

SYMPOSIUM: "NOMINALISM"

"OSTRICH NOMINALISM"
OR "MIRAGE REALISM"?

BY

MICHAEL DEVITT

DAVID Armstrong's approach to "the problem of universals" has a contemporary gloss: he leaves it to "total science . . . to determine what universals there are." Nevertheless his conception of the problem shows him to be a devotee of the "old-time" metaphysics. The problem is the traditional one allegedly posed by the premise of "Plato's One over Many argument": "Many different particulars can all have what appears to be the same nature" (p. xiii).¹ It is a pity that Armstrong takes no serious account of the "new" metaphysics of W. V. Quine and others according to which there is no such problem as Armstrong seeks to solve.² In my view this Quinean position is a much stronger rival to Armstrong's Realism about universals than the many others he carefully demolishes.

The universals we are concerned with here are properties (what Quine calls "attributes") and relations. "Realists" believe in them, "Nominalists" don't. After outlining five versions of Nominalism, Armstrong mentions the Quinean position as a possible sixth under the title "Ostrich or Cloak-and-dagger Nominalism":

I have in mind those philosophers who refuse to countenance universals but who at the same time see no need for any reductive analyses of the sorts just outlined. There are no universals but the proposition that *a* is *F* is perfectly all right as it is. Quine's refusal to take predicates with any ontological seriousness seems to make him a Nominalist of this kind. (p. 16)

Worse, these philosophers are guilty of trying to have it both ways: denying universals whilst, *prima facie*, unashamedly making use of them. They commit the sin of failing to answer "a compulsory question in the examination paper" (p. 17). In Quinean language, they fail to face up to their ontological commitments.

Ostriches are reputed to ignore problems by putting their heads in the sand. Mirages are another feature of desert life: people see things that aren't there. An "Ostrich Nominalist" is a person who maintains Nominalism whilst ignoring a problem. A "Mirage Realist" is a person who adopts Realism because he sees a problem that isn't there. My major thesis is as follows:

1. To maintain Nominalism whilst ignoring the One over Many argument is not to be an Ostrich Nominalist; rather to adopt Realism because of that argument is to be a Mirage Realist.

Establishing this thesis would not, of course, show Realism to be unjustified (let alone false): there might be problems independent of the One over Many argument for which Realism is a possible solution. Armstrong thinks there are. I agree. To the extent that he is responding to those problems he is not a Mirage Realist. My thesis about him is as follows:

2. Armstrong is largely though not entirely a Mirage Realist.

Correspondingly, a Nominalist could be an Ostrich by putting his head in the sand as *real* problems loom. However correct his stand on the One over Many argument he could *otherwise* commit the sin that Armstrong complains of. I don't know whether there are any Ostrich Nominalists, but the only philosopher Armstrong alleges (tentatively) to be one, Quine, is not:

3. Quine is not an Ostrich Nominalist.

Argument for Thesis 1

According to Armstrong, the problem posed by the One over Many argument is that of explaining "how numerically different particulars can nevertheless be identical in nature, all be of the same 'type'" (p. 41). What phenomena are supposed to need explaining here? I take it that what Armstrong is alluding to is the common habit of expressing, assenting to, and believing, statements of the following form:

- (1) *a* and *b* have the same property (are of the same type), *F*-ness.

To settle ontological questions we need a criterion of ontological commitment. Perhaps Quine's criterion has difficulties, but something along that line is mandatory. The key idea is that a person is committed to the existence of those things that must exist for the sentences he accepts to be true. What must exist for a given sentence to be true is a semantic question to which our best theory may give no answer in which we have confidence. Furthermore the sentence may, by its use of quantifiers or singular terms, suggest an answer which the person would want to resist. Hence, in my view, the importance of Quine's mention of paraphrase in this context. Suppose the given sentence *seems* to require for its truth the existence of *G*'s yet the person can offer another sentence, which serves his purposes well enough, and which is known not to have that requirement. This is known because our semantic theory can be applied to this other sentence, in a way that it cannot to the given sentence, to show that the sentence can be true even though *G*'s do not exist. We can then say that the person's apparent commitment to *G*'s in the given sentence arises from "a mere manner of speaking"; he is not really committed to them.

Now in the ordinary course of conversation a Quinean is prepared to express or assent to the likes of (1). (1) seems to require the existence of an *F*-ness for it to be true. So he appears committed to that existence. To this extent the One over Many argument does pose a problem to the Quinean Nominalist, but it is a negligible extent. He has a suitable paraphrase readily to hand:

- (2) *a* and *b* are both *F*.

When the ontological chips are down, he can drop (1). There is no problem about identities in nature beyond a trivial one of paraphrase.

Armstrong will not be satisfied by this, of course: "You have simply shifted the problem. In virtue of what are *a* and *b* both *F*?" The Quinean sees only a trivial problem here too. It is in virtue of the following:

- (3) *a* is *F*;
- (4) *b* is *F*.

Armstrong will still be dissatisfied: "In virtue of what is *a* (or *b*) *F*?" If the One over Many argument poses a problem it is this. That was historically the case and, though Armstrong always *states* the problem in terms of identities in nature, it is the case for him too.³ *If there is no problem for the Nominalist in (3) and (4) as they stand then he has an easy explanation of identities in nature.*

The Realist who accepts the One over Many problem attempts to solve it here by claiming the existence of a universal, *F*-ness, which both *a* and *b* have. The Nominalist who accepts the problem attempts to solve it without that claim. The Quinean rejects the problem.

The Quinean sees no problem for Nominalism in the likes of (3) because there is a well-known semantic theory which shows that (3) can be true without there being any universals:

- (3) is true if and only if there exists an *x* such that '*a*' designates *x* and '*F*' applies to *x*.

So (3) can be true without the existence of *F*-ness. There is no refusal here "to take predicates with any ontological seriousness." The Quinean thinks that there *really must exist something* (said as firmly as you like) that the predicate '*F*' applies to. However that thing is not a universal but simply an object. Further, in denying that this object need have properties, the Quinean is not denying that it *really is F* (or *G*, or whatever). He is not claiming that it is "a bare particular." He sees no need to play that game.

The Realist may reply that this is a mistaken statement of the truth conditions of (3) and that the correct one *does* require the existence of *F*-ness for (3)'s truth. Until a good argument for this reply is produced the Quinean is entitled to go on thinking he has no problem.

All of this is not to say that there is nothing further about (3), or about *a* being *F*, that might need explanation. I can think of four possible problems here. None of them pose any special difficulty for the Nominalist: they are irrelevant to "the problem of universals."

(i) We might need to explain what *caused* *a* to be *F*. (ii) We might need to explain what was *the purpose* of *a* being *F*. Nobody interested in "the problem of universals" is likely to confuse their problem with (i) or (ii) and so I shall set them aside immediately.

It is not so easy to keep the next two problems distinct from "the problem of universals." (iii) If '*F*' is not a fundamental predicate then as reductivists we might need to explain what *constitutes* *a* being *F*: perhaps we will want to be told that it is in virtue of being *G*, where '*G*' is some physical predicate (*a* is a gene in virtue of being a DNA molecule). (iv) We might need to explain the *semantics* of '*F*': we might want to know what makes it the case that '*F*' applies to *a*.

The traditional "problem of universals" has often appeared in a misleading semantic guise: how can '*F*' "be applied to an indefinite multiplicity of particulars" (p. xiii; Armstrong does not approve of this way of putting the problem)? The strictly semantic problem of multiplicity does not have anything to do with universals. We need to explain the link between '*F*' and all *F* things in virtue of which the former applies to the latter. This is not different *in principle* from explaining the link between '*a*' and one object, *a*, in virtue of which the former designates the latter. The explanation of '*F*''s application depends on a theory of one semantic relation, application, the explanation of '*a*''s designation depends on a theory of another, designation. A feature of the explanations will be that it is *F* things that are linked to '*F*', and *a* that is linked to '*a*'. The *F*-ness of *F* things and the *a*-ness of *a* need not go unexplained in the semantics. Thus I think it is part of a good explanation of the link between 'tiger' and the many objects that it applies to that those objects are genetically of a certain sort. So the semantic problem may require *some* answer to the question: in virtue of what is *a* *F*? But the answer required is of type (iii), a reductivist answer.

In denying that there is any problem for the Nominalist about (3) it is important to see that we are not denying the reductivist problem (iii), nor the semanticist problem (iv), nor some combination of (iii) and (iv). What we are denying can be brought out vividly by taking '*F*' to be a fundamental predicate, say a physical predicate. Then there is no problem (iii): we have nothing to say about what makes *a* *F*, it just *is* *F*; that is a basic and inexplicable fact⁴ about the universe. Problem (iv) remains: it is the problem of explaining the link between the predicate '*F*' and that basic fact. Nothing else remains to be explained.

Why be dissatisfied with this? Explanation must stop somewhere. What better place than with a fundamental physical fact of our world?

Armstrong feels that we need to go further. How can we tell who is right? There is one sure sign that explanation has not gone far enough: an explanation that goes further. Thus if Armstrong's Realist response to the One over Many argument is a genuine explanation then there must be a genuine problem here to be explained. My final remarks in support of thesis 1 will consider Armstrong's response.

One Realist response, but not Armstrong's, to the One over Many argument runs as follows: *a* is *F* in virtue of having the property *F*-ness. We explain (3) by

(5) *a* has *F*-ness.

An obvious question arises: how is (5) to be explained? The Realist feels that the one-place predication (3) left something unexplained, yet all he has done to explain it is offer a two-place predication (a relational statement). If there is a problem about *a* being *F* then there is at least an equal problem about *a* having *F*-ness. Furthermore, the point of this manoeuvre for the Realist is to commit us to universals. In ontology, the less the better. Therefore this sort of Realist makes us ontologically worse off without explanatory gain. Any attempt by him to achieve explanatory power by explaining (5) seems doomed before it starts: it will simply raise the same problem as (5); he is in a vicious regress. If there is a problem about (3) this sort of Realist *cannot* solve it.

Armstrong calls the doctrine we have just considered "relational Immanent Realism," and rejects it for reasons not unconnected to mine (pp. 104–107). In its place he offers us "non-relational Immanent Realism." This doctrine is obscure. Armstrong offers us (5), or the similar, '*F*-ness is in *a*,' and simply declares it to be non-relational and inexplicable: particulars are not *related* to universals but bonded to them in a metaphysical unity (pp. 108–111). We have just seen that (5), taken at face value, cannot explain any problem about (3): it is a relational statement and so any problem for (3) is a problem for it. Armstrong avoids this grievous difficulty for Realism by fiat: (5) is not to be taken at face value. How then is it to be taken? Do we have even the remotest idea of what the words 'in' and 'have' mean here if they are not construed as relational predicates? Armstrong's Realism replaces the explanatory failings of relational Realism with a complete mystery. I suspect that Armstrong views sentences like (5) as attempts to speak the unspeakable: to talk about "the link" between particulars and universals without saying they are related. (Note the scare-quotes around 'in' on p. 108 and the use of a special hyphenating device on p. 111.)

Talk of "particulars" and "universals" clutters the landscape without adding to our understanding. We should rest with the basic fact that *a* is *F*. Even the alleged unity of particular and universal can be captured without mystery: a predication must involve both a singular term and a predicate; drop either partner and you say nothing. For the Nominalist the unity of predication is an unexciting non-linguistic fact. The move to relational Realism loses the unity. Armstrong's non-relational Realism attempts to bring it back with metaphysical glue. These are "degenerating problem shifts" (Lakatos).

Armstrong sees the One over Many argument as posing a problem for Nominalism and offers a Realist solution. If his solution were real then the problem would be real. The solution is not real. So it throws no doubt on my earlier argument that the problem is not real.

Indeed the Quinean can gain much comfort from Armstrong's book: it is a powerful argument for thesis 1. We have just demonstrated the failings of Armstrong's response to the One over Many argument. Armstrong himself carefully, and convincingly, demolishes every other known response to it. This chronicle of two thousand years of failure makes the task seem hopeless. The alternative view that there is no problem to solve becomes very attractive.

I take my major thesis to be established:

1. To maintain Nominalism whilst ignoring the One over Many argument is not to be an Ostrich Nominalist; rather to adopt Realism because of that argument is to be a Mirage Realist.

Even if there *are* universals they cannot form part of a solution to the One over Many problem, because that problem is a mirage.

Argument for Thesis 2

The arguments for theses 2 and 3 will be brief.

It follows from thesis 1 that in so far as Armstrong adopts Realism because of the One over Many argument, he is a Mirage Realist. At the beginning of his book he indicates that he sees that argument as the main one for universals (p. xiii). When he talks of "the problem of universals" it is the problem allegedly posed by that argument that he is referring to (e.g. p. 41). Almost the whole book is taken up with the consideration of responses to that argument. Armstrong is largely a Mirage Realist.

In one chapter, drawing on the ideas of Arthur Pap and Frank Jackson, Armstrong offers quite independent reasons for Realism (pp. 58–63).⁵ We all assent to, express, believe, statements like the following:

- (6) Red resembles orange more than it resembles blue;
- (7) Red is a colour;
- (8) He has the same virtues as his father;
- (9) The dresses were of the same colour.

Unlike (3) these seem to require the existence of properties for them to be true. Whether or not they are sufficient for Realism depends on whether or not we can find acceptable paraphrases without that commitment. There is nothing illusory about this problem for a Nominalist. Armstrong is not entirely a Mirage Realist. So,

2. Armstrong is largely though not entirely a Mirage Realist.

Argument for Thesis 3

For Quine to be an Ostrich Nominalist would be for him to ignore the ontological problem posed by his acceptance of statements like (6) to (9). *A priori* it is unlikely that this would be so. Quine, more than any other philosopher, has pointed out what constitutes an ontological commitment and has preached against ignoring such. Philosophers, like others, can fail to practise what they preach, but I suggest that it is unlikely that Quine would fail here, about as unlikely as that he would confuse use and mention.

A quick glance through *Word and Object*⁶ shows that he does not fail. In a section on abstract terms he considers, e.g., the sentence,

- (10) Humility is a virtue,

a sentence that raises much the same problem as Armstrong's (8), and sees it as committing him to the existence of "an abstract object" (p. 119), in fact to "an attribute," what Armstrong would call "a property." He goes on to "deplore that facile line of thought" that allows us to ignore this (pp. 119–120). He considers ways to paraphrase away this apparent commitment to attributes and admits the difficulties (pp. 121–123). The issues are postponed until Chapter VII. He does not there discuss sentences like (6) to (10) directly, so far as I can see, but his strategy for them is clear enough: all talk of attributes is to be dispensed with in favour of talk of eternal open sentences or talk of classes (p. 209). Whatever the merits of this approach it is not the behaviour of an Ostrich. So,

3. Quine is not an Ostrich Nominalist.

University of Sydney
Sydney, Australia

NOTES

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¹Such references are to *Nominalism and Realism: Universals and Scientific Realism, Volume 1*; Cambridge: University, 1978.

²See particularly Quine's discussion in "On What There Is," *From a Logical Point of View*; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963; pp. 9–14. Quine's discussion is largely aimed at a position like Armstrong's ("For 'McX' read 'McArmstrong'"; Elizabeth Prior).

³See, e.g., his remarks on Ostrich Nominalism (quoted above) and his discussion of the varieties of Nominalism, pp. 12–16.

⁴Lest an uncharitable reader should take this talk as committing me to the existence of facts, let me hasten to add that such talk is a mere manner of speaking, eliminable at the cost of style and emphasis.

⁵Given the importance Armstrong attaches to the One over Many argument for Realism, this chapter's title, "Arguments for Realism," is misleading.

⁶W.V. Quine, *Word and Object*; Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T., 1960.