Problem of Universals in Medieval Philosophy. Question 1.4 The Problem of Universals in Medieval (and later) Philosophy 1. Explain, as best you can, the Problem of Universals; and then state (and critique) the main philosophical (metaphysical) theories that claim to answer questions about universals. Please follow the following template. First, you should explain, as best you can, what questions theories of universals are meant to answer. According to Crumley, for example, they are (1) attribute agreement and (2) abstract reference. Explain what he means, with some short quotes from his just-published book An Introduction to Metaphysics. Attribute Agreement refers to our ability – in thought and speech – to speak of an “element” or “property” (such as redness or courage) as occurring in many different places (that is, in many different individuals or particulars) at the same time. (Crumley, p. 107) It is then argued that accepting the existence of universals is the best way to explain our ability to speak of Attribute Agreement. (Ibid., p. 113) Common nouns – or any substantive word or concept – such as “horse” or “duck” seem to refer not only to all members of those classes (horses and ducks) but sometimes seem also to refer to the KINDS themselves. This is known as Abstract Reference. (Crumley, p. 113) It is then argued that accepting the existence of universals is the best way to explain our ability to utilize Abstract Reference in our thought and speech. (Ibid., p. 113) Second, you should say what universals are usually said to refer to (among those who believe they exist). There are two primary categories that almost all philosophers accept as potential referents of “universals.” These two categories are (1) properties (sensory and any other kind, including relational properties to other entities) and (2) kinds (i.e. the classes of things that a particular entity (or event, process, etc.) belongs to. For example, you have very many properties and also you belong to many different kinds (or classes). You have a material composition (so you have the property of corporeality), you are a life form (and thus have the property of being animate), you are an animal (no offense … just meaning “not a plant”), you are a homo sapiens, you are a person, you are a human being, you are both a moral entity (i.e. object of moral concern) and a moral agent (an entity that can be held morally responsible for its intentional actions), you are a college student, you are a college student currently studying at USD, etc., etc., etc. (Think here of Yul Brenner saying this while portraying the 1860s Thai King in the 1956 movie musical “The King and I”. See 14 second video clip at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JHH6iwgIek .) Third, define “Universals” in terms of whether they can be said to exist in space and/or time, in comparison to material entities (events, etc.) and mental entities (events, etc.) The name for this general class of things is “abstract entities.” (You might want to make a small chart here to illustrate these distinctions, as we did on the whiteboard in class.) Fourth, another way to try to explain what universals are supposed to be – though certainly not the only way – is to classify them (i.e. universals) in terms of (A) particulars, (B) categories (or sets) of particulars, and (C) abstract entities. Consider first (A) particulars and (B) categories (or sets) of particulars (setting aside considering them as abstract entities other than their extensions in terms of sets (or classes). Almost every thinker (with a considered view on the subject) thinks that there are particulars … although what kinds of things fit under this category is a matter of some debate. Common Sense claims that we know many universals as correlated to our general words (and categories) for macrophysical objects (and events), both natural and human-made things. And as G.E. Moore once pointed out, the Common Sense view also accepts mental acts (or states) and the minds (or selves?) that have them. And, as Wilfried Sellars tells us, we can’t get by without having certain kinds of normative categories, such as the basic normative category of being a moral entity (that is, anything deserving moral concern or having moral standing, aka having intrinsic moral value) as well as the concept of a “person” and the concepts of duty, freedom, responsibility, which are probably, in some sense, based on the concept of a person. But that’s only to describe basic categories and universals from the Common Sense Worldview. From the Scientific Realist point of view it is really the microphysical entities and events (and connected facts about the general structure of the material world or reality), rather than the macrophysical entities (and events) that are really important and are said to be the “really existing things” (as opposed to macrophysical objects). (It is at this point, in some conversations, that Wilfried Sellars would emphasize this point by saying things like: “Yes…. Dogs and Cats, Trees and Bushes, Black Holes and Regular Holes, and Cabbages and Kings are all ‘real in some sense’… but are they REALLY Real?” He never bothered adding that in his view only the theoretical entities of science were “really real” (besides qualia and normative categories such as the categories of a person, duties, and rights). But he didn’t have to, because his position on this metaphysical issue was well known to all assembled.) But universals can also be considered as being part of the category of (C) abstract entities. If I say “There are about 100 sheep on that hillside” I am so far only talking about individuals. If I move on to talking about the group (or “set”) of sheep on a hill then I am NOT YET talking about a group (or set) as such, and thus we have not yet gone beyond a strictly empiricist-naturalist metaphysical landscape. But if we say something about a kind of thing – such as “Sheep are mammals” – then we seem to be acknowledging that kind of thing as an abstract entity. Also if we talk about “sets” or “classes” in the mathematical sense then we are recognizing them as abstract entities. (In fact, even though W.V.O. Quine is a “desert ontologist” – as opposed to a “jungle ontologist” – and would very much like to be a Nominalist on the Question of Abstract Entities, he argues that science needs mathematics and, thus, we are forced to acknowledge all the entities postulated by classical mathematics (numbers, series, sets, functions, equations, etc.). This has become known as the “Quine-Putnam Indispensability Thesis”.) And, as Bertrand Russell had observed even earlier, in merely comparing one particular to others we need to acknowledge the general concept (or category) of similarity (between things). For this reason Russell essentially threw in the towel and gave up on Nominalism and opened to floodgates to many kinds of universals. It seems that, for Russell, once the nominalist dam had been breached it didn’t matter how many things poured over the top of it. Yet some Nominalists deny the existence of universals in any sense, even as completely non-artificial and non-arbitrary concepts. 2. Define the four major positions on universals by late Medieval times, and mention at least one major philosopher -- other than St. Thomas Aquinas – who advocates each position. (Be sure to cover both the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of each position, to the extent that both aspects have been covered in our readings and in class lectures.) Namely: absolute realism, moderate realism, conceptualism, and nominalism. (Feel free to make a chart here if you think it might be helpful for understanding the Problem of Universals.) (By the way, in his book Introduction to Metaphysics, Jack Crumley speaks of the three major theories about universals; but this is only a verbal dispute with our position that there are four such theories (with any number of versions) since Crumley counts absolute realism and moderate realism as being versions (or subcategories) of the position of Realism. Also, whenever Crumley just says “realism” or “realist” he is referring to what we call absolute or Platonic realism; when he is speaking of moderate realism he always notes that he is speaking of “moderate realism.”) 3. Explain Aquinas' position of Ante Rem, In Re, and Post Rem universals and how he arrived at this position of absolute realism given that he is a thorough-going Aristotelian in terms of his philosophical views (and, thus, would probably – at least initially – be most attracted to the position of moderate realism). 4. Explain William of Ockham's position on universals. Which of the four positions would be chosen if we only used "Ockham's Razor" (i.e. the principle of simplicity)? State another general methodological principle that might "trump" "Ockham's Razor" and that might force us to choose a theory that is not the simplest in terms of the number of kinds of entities posited. How might this apply to the debate over universals? 5. Describe how Noam Chomsky's theory of the "deep structure of natural language" and Jerry Fodor's related theory of the "language of thought" seems to impact the problem of universals. Do these theories necessarily pick only one of the four major theories of universals? Or do they only eliminate one (or more) of them as plausible theories? If so, which one (or ones)? 6. If you haven’t done so already, please give some short quotes from Jack Crumley, Introduction to Metaphysics, chapter 4 (on Universals) on at least some of the different theories of universals he defines and explains, and anything he says about them in his analysis that you think is interesting and important. 7. Which of the four general positions on universals do you think is best? Why? (You might have to point out the version of one of the theories, in some cases.) 8. In addition to the types that the ancient philosophers called "forms" and which Medieval (and later) philosophers have called "universals,” can you think of any other kinds of abstract entities that might exist (with some theorists arguing that they do exist in one form or another, and other theorists arguing that they don’t exist at all). By definition, we shall stipulate, abstract entities (if they exist) are not material and do not exist in space and time). If so, what are these other things, if they should be said to exist?