Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy
Volume 16, Number 6 (2026)

The Problem of Universals Revisited

Margaret Macdonald's Encounter with A. J. Ayer

Scott Metzger
scott.metzger@utoronto.ca
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

This work contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Margaret Macdonald by advancing an interpretation of her early work on pragmatism, communication, and generality. I connect her pragmatist theory of universals to the problem of universals in analytic philosophy by recovering her encounter with A. J. Ayer at the Aristotelian Society in 1933. I argue that Macdonald was not interested in the theory of universals as a problem for metaphysics, but rather, as offering a plausible solution to a more pressing issue concerning the problem of solipsism in communication. After presenting Ayer's position as a response to Russell and Ramsey on universals, I examine Macdonald's criticisms of Ayer by setting them against the backdrop of her doctoral work on C. S. Peirce. While Ayer had difficulty accounting for the role universals play in our communicative practices, Macdonald thought that difficulty overcome by turning to Peirce on universals and reality.

1. Setting the Stage

The problem of universals was an issue of prime importance for the first generation of analytic philosophers. Fraser MacBride has traced its genealogy from Kant to Frank Ramsey as it unfolded in venues like the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society in the first half of the twentieth century (MacBride 2018). This paper contributes to our understanding of that genealogy by recovering an encounter which has gone unnoticed in our historical accounts; that between Margaret Macdonald and A. J. Ayer at the Aristotelian Society on 11 December 1933.

At that meeting Ayer entered the ring concerning universals, reconstructing the particular-universal distinction anew out of relations among sense data (Ayer 1933). The "Minutes" state that Susan Stebbing was in the chair and "Miss Macdonald" (Stebbing's graduate student), was among the discussants.[1] Macdonald reported to Max Black that "Ayer's meeting was very good" and that "he is a bright young man though a little affected and 'Oxford'" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 85).[2] She raised some concerns in the discussion which she relayed to Black. She saw an affinity between Ayer and the American pragmatist, C. I. Lewis: "Ayer is very impressed. . .with. . .'Mind & World Order'" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 86). "For Lewis (and Ayer accepts this view)", she explained, "there is the Bergsonian flux or stream of experiences or ineffable 'qualia' about which individually nothing can be said" and onto which "we impose 'conceptual order' by means of definitions, in the interests of adaptation and control" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 86). Ayer had begun with sense data (which Macdonald likened to Lewis's given) and defined the difference between particulars and universals in terms of the way each is constructed from what is given in experience. "But as I objected to Ayer in the discussion", she continued, "can you speak of knowledge or error on this view? For what is there to know? The relations between a stream of disembodied 'qualia'?" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 86). If our knowledge of universals is explained via relations among sense data, and that data is ultimately private, then how do we verify whether universals are real features of our common world, and not simply products of our own construction? Further still, how do we communicate about them if they are constructed from our private sense data? Genuine knowledge must be communicable.

She sharpened her critique a year later while conducting her postdoctoral research at Girton College, Cambridge. "My point is this," she again elaborated to Black, Ayer says that

> when I use such words as ['red'] I am referring to sense data. Now a universal is obviously not a particular sense datum or generality would be impossible. They [Ayer and the logical positivists] can only interpret

[1] See, "Abstract of the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society for the Fifty-Fifth Session, 1933–1934" (1934) for the full list of discussants. Notably, Gilbert Ryle was also in attendance.

[2] References to Macdonald's letters to Max Black refer to Kremer and Misak's volume, which includes their surviving correspondence.

> the words in terms of a relation of similarity between sense data and that (in spite of Ayer) seems to me to raise all the old nominalistic difficulties. (Kremer and Misak 2025, 107)

She did not wish to make universals "into Platonic mysteries, but to interpret them in terms of sense data and relations of similarity between them seems to me equally unsatisfactory at the moment" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 107). Taken out of context, it is difficult to feel the weight of Macdonald's worries, and we are left in the dark as to what, exactly, she thought a satisfactory account of universals amounts to. Not to mention that Ayer blatantly presented his position in opposition to nominalism, suggesting that Macdonald may have simply misunderstood him.

Macdonald was pressing an issue Ayer only scratched the surface of; one concerning the role universal terms play in communication. By setting her criticisms of Ayer against the backdrop of her own work on the problem of universals, I contextualize her critique and articulate the theory of universals she thought worthy to replace it. For Macdonald encountered Ayer at a pivotal moment in her philosophical development, while working toward her own pragmatist theory of universals, which she recovered from an extensive study of Charles Peirce, Frank Ramsey, and C. I. Lewis in the years spanning 1932–1937. In 1933, while researching Peirce and Lewis for her doctoral thesis, she confessed to Black that Peirce had her tied up in "several knots about universals" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 83). A month later, after attending Ayer's talk, she sent Black her copy of Ayer's Aristotelian Society paper alongside her own on Peirce and universals, which she had submitted for publication in *Mind*, but was rejected by G. E. Moore.[3] I believe that Macdonald's work on Peirce and Lewis informed her critique of Ayer. That is why she brought Lewis up to Ayer in discussion at the meeting; and that is why she sent Black her Peirce paper alongside Ayer's a month later. But what, exactly, did she think these pragmatists had to offer the problem of universals?

I shall argue that Macdonald was not interested in the theory of universals as a problem for metaphysics, but rather, as offering a plausible solution to a more pressing issue in the philosophy of language and communication. For if the meaning of every proposition is determined by its verification in *my* experience, then how do I know that we understand

[3] Misak tells the story (2025a, 2025b).

each other when we communicate? We need a theory of generality, or universals, to establish understanding in communication, otherwise we would be left imprisoned in our own private language unable to communicate anything to one another. To give a *description* (metaphysical or otherwise) of the difference between particulars and universals says nothing, Macdonald thought, unless you then go on to explain how terms expressing the particulars and universals *so described* operate in acts of communication. This problem was the impetus for her dissertation and she thought it best solved by developing a pragmatic theory of universals. According to the pragmatist position she would ultimately defend, universals are "rule[s] of conduct or. . .guide[s] for behavior" (Macdonald, Ryle, and Berlin 1937, 107). "To make a communication," we will see, "is to establish or activate a similar habit which will give rise to similar future behaviour in another" (Macdonald 1935, 128). Peirce and Lewis thought that we understand one another by making the "common world a social construction exhibited in the congruent behaviour of human beings" (Macdonald 1934a, 106). This position shares similarities with Ayer's own commitment to behaviourism but was set against logical positivism more generally by rejecting underlying nominalistic assumptions which make the individual, as opposed to the community, the grand arbiter of knowledge and their private experience the source of its verification. Neither individualism nor reduction to sense experience had a place in the pragmatist framework Macdonald was busy recovering from C. S. Peirce.[4]

I will begin by presenting Ayer's paper (which Macdonald experienced first-hand) as a response to Russell and Ramsey. Then I will turn to Macdonald and extract her Peircean theory of universals from her dissertation and early papers. I will conclude by returning to the criticisms

[4]One might worry that my argument overlooks the concerns Macdonald raised about pragmatism in her dissertation (Macdonald 1934a, 176–77). She does not endorse pragmatism willy-nilly but raises three arguments against the pragmatist position concerning 1) idealism, 2) the possibility of knowledge, and 3) our biological needs. These are very real concerns which I am busy addressing in another paper currently under development. As I understand it, Macdonald's concerns are directed at Lewis's pragmatism. While in her dissertation she worries the same issues might also confront Peirce's position, she ultimately defends Peirce against these criticisms in her *C. S. Peirce on Language* (1935). My position here is that Macdonald is recovering a distinctly *Peircean* theory of universals which she absolved of these worries in 1935.

she brought against Ayer in the above-mentioned letters, presenting them in the right light at last.

2. That Great Muddle

It is helpful to recall what was at stake in what Ramsey called "that great muddle the theory of universals" (Ramsey [1925] 1931, 134). MacBride has laid down the intricate history of this debate, presenting Ramsey as the bookend to a trajectory which began with Kant and passed through Moore, Russell, Whitehead, Stout, and Wittgenstein. To understand where Ayer was coming from in 1933, it's helpful to recount Russell's and Ramsey's work on these issues.

The problem of universals was revitalized, at least within the Aristotelian Society, first by G. E. Moore in 1901, and then most forcefully by Russell in his 1911 presidential address. There Russell defended a version of categorical dualism which declared for two kinds of entities: universals and particulars. The distinction was previously muddled because sometimes it was drawn psychologically (particulars are percepts while universals are concepts), sometimes metaphysically (particulars are entities existing in time, while universals are entities existing outside of time), and sometimes logically or linguistically (particulars are denoted by substantives while universals by verbs). Russell's task was to show that it is a mistake to admit either universals or particulars while denying the other. We cannot admit universals while denying particulars because material things are not simply bundles of universals. Conversely, we cannot admit particulars while denying universals because we at least require a theory of universal likeness to account for the "qualitative similarity of numerically diverse things" (MacBride 2018, 205). In the end, Russell divided all entities into two classes:

1) Particulars, which enter into complexes only as the subjects of predicates or terms of relations, and, if they belong to the world of which we have experience, exist in time, and cannot occupy more than one place at one time in the space to which they belong;

2) Universals, which can occur as predicates or relations in complexes, do not exist in time, and have no relation to one place which they may not simultaneously have to another. (Russell 1911, 23–24)

Russell blended logical and metaphysical aspects of the universal-particular distinction. The logical part makes subject terms refer to particulars and predicates and relations to universals. The metaphysical part adds that particulars *capable of being experienced* can only occupy one place at one time, while universals may occupy many places at once.

Russell's account of the distinction held for a little while. But Ramsey overturned it in *Mind* in 1925. Never mind the psychological and metaphysical ways of dividing particulars and universals. For Ramsey, the issue was fundamentally a logical one (Ramsey [1925] 1931, 113; MacBride 2018, 206–07; Misak 2020, 236). Ramsey showed "that the whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality what is merely a characteristic of language" (Ramsey [1925] 1931, 117). Russell maintained that part of distinguishing between particulars and universals involved discerning the logical difference between subjects on the one hand and predicates and relations on the other. In "Socrates is wise", for example, the subject "Socrates" functions by referring to a particular while the predicate "is wise" functions by referring to a universal. Ramsey thought it a mistake to read the structure of our language onto the world. Carving out an ontological distinction between particulars and universals in terms of the logical distinction between subjects and predicates only leads to more confusion (MacBride 2018, 209; Misak 2020, 236).

I may say that "Socrates is wise" or that "Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates" even though both clearly "assert the same fact and express the same proposition" (Ramsey [1925] 1931, 116). Our language allows for swift re-configurations. In the latter case, "wisdom" functions as the subject. But this would make "wisdom" refer to a particular according to Russell's logical account of the distinction. That spells disaster for the view that subjects refer to particulars and predicates to universals because in the former case, "wisdom" occupied the predicate position and there would be treated as referring to a universal. As Ramsey put it, "with a sufficiently elastic language any proposition can be so expressed that any of its terms is the subject. Hence there is no essential distinction between the subject of a proposition and its predicate, and no fundamental classification of objects can be based upon such a distinction" (Ramsey [1925] 1931, 116) For Ramsey, the subject-predicate form of language is not descriptive of an underlying

ontological structure. Rather, it serves a communicative function. Since any term can be stretched to occupy the subject position, it comes down to the language user's interests. I can make "wisdom" the subject of my proposition when I am interested in that quality; and I can make "Socrates" the subject when I am interested in that gadfly (Misak 2020, 236; MacBride 2018, 210).[5]

If Russell declared the distinction ultimate and Ramsey dismantled it, then Ayer entered the fray to restore it in 1933. Like Russell, Ayer wanted to know what the difference was between two types of objects: particulars and universals. But unlike Russell, he redrew the distinction as "a difference between two different types of construct" such that the source of the distinction "lies in a difference between the principles of construction involved" (Ayer 1933, 52). Taking his cue from Viennese positivism, Ayer assumed that "all the propositions that I can understand can be verified by the occurrence of certain sense-contents in a sense-field," making "all of them in principle formulatable as propositions about (my) sense-contents" (Ayer 1933, 51).[6] Ayer's point was that the distinction between universals and particulars is established by determining how "the relation between sense-contents in virtue of which they constitute a particular differs from the relation between sense-contents in virtue of which they constitute a universal"—hence his emphasis on the distinction being drawn in terms of the principles of construction involved (Ayer 1933, 52).

To explain his view, Ayer considered a proposition about his Siamese cat, Toro: "Toro is white." How do the sense-contents constituting Toro differ from the sense-contents constituting whiteness? Toro is a particular cat after all, but white is found elsewhere than Toro's fur. In what sense is Toro a particular? More basic than Toro qua *thing* are the sense-contents which constitute her in my sense field. If I observe Toro for all her life, there will be only one T sense-content occurring in each successive sensory field. Ayer argued that "the position of each T sense-content in its own sense-field corresponds either directly or indirectly to the position of every other T sense-content in its own field"

[5]This brief sketch only covers the first of Ramsey's arguments. See MacBride (2018), for a complete analysis of Ramsey's position.

[6]However, we have seen that Macdonald's correspondence with Black suggests that C. I. Lewis's account of the given also influenced Ayer's starting point (Kremer and Misak 2025, 86).

(Ayer 1933, 55). Toro is a particular because no two T sense-contents can occupy the same sensory field, "which is only another way of saying that Toro cannot be in two places at once" (Ayer 1933, 55). Toro, then, is constituted by a "relation of spatial contiguity in successive sense-fields" (Ayer 1933, 54). Her particularity is a result of the way she has been defined, and not an empirical property of her as a substantive thing.

The universal "is white," however, is constituted by a "relation of resemblance-in-being-white" (Ayer 1933, 56). While particulars (constructed from relations of spatial contiguity) can only occupy one position in each successive sensory field, sense-contents involving relations of resemblance can occupy many places in the same sensory field. If Toro is sleeping on a stack of philosophy papers, her white fur *resembles* the white tone of the paper and the two share a relation of resemblance-in-being-white. Hence, "it is possible for there to be two or more white sense-contents in a single visual field: which is merely another way of saying that white (or whiteness) can be in many places at once" (Ayer 1933, 56). So, Ayer cashed out the difference between universals and particulars in terms of the relations that factor into their construction from sense-contents. Whiteness is not an empirical property of Toro or the stack of papers but a result of the way those contents have been defined.

What was the upshot of Ayer's presentation? He saw himself as contributing to discussion of the ultimacy of the distinction as treated by Russell and Ramsey. We saw that Russell rendered the distinction ultimate by tending to the logical and metaphysical aspects of particulars and universals and that Ramsey challenged the logical basis of Russell's position. Against them both Ayer argued that the distinction depends on relations among sense-contents in our visual field. "Ramsey, and I think Russell also, took [the question of ultimacy] to mean, 'Are the constituents of atomic facts of two different types?'" (Ayer 1933, 59).[7] Ayer deprecated atomic facts, however, replacing them with "situations whose occurrence would verify all significant propositions", "the constituents of [those]

[7] In other words, if the world is comprised of facts and not of things, and some of those facts are considered atomic (e.g., "this ball is blue"), then are the constituents of those atomic facts of two different types (e.g., particulars ("ball") and properties or relations ("blue"))? Ayer wants to replace this talk of atomic facts with a theory that recognizes our sense data first and foremostly.

situations" being "(my) sense-contents" (Ayer 1933, 59). Wherein lies the ultimacy of the distinction for Ayer? In that

> the only way in which I can describe the nature of a particular is by saying that it has a certain *relation* to another particular, and the only way in which I can describe this particular is by saying that it has certain relations to certain other particulars, and so on. I can only identify a particular in my language by saying that it has certain properties, relational properties, if qualities be reduced to relations, not all of which belong to any other particulars. (Ayer 1933, 61, my emphasis)

Ayer thought the distinction ultimate because you can't mention particulars without saying something about them—that is by stating their relations to other contents in your sense field—and to say anything about their relations always requires universal terms of some kind.[8]

With that Ayer had said all he wanted about the problem of universals. But he concluded by broaching an additional objection, which Macdonald was busy developing in her dissertation: the problem of solipsism for communication. Ayer's parting words stimulated Macdonald to press him on this issue in the subsequent discussion. "It might be said that all I have shown is that the use of universals is necessary for my private language," he suggested. "I have not shown that they render possible an inter-subjective language" (Ayer 1933, 61). For Macdonald, this was the crux of the matter. If, according to Ayer, universals are constructed out of relations among my sense-contents, and I can't talk about particulars without deploying universal terms, then those universals are products of *my* language which are referable only to *my* experience. In my language my particulars and universals might be constructed differently than in yours because they ultimately refer to sense-contents which are private to me. How then can we communicate, if all that we call particular or universal comes down to relations among private and unrepeatable sense-contents? Macdonald thought we must get beyond verification in our private experiences, for unless we do, we fall short of genuine communication and shared understanding about the world.

Turning now, from Ayer to Macdonald, I will argue that Peirce showed her a way to establish common understanding via our shared habits of action. Macdonald's worry in a nutshell: Ayer may have offered a new

[8] Ayer's claim here is likely inspired by Wittgenstein's remark that "a proposition can only say *how* a thing is, not *what* it is" (Wittgenstein [1922] 2014, 3.221).

way of describing the distinction between universals and particulars, but he did not account for the practical bearing his characterization had on our conduct in communication. Her solution: to establish understanding in communication, we must treat universals, not in terms of sense data, but as rules which produce habits of action, those habits being general, public, and communicable.

3. Structure and Behaviour

Macdonald's critique of Ayer's position is best understood when considering her doctoral work, which was motivated by her worry that the principle of verification leads to solipsism, making communication impossible (Macdonald 1934a, 1).[9] This was precisely the issue Ayer broached in the final breath of his presentation:

> Since. . . every proposition I can understand must be verifiable in principle in my private experience it follows that all language is in a sense "my" language. The content of relations no less than the content of terms is incommunicable to others. (Ayer 1933, 61)

Like Macdonald, Ayer knew this was a problem for the logical positivists. If propositions are verifiable in sense experience and the content of that experience is private, then how could we communicate our knowledge of the world? Macdonald thought Ayer's answer to this problem, while brief and underdeveloped, gestured at pragmatism. This was his gesture: "I observe that two people—one of whom may be myself—understand one another, understanding being defined in terms of behaviour, and I say this would not be possible unless their worlds had a similar structure" (Ayer 1933, 61). He added that this position does not lead to solipsism because it admits that "other people besides [himself] do exist: and that they employ a language containing symbols for universals: and that [they] understand one another: only [he] think[s] that these and all other expressions ultimately refer to [private sense] experience" (Ayer 1933, 61). Ayer tried to overcome the problem of communication by integrating behaviorism with structuralism. He got the former from Lewis and the latter from logical positivists like Carnap.

[9] This issue was motivated by a then prevailing but now disputed interpretation of the early Wittgenstein as a verificationist.

The tinge of pragmatism in Ayer's position involves his suggestion that understanding be defined in terms of shared behaviour. He got that from Lewis's *Mind and the World Order*: "community of meaning is secured if each discover, within his own experience, that complex content which this common concept will fit. When the behavior of each, guided by this common concept, is comparable or congruous, we have, so far, a reality in common" (Lewis 1929, 116). For Lewis, Macdonald argued, "although we do not know whether. . .what is given to each mind is similar or not, we do know that human beings have similar basic needs which will cause them to relate their experiences similarly, take the same attitudes, and act similarly on most occasions" so that "our modes of interpreting and classifying experience are conceptual" and "revealed in congruent social behaviour" (Macdonald 1934a, 175). While what is given in experience is private and incommunicable, we share a common world because we share a conceptual framework. We can communicate because the meaning of our concepts is revealed in our shared habits of action. I can't experience your toothache, but I understand your condition because you are acting similarly to the way I did when I had a toothache. That is what she thought Ayer gleaned from Lewis's pragmatism in 1933. But Macdonald thought that Ayer pulled back from fully endorsing this position, held captive both by a reduction to private experience and a commitment to structuralism, which she recognized was common to most logical positivisms of her time.

While in 1933 Ayer reminded her of Lewis, in her 1934 dissertation she had him lumped in with Schlick and Carnap, now emphasizing the structuralist dimension of Ayer's position.[10] Broadly, Viennese structuralism focuses on the structure of relations among experiences rather than on the content of those experiences. While the content of experience is private, the structure of the relations among experiences is general and communicable. The logical positivists attempted to explain "communication in terms of 'structure'" then, and Macdonald thought that "unsatisfactory" because it "presupposes a peculiar 'pre-established harmony' between incomparable experiences" (Macdonald 1934a, 1). Recall that Ayer had argued that while understanding be treated in

[10]See Spinney (2025b, 192; 2025a, 6) for more on Macdonald, Carnap, Lewis and the problem of structure.

terms of behaviour, it also requires that the giver and recipient's worlds (meaning their experience of their worlds) share a common structure. So, it is not enough that you are now behaving as I once did when I had a toothache, our experiences of toothaches must share a common structure. As she understood the logical positivists, this structure involves "a certain order among experiences" and is "introduced to provide the necessary common element without which communication is impossible" (Macdonald 1934a, 149). "To understand a sentence," she continued, "is to identify its arrangement and the arrangement of its implications. . .with the recurrent arrangement. . .of certain items in my experience which are never repeated" (Macdonald 1934a, 149). The so-called structural harmony is shared among the arrangement or structure of the proposition and its verifications on the one hand, and the structure of the experiences which coincide with those verifications on the other. It was because our experience of the world shares a common structure that Ayer and the positivists thought it possible to secure understanding in communication by observing how others react when presented with similar sensory stimuli. And so, Ayer blended the Lewisian commitment to congruent behaviour with the Viennese commitment to structure. She explained that while she cannot observe the content of someone's experiences, she can observe their behaviour in circumstances which resemble hers: "I can. . .test what you mean by 'jade green' by observing your reactions to suitable stimuli" and determine whether "they agree with those I should make in the presence of jade green" (Macdonald 1934a, 150). If they do agree, then "our worlds have a similar colour structure" and that structure would allow us to communicate about colour (Macdonald 1934a, 150).

But Macdonald didn't think the logical positivists were very clear about what this structure was and how it figured in our communicative practices. At best, their appeal to structure made it so that all which could be communicated was "the number of elements in the situations to which I refer" (Macdonald 1934a, 163).[11] She cautioned that

[11] Misak addresses Macdonald's worries about structuralism, connecting her argument here to Max Newman's own, which birthed the "Newman Problem" (Misak 2025b, 149). This is not the place to dwell on this connection, but it is worth noting that Macdonald here recapitulates an aspect of Newman's worry. As she understood it, the logical positivist appeals to structure to make communication possible. While the content of experience is private, structure is general and therefore repeatable and shared among speaker and

> a great burden is thrown upon this 'happy accident' that the 'worlds' of different subjects though incomparable in respect of content are nevertheless similar in structure and so we are able to understand each other by acting congruently. For we are told [by Ayer] that when we communicate what happens is that "I observe two people – one of whom may be myself – understand one another, understanding being defined in terms of behaviour and I say this would not be possible unless their worlds had similar structure". Similarity of structure then is indispensable to communication and hence to the existence of a language. (Macdonald 1934a, 156)

She went on to explain that the structure of experience involves a universal element distinct from the flux of private content. Communication requires such "universal elements common to the giver and recipient of the communication" (Macdonald 1934a, 157). Otherwise, communication would be impossible: "all that is communicated is general and hence presupposes. . .a common knowledge of universals" (Macdonald 1934a, 163). With that, Macdonald had recognized that the problem of universals bears directly on the problem of solipsism in communication. If we could secure a satisfactory theory of universals, then the problem of solipsism in communication would dissolve at last.

While the logical positivists tried to account for this generality via a structure "exhibited in common social behaviour" (Macdonald 1934a, 157), Macdonald thought they ultimately struggled with their account of generality, at least insofar as they understood it in terms of structure. Shortly after defending her thesis, she recapitulated her worry to Black:

> I think there is one interpretation of the Verifiability Principle in which they would be led to deny 'universals' in the ordinary sense or at least to reinterpret them in terms of common 'structure' or behaviour. . . . I think they must deny that the meaning of a statement involves universals as the properties of things. For a universal just cant be experienced as a particular instance can and hence is always an anathema to empirical and positivist views. Surely to get rid of universals in the metaphysical sense was the whole point of Ayer's paper on the subject. But I cannot

recipient. But if structure is all that can be communicated, then I can't communicate much, since all I could communicate is the *number* of elements related within the structure, and nothing about the nature of the content themselves. If *R(x,y)* constitutes the structure of my proposition, then at best I communicate that two elements are related by *R*. But that is not to communicate much of value, since the recipient is still in the dark as to what *x* and *y* refer to in my experience.

> see that the recurrent process of 'looking for red' [or jade green] does not involve a universal as much as the general term 'red' on the ordinary view. Surely 'common behaviour'; 'similar responses to certain stimuli', etc are all general notions? And if you say, why not? I should say because they have given no adequate account of generality in language. It is not anything which can be experienced. I can't see 'red' as I see particular reds, I can't see similarity or what the processes of 'looking for red' have in common. Yet we do communicate which presupposes general or common elements in our experience or behaviour or both. This question cannot be avoided even if there is no difference between understanding and communication and putting a 1d. in the slot and getting the 'uniform' behaviour of the production of a piece of chocolate. For we might just as well call the 1d. the symbol and the chocolate its meaning. (Kremer and Misak 2025, 103)

If experience be understood in terms of sense-content, then experiencing generality would be impossible, for real generality cannot be experienced as particulars can. Yet, the very fact that we do communicate presupposes generality of some kind. So how should we understand this generality? Not in terms of structure, for that is a murky notion. Macdonald thought we must elaborate the real generality exhibited in our shared behaviour. And for that, Peirce even more than Lewis was poised to do so. Peirce offered a more plausible explanation of generality by clarifying the meaning of reality in terms of shared habits of action which arise from investigation. While Ayer had a tinge of pragmatism, he was ultimately closer to Vienna than Macdonald first thought: he had "swallowed [Carnap] so wholesale. . . that a critical point of view will be difficult for him" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 98).

4. Peirce's Pragmatism

In her dissertation Macdonald elaborated the Peircean alternative to Viennese positivism. She was in a better position to do so, for unlike Ayer, who admitted to Stebbing at dinner before his talk that he had then never read Peirce, Macdonald had, and she knew that Lewis was "positivism via Peirce and not via Wittgenstein or Vienna at all" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 86). Indeed, Lewis extolled his debt to "the dictum of Charles Peirce" that the meaning of our conceptions concerns their conceivable practical effects (Lewis 1929, 133). In her dissertation

abstract, she explained that Peirce's view includes "pragmatic elements which are absent from [Wittgenstein and the logical positivists] but may be required for their logical completion" (Macdonald 1934a, 1). What was it about the pragmatist account of universals which completes the logic of communication?

For Macdonald, the pragmatist theory of universals, much like Ayer's, eschewed extraneous metaphysical commitments:

> in place then of substantival universals as the common properties of things we have only rules or general agreements for the production of certain effects and all common terms are shorthand directions for the performing of experiments which will produce these effects. (Macdonald 1934a, 98)

But unlike Ayer, Peirce grounded his theory of universals in what he called scholastic realism. Macdonald thought that by integrating Peirce's pragmatist theory of meaning with his realism, she could develop a theory of universals which explains how communication is possible without recourse to a murky structuralism, and all while avoiding the dead end of solipsism.

Macdonald began by explaining Peirce's pragmatic theory of meaning. To say that a general symbol like 'hard' is interpreted as "a general sign is to say that in every situation in which a certain experiment or set of experiments is appropriate certain effects will always occur" (Macdonald 1934a, 97). This makes every proposition a "prescription for a complicated series of experiments involving both its subject and its predicate and perhaps the relation between them" (Macdonald 1934a, 97). That series "could be given in a set of 'if. . ., then. . .' propositions which would be the implications or consequences of the original statement" (Macdonald 1934a, 97). This was another way of putting Peirce's point that the pragmatic meaning of "this stone is hard" is ascertained by making that categorical proposition the antecedent of a conditional: "if this stone is hard, then it won't scratch." That makes its signification "all its different implications" (Macdonald 1934a, 97). As Peirce argued, "the rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future" (Macdonald, 1934a, 98; Peirce, EP2, 340). While each instance of scratching the stone "will be numerically distinct and different," Macdonald wrote, "the result of the experiment will always be recognizably similar" (Macdonald 1934a, 97). Whereas the positivist looks back to their sense data for the

source of verification, the pragmatist looks ahead to the upshot of all the inferences we draw from our experience. So, Macdonald understood Peirce as replacing the metaphysical theory that universals are common properties of things with a pragmatic theory that explained their generality via prescriptions for experimentation. To know that two different stones are hard, we need only scratch them and see. If each responds to the experiment similarly, then the general term "hard" applies to both. To say that hardness is anything more (like a substantival essence) would perpetuate a fiction of metaphysics.

Macdonald rightfully understood Peirce's pragmatism as an earlier, less extreme, form of verificationism because the pragmatic aspect of meaning is not the whole of meaning for Peirce.[12] Like all forms of verificationism though, she worried that the threat of solipsism also presses in on Peirce's pragmatist theory of meaning:

> If all that I mean when I say 'there is a table in this room' is a set of propositions of the form 'if I do so and so then certain experiences will result' and if these experiences (as they must be) are private and incommunicable how do we manage to understand each other when we talk about tables? (Macdonald 1934a, 98)

Her concerns about positivism are broached again. How could I possibly communicate a knowledge of common objects if my experiences of those objects are *mine alone*? Despite this "obvious criticism," she argued, "solipsism never seems to have occurred to Peirce" and "if challenged he would probably have replied that he avoided solipsism by his theory of universals" (Macdonald 1934a, 98). Peirce's theory seems to imply that the experiences which result from experimentation are private. This might seem problematic, especially when it comes to communicating our experimental results. This worry is superficial, however, once set against the backdrop of Peirce's realism, which is inextricably linked to his pragmatist theory of meaning.

Macdonald knew Peirce had already distinguished his pragmatism from the earlier positivisms of Comte, Mach, and Pearson by his "strenuous insistence upon the truth of scholastic realism," which treated

[12] For Peirce, meaning involves three grades of clarity: familiarity, definition, and practical effects. We first have some familiarity with hardness, since we have experienced many hard objects. Then we define what it means for something to be hard. Finally, we consider the conceivable practical effects of an object's being hard: "if I were to scratch it, it would not leave an impression." Meaning involves all three of these grades of clarity.

generals, such as universals and laws, as realities inasmuch as particulars are (Peirce, EP2, 339). In the final section of her dissertation chapter on Peirce, and again in her 1935 article "C. S. Peirce on Language," she turned to his 1871 review of Fraser's *The Works of George Berkeley* to articulate the theory of reality which informed Peirce's account of universals. "What Peirce wants to hold", she expressed with penetration, "is that the universal element predicated in such propositions is not a substantival essence existing apart from all minds but is the final product of thought itself and *especially of social or communal thought* for 'whatever is believed in the final opinion is real'" (Macdonald 1934a, 100, my emphasis).

5. Peirce's Realism

Macdonald saw that Peirce's realism was dead set against a nominalism which first emerged in the Middle Ages, but which British empiricism never managed to shake. What was the crux of the issue? The medieval controversy turned on the question "are universals real, i. e. can we make true propositions about all the members of a class and, if so, how is this possible?" (Macdonald 1934a, 100–01). While that was the question, Peirce thought the debate turns on the standpoint one takes regarding the meaning of reality. "We have only to stop and consider a moment what was meant by the word *real*," Peirce argued, "when the whole issue becomes apparent" (Peirce, W2, 467).

Peirce thought that nominalist and realist hold the same *neutral definition of reality.* But defining reality is one task and showing what reality means another. Macdonald gave Peirce's division of objects into dreams, fictions, and realities, explaining that while the former two are "are wholly dependent on subjective conditions in the experient, the latter we believe have an existence [to quote Peirce] independent 'of your mind or mine or that of any number of persons'" (Macdonald 1934a, 101). "The real," Peirce clarified, "is that which is not whatever we happen to think it, but is unaffected by what we may think of it" (Peirce, W2, 467). So, while dreams and figments are subjective and internal, realities remain unaffected by what we think about them. Both nominalist and realist accepted that. The question was "whether *man*, *horse*, and other names of natural classes, correspond with anything which all men, or all horses, really have in common, independent of our thought, or whether

these classes are constituted simply by a likeness in the way in which our minds are affected by individual objects which have in themselves no resemblance or relationship whatsoever" (Peirce, W2, 467). Do general terms like *man* correspond to some common nature which all men share independently of how we think about them? Or rather, is the general term *man* a product of our thinking, used shorthand to talk about groups of objects that seem alike, but are ultimately disparate? The answer one gives depends on where they take "the real, the thing independent of how we think about it, to be found" (Peirce, W2, 468).

The nominalist adopted the standpoint that since the real is defined as that which is independent of how we think of it, it must be found in *res extra animam*—a thing outside the mind. Peirce thought that a *non sequitur*. Macdonald explained that

> [t]he nominalist holds that our thoughts about things arise from sensations which have been caused by some object independent of the mind. These objects have nothing in common and neither have the loose and separate sensations but the mind relates them by bringing both under the same thought-sign 'man' or 'white'. (Macdonald 1934a, 101)

Audrey and Sophie are my cats. On the nominalist picture, my thoughts about them arise from sensations determined by them qua external objects. They have nothing more in common than my separate sensations do. My mind relates them by bringing them together under a single thought-sign as when I say "Audrey and Sophie are my cats." "The point is," Macdonald wrote, "that to collect these isolated particulars together under one thought-sign is merely a matter of convenience and an aid to memory" (Macdonald 1934a, 101). "The mind is not constrained to do so by anything external in the objects themselves," she added. "Catness" is not *in* Sophie or Audrey, nor is it a common property existing apart from them. Universals are not genuine entities and uttering generalities is blowing hot air.

Why aren't universals considered real on the nominalist picture? Because the nominalist has reduced reality to mind-independent existence. Only that which exists is real, and since generalization only occurs within a thought-sign, it is of the order *ens rationis* and not *ens reale*. Universals are fictive *because* the nominalist has erroneously inferred that since reality is independent of what we think of it, it must then be found in objects outside of the mind. Since universals are signs

predicable of many, they are nowhere found among existing things. As Macdonald put it, "according to the nominalist view there are no universal or common properties of things, generalization is a device of the symbol using mind, dependent on the subject and its generalities are fiction" (Macdonald 1934a, 102).

The realists upheld the same neutral definition of reality. Only for them, it did not imply that reality is reduced to mind-independent existence. Rather, they thought reality is independent, not of thought entirely, but only of thought-in-particular such that *thought-in-general* is real. "On the realist view," Macdonald explained, "although human thought contains an element of error yet in the long run it tends to a definite form which is the truth" (Macdonald 1934a, 103). While individuals may err due to their idiosyncrasies, with a proper method of investigation (for Peirce, the method of science), "in the end general agreement will be reached on every subject" (Macdonald 1934a, 103). Peirce illustrated the point by considering a blind man and a deaf man who witness a murder. One heard the pistol fire and the victim cry; the other saw it all. While each had different sensations "owing to their individual peculiarities," "their final conclusions, *the thought remotest from sense*, [were] identical and free from the one-sidedness of their idiosyncrasies" (Peirce, W2, 469, my emphasis). With a proper method of investigation (abducing hypotheses, deducing their consequences, and testing them in experience with induction), different minds would be led to general agreement in the long run. "This final opinion, then, is independent, *not indeed of thought in general*, but of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought; is quite independent of how you, or I, or any number of men think" (Peirce, W2, 469). Whatever *would be* represented in that opinion is real because it is unaffected by what any *one individual inquirer or group of inquirers may think*. Crucially, reality is not exhausted by mind-independent existence, but is that which is approximated by communal investigation in the long run. That is what Peirce got when he applied his pragmatic maxim to the concept of reality itself: "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in that opinion is real" (Peirce, W3, 273). The upshot is that, while nominalists and realists agreed about the definition of reality, the nominalist took reality to mean

mind-independent existence whereas the realist took it to mean an ideal limit, constituted by what *would be* represented in the final opinion.

From the realist perspective, *some* universals are considered real because, while they are signs predicable of many, their relations do not depend on the thought of any one individual or group of individuals but on what relations would hold in the ultimate opinion. Unlike Ayer, who brought it all back to relations of similarity in the individual's sense field, Macdonald knew that Peirce looked to future experience and found the meaning of reality in the inferences a community of inquirers would draw from experience—the product of those inferences being far remote from the sensory impressions which initially stimulated their inquiry. As Peirce explained to Victoria Welby in 1909, "the Real is such that whatever is true of it is not true because some individual person's thought or some individual group of persons' thought attributes its predicate to its subject, but is true no matter what any person or group of persons may think *about* it" (Peirce and Welby 1977, 116). Macdonald saw that

> the most important point. . .is the necessity for general agreements. It is not enough that whenever I see a white thing I shall call it white for I could not be sure that this was not due to persistent error on my part, but if everyone I meet agrees with me, then it is probably true and if everyone past, present, and future were to agree with me then the proposition would certainly be true and nothing more could be meant by calling it true. (Macdonald 1934a, 104)

Whereas the nominalist makes the individual the grand arbiter of knowledge, for Peirce, the individual's limited perspective is outshined by what the community of inquirers would hold in the end, were they to continue to investigate until no doubt is left unanswered. This implies that the process of verification must, for Peirce, involve *communal* investigation. Verification is not as simple as comparing my proposition against my sense contents and determining whether the former pictures the latter. Verification requires communal investigation: we form a hypothesis using abductive inference, we deduce the consequences of our hypothesis, and then test whether those consequences bear out in practice using induction. Throughout this process, the idiosyncrasies of individual inquirers fall to the wayside and reality is nothing more than what would ultimately be represented in the final opinion—a shared belief undefeated by what future experience may bring. The cooperative

inquiry of the blind and deaf men led them to a shared understanding of their reality. Their joint investigation serves as a small-scale exemplar of the much larger scientific project Peirce envisioned.

But how do we test our common reality? How do we know that we share similar experiences? And most important for Macdonald, how do we communicate about these realities? "Peirce replies, by our behavior," Macdonald argued, for

> if two ideas have the same practical consequences they are identical. Then I know that you are seeing green when I am seeing green by observing your reactions. If you make a noise 'green' similar to the one which I make in the same situation then we are seeing 'the same thing' and if everyone in that situation were to make the same reaction then the 'reality' of green would be established. (Macdonald 1934a, 105)

This makes reality "the product of social thinking" inasmuch as "our ways of thinking. . .are determined largely by our ways of living" so that "we exhibit our common world by our similar social behaviour" (Macdonald 1934a, 105). Peirce therefore avoided "solipsism by making the common world a social construction exhibited in the congruent behaviour of human beings" (Macdonald 1934a, 106). For Macdonald, this pragmatic generality arises when we translate the meaning of every proposition into prescriptions for experimentation, which bear out in human conduct, thereby overcoming our private experiences by establishing shared habits of action at the communal (rather than individual or group) level, which are recognizable in one another, making communication about them possible.

But turning to scholastic realism to overcome solipsism would have seemed mighty suspicious to many of Macdonald's contemporaries who were then eschewing extraneous metaphysical commitments. Why waste time defending scholastic doctrine? In her dissertation, she echoed the sentiments of her contemporaries, worrying that Peirce's view was too metaphysical, bordering on simple idealism (which we know, was a bugbear for the first generation of analytic philosophers). She did not then defend Peirce against that objection. However, when she developed her Peirce chapter for C. K. Ogden's *Psyche* at Girton in 1935, she considered these worries unfounded. Peirce thought we "have a common world because 'it is a consensus or common confession. . .which constitutes reality'" (Macdonald 1935, 127). "This," she explained, "will be condemned as simple idealism or simple behaviourism disguised

in semi-scholastic terminology" (Macdonald 1935, 127). This was the worry she had in mind:

> to say that universal agreement about the truth of propositions constitutes the reality of the objects to which they refer sounds like saying that objects are somehow composed of people's ideas or beliefs or that the mind Kantian fashion does not draw its laws from nature but prescribes them to it. (Macdonald 1935, 128)

If reality is represented *in* the final opinion, then reality seems to be constituted by what the community of inquirers would think, making realities out to be merely objects of thought. That sounds like idealism, not realism. And furthermore, if we only know we are having similar experiences based on our behavior, then isn't this just an anticipation of the kind of behaviourism that Macdonald thought the logical positivists, like Ayer, appealed to in answering the problem of solipsism in communication?

While Macdonald expressed concern about that aspect of Peirce's position in her dissertation, she overcame it by pitching Peirce's position as one where we understand propositions about the world as questions of "the meaning of signs" (Macdonald 1935, 128). Peirce did not begin with facts, but with the use of signs and symbols. She explained:

> Now signs are a human invention for human convenience and what Peirce points out is that we so use language that a proposition is said to give us information or to induce a state of belief in which most people tend to persist when its use can be correlated with an orderly sequence of experiences such that the assertion of the proposition expresses the expectation that a similar sequence would occur if I acted in appropriate ways, i.e. in ways determined by the habit induced by the previous experiences. . . . (Macdonald 1935, 128)

When I assert a proposition about the world, I take it to be true, and I act according to my belief that it is true. If experience led me to believe that nightshade berries are toxic, I will avoid willingly ingesting them (unless I wish to die). So, one implication of my asserting that "nightshade berries are poisonous" is that "if x is nightshade, I should avoid consuming it." In this way, Misak has pointed out that Macdonald's theory of pragmatic generality treats general terms as rules or guides for action (Misak 2025b, 155). In accordance with Ramsey's formulation that "to believe P is to act from a P-formed habit" (Macdonald, Ryle, and

Berlin 1937, 25), when I tell you that nightshade berries are poisonous, I am trying to establish a habit or general rule with which you will meet the future. "To make a communication," Macdonald argued, "is to establish or activate a similar habit which will give rise to similar future behaviour in another" (Macdonald 1935, 128). But where do these rules come from? How do they become embedded in our practices? We do not construct our rules willy nilly. The problem with Ramsey's strawberry-abstainers was that they did not experiment before ruling to avoid strawberries (Ramsey [1929] 1931, 253). Macdonald put Ramsey plain: "Before making a rule make experiments" (Macdonald, Ryle, and Berlin 1937, 25). For our rules to be genuine, they must emerge from experimentation and become entrenched in our practices. From the Peircean position she was advocating, that means our rules must arise from a process of communal investigation involving abductive, deductive, and inductive inferences.

Indeed, Macdonald's theory of universals-as-rules is supported by Peirce's clarification of reality as that which withstands inquiry in the long run. When I communicate the dangers of nightshade, I want you to realize, not just that if you consume *these* berries, you will likely die, but that if anyone at any time were to consume berries with these characteristics, they *would* likely die. Continual experimentation on nightshade berries reveals their toxicity to be a real general characteristic and so to have bearing on the conduct of the entire community. The community does not adopt the rule that we should avoid ingesting nightshade berries on a whim—our habits adapt to the results of experimentation. If I witness you eat nightshade berries and subsequently notice your pupils dilate, your balance goes, your speech slurs, and rashes form all over your body, I might *abduce* that the berries you ate were toxic. That is because, if the berries were toxic, all your symptoms would be a matter of course.[13] Now I have a hypothesis from which I can deduce conceivable consequences and test them by induction (perhaps by feeding mice my berries and observing the results). If my experiments continue to confirm my hypothesis, then I become more confident in my belief that nightshade berries are toxic and my habits regarding them begin to settle (I use gloves to handle them, I caution against ingesting them, and so on). By this process of investigation, we discern real general ten-

[13]Peirce gave the logical form of abductive inference in 1903 (Peirce, EP2, 231).

dencies concerning nightshade berries—tendencies which are external to my mind and yours and which ultimately affect our conduct. Our understanding of these tendencies depends on what the community of inquirers would hold in the long run, and so too do the rules we associate with them. Only, rules which arise from genuine investigation are real, communicable generalities. "It is this which is the meaning of generality and not any metaphysical question about the substantial existence of universals," Macdonald concluded (Macdonald 1935, 128). In the end, she thought Peirce's position was neither simple idealism nor simple behaviorism, and properly accounted for understanding in communication by translating generals into guides for action which arise from communal investigation.

6. Macdonald Contra Ayer

Returning to the letters with which we began, let us consider Macdonald's criticism of Ayer in light of her interpretation of Peirce's theory of universals and reality. When Macdonald arrived at Girton College in autumn 1934, she had yet to vindicate Peirce's position from the charge of idealism and simple behaviorism. But she was well on her way to doing so. In late November, Macdonald, Black, and Stebbing each reached out to Ogden trying to get him in touch with Macdonald.[14] Sometime in early 1935, Black's bid paid off, for Macdonald met Ogden, who was enthusiastic about her Peirce chapter and wanted it as a standalone piece for *Psyche* (Kremer and Misak 2025, 112). It was this opportunity, coupled with Wittgenstein's growing anathema to generality, which occasioned her to return to Peirce's theory of universals. With her dissertation behind her, and a renewed interest in Peirce's theory of universals, she raised her best objection to Ayer's paper in December 1934, about a year after she first attended his presentation in December 1933:

> About universals. No, I don't want to make them into Platonic mysteries, but to interpret them in terms of sense data and relations of similarity between them seems to me equally unsatisfactory at the moment. You see, you have not come to an end when you have said 'x is red' ≡ 'x has some or other shade which is a shade of red' (which is what you mean, I

[14] Stebbing's and Macdonald's letters to Ogden are lost, but Black's letter survives at the Charles Ogden Fonds at McMaster University, Box 4, File 8.

> take it, by saying 'x has either r_1, r_2,—r_n') for what is the status of the specific shades?
> Of course, I dont think the L. P.s {Logical Positivists} can (or would say that they could) dispense with symbols like 'red' 'like', etc, because language would be impossible without them. My point is this: they say that when I use such words I am referring to sense data. Now a universal is obviously not a particular sense datum or generality would be impossible. They can only interpret the words as referring to in terms of a relation of similarity between sense data and that (in spite of Ayer) seems to me to raise all the old nominalistic difficulties. (Kremer and Misak 2025, 107)

Like Peirce, Lewis, and Ayer, Macdonald did not want a Platonic theory of universals. But unlike Ayer, the view that universals are relations of similarity among sense-contents won't do because it is unclear how universal terms expressing these relations figure in our communicative practices. Macdonald knew that universal terms are indispensable to genuine communication and that our theory of universals must account for how terms expressing them function in practice. Ayer cannot maintain that universal terms refer to sense-data, for sense-data are particular and unrepeatable. Ayer never thought that. Like Macdonald said, Ayer treated universal terms as expressing resemblance relations among sense-contents, those resemblance relations, and not the content they relate, being universal. But "in spite of Ayer" that raises "all the old nominalistic difficulties" (Kremer and Misak 2025, 107). Why *in spite* of Ayer? Because Ayer was adamant that his position is no nominalism. An interpretative puzzle: why was Macdonald so sure that Ayer's view leads to nominalism even though Ayer himself maintained it didn't? A plausible solution: Macdonald's work on Peirce's theory of universals, which we saw was set against nominalism, showed her precisely what was nominalistic about Ayer's position.

In his presentation, Ayer had already considered the threat of nominalism. He argued that his theory was *not* nominalistic because nominalists "deny that any two things. . . ever have a common quality" (Ayer 1933, 56). Our assertions about Toro and the stack of philosophy papers are reducible to assertions about our sense contents and the nominalist would say that the sense contents share no common quality. But Ayer held "that sense-contents do have common qualities" (Ayer 1933, 56). Toro and the stack of philosophy papers "are both members of the class

defined by the property of resemblance in being white" (Ayer 1933, 57). Ayer took this *relation* of resemblance to be a universal, since Russell had shown that "all relations are universals" (Ayer 1933, 57; Russell 1911, 4–6). The nominalist, on the other hand, denied that similarity is itself a universal. For them, only monadic predicates are universals and they are merely shorthand descriptions for *collecting* objects that seem alike but that share no common property. Ayer, however, considered white a universal because a *qualitative similarity* is established among all the sense-contents that share a resemblance-in-being-white. His point was not to confuse the sameness of things, which requires "a peculiar relation of spatial correspondence" with the sameness of qualities, which only requires that two sense-contents "resemble one another in a certain respect" (Ayer 1933, 58). So, while Toro and the stack of papers are certainly different things, they are qualitatively similar at least with respect to their colour. He was not a nominalist because, while he denied the metaphysical status of universals, he nonetheless accounted for them via qualitative resemblance among sense-contents, and the very relation of similarity itself *is* universal. Hence, if nominalism is defined as a view that does not countenance universals of any kind, and Ayer's view admits of similarity as a universal, then it seems his view is not nominalistic. That's well and good, if that is what we understand the central commitment of nominalism to be. But we saw Peirce offer another interpretation of nominalism, which centers around the theory of reality.[15]

Peirce taught Macdonald that nominalism "arises from taking that view of reality which regards whatever is in thought as caused by something in sense, and whatever is in sense as caused by something without the mind" (Peirce, W2, 476). Despite Ayer, Macdonald thought that qualitative similarity was only another way of putting the nominalist point that to say "'This is white' and 'That is white'" is to make whiteness "constituted by a likeness in the way in which these things affect our minds" (Macdonald 1934a, 101). On Ayer's view, universals become short-hand descriptions for the way sense-contents resemble one another

[15]Calvin Normore (1987) and Barry Allen (2020) have each overturned the textbook account of nominalism as the view that universals are not real, arguing that it rather has to do with the nature of reality and the relationship between language and the world. I have argued elsewhere that Peirce's interpretation of nominalism is in line with Normore's and Allen's later scholarship.

in my experience. The issue was not resolved by moving from a perceived similarity shared among *things* to a *qualitative* similarity shared among sense-contents, for that is still to define universality in terms of *my* sensory field, which is presumably still linked to a mind-independent external reality. Macdonald saw that for Peirce the nominalism-realism controversy was never about the ontological status of universals or relations, and that the difference between realism and nominalism comes down to the way each understands the meaning of 'reality'. A further consequence of nominalism (according to Peirce) is that it makes individuals the grand arbiters of knowledge, while the Peircean realist thinks that the individual knower is only a negation, and that our understanding of reality arises from *communal* investigation. The real is what *would be represented* in the long run, and not at all reducible to the sense-contents of any one inquirer, let alone the relations among them in their sensory field *here and now*. I may identify and describe spatial contiguities and qualitative similarities in my sensory field. But in practice those constructions still only involve *my* experience and not the coordinated experience of a community of inquirers. Ayer's nominalism stemmed from his debt to an empiricism which held that propositions about the world are properly propositions about *my* sense-contents. In so doing, he was held captive by a form of individualism which made it difficult to account for how universal terms expressing these relations function in practice. If my terms refer merely to my sense contents, then I am led to solipsism because I cannot communicate my experiences to you. What use has Ayer's theory, if it struggles to communicate its universals?

On the Peircean view Macdonald championed, general terms "always transcend what is immediately experienced" and "refer to other experiences related to this one in ways determined by a law or habit of future behaviour which could be expressed in a set of conditional propositions" (Macdonald 1935, 109). What matters in the end is not that we have defined generality anew, but that we have understood what bearing generality has on our practices. Macdonald found a more plausible solution to the problem of solipsism in pragmatism:

> we test our common reality in behaviour. For if two ideas have the same practical consequences they are identical. Then I know that you are in the presence of a table when I am by observing your reactions. If they are similar to mine in the same situation then we are aware of 'the same thing'

> and if everyone in that situation were to make the same reaction then the 'reality' of the table would be established. . . . For the true opinion is the one which everyone will hold in the end. It is not pragmatic in the sense of being determined by any individual's transitory desires or idiosyncrasies, nor is it dependent on something outside all minds [in other words, no nominalism] but it is determined by "a general drift in the history of human thought which will lead to one general agreement, one catholic consent." The object, universal or law is thus the product of social thinking and our common world a social construction exhibited in the congruent behaviour of human beings. (Macdonald 1935, 127)

Our universals are rules with which we meet the future and our behaviour understood in terms of general habits of action—shared tendencies to act in certain ways when presented with certain stimuli—which transcend the individual's experience. While Ayer gestured at this kind of pragmatism in his presentation, especially regarding the role behaviour plays in communication, that perceived affinity breaks down once we consider his unrelenting reduction to sense-contents, which bottoms out in an individualism utterly unlike Peirce's communal project. Ayer, like all the positivists before him, could not satisfactorily work his way beyond his own sense-contents—beyond the limited bent of his personal experience, and that made communication impossible. *That* is why Macdonald charged him of nominalism in 1934. The nominalistic difficulties were precisely those which led to the problem of solipsism in communication inasmuch as the meaning of propositions comes down to their verification in *my* experience.

In her work, Cheryl Misak points to Macdonald's 1937 "Induction and Hypothesis" as epitomizing Macdonald's pragmatist theory of universals (Misak 2025b, 2025a). There Macdonald married the Peircean view that "the rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future" (which she first recovered in her 1934 dissertation) with Ramsey's account that "to believe P is to act from a P-formed habit", ultimately arriving at the pragmatist position that generals are "rule[s] of conduct or. . .guide[s] for behavior" (Macdonald, Ryle, and Berlin 1937, 107). But Macdonald brought it all back to nominalism and realism when she reviewed Justus Buchler's *Charles Peirce's Empiricism* in 1939. In that review, she had her final say on the matter, crystallizing her Peircean theory of universals by linking his pragmatism with his realism, and

setting it against the nominalist tendency of positivisms old and new. Macdonald put it best. Peirce's was

> a verificationist theory of meaning which tried to avoid the subjectivism and consequent solipsism of the current sensationalist positivism of Comte, Mach, and Pearson. *It is interesting to see how much Peirce was aware of these traps into which later positivists again tumbled headfirst in the palmy days when all propositions were translatable in terms only of 'my' experiences and the world and life were one.* Peirce liked to give himself the medieval label of 'realist' as opposed to 'nominalist'. The nominalists denied that general terms are the names of universals. They are a convenient linguistic device under which to collect classes of individuals. . . . So-called laws are merely a convenient shorthand for the recording of innumerable sensible facts. They are useful fictions, economy devices created by scientists. . . . *Peirce, who started not from 'facts' but from the use of symbols, saw that this was nonsense.* What cannot be communicated is not known; we cannot communicate without language and what would a language without general terms be like? We could not "ideally" refuse to use class names or formulate laws if we did not wish to economise thought, for we could say nothing if we did. *In this he seems completely right*. (Macdonald 1939, 82, my emphases)

That encapsulates what Macdonald distilled from Peirce's daunting system in the seven years since she first encountered him as a graduate student in 1932. Her pragmatist position culminated in the forceful claim that Peirce's realism offered a better solution to the problem of universals and solipsism than the alternative nominalist approaches, which she thought hindered the best of her contemporaries' progress, Ayer included. Peirce began with the *use of symbols*, the meaning of which bears out in our practices, our habits of action. Symbols expressing universals, then, are public and communicable inasmuch as the habits of action correlated with their use are public and communicable. Knowledge of universals, as of everything else, must be communicable, otherwise what value would knowledge have? That requires that we shake the nominalist delusion which brings it all back to the individual and their sense-contents. And *that* requires a pragmatic realism of the sort Peirce envisioned, and which Macdonald brought to bear on Ayer.

7. The Problem of Universals Revisited

If one task of this paper was to contextualize Macdonald's encounter with A. J. Ayer and to present her arguments against him in light of her work on Peirce and Lewis, another was to show how her work links up with the analytic debate about universals. Macdonald thought that the analytic debate got bogged down in metaphysical worries. Indeed, MacBride's genealogy traces its development from competing categorical dualisms and monisms to a categorical pluralism which admits of many kinds of entity, thereby treating the problem of universals primarily as a problem of metaphysics (MacBride 2018). Of course it was, and in many ways, still is.

But I have shown that Macdonald breaks from this trend in a radical way by reframing the problem of universals as one, the right solution of which, must explain its relation to our communicative practices. Macdonald teaches that it does not matter whether the particular-universal distinction is ultimate, or how many categories of entities there are, unless the theory you develop can adequately account for the role universal terms play in communication. That explains her dissatisfaction with Ayer's proposed solution, which answered Ramsey in offering a new kind of dualism but failed to account for communication because he framed it all in terms of sense-contents and ended up endorsing an individualism which makes it difficult to account for the generality of behaviour and structure requisite for genuine communication. The first generation of analytic philosophers didn't say much about the communicative function of universals, so Macdonald's position is refreshing. She invites us to rethink what a plausible solution to the problem of universals must involve. Indeed, I think even contemporary philosophers would do well to heed Macdonald's insights by explaining how their theories of universals figure in our communities and their communicative practices.

Acknowledgements

Research funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers and Cheryl Misak for their good wisdom and valuable insights regarding this paper.

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Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 6 (2026)

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