8.E: the ***Philosophyldeas*** overview of

Nominalism

The platonist may believe that universals (features held in common by many objects, such as being flat) actually exist in a world of their own, and many philosophers believe that abstract objects such as numbers exist. The denial of these views is 'Nominalism'. Denial of universals usually involves the assertion that only particular things exist, and their common features might be explained by resemblance. Denial of abstract objects ('abstracta') usually involves the assertion that all that exists is the nature we directly experience, and that it is very likely to be entirely physical. The earliest forms of nominalism attacked universals, and the attack on abstracta is a more recent development. All nominalists like to keep their ontology to a minimum, and try to maximise simplicity in their account of the world, and certainly to avoid straying into anything that looks supernatural when describing what seems to be natural.

The word 'nominalism' implies that these supposed universals and abstracta are really just words. The main motivation for nominalism was a general unease that modes of existence were being proposed which could neither be experienced, nor solve the problems they were supposed to address. Universals are said to be 'one-over-many', where a single entity (the universal) is said to have many instances and locations. It seemed to nominalists that the instances were clear but the universal was not, since it was abstract, vague, and very different from the instances we experience. A particular thing involved many universals, which coincide, and might even have contradictory definitions. The universal of the circle can't seem to have a diameter, since it must explain the variety of diameters in the actual circles. More recent nominalism is driven by resistance to a quasi-mystical element in the belief in abstracta, when modern thought increasingly focuses on what is natural and physical. For example, if new abstracta appear, such as complex numbers, that occurs in time, which seems to place them in space, and hence prevent them from being abstract. However, science, mathematics and ordinary life are full of references to what seem to be abstract objects, such as vectors, pi, and inflation rates, and nominalists have to explain this fact.

A traditional problem with universals was to say how they relate to particulars. If we say that particulars resemble because they all contain the one universal then it is puzzling how each instance relates to the obscure universal. Nominalists suggest that we can cut the middle man, and explain universals just by the resemblance relation, known as Resemblance Nominalism. Thus all the red things resemble one another, and all the circular things, and the so-called universals are these families of resembling instances. Where resemblance was explained by the presence of the one universal in each case, resemblance is now treated as an inexplicable primitive phenomenon. Things just resemble one another, and our concepts reflect that. The attraction of the theory is that it cuts nature down to particular entities which we can experience, and that it responds to how reality actually is.

An obvious difficulty is that resemblance is very rarely a precise relation. Things can 'somewhat' resemble one another. A can resemble B, and B resemble C, but A not resemble C. For weaker resemblance we normally say in what 'respect' the things are like one another, but even respects can differ. Cats and dogs are both furry, but their fur is somewhat different. Two shades of red resemble, but we link them with the one word 'red', when we can see that they are not identical in their redness. It also seems that more than one item is required (for comparison) before we can state a thing's properties, which sounds wrong. All red circles may form a nice family, tied together by resemblance, but is the tie the redness or the circularity (the 'companionship difficulty')? We then see that there can't be neat families, matching the universals we talk about, because they shade off into one another, and items can end up in the same family despite (at the extremes) having nothing in common (the 'imperfect community' problem). In any case, perceptions of resemble seem rather too subjective for a metaphysical theory. If those difficulties were not enough, critics say that 'resemblance' itself is a universal, so the whole theory is founded on a misunderstanding.

A different approach is Predicate Nominalism, which emphasises that universals are 'just words'. Being one-over-many is exactly what words do, and since words are human conventions, the uncertainties about what exactly resembles what don't matter, because we can talk in whatever way seems convenient to us. If we say that universals are just words, then there are exactly as many universals as there are predicates. So we give up on 'natural' universals, and allow any weird or complex predicate to specify some universal. There is a problem that there seem to be a lot of properties (e.g. minute shades of colour) which no predicate has captured, and there are some paradoxical predicates which can't represent any property. More basically, we might wonder why we seem to apply universals to things in the world, if universals are nothing more than words. Words don't usually mean themselves. We might retreat from words and embrace Concept Nominalism, though that has similar problems about how far concepts match the features we are concerned with. One approach to the concepts is Fictionalism, which says we simply invent the concepts we need, and pretend they refer to features of the world. If our pretences are sensible, the universals we are imagining might describe the world quite well. Another approach is Mereological Nominalism, which treats all the red in the world as one large single entity, made up of many red parts. This works nicely for colour, but looks less promising when you think of circular items, and still doesn't tell us what the one red thing is.

Perhaps the most popular theory amongst modern analytical empiricists is Class Nominalism. This thoroughly embraces the idea that only particular entities exist by saying that there is a set of things that are red, and another of circular things, and there is nothing more to a universal than membership of such a set. This theory is 'extensional', because it relies on the things to which the predicate applies, and ignores the meaning of the predicate. A well known problem is that a few pairs of predicates refer to exactly the same things, resulting in one set for two predicates. A solution is to embrace *possible* bearers of the predicates, as well as the actual ones (to show the two predicates can come apart), but even that doesn't quite shake off the problem. Critics say that you cannot ignore the meanings of the predicates in this way. We may know red things are in the red set, but why are they in it?

A different strategy for nominalists is Trope Theory, which rejects universals by saying a patch of red is a separate particular, though this theory relies on abstract particulars, where most nominalists favour concrete particulars.