

Philosophy 125 — Day 7: Overview

- Administrative Stuff
 - First Paper Topics and Study Questions will be announced Thursday (9/18)
 - All section locations are now (finally!) known (see website)
 - Blog on regresses (my last word?!) available (see home page for link)
 - Guest Lecture next Thursday: Ed Zalta on Nonexistent/Abstract Objects
- **Agenda:** Nominalism
 - Austere Nominalism
 - “Plato’s Beard”
 - * A Puzzle for Nominalism, and a Proposed Solution by Quine
 - Metalingusitic Nominalism
 - Trope Theory



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).
- There is 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, “ a is F ” must *mean* or *assert* that a is F (and *that* is not guaranteed merely by a ’s being F). So, (T) seems *false* if it is applied to *sentences* “ a is F ”.
- There is another horn here. Perhaps we should read (T) as asserting that the



*proposition expressed by the sentence “ a is F ” is true iff a is F . But, then we face a difficulty with the *explanation*, which says “ a is F ” *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?
- Realists may be tempted here to complain that (T) is (true, but) *trivial*. But, they must be careful, since the same charge may threaten their own account.
- Recall the realist ‘paraphrase’ “Socrates exemplifies courage”. If this is equivalent to “Socrates is courageous”, then (plausibly) it is true iff Socrates is courageous — back to (T). How does this lead to a less trivial *explanation*?
- 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 old dilemma!
- 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) Those two species are cross-fertile. [This is Quine's example – see below.]
- The realist accounts for the truth of these abstract claims in exactly the same sort of way that they account for the truth of more mundane 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 a successful austere nominalist translation strategy can be found here, but it seems it'll have to be more subtle. Perhaps we could 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 that 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 unified explanatory scheme for subject-predicate discourse in general (esp. the case of abstract reference).
 - How are we to weigh these conflicting assessments of parsimony?



Nominalism VIII: A Puzzle Concerning Nominalistic Discourse 1

- Here are two fundamental questions about nominalistic discourse:
 - (Q1) When a nominalist (particularly, an Austere Nominalist) says “There are no universals”, what could this possibly mean (by their own lights)?
 - (Q2) When a realist says “There are universals”, how can the nominalist make sense of this claim (and how can the nominalist engage the realist here)?
- Quine (in “On What There Is”) suggests an answer to (Q1), based on Russell's “On Denoting” (which is assigned for next week's guest lecture).
- Quine also discusses (Q2), but only briefly. He suggests that the nominalist should resort to talking about the realist's *sentences*, and how they are used.
- Before we get to metalinguistic nominalism, I think it will be useful to digress somewhat and discuss Quine's application of Russell's theory of descriptions.
- Russell was concerned with the problem of *empty names*. Problem: How can we make sense out of singular claims with empty singular terms (subjects)?



Nominalism IX: A Puzzle Concerning Nominalistic Discourse 2

- Quine's Example: Consider a debate on the issue "Whether Pegasus exists". The realist believes Pegasus is, and the nominalist believes that Pegasus is not.
- It seems strange for the nominalist to assert "Pegasus does not exist". You can imagine the realist asking "What does not exist?". It seems the nominalist is referring to *something* and then saying of *that thing* that it does not exist (!).
- To the realist, making such discourse meaningful seems to require having *something* in our ontology to which the singular term "Pegasus" refers.
- Many Realists *do* postulate such things, which do not (actually) exist in space and time. Some realists posit "*possible* (concrete) objects", others postulate "(actual) *abstract* objects". Zalta does the latter (next week's guest lecture).
- Quine rejects "possible objects" on the grounds that modality only applies to *propositions as a whole*, and not to *bound variables* (e.g., "something"). Similar worries arise for theories of "abstract objects", which also tend to involve mixtures of modal operators and bound variables (Zalta's lecture).



Nominalism X: A Puzzle Concerning Nominalistic Discourse 3

- Ed will address 'objectual' issues next week, and we'll do modality in unit 3. I'll focus on Quine, Russell, and the nominalism/realism *universals* debate.
- As Quine explains, Russell provides a way to make such discourse *meaningful*, without presupposing that there is something to which such singular terms *refer*. The key here is Russell's theory of singular descriptions.
- Russell focuses on claims involving empty singular descriptions, like:
(*) The present King of France is bald.
- There is no present king of France. So, how can we make sense of (*)?
- Russell: singular descriptions like "the present King of France" are (semantically incomplete) 'denoting' expressions, which have *meaning* — *in the context of entire claims, like* (*), *in which they appear* — but *no referent*.
- In particular, Russell unpacks (*) as "Something is the present King of France, and nothing else is the present King of France", which is *false*.



Nominalism XI: A Puzzle Concerning Nominalistic Discourse 4

- Quine argues that Russell's trick can be applied to singular terms (*seeming* proper names) like "Pegasus" as well, by 'descriptionizing' them. To wit, the claim "Pegasus is not" becomes "The thing which is-Pegasus is not."
- On Quine's approach, this becomes "Nothing uniquely Pegasizes", or, more precisely, "There is no x such that (x is-Pegasus and every y which is-Pegasus is identical to x)"^a, which is true iff the 'Pegasus-nominalist' is correct.
- Thus, "Pegasus" is given a *meaning* (in the context of complete sentences in which it occurs), *without* having a *referent*. And, we seem to get the intuitively correct answers for the truth values of various claims involving "Pegasus".
- This gives the 'Pegasus-nominalist' a way to ground the truth of the claim "Pegasus is not". How do realists do it? Ed Zalta will explain this next week.
- So far, this Russellian trick for *particulars* does not seem to directly help us with the debate between realists and nominalists about *universals*. Can it?

^aEven more precisely: " $\neg(\exists x)[P(x) \ \& \ (\forall y)(P(y) \rightarrow y = x)]$ ", where " $P(x)$ " reads " x is-Pegasus".



Nominalism XII: A Puzzle Concerning Nominalistic Discourse 5

- Quine argues this exposes a fallacy in the realist 'paraphrase' strategy. *Even if* we *grant* the realist their paraphrase of "Socrates is courageous" into "Socrates exemplifies Courage", it does not follow that the seeming name "Courage" refers to anything (either *via* naming *or via* 'connoting').
- Quine: the conflation of *meaning* and *reference* (see Frege reading) causes people to believe "Courage" refers to a universal (or to an idea in the mind).
- Quine then considers some possible replies/objections, on behalf of the realist:
 - OK for non-abstract S-P discourse, but what about attribute agreement?
 - * Quine: Why think attribute agreement is something to explain at all? "... that ... houses and roses and sunsets are all of them red may be taken as ultimate and irreducible." Sound familiar (and austere)?
 - Aren't *meanings* (distinguished by Quine from *referents*) universals?
 - * Quine: There are no meanings (only people using language). He is a behaviorist about meaning — they're psycho/sociological dispositions.



Nominalism XIII: A Puzzle Concerning Nominalistic Discourse 6

- Abstract Reference: What would Quine say about “Courage is a virtue”?
- ‘Descriptionizing’ gives: “The thing which is-Courage is a virtue”. But, on Quine’s account, this becomes “Something uniquely courageizes, and that thing is a virtue”, which is *false* for a Courage-nominalist. But, courage *is* a virtue!
- This seems to make it impossible for a Courage-nominalist to affirm claims like “Courage is a virtue”, which seem to express truths about courage.
- Other versions of nominalism (metalinguistic, austere) allow the Courage-nominalist to affirm the (intuitively true) claim “Courage is a virtue”.
- Quine talks about abstract reference elsewhere, and he suggests (where possible) the paraphrase strategies (above) adopted by austere nominalism.
- For (Q2), Quine goes meta-linguistic: nominalists *can’t* (consistently) say “There are things the realist has in his ontology but I do not”; they *can* “talk about the realist’s sentences” & “what to do with them” (*i.e.*, debate their usage).



Nominalism XIV: A Puzzle Concerning Nominalistic Discourse 7

- Quine’s view seems to be that one’s ontological commitments are determined by the “ineliminable” bound variable expressions in one’s best theory of the world — *i.e.*, the *entities (ineliminably) quantified over* in one’s best theory.
We may say ... that some dogs are white and not thereby commit ourselves to recognizing either doghood or whiteness as entities. ‘Some dogs are white’ says that some things that are dogs are white; and, in order that this statement be true, the things over which the bound variable ‘something’ ranges must include some white dogs, but need not include doghood or whiteness. On the other hand, when we say that some zoological species are cross-fertile we are committing ourselves to recognizing as entities the several species themselves, abstract though they are. We remain so committed at least until we devise some way of so paraphrasing the statement as to show that the seeming reference to species on the part of our bound variable was an ‘avoidable manner of speaking.’
- Quine says classical mathematics is committed to various abstract entities (*e.g.*, sets), and he says *science* is too (sets are ‘indispensible’ to best science).



Nominalism XV: Epilogue on Quine

Let us by all means see how much of the physicalistic conceptual scheme can be reduced to a phenomenalistic one ... physics also ... demands pursuing, irreducible *in toto* though it be. Let us see ... to what degree, natural science may be rendered independent of platonistic mathematics; but let us also pursue mathematics and ... its platonistic foundations.

- Here, Quine hints that realism about *some* physical universals (*e.g.*, species) and *some* mathematical universals (*e.g.*, sets) may be ineliminable.

Provided merely that [the nominalist’s] ontology countenances linguistic forms, or at least concrete inscriptions and utterances, [she] can talk about [the realist’s] sentences.

- Here, Quine suggests that the nominalist go meta-linguistic in their reconstruction (or ‘paraphrase’) of realist discourse. Interesting. More? BUT ... we must not jump to the conclusion that what there is depends on words. Translatability of a question into semantical terms is no indication that the question is linguistic.



- Here, Quine makes it clear that ontological debates are not about language (even if we reconstruct the discourse in this way). They’re about which theory is best, and what it quantifies over. Segué into metalinguistic nominalism ...



Nominalism XVI: Metalinguistic Nominalism 1

- Metalinguistic nominalism has only recently been carefully worked out (20th century: Carnap and Sellars), but its roots are in medieval philosophy, in the work of Roscelin, Abelard, and William of Ockham.
- Roscelin : talk about universals is really talk about certain linguistic expressions, those that can be predicatively ascribed to many individuals.^a And, linguistic expressions are physical vocalizations (mere breaths of air).
- Abelard: universals are *meaningful* linguistic expressions (not mere breaths); and, the challenge for nominalism is to explain how predicable expressions can be meaningful *in the absence of* multiply exemplifiable entities.
- William of Ockham: Abelard is right, but the meaningfulness of written or spoken language requires an inner language of the soul (language of thought).
- All agree that the notion of universality itself is to be explained in terms of the linguistic activity of predication (this turns realism's scheme on its head!).

^aOnly names that are general terms (*nomina*) can have universality – the origin of “nominalism”.



Nominalism XVII: Metalinguistic Nominalism 2

- Metalinguistic nominalists think that realists and austere nominalists make the same kind of mistake: thinking that there must be some non-linguistic entities to which terms like “courage” (in, *e.g.*, “Courage is a virtue”) refer.
- For realists, these entities are universals, for austere nominalists, the entities are concrete particulars (*e.g.*, courageous persons). The metalinguistic nominalist thinks both the realist and the austere nominalist are incorrect.
- Carnap sketches how a systematic and precise metalinguistic nominalistic theory might be worked out. Carnap proposes (roughly) that claims like “Courage is a virtue” get unpacked as claims about predicates in languages:
“Courage is a virtue” \mapsto “ ‘Courageous’ is a virtue predicate in English”.
“Trangularity is a shape” \mapsto “ ‘Triangular’ is a shape predicate in English”.
- Problems: (1) Linguistic types *vs* linguistic tokens (trading new universals for old ones?), (2) Language relativity (abs. claims don't seem language relative).

