great" is indefinite, because the claim could be referring to some instance(s) of great things or all instances of great things.
5.) The two terms in this proposition are "Aristotle" and "Plato's student." The term "Aristotle" is particular because it refers to a singular thing: the person of Aristotle. "Plato's student" is indefinite because it refers to a subset of Plato's students, but it could be one of Plato's students or all of Plato's students (if Plato had only one student).
6.) The two terms in this proposition are "some people" and "friendly." The term "some people" is indefinite because it refers to at least a subset of people, but "friendly" is universal because the claim is that *no* friendly things are those people referred to by the subject.
7.) The two terms in this proposition are "philosophers" and "philosophy." "philosophers" is indefinite, since the proposition does not make clear whether it expresses that philosophers *generally* love philosophy or that *all* philosophers love philosophy. If one interprets "philosophy" to refer to the subject, then it is particular. If one interprets it to refer to instances of the action of philosophizing, then it is indefinite.
8.) The two terms in this proposition are "this summer" and "hot." The term "this summer" is particular, because it refers to a singular thing: a particular summer. "Hot" is indefinite because it refers to at least a subset of "hot things". But it could refer to just a subset of hot things or to *all* of them (if this summer is the only hot thing).