

Philosophy 125 — Day 6: Overview

- Administrative Stuff
 - **Due dates** for study questions & papers announced (see web for details).
 - Handout on regress arguments available online (see homepage)
 - Thursday section meeting place known: 175 Barrows
- **Agenda:** Armstrong & Nominalism (not all today)
 - A Taste of Armstrong's Realist, Non-Platonist Theory
 - Why be a Nominalist?
 - Austere Nominalism
 - Metalingusitic Nominalism
 - Trope Theory
- But, first, a picture (in lieu of 2,792 words) ...



Armstrong's Alternative Realist Theory of Universals 1

- According to Armstrong, Universals are 'ways things are' (or 'attributes'). In order to sketch Armstrong's theory, we need to introduce some terminology (we'll really need units 2, 3 & 4 to evaluate all of Armstrong's arguments):
 - **States of Affairs:** If *a* is *F*, then *a*'s *being F* (e.g., Socrates' being courageous) is a state of affairs (some call these *facts*)
 - **Instantiation:** If *a* is *F*, then *a* instantiates the attribute *F*-ness
 - *a*'s *being F* is the **truthmaker** of "*a* is *F*". It is *in virtue of a*'s *being F* that "*a* is *F*" is true. If true, "*a* is *F*" corresponds to the SOA *a*'s *being F*.
- According to Armstrong, we need states of affairs in our ontology because we cannot account for the truth of "*a* is *F*" merely by positing the existence of *a*, *F*-ness, and a fundamental tie between them (exemplification or instantiation).
- Particulars and universals (and instantiation) are *not* ontologically basic. They only exist *within states of affairs*. States of affairs are ontological bedrock.



Armstrong's Alternative Realist Theory of Universals 2

- The 'fundamental tie' or 'nexus' (called "instantiation" or "exemplification") is simply the 'coming together' of particulars and attributes in states of affairs.
- On Armstrong's view, all universals are instantiated at some time & place (in the history of the universe), because they only exist within *facts*. And, for Armstrong, facts are true claims about the space-time (physical) world.
- Armstrong is a physicalist, and he thinks that only physical attributes (those occurring as primitives in our best physical theories) are basic (or primitive).
- In part, this seems to be motivated by *causal* considerations. He thinks that by instantiating (proper) universals, particulars have causal powers. And, or so the story goes, science is in the business of carving nature along its causal joints. This causal salience is one reason he favors the scientific primitives.
- He also uses causal considerations to rule-out various combinations or functions of (primitive) universals. E.g., disjunctions/negations of primitives.



- He rules-out disjunctions of primitives on the grounds that (in general) *A OR B* adds no causal efficacy to its disjuncts *A, B*. *a's being A* (or *a's being B*) has causal efficacy, but *a's being A OR B* (generally) does not.
- Armstrong rules-out negations of primitives on the grounds that only attributes *a instantiates* can contribute causal powers to *a*. Attributes *a lacks* cannot give *a* any causal powers. (“positive” *versus* “negative” attributes?)
- Armstrong is making some rather strong assumptions about causation. He assumes that states of affairs are the relata of causal relation. He assumes that disjunctive factors can never have (*sui generis*) causal efficacy. And, he assumes that *absences* cannot cause. Not all theories of causation agree.
- Conjunctive universals are OK'd by Armstrong, so long as *a* instantiates both *A* and *B at the same time* (then *A AND B* can have causal significance). Here, he assumes that *A AND B* can have causal powers that *A* and *B* do not have separately (almost all theories of causation agree with this – interaction).
- We'll reconsider these issues in the causation section.



Armstrong's Alternative Realist Theory of Universals 3

- In a way, Armstrong seems only to be paying lip service to universals (and particulars, for that matter!). It is states of affairs that do all the work in his metaphysics. S.Q.: why does he need/want particulars or universals at all?
- How (and why) does he carve up SOAs? He stresses SOAs (his ontological bedrock) are ‘more than the sum of their parts’ (particular, attribute, instantiation). So, why does he care about their parts (even if there are any)? And, even if they do split, why should SOAs split along lines similar to the Platonic realist's subject-predicate-inspired lines?
- Note: Armstrong thinks arguments from subject-predicate discourse (‘meaning arguments’) are *bad* reasons to believe in universals. Then, why does *he* believe in them? Why does he think states of affairs *contain* them?
- Imagine a pictorial language with no subject-predicate structure in which the SOA *a's being F* is represented by a picture of that SOA (e.g., snapshot of a red sphere). Why carve this picture along subject-predicate joints? Why not simply take the *whole* as *the* real thing, and view talk of parts as *arbitrary*?



Nominalism I: Why Be A Nominalist?

- Many nominalists see technical and Epistemic problems with realism. E.g.:
 - The paradoxes and regresses we saw in chapter 1
 - * We have already seen various replies and responses to these.
 - The impossibility of spatio-temporally discontinuous multiple exemplification. How can one universal be in two places at once? Historically, this began with the following Parmenidean dilemma:
 - * The entire universal is located where each particular exemplifies it. Then, it will be “separate from itself,” which seems impossible.
 - * Reply: This worry seems grounded in intuitions about *particulars*.
 - * Only a part of the universal is located where each particular exemplifies it. Then, it will be many, and not one, which also seems impossible. (An even more important problem here, that Plato does not seem to mention: if two different exemplifiers have two different things in them, what makes them have one and the same thing in common?)



- The impossibility of providing non-circular identity conditions for U's.
 - * It would be a mistake (although, non-circular!) to identify a universal with its *extension* (i.e., the collection of all of its exemplifiers).
 - * Intuitively, for instance, Featherless Biped ≠ Human Being (even though they have the same extension). But, how can we give a non-circular account of the *content* or the *intension* of a universal?
 - * An account of the content of two allegedly distinct universals will appeal to their *definitions*, which will contain further (allegedly distinct) universals, and we'll need assurance that *they* are distinct, etc.
 - * Reply: This can't be done for material objects either (*tu quoque?*).
- Epistemic difficulties involved in *knowing about* universals:
 - * Reply: Only a deep problem for (necessarily) unexemplified universals, and not all realists accept a “two-worlds” ontology (e.g., Armstrong)
- But, these technical and epistemic problems do not seem decisive or motivationally central for the nominalist. Ultimately, this dispute comes down to a battle (or many battles) between explanatory schemes.



Nominalism II: Why Be A Nominalist? (Cont'd)

- Nominalists think that their accounts and explanations are just as good as the realist's — *only simpler* (since they don't invoke universals, only particulars).
- That is, the nominalist thinks they can meet the realist's challenge, and with a simpler, more elegant, and more parsimonious ontological framework.
- If this were true, then – or so the story goes – there would be strong *methodological* reasons for adopting the nominalist's approach (and eschewing realism's posits). Pause: Why is parsimony important here?
 - **Ockham's Razor:** given two theories of equal explanatory power, the theory that postulates fewer irreducibly distinct kinds or types of entities is preferable. [This is a 'use it or lose it!' methodological principle.]
 - Some things to keep in mind in connection with Ockham's Razor:
 - * How do we count 'the number of distinct kinds or types of entities postulated by a theory?' How do we compare different kinds/types?



- * How do we gauge the relative explanatory power of competing theories?
- * Are other types of simplicity (or unification) relevant to our choice (*e.g.*, explanatory simplicity – see below)? If so, then how are *they* gauged?
- There are various forms of nominalism. We will discuss a few, with an eye toward seeing how well they account for or explain the realist's phenomena.
- We begin with *Austere Nominalism* – a rather naïve version of nominalism that includes only concrete particulars (people, plants, *etc.*) in its ontology.
- After Austere Nominalism, we will move on to discuss *Metalinguistic Nominalism* – a very sophisticated and subtle variety – which unpacks apparent talk about non-linguistic universals as talk about linguistic entities.
- Finally, we will cover *Trope Theory* – another subtle variety of nominalism – which includes concrete particulars and their 'shares of universals'.
- The austere nominalist claims that her theory can do all of the philosophical work (worth doing!) that the realist theory can do, but with much less stuff.
- Let's start with the problem of attribute agreement (where our story began).



Nominalism III: Austere Nominalism 1

- So, how does the austere nominalist account for or explain attribute agreement among concrete particulars? They don't. They say it isn't necessary.
- According to austere nominalism, attribute agreement among concrete particulars is simply a basic, unanalyzable, and inexplicable fact.
- Recall that perhaps the most popular realist reply to the (attribute agreement) regress we saw in the last chapter was to claim that "each of $a \dots n$ exemplifies F -ness" does not itself require an explanation (within a realist framework).
- The austere nominalist agrees with this claim, but goes farther. They claim that the *original fact* (*explanandum* for the realist) does not even require explanation. The austere nominalist takes attribute agreement *itself* as basic.
- So, for the austere nominalist, attribute agreement is not something requiring explanation, and so this is only an apparent success story for the realist.
- How about an austere nominalist account of predication?



Nominalism IV: Austere Nominalism 2

- The nominalist does think that an explanation of the truth of " a is F " is needed. For the nominalist, though, this explanation is painfully simple. Nominalists adopt a very weak, minimal account of truth, based on:

(T) " a is F " is true if and only if a is F . (*viz.*, " a is F " is true *because* a is F)
- This is called a *disquotational* or *deflationary* account of truth. NOTE: (T) in and of itself is not inconsistent with a (realist) correspondence theory of truth, which requires there to be a *language-independent truthmaker* in virtue of which " a is F " is true. So, nominalists need not be anti-realists (more later).
- Realists may be tempted to complain that (T) is (true, but) *trivial*. But, they must be careful, since the same charge seems to threaten their own account.
- Recall the realist 'paraphrase' of "Socrates is courageous": "Socrates exemplifies courage". If this is equivalent to "Socrates is courageous", then it is true iff Socrates is courageous (back to (T)). How is this any less trivial?



- If, on the other hand, “Socrates exemplifies courage” is *not* equivalent to “Socrates is courageous”, then how can the realist claim to be giving truth conditions for the latter using the former? We’re back to our dilemma!
- Sidebar: there is also a dilemma for deflationary accounts of truth. It seems that there is much more to the truth of the sentence “*a* is *F*” than merely *a*’s being *F*. After all, the sentence “*a* is *F*” must *mean* or *assert* that *a* is *F* (that, of course, is not guaranteed merely by *a*’s being *F*). So, (T) seems false.
- We might respond by rephrasing (T) as asserting that the *proposition* (rather than the *sentence*) that *a* is *F* is true iff *a* is *F*. But, then we seem to have a difficulty with the *explanatory* claim that “*a* is *F*” is true *because a* is *F*.
- If this, too, is read as a *propositional* claim (i.e., as “the *proposition* that *a* is *F* is true because *a* is *F*”), then we seem to be able to deduce (using (T)) that *a* is *F* because *a* is *F*, which seems false (since *because* is not reflexive). But, then it seems we can’t have both (T) and the explanatory claim as well. Thoughts?
- What about abstract reference? What do austere nominalists say about that?



Nominalism V: Austere Nominalism 3

- Remember, the problem of abstract reference involves statements like:
 - (2) Courage is a virtue.
 - (4) John’s eyes are the same color as his hair.
 - (5) That shape does not occur in nature.
- The realist accounts for the truth of these in exactly the same sort of way that they account for the truth of claims like:
 - (3) Socrates is a man.
- The nominalist must account for the truth of such claims without positing the existence of a universal that is denoted by the subject term of the sentence.
- Claims like (2) seem doable for the austere nominalist. They can say:
 - (2’) Courageous persons are virtuous.
- But, do (2) and (2’) have the same meaning? (2) seems necessarily true, but (2’) may well be false (imagine a courageous person with no other virtue).



Nominalism VI: Austere Nominalism 4

- Perhaps the austere nominalist translation strategy can be pursued, but it’ll have to be more subtle. We’ll have to say things like:
 - (2’’) *Ceteris paribus* (other things being equal), courageous persons are virtuous.
- Problem: what is the force of the *ceteris paribus* clause? Intuitively, it means that courageous persons *who have all the remaining virtues* are virtuous. But, nominalists cannot say *that* – it reintroduces what was to be eliminated.
- Try “courageous persons *who satisfy all the remaining virtue predicates*” are virtuous. But, there aren’t enough virtue predicates to ensure that (2’’) cannot be false. Loux concludes CP’s are not fully nominalistically analyzable.
- Claims like (4) present further problems. The austere nominalist has to explain (4) in terms of concrete particulars agreeing in various ways. One could try to introduce *adverbs* here, and then translate (4) into:
 - (4’) John’s eyes and John’s hair agree *colorwise*.
- Loux: these adverbs must then be taken as explanatorily primitive (*Why?*).



Nominalism VII: Austere Nominalism 5

- Loux concedes that austere nominalism posits fewer *ontological categories* than realism (no universals, only particulars). But, he argues that austere nominalism is *explanatorily* more complex and less unified than realism.
- Austere nominalism seems to treat more things as *explanatorily primitive*
 - Attribute agreement
 - Their *ceteris paribus* clauses
 - Their adverbial expressions
- Austere nominalism also seems to have a less unified account of the truth of subject-predicate claims – especially in the case of abstract reference:
 - They do not have a general recipe for generating nominalistic translations of abstract claims. These seem to be done piecemeal or one at a time.
 - Realism, on the other hand, has a very elegant *explanation* of subject-predicate discourse in general (esp. the case of abstract reference).
 - How are we to weigh these conflicting assessments of parsimony?

