

Nominalism

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Philosophical Concept

‘Nominalism’ refers to a reductionist approach to problems about the existence and nature of abstract entities; it thus stands opposed to Platonism and realism. Whereas the Platonist defends an ontological framework in which things like properties, kinds, relations, propositions, sets and states of affairs are taken to be primitive and irreducible, the nominalist denies the existence of abstract entities and typically seeks to show that discourse about abstract entities is analysable in terms of discourse about familiar concrete particulars.

In different periods, different issues have provided the focus for the debate between nominalists and Platonists. In the Middle Ages, the problem of universals was pivotal. Nominalists like Abelard and Ockham insisted that everything that exists is a particular. They argued that talk of universals is talk about certain linguistic expressions - those with generality of application - and they attempted to provide an account of the semantics of general terms rich enough to accommodate the view that universals are to be identified with them.

The classical empiricists followed medieval nominalists in being particularists, and they sought to identify the kinds of mental representations associated with general terms. Locke argued that these representations have a special content. He called them abstract ideas and claimed that they are formed by removing from ideas of particulars those features peculiar to the particulars in question. Berkeley and Hume, however, attacked Locke’s doctrine of abstraction and insisted that the ideas corresponding to general terms are ideas whose content is fully determinate and particular, but which the mind uses as proxies for other particular ideas of the same sort.

A wider range of issues has dominated recent ontological discussion, and concern over the existence and status of things like sets, propositions, events and states of affairs has come to be every bit as significant as concern over universals. Furthermore, the nature of the debate has changed. While there are philosophers who endorse a nominalist approach to all abstract entities, a more typical brand of nominalism is that which recognizes the existence of sets and attempts to reduce talk about other kinds of abstract entities to talk about set-theoretical structures whose ultimate constituents are concrete particulars.

1. Introduction

In one use, 'nominalism' refers to a cluster of loosely-related philosophical and theological themes articulated by certain late fourteenth-century thinkers who were influenced by William of Ockham. These thinkers expressed doubts about the Aristotelian metaphysics, in particular its use in proving God's existence. They gave priority to faith over reason and emphasized the omnipotence of God in ways that often led to a Divine Command theory in ethics and a general scepticism about our knowledge of both causal relations and the substance-accident distinction.

Used this way, the term has its roots in the more common use which refers to a general theoretical orientation to questions about the existence and nature of abstract entities, an orientation exemplified in the work of Ockham himself. Those who are nominalists in this sense reject a Platonistic or realistic interpretation of discourse about things as diverse as properties, kinds, relations, propositions, sets, states of affairs and modality. Sometimes the nominalist is said to endorse the view that discourse of the sort in question is metalinguistic and that talk about the so-called abstract entities is really just talk about *nomina* or linguistic expressions. Characterized in this way, nominalism is sometimes said to stand opposed to conceptualism, another reductionist approach to ontological questions about abstract entities. The claim is that while the conceptualist insists that it is necessary to make reference to the activity of conceptual representation to accommodate the recalcitrant discourse, the nominalist denies this. But, first, not all of those who are called nominalists endorse a metalinguistic interpretation of the disputed discourse; and, second, since few philosophers have thought it possible to characterize language without referring to conceptual activity, to take nominalism as a view opposed to conceptualism yields the result that few of those thinkers normally taken to be nominalists turn out to deserve that label. Accordingly, it has become customary to construe as nominalistic any reductive approach to ontological questions about abstract entities that stands opposed to the Platonistic view.

2. The medieval period

The orientation we call nominalism is typically traced back to medieval debates over universals. A major source of these debates was Boethius' commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, where we find a detailed discussion of the ontological status of universals (see Boethius, A.M.S.; Porphyry §1). Boethius' commentary became a pivotal text for medieval philosophers, and by the twelfth century the debate over universals had become a dominant topic of philosophical concern. Two opposing views emerged. One, championed by William of Champeaux, was an extreme form of realism. On this view, a genus or a species is literally the same in all its members; the individuals falling under the kind are rendered distinct by the addition of forms to the common essence, and those forms are predicates of the essence. The opposing view, defended by Roscelin of Compiègne, represented an extreme version of nominalism. Insisting that all entities are particulars, Roscelin argued that talk of universals is merely talk about linguistic expressions that can be applied to a number of different particulars, and he held to an austere interpretation of linguistic expressions where universals are mere *flatus vocis* or vocalizations.

Abelard attacked both views (see Abelard, P. §5). He argued that since the forms which allegedly diversify any common essence are contraries, William's realism commits us to the view that a single entity can simultaneously exhibit incompatible properties; and he appealed to Aristotle's definition of the universal as that which can be predicated of many to call into question the claim that nonlinguistic entities can be universals. That definition, he contended, applies exclusively to things that can function as predicates in subject-predicate sentences, to what we nowadays call general terms. But while agreeing with Roscelin that we can 'ascribe universality to words alone' Abelard rejected Roscelin's claim that universals are mere *flatus vocis*, insisting that they are expressions that are significative or meaningful; and he argued that any adequate account of universals must show how, in the absence of a common essence, general terms can be meaningful. In doing so, it must answer two questions: (1) what is the cause of the imposition of a common name; and (2) what is it that we grasp when we grasp the signification of a common name?

Abelard's answer to the first question is disarming. The things to which the term 'man' applies, for example, all agree in being men. Their being men is the ground of the imposition of the common name 'man'. Abelard denies, however, that this agreement involves any common entity. He takes it to be an irreducibly primitive fact that all the things called men agree in that they are all men. In response to the second question, Abelard argues that what we grasp when we understand the common name 'man' is not any of the particular men named by that term; nor is it the collection consisting of all those particulars. To explain the kind of cognition associated with general terms, Abelard appeals to the distinction between perception and intellection. In perception, we grasp the particular named by a proper name; the cognition associated with general terms is, however, intellective. Here, the mind is directed toward an object of its own making, a *res ficta*. The *res ficta* is a kind of image, one that is *communis et confusa* (common and indifferent). It is common to all the items named by the associated general term and proper to none. Accordingly, it represents them all indifferently. Since it is something distinct from any of the particulars that fall under the Aristotelian categories, it is neither a substance nor an accident. It is the product of the intellect's activity of abstraction, and it is what is signified by the associated general term - it is what we grasp when we understand such a term.

The century after Abelard brought a number of different developments. The appearance of the complete Aristotelian corpus gave a clearer picture of Aristotle's views on universals, and the rich framework of semantical concepts associated with the developing terminist logic made possible the articulation of a more powerful form of nominalism than those defended by Roscelin and Abelard. That articulation came from William of Ockham (see William of Ockham §6). Following terminist logicians, Ockham distinguished between categorematic and syncategorematic terms. Categorematic terms are expressions whose significance derives from their having a 'definite and determinate signification'. Syncategorematic terms, by contrast, do

not serve as signs of objects; their significance derives from the roles they play when used in conjunction with categorematic terms. Categorematic terms are further divided into discrete and common terms, where this is the contrast between expressions that signify just one object and expressions that signify many and so are predicable of many.

Like Abelard, Ockham identifies universals with common terms. Insisting that every existing thing is a particular, he construes the distinction between universals and particulars as a distinction between categorematic terms that signify just one thing and those that signify many. But where Abelard takes conceptual representations to be nonlinguistic items that function as the significata of the various common terms, Ockham wants to claim that a common term like 'man' signifies the various particulars of which it is truly predicable, and that the conceptual representation corresponding to the term 'man' is itself a linguistic entity. His idea is that thinking is inner dialogue, best understood by way of the familiar concepts appropriate to spoken and written language. Thus, concepts are mental terms, judgments are mental propositions, and inferences are mental syllogisms. Conceptual linguistic items differ, however, from spoken or written words in that while the latter are only conventionally significant, the former are natural signs. The phoneme 'man' has the meaning it does only by virtue of a complicated system of conventions, but the concept *man* is something whose intrinsic nature it is to play the linguistic role it does; and although we describe conceptual representations by the use of concepts derived from our characterization of spoken and written language, mental language is prior to both. Just as written language is an outgrowth of spoken language, spoken language is an extension of mental language, a sort of 'thinking out loud'.

The distinction between discrete and common terms, therefore, applies to conceptual representations, so that there are conceptual universals - conceptual representations that are predicable of many - and these are the genuine universals. Since they are naturally significant, the common terms of mental language are in their intrinsic nature items predicated of many; and their universality is the root of the merely conventional universality of the common terms of spoken and written language. Corresponding to the spoken/written term 'universal' there is a mental common term *universal*. To bring out the contrast between his own form of nominalism and its realist alternatives, Ockham tells us that this mental term is a term of second rather than first intention; it is a term that signifies not extramental entities but, rather, intentions of the soul, those that are in their intrinsic nature signs of many.

In characterizing the conceptual items that are in their intrinsic nature universals, Ockham mentions three possible views. One harkens back to Abelard and construes the mental term as a *res ficta* not found in any Aristotelian category; a second construes mental terms as qualities of the soul that serve as objects of its acts of understanding; the third identifies the mental term with the act of understanding itself. Over the course of his career, Ockham wavers between these views, but he ultimately comes to endorse the third view on grounds of theoretical simplicity.

Ockham's nominalism extends beyond a concern with universals and the distinction between common and discrete terms. He is also interested in the distinction between concrete and abstract terms, between terms like 'man' and 'humanity', 'courageous' and 'courage', and he is concerned to undermine what initially appears to be a plausible account of this distinction. A natural response to the distinction is to say that whereas concrete terms signify familiar concrete particulars (the particulars which are men and courageous), their abstract counterparts signify the abstract entities (humanity and courage) those particulars exhibit. Since the distinction between concrete and abstract terms is found in all ten Aristotelian categories, the view unfolds into the claim that for each category there is a categorically different kind of abstract entity such that, in virtue of exhibiting an entity of that kind, a particular comes to be characterized by the appropriate concrete term.

In combating this view, Ockham argues that the categories do not represent a classification of nonlinguistic objects; they are, rather, a classification of linguistic expressions according to their mode of signification. As he sees it, there are nonlinguistic objects corresponding only to the categories of substance and quality, and the entities in question are all particulars. So there are particular substances (like this man) and particular qualities (like the whiteness of this piece of paper). Abstract terms from the category of substance do not signify anything distinct from the particular substances signified by their concrete counterparts. Abstract terms from the category of quality do tend to signify entities distinct from the familiar substances that we say are white and courageous; but a term like 'courage' does not signify some one quality that all courageous individuals share. 'Courage' is better construed as a general term signifying individual qualities, the various courages in virtue of which individual human beings are called courageous. In none of the other Aristotelian categories do abstract terms signify any entities distinct from those signified by their concrete counterparts. Indeed, Ockham wanted to claim that abstract terms from categories other than that of quality are eliminable from discourse, that sentences incorporating terms like 'paternity' and 'burglary' can be replaced, without loss of content, by sentences in which those terms do not appear, but their concrete counterparts ('father' and 'burglar') do; and a significant portion of his ontological/logical works is dedicated to showing how these translations are to go (see Aristotelianism, medieval).

3. Classical British empiricism

The classical empiricists followed Abelard and Ockham in denying that general terms signify universals. Thus, Hobbes sounds a familiar theme when he tells us that the only things that exist are particulars and that the terms 'general' and 'universal' are just 'names of names'. Like their medieval forbears, the empiricists recognized that the plausibility of this view hinges on our ability to provide a satisfactory account of the relation between general terms and the inner representations or ideas corresponding to them. Locke, who agrees that extramental entities are one and all particulars, argues that words signify ideas and that the ideas corresponding to

general terms are abstract ideas - ideas formed from our ideas of particulars by separating out the features peculiar to this or that particular, retaining 'only what is common' to all the things to which a given general term applies. Berkeley goes further in his nominalism, denying that we have abstract ideas of the sort Locke describes. On Locke's view, the process of forming an abstract idea of a triangle, for example, consists in separating out all those features with respect to which triangles differ; and the result of this process is an idea of a triangle that is 'neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral nor equicrural nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once'. Berkeley challenges us to identify an idea that corresponds to this characterization. As he sees it, our ideas are determinate in all their features and, accordingly, particular in their content (see Hobbes, T. §3; Locke, J. §6; Berkeley, G. §2).

While Berkeley attacks the view that ideas are general in virtue of being abstract, he concedes that there are general ideas; but he insists that the generality of an idea is a function of its role in thinking rather than any special kind of content. Ideas are general not because they result from abstraction in Locke's sense, but because the idea is made 'to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort'. So the mind takes an idea that is fully determinate and particular in its content and makes it stand for other ideas of the same kind. Hume wholeheartedly endorses Berkeley's attack on abstraction and his account of generality, telling us that general ideas are 'in themselves individual, however they may become general in their representation. The image in the mind is only that of a particular object, though the application of it in our reasoning be the same as if it were universal' (Hume [1740] 1978: 20).

4. The twentieth century

Like ontological debates in earlier periods, ontological discussions in early analytic philosophy typically focused on the problem of universals. Thus, Frege, Moore and Russell were all anxious to undermine nominalistic theories that seek to analyse subject-predicate discourse without reference to nonlinguistic universals; and when the later Wittgenstein attacks the view that the use of a general term like 'game' is grounded in the antecedent recognition of a property or set of properties common to all the items to which the term applies, he is, among other things, challenging their Platonistic accounts of subject-predicate discourse (see Wittgenstein, L. §10). Although concern with universals has continued throughout the twentieth century, the investigations of recent nominalists bear on a wider range of issues than those of their medieval and classical modern forbears. In addition to concern with universals, contemporary nominalists attempt to provide reductive accounts of things as diverse as the mathematician's sets, propositions, states of affairs, events and possible worlds, and philosophers of a nominalistic spirit take different attitudes towards different items on this list. Some, for example, are nominalists with regard to the traditional universals while insisting on a Platonistic account of sets; others insist on the irreducibility of events while providing reductive accounts of discourse apparently about propositions, states of affairs and universals. Indeed, few philosophers have

been willing to defend a nominalistic approach to all of the so-called abstract entities. One exception is Wilfred Sellars (see Sellars, W. §2).

The account given by Sellars is an elaboration of Ockham's suggestion that talk about abstract entities is metalinguistic discourse. This suggestion had previously been elaborated in a proposal by Rudolf Carnap *The Logical Syntax of Language* that we construe talk about abstract entities as pseudo-material mode discourse, discourse apparently, but not really about nonlinguistic objects (see Carnap, R. §3). Carnap's concern is with sentences of the following sort:

1. Courage is a property.
2. Mankind is a kind.
3. Paternity is a relation.
4. That two plus two equals four is a proposition

His proposal is that we treat these sentences as disguised ways of making claims about the syntax of certain linguistic expressions. Thus, (1)-(4) become:

- (1') 'Courage' is an adjective.
- (2') 'Man' is a common noun.
- (3') 'Father of' is a many-place predicate.
- (4') 'Two plus two equals four' is a declarative sentence

The difficulty with this proposal is that (1)-(4) turn out to be claims about *English* expressions. The proposal forces us to take the Spanish counterparts of (1)-(4), for example, to be claims about *Spanish* words, so that (1)-(4) and what are supposed to be their Spanish translations do not even agree in reference. Sellars responds to this problem by introducing a kind of quotation that cuts across languages, called dot quotation. Whereas standard quotation of the sort we meet in (1')-(4') creates metalinguistic expressions that apply exclusively to words in the quoting language, the application of Sellars' dot quotation to an expression creates a metalinguistic common noun that is true of all those expressions, regardless of language, which play the same linguistic role that the quoted expression plays in the base language. Thus, '**man**' is a common noun true of 'hombre', 'homme', and 'Mensch'. In their respective languages, these terms play the same role that 'man' plays in English; they are all '**man**'s. Now, Sellars wants to claim that using the machinery of dot quotation, we can provide a satisfactory reconstruction of (1)-(4) as:

1. (1'') **Red** s are adjectives.
2. (2'') **Man** s are common nouns.
3. (3'') **Father of** s are many-place predicates.
4. (4'') **Two plus two equals four** s are declarative sentences.

As Sellars understands them, (1'')-(4'') represent claims about linguistic expressions construed as tokens rather than types; and talk of linguistic tokens can be recast as talk about speakers and inscribers. Even the apparent Platonism involved in talk about linguistic roles is illusory since talk about linguistic roles can be eliminated by reference to talk about the linguistic rules that govern the use of terms. Accordingly, talk apparently about abstract entities is consistent with the most austere nominalism; it is merely metalinguistic discourse that cuts across languages. Sellars believes that the sort of account he proposes for (1'')-(4'') can be extended to handle all discourse involving the so-called abstract entities. A slightly less radical form of nominalism is found in the writings of W.V. Quine (see Quine, W.V. §6). Early in his career, Quine espoused a nominalism as austere as that developed by Sellars, but by the time he wrote *Word & Object* (1960), he had concluded that there is one kind of abstract entity whose existence we have to acknowledge, the mathematician's set or class. Quine remains unwilling to recognize things like properties, relations, kinds, and propositions, however. Unlike sets, these alleged entities lack clear-cut identity conditions and should play no role in our ontology.

Most contemporary philosophers agree with Quine that we must endorse an ontology of sets. This view provides the backdrop for the reductive approach to universals defended by G.F. Stout and D.C. Williams. They hold that there are particulars as opposed to general qualities or properties, things like the whiteness of this piece of paper. So there are abstract entities besides sets; but they are one and all particulars. Williams calls these abstract particulars *tropes* and he tells us that they constitute 'the alphabet of being'. Tropes are ontologically primitive, and items from other categories are constructions out of them. Thus, the universal of the Platonist is a set of resembling tropes; and familiar concrete objects are bundles of tropes that contingently enter into a relation of 'collocation'.

Although Williams' trope-theoretic nominalism continues to enjoy some popularity, the most prominent form of nominalism in the contemporary arena is that influenced by developments in the semantics of modal logic, where we meet the idea that the actual world is just one of infinitely many possible worlds and that the totality of possible worlds constitutes the subject matter for talk about necessity and possibility (see Possible worlds). Contemporary nominalists claim that the framework of possible worlds provides the resources for a genuinely reductive account of things like properties and propositions. These philosophers propose that we take possible worlds as primitive. Each such world, they claim, can be characterized in nominalist terms as a totality of concrete particulars, and they argue that we can provide a nominalist treatment of things like properties and propositions by identifying them with set-theoretical entities of a transworld sort. We can identify properties with functions from worlds to sets of objects, relations with functions from worlds to sets of ordered *n*-tuples and propositions with sets of worlds or functions from worlds to the truth values. The most prominent proponent of this sort of view is David Lewis (see Lewis, D. §3). He has invoked the framework of possible worlds not simply to provide an account of properties and propositions, but to clarify the concept

of meaning, to state truth conditions for counterfactuals, and to provide an analysis of causation (1986).

References and further reading

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(The essays in this volume express the earliest and most austere form of Quine's nominalism.)

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(Gives the 'sets only' doctrine.)

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(Exposition of the line of thought outlined in §4 above.)

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(British Academy Lecture which discusses 'Trope Theory', outlined in §4 above.)

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('Trope theory' outlined in §4 above.)

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(The famous passage on 'family resemblances' begins at §65.)

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