



NOMINALIST ANALYSES OF AN ENTITY BEING CHARACTERED

ANÁLISIS NOMINALISTA DE UNA ENTIDAD QUE ESTÁ SIENDO CARACTERIZADA

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RECIBIDO EL 17 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 2012 Y APROBADO EL 17 DE OCTUBRE DE 2012

RESUMEN ABSTRACT

Este artículo está concebido principalmente como una herramienta de referencia para quienes participan en el debate entre realismo y nominalismo sobre los universales. A su vez, ofrece un catálogo exhaustivo de los análisis básicos de una entidad que está siendo caracterizada y que los nominalistas pueden emplear tanto en una ontología no-constitutiva, como en una constitutiva.

This paper is intended primarily as a reference tool for participants in the debate between realism and nominalism concerning universals. It provides an exhaustive catalogue of the basic analyses of an entity being characterized that nominalists can employ in both a constituent and nonconstituent ontology.

PALABRAS CLAVE KEY WORDS

ontología constitutiva, nominalismo, ontología no-constitutiva, particulares, problema de los universales, propiedad, universales.

constituent ontology, nominalism, non-constituent ontology, particular, problem of universals, property, universals.

Introductory remarks

Nominalism (that is, antirealism) concerning universals is the view that it is impossible for something to have the intrinsic capacity to be wholly present through multiple entities at one and the same time. It is the view, in other words, that there can be no strict identity had among members of a multiplicity and thus that the agreement or sameness between things is never grounded in identity between those things. The purpose of this paper is to delineate the three basic and exhaustive nominalist analyses of an entity being charactered. I intend this brief taxonomy to serve as a resource, a reference tool, for thinking about the controversy between realism and nominalism concerning universals.

There can be only the following two exhaustive analyses of an entity being charactered: (1) a constituent analysis, according to which what makes it correct to predicate P of entity o is some property had by o, and (2) a nonconstituent analysis, according to which it is not the case that what makes it correct to predicate P of entity o is some property had by o. In light of this coarse division, there can be only the following three exhaustive categories of nominalism: relational and austere nominalism (which are the two exclusive and exhaustive forms of nonconstituent nominalism), and constituent nominalism¹. In this section, I will outline these three views (all of which have been occupied in the history of philosophy), and then conclude with a note about how the infamous medieval theory of conceptualism is supposed to fit on this map.

I

Nonconstituent nominalism

Nonconstituent nominalism, the orthodox form of nominalism, takes individuals to be the only sorts of entities possible, where by “individual” it is usually meant a non-property item (a non-property item that is usually going to be charactered), and takes these individuals to be particulars, where by “particular” I do not mean *specific* (as in the colloquial sense of the term), but rather that which cannot appear in,

¹ Some expressions of relational nominalism can be found in Roscelin and Ockham (Loux 63). An expression of austere nominalism can be found in Ockham (Loux 83fn21). A “common intellectual currency” according to D. C. Williams (106), some expressions (although not necessarily advocacy) of constituent nominalism (that is, trope theory) can be found in Plato, Aristotle, Boëthius, Avicenna, Averroës, Aquinas, Ockham, Scotus, Buridan, Suárez, and Leibniz (Mertz ch. 4) (Loux 73). Williams (107) finds trope theory prevalent in Descartes and Spinoza, and so does Stout (9) and Seargent (13).

be a constituent of, multiple entities at the same time. Nonconstituent nominalism, in other words, (1) denies that individuals (usually taken to be non-property items) in themselves have any characteristics and (2) defines individuals as particulars (as non-universal items). There are only two nonconstituent nominalist analyses possible: relational and austere nominalism.

Relational nominalism

Relational nominalism holds that a particular individual's being characterized in a certain way is due merely to that individual's relation to some other individual that is also a particular. For example, according to predicate nominalism, a subjectivist form of relational nominalism that traditionally is all that nominalism has been thought to be, this particular individual apple is green if and only if it falls under the predicate 'green', such that there is nothing like greenness that the green apple has and if there were no predicate term 'green' – or at least no possibility of the predicate term 'green' – the apple would not in fact be green. All the analyses of relational nominalism have the following reductive form, then: to say that particular individual *o* is *P* is merely to say that *o* has a relation to some particular individual *x* (such that there is nothing like *P*ness that a *P* thing has).

Austere nominalism

As with relational nominalism, austere nominalism (1) denies that individuals (usually taken to be non-property items) intrinsically have any characteristics and (2) defines individuals as particulars (as non-universals). Although both in effect view individuals in themselves as ontologically unstructured simples, and thus are extreme insofar as they deny any reality to properties, austere nominalism refuses to give an account of what it means to say that a particular individual is a certain way, has a certain character.² The truthmaker, the ontological ground, for attributing *P* of particular individual *o* is nothing more and nothing less than the ontologically unstructured individual that is *o*, in which case the sweetness of the bonbon is nothing more, nothing less, than the ontologically (although not mereologically) unstructured bonbon itself. The austere nominalist "analysis" has the following form, then: particular individual *o* is *P* just means that *o* is *P* – nothing more than that can be said.

² Quine is taken to be the father of this view. There are more recent defenders, such as Devitt and Parsons.

As with relational nominalism, austere nominalism does not deny that Socrates is characterized in many ways and can be correctly described in various ways. But whereas relational nominalism explains why this does not mean that the individual has intrinsic features, austere nominalism does not provide an explanation (even though it continues to say such things as “this figure is round” and “both of these are cars”). To put this important difference another way, relational nominalists think that the resources for explaining why an individual is characterized and yet devoid of properties cannot just be the thing itself and for this reason they bring in other individuals besides the thing in question to help in the explanation. Austere nominalists, on the contrary, refuse to expand their explanatory resources beyond the thing in question. Given that the only resource they have for explaining the individual is the individual itself, when asked why *o* is *P* the best they can do is point to *o* (and then, as the quip against them goes, stick their head in the sand, which is why they are sometimes called “ostrich nominalists”). In effect, austere nominalism offers a pretty thin analysis of a thing having a property, it just says that *o* is *P* if and only if *o* is *P* (such that there is nothing like *P*ness that a *P* thing has).

II Constituent nominalism

In contrast to relational and austere nominalism, the two basic and exhaustive forms of nonconstituent nominalism, constituent nominalism is, in a sense, much more moderate in that it does not deny the reality of properties. Called “trope theory” in recent literature, this form holds that there really are properties constituting characterized items—items commonly understood as individuals by trope theorists even when trope theorists view such items as nothing but a bundle of properties (as they commonly do). So, in contrast to relational nominalism, the state of affairs of particular individual *o* having property *P* is not parasitic upon *o* being in relation to some entity. Rather, it is just is a matter of *o* having a *P* property as a constituent. Unlike the other views, then, a *P* thing possesses *P*ness: *o* is *P* if and only if *o* has *P*ness. What makes this view nominalist, however, is that properties, such as this *P*ness, are taken to be particulars rather than universals, which means that these properties are intrinsically unable to be wholly present in more than one (nonconcurrent) entity at one time, and thus cannot serve as the respect of similarity between two or more entities. In effect, if there are

two exactly similar qualities on this view, they will not be identical (for to say that they are is to accept realism concerning universals). Rather, they would be merely perfectly resembling, merely indiscernible (where the term “merely” is meant to stress that they are not thereby identical in any way).³ So although constituent nominalism is moderate in the sense that it preserves the everyday belief in qualities, it is extreme in the sense that it denies that objective indiscernibility between qualities means identity, something that runs against everyday intuition (and is presumably why proponents of the other two forms of nominalism feel they must reject qualities had by an individual in order to reject realism).

III

What about conceptualism?

If one is not a realist concerning universals, then one must fall within one of the above three nominalist categories. First, there is no other choice but to adopt a constituent or nonconstituent ontology; this is an exhaustive taxonomic division. Second, if one adopts a constituent ontology as a nominalist, one can only be saying that there are properties that are non-universals (trope theory). Third, if one adopts a nonconstituent ontology as a nominalist, in which case one rejects the reality of properties had by an individual (an individual typically construed as itself a non-property), then one can account for something being characterized in some way either by saying that it is in relation to some other entity (the relational explanation of relational nominalism) or else by saying simply that that something is characterized in that way (the non-relational explanation of austere nominalism). Now, historians of philosophy generally will be aware of the medieval position known as conceptualism, which is often packaged as a middle path between realism and nominalism. In order to obviate the response that I have not been sensitive to all the options, I will close this section by explaining that conceptualism, if it is antirealism, does not fall in any way outside of the parameters that I have laid out above.

Medieval conceptualism is the view, generally put, that any identity among the members of diversity is merely in the mind. Either this means

³ See Istvan. Trope theory is perhaps the most popular form of nominalism today. Here are some of the popular contemporary advocates of the view: G. F. Stout (1936); D.C. Williams (1966); Keith Campbell (1990); John Bacon (1995); and Anna-Sofia Maurin (2002). Trope view is, however, ancient. For more on the ancient legacy of tropes, see Mertz (1996).

that there is nothing physical or mental (or so on) that has the capability of being wholly present in multiple physical or mental entities at one and the same time, or else it means that that which has the capability of being present in multiple mental entities can only be mental. In the first case, we are just dealing with nominalism (and thus the worldview that there can be no strict identity – however partial – among many things).⁴ Most likely this view then will be classified as what is now called “concept nominalism,” which is a relational form of nominalism that analyzes a particular individual being characterized in the following way: *o* is *P* just means that *o* falls under the concept *P* (such that there is nothing like *P*ness that a *P* thing has). In the second case, we are just dealing with realism (and thus the worldview that there can be strict identity – however partial – among many things); it is just that, according to this particular brand of realism, only mental items can exemplify universals serving as the respects in which these items are similar.

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⁴ The phrase “partial strict identity” may have a ring of self-contradiction, but it is not upon consideration. I say that two purported entities have *full* strict identity if everything about the one is strictly – as opposed to loosely and popularly – identical to everything about the other. I say, therefore, that two purported entities have partial strict identity if something, but not everything, about them is strictly identical. Here is an example. Assume that *A* is nothing more than *x*, *y*, and *z*. *A* would have partial strict identity with *B* if, for instance, (1) *B* was *x*, *g*, and *r* (this covers the talk of “partial” since *A* and *B* merely have *x* in common) and (2) *A*’s *x* is identical – rather than merely similar or exactly similar – to *B*’s (this covers the talk of “strict”).

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