

The Problem of Universals, part II

Background to Nominalism

Some Realists have suggested that Berkeley's version of **Conceptualism** slides back into a type of moderate realism concerning universals. He says that an idea is always particular in its nature but may become general in its representation, capable of representing anything in a class of particulars. But, to transform this idea into a general idea we must focus our attention on just those features of the idea in virtue of which it is of a certain type without paying special attention to its other features,

What a realist might ask Berkeley is this: Once we have considered the idea in this way, what is it that *then* makes it capable of representing what it does? Berkeley seems to think that an idea of a triangle is general just because it resembles any and every one of the class of triangular things insofar as the idea itself is a triangular item which is being specially considered just insofar as it is triangular. But then, isn't Berkeley saying the same thing a realist says about the property of triangularity? Berkeley's way of defining a general idea makes it obvious that he thinks the idea of a particular triangle itself exemplifies the property of triangularity. Otherwise, we could not focus our attention on that feature of the idea. Berkeley wants to make sure that we don't suppose that he thinks that the property could exist separately from particulars, but any moderate realist would take the same precautions.

One way a Nominalist might begin to defend Nominalism would be by exhibiting what he or she takes to be weaknesses in both Conceptualism and Realism. For the moment, let us suppose that Realism is not an acceptable option. We have just seen how conceptualists like Locke and Berkeley might be criticised on the grounds that their position is not distinguishable from realism. A nominalist might then point out that Locke and Berkeley fail to notice that certain parts of their own theories support nominalism far better than conceptualism.

In Berkeley's case, this can be seen in several ways.

(1) Berkeley points out that Locke seems to think that ideas, even abstract ideas are mental images of some sort. One thing he says that is wrong with that is that no one can possibly form a mental image of something that is abstract, e.g. of a triangle which is neither scalene, nor isosceles nor equilateral.

(2) But Berkeley also makes the more important point that people commonly do not have the same mental images in mind when they use the same terms. Each person's mental images are often different on different occasions of using the same term and often when we use a general term we just have no mental image in mind at all. Even in those cases where we do often have similar mental images on the occasions of using the same general term, therefore, we may ask whether it is really the occurrence of the images that is *essential* to the term's meaning what it does. What mental images come to mind when we correctly use terms like 'negotiation', 'force', 'justice' or 'history'? For most people, the answer is typically 'none in particular' or 'random assortments of images'. So, what is really important (according to what B sometimes says) in accounting for the meaningfulness of a general term is not having ideas but *knowing the term's verbal definition*. Berkeley took some steps toward a theory of meaning which might be called the theory of meaning as correct use but these steps were very few. He gave no account of how one knows the meaning of a term without having an idea in one's mind that it signifies.

He called this 'having a notion'. He used this term extensively but did not provide much of an explanation of it. Clearly, these were steps that would lead one in the direction of nominalism. Berkeley failed to see the direction.

In Locke's case, Locke explicitly says that the way that ideas of modes, substances, and relations are formed is in connection with the way that words are commonly used. Human beings form their abstract general ideas out of ideas of sensation but they do this in a way that generally coincides with their learning of language as children. Our abstract ideas of these things are nominal essences in the sense that they are formed in and through the process of learning to use a general term. It is this process of *linguistic learning* which makes abstract general ideas possible. The language records the way that the social community goes about identifying things by type or kind. Participating in the language community tends to more or less standardize the sorts of abstract ideas we form or at least as they are first formed when we are children. What seems to play the dominant role here then is the general community standards of correctness of linguistic usage. Without this, nominal essences, i.e. universals, would be impossible.

Now, according to Locke, there are also real essences which are not ideas at all, but the actual constitutions of substances and modes. He calls these real essences and it is fair to wonder just how different these are from Aristotle's essential natures. On this count alone, we could accuse Locke of being more of a realist than he is willing to admit.

The constitutions of the insensible parts of material substances he says are unknown but progress may be made in science toward making our nominal essences of these material substances more likely to be in correspondence with the real essences of material substances. The nominal essences of modes, especially mathematical and moral modes like Triangularity or Justice are always the *same* as their real essences. This is because modes are actually *created* by the mind and do not correspond to anything in universal in substances. This is Locke's particularism. So we can have intuitive and demonstrative knowledge of modes. All that they contain is what we put into them. Locke says many things which make it clear that he thought universals were things in the mind but his views on the importance of language and social conventions in the way that terms are used and defined in the formation

of abstract ideas also make it clear that some parts of his theory are leaning in the direction of Nominalism.

Nominalism

As with Realism, we can distinguish an extreme version and a moderate version of nominalism. In its most extreme form, nominalism is the claim that

What things that are referred to by the same term have in common is just the fact that they are all referred to by the same term.

If this were the best that could be done to define nominalism then nominalism would be no more than an empty tautology. (All X are X). In this most extreme version of nominalism, no reason of any sort can be given for the fact that some things are referred to by the same term. Nor can any reason be given for including some things in the group of those things referred to by the term and excluding others from it.

For an extreme nominalist, classes or groups are the classes or groups they are just because of the terms that are applied to them. Fido is a dog because he belongs to the class of dogs but the class of dogs is simply those things to which the term 'dog' is applied.

We cannot hope for an answer if we ask why the term is applied to just those things, nor can we have the slightest idea of what things will be dogs tomorrow. The way in which words are applied is completely arbitrary, according to this extreme form of nominalism.

What is worse, we will have to explain why it is that there are not different classes of things corresponding to "dog", "chien", "hund", etc. If what makes a dog a dog is just that it is one of the group of things to which the word "dog" is applied, then would dogs cease to exist if the

English language went out of use and only other languages, containing words like "chien", "hund" or "perro" still remained in use?

It is considerations like these that motivate both realism and conceptualism. Conceptualism especially seems to have been invented for this reason among others. The words may differ from language to language but the concept is, or can be, the same.

However, even if there were only one language, extreme nominalism would have another problem. In order to even state the position, one must say that different things can have the *same word* applied to them. What does "same word" mean here? Numerically identical? Any one occurrence of "dog" is an individual thing or event and so it is a particular. But no one of those individual things can be repeated. Nor can any one of them exist in different places at the same time. Somehow, the extreme nominalist must explain what it is for two individual things to be the same *word* without falling into realism or conceptualism. Realists are comfortable with saying that there are many *tokens* of the same *word-type*. But what is a word-type? We may say that in the space below there are two word-tokens "of the same type".

The The

Each of the tokens is a particular. How can we speak of them as being of the same type without falling into realism? We have already encountered arguments (in connection with Locke and Berkeley) which conclude that conceptualism presupposes some sort of realism and we are assuming, for now, that realism is unacceptable. Is extreme nominalism the only alternative left? Few, if any, nominalists have been as extreme as the sort we have just described. Nearly all have tried to explain what it is that makes the use of general terms non-arbitrary and based on something objective, something independent of thought or linguistic convention.

What could this be if not concepts or realist universals?

Nominalism, II.

More moderate versions of Nominalism are usually presented by opponents of realism and conceptualism.

The most common nominalistic approach to providing reasons which are non-arbitrary and based on something objective is to emphasize resemblances among things in the class to which the general term applies. Let us call this version **Resemblance Nominalism**.

That X resembles Y is an *objective* fact. So, that is not an arbitrary reason to give for applying the same term to both particulars. However, not just any resemblance will be a sufficient reason for applying the same term, even though the resemblance may be quite objective. If Jones' daughter Jill was born on the same day as his cat Tabby was born then Jill and Tabby do resemble each other objectively to some extent. But this sort of resemblance would not be a sufficient reason for calling both of them cats or both of them people.

To give a relevant and sufficient reason for applying the same term to both, the resemblances must be of the *right sort* and they must be *close enough* to justify applying it. To be close enough, we need to avoid demanding that it be absolutely exact *and* we need to be careful not to allow too many dissimilarities. Merely having the same birth date allows too many dissimilarities. If Samantha is Tabby's littermate but one of the hairs on Samantha's tail is a millimeter longer than the corresponding hair on Tabby's tail then we would be too strict if we refused to classify them both as cats on that ground alone.

The resemblance nominalist needs a good definition of the sort of resemblance that will justify putting several particulars in the same class

and applying the same term to them all. One way of defining the appropriate sort of resemblance is not available to the nominalist. If we said that

X and Y must resemble each other in most ways

and we define this as meaning

Most of X's properties are numerically identical with most of Y's properties

the nominalist would apparently have fallen into Realism.

The concept of even partial Qualitative Identity (at least one quality of X is numerically identical with some quality of Y) seems to be a principle that a Resemblance Nominalist cannot do without in defining the sort of resemblance his theory requires but it also seems to be a principle that is tailor-made for a Realist because it seems to require objectively referring to *both* properties *and* particulars. How can a resemblance nominalist handle this difficulty?

In order to remain faithful to Particularism, a nominalist must *not* analyze resemblance as implying the existence of anything numerically identical *exemplified by* two or more particulars. By definition, any particular can exist in only one place at a time. So, if there are two particulars existing at the same time, they must occupy different places. If there were something numerically identical exemplified by both particulars, then, it could not be a particular. Or, so it would seem.

Here are some lines along which an attempt might be made to defend some moderate version of Nominalism.

The principle of Qualitative identity seems to be an obvious fact and a matter of basic common sense. Perhaps it is. But it is fair to ask

whether in metaphysics we should make commitments to kinds of basic entities merely by consulting common sense. We need not reject common sense in order to take metaphysical positions but that does not mean that we must be slaves to it either. It may be that there are some parts of common sense that can be accepted but reasonably interpreted in more than one way. And it may be that some interpretations of common sense are more reasonable than others, given the rest of what we seem to know or intuitively believe. Does a nominalist have an obligation to show how we could get rid of, do without, *all* apparent references to properties, qualities, features, characteristics, etc? The chances of showing how to do this are not at all good. We wouldn't be able to say much of what we know or even much of what we believe. There is no point in even trying to get rid of such terms or even show how they could be dispensed with. While it may be completely *impractical* to give up speaking of properties as well as particulars, it may be possible to define references to "properties" so that they do not *contradict* particularism. Here is a first attempt.

X has property P iff X is a thing of type T

So far all we have done is to trade speaking of properties for speaking of types. But what are types? One suggestion is this:

X is a thing of type T iff X is a member of class C

Consider, for example, the class of electrons. It seems quite reasonable to define away the funny sort of property of *electronhood* or *being an electron* by explaining that, for X to have such a property just means that X is a member of the class of electrons. Notice one thing about classes that is congenial to a nominalist: The class of electrons includes *all* the electrons; and it is a class that is *open* regarding how many things are in it and regarding the times or places in which they may exist. That's how it can include *all* electrons; so, for that very reason, the class is not *repeatable*. Though it is a class, it seems to be a kind of particular. No problem so far then, for

a nominalist, with speaking of classes. Classes seem so far to be just one sort of particular. It's just the sort of particular that can have particulars as members of itself. Are types simply classes? A nominalist would have reason to hope that they are.

In order to define types as classes, though, one must be prepared to allow that (i) every type is a class and (ii) every class is a type. Statement (i) seems unproblematic. If there is such a *type* of thing as dogs then there must be a *class* which is the class of dogs. But there does seem to be a problem with statement (ii). Modern mathematicians commonly use the term "set", instead of "class" but the choice of terms seems to be of no importance. In Mathematics, sets are just classes by a different name. Anything or things may be treated as constituting a set. Not just dogs, trees or microbes but any arbitrarily chosen things may be treated as constituting a set. Napoleon's left boot, my cat's longest whisker, your last thought on December 22, 1993 and the tallest Kangaroo in Australia, may be considered as constituting the membership of a set. Many true things may be said about this set and some valid reasoning may be done about it and with it. Look at any standard mathematical development of the theory of sets. But is this set we have just referred to a type? Clearly not. Unlike the set of dogs or the set of electrons, it is just wrong to suppose that all of the members of this set are of a single type.

One way of stating the problem of universals might thus be as follows: *What distinguishes the classes of particulars that constitute types from those classes of particulars that do not constitute types?* Let us call the classes that are more like the class of electrons or the class of oak trees *natural classes*. We can make use of this term without having to be absolutely strict about the difference between natural and non-natural classes. We may even allow that naturalness is a matter of *degree*, that some classes are more natural than others. This freedom that we allow ourselves in this matter does not necessarily mean that we are regarding the difference between naturalness and non-naturalness to be merely arbitrary or sheer fiction. Some classes, like the class of electrons, are

so extremely natural (because there is almost no difference between one electron and another) that it would be grossly implausible to compare it to the class of things we invented containing Napoleon's left boot. That class is one whose membership was entirely determined by us. That class's existence depend entirely on our *subjective* decision. Which class constitutes the class of electrons is not something we determined. That *objectivity* of the existence of a class is part of what we can introduce the notion of naturalness to indicate about some classes.

One possible theory about the difference between natural and non-natural classes is that the difference is so basic, so primitive, that it cannot be explained. They are just different, period. Nothing can be said in explanation of the difference.

Resemblance nominalism starts from a denial of the latter theory. It is often a matter of dispute as to whether something belongs in a natural class or whether some set of things constitutes a natural class. One of the main activities of Science is to settle just this sort of dispute as best it can. To begin by taking the position that there can be no explanation of why a given class is a natural class would be to unjustifiably condemn as illogical any such scientific activity. Not every class we believe to be natural may be a *true* natural class. Science is the attempt to identify the true natural classes. So, resemblance nominalism tries to provide some explanation of the difference by using the relation of resemblance. Natural classes are those classes of particulars having certain objective relations of resemblance holding among these particulars. But the resemblances cannot be defined as (partial) numerical identities of qualities.

Remember that the nominalist would like to first identify having a property with being of a type and being of a type with being a member of a natural class. One problem with this that must be dealt with by the nominalist is this. Two different classes cannot *coincide in membership*. If every member of class C1 is also a member of class C2 and conversely then there are not two classes, there is only one. In other

words, C1 and C2 are numerically identical. For example, everything in the class of cordates (creatures with a heart) is also a member of the class of renates (creatures with kidneys) and conversely. There are not two different classes of creatures, cordates and renates. There is only one class, each of whose members has a heart and has kidneys. Obviously, though, having a heart is not the same as having a kidney. We have only one class here but don't we have two different properties? How can we define having the property of having a heart with being a member of class C if we have no class other than C to use in defining having the property of having kidneys?

One response that might be made to this question is to point out that class-identity of cordates and renates is just a fact about how the *actual* world happens to be. There *could be* cordates that were not renates or conversely. The class of nonrenate cordates is at least a possible class.

Perhaps a nominalist could deal with the problem of coextensional properties by arguing that if there could be a class of As which are not Bs or conversely then that is enough to distinguish the property of being an A from the property of being a B. Numerical identity of properties would only occur if, in no possible class are there As which are not Bs or conversely.

So "X has property A" could be defined as "X is a member of every possible class of As".

Let us assume, for now, that this answer to the problem of coextensive properties is good enough, even though it may leave us wondering what a possible class is.

Much more could and has been said about resemblance nominalism. I will bring my present remarks on it to a close with three criticisms. These criticisms may or may not inflict serious damage to resemblance nominalism. The reader should pursue these issues to wherever they may lead.

First, whatever the kinds and degrees of resemblance required among the members of a natural class, it is obvious that these resemblances can be identified only if the class has more than one member. But why couldn't there be properties or qualities that exactly one thing exemplified? The nominalist's strategy of translating talk about properties into talk about membership in a natural class works only if that class has members which stand in the right sorts of resemblance relations. But if the class happened to have exactly one member, then it would stand in no resemblance relations of the right sort because it would be the only member.

The second criticism is this. Membership in a natural class is supposed to be our nominalistic substitute for exemplifying properties. But what *fits* a thing for membership in a natural class? Put the question in the form of a dilemma. Do things have properties because they are members of natural classes or are they members of natural classes because they have the right sorts of properties? If there were no way to explain what it is about a thing which entitles it to membership in a certain natural class except to refer to some of its properties, then the notion of a natural class would presuppose the notion of exemplifying properties and could not replace it or even serve as a working substitute for it.

The third criticism is a classic. It was expressed in a very appealing way by Bertrand Russell in his book *The Problems of Philosophy*. I will just quote what Russell says.

If we wish to avoid the universals whiteness and triangularity, we shall choose some particular patch of white or some particular triangle and say that anything is white or triangular if it has the right sort of resemblance to our chosen particular but then the resemblance required will have to be a universal. Since there are many white things, the resemblance must hold between many pairs of particular white things and this is the characteristic of a universal. It will be useless to say that there is a different resemblance to each pair for then we will have to say

that these resemblances resemble each other and thus at last we shall be forced to say that resemblance is a universal. The relation of resemblance, therefore, must be a true universal and having been forced to admit this universal we find that it is no longer worthwhile to invent difficult and implausible theories to avoid the admission of such universals as whiteness and triangularity.