# UNIT- 4: NOMINALISM

**UNIT STRUCTURE**

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## 4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Know about what Nominalism is and how it is related to the problem of universals,
- Know how to build the concepts of abstract objects and abstract universals,
- know the nominalist's arguments for the non-existence of the universals,
- Explain different types of nominalism,
- Distinguish between nominalism about proposition and about possible world,
- Give a critical account of nominalism.

## 4.2 INTRODUCTION

Nominalism is a theory according to which reality is only made up of particular items. It denies the real existence of any general entities such as properties, species, or other categories. The term "nominalism" stems from the Latin "nomen", "name." According to nominalism there is nothing general except names.

Nominalism comes in at least two varieties. In one of them it is the rejection of abstract objects; in the other it is the rejection of universals. Philosophers have often found it necessary to postulate either abstract objects or universals. And so Nominalism in one form or another has played a significant role in the metaphysical debate since at least the Middle Ages.

Nominalism is the theory that is related to the solution of one of the most important questions in philosophy, which is the problem of universals. It was a favorite subject for discussion in ancient times, and especially in the Middle Ages, is still in modern and contemporary philosophy.

## 4.3 PROBLEM O F UNIVERSALS

Nominalism arose in reaction to the problem of universals. The problem of universals is the problem of the correspondence of our mental concepts to things existing outside our intellect. Whereas external objects are determinate, individual, and they are excluded from all multiplicity, our concepts or mental representations offer us the realities independent of all particular determination; they are abstract and universal. The question, therefore, is to discover to what extent the concepts of the mind correspond to the things they represent; how the flower we conceive represents the flower existing in nature; in a word, whether our ideas are faithful and have an objective reality.

What is often called the "problem of universals" has emerged in the attempts that have been going on since Greek antiquity to understand and interpret. There are at any rate, two groups of questions about universals and are frequently distinguished as 'ontological' and 'epistemological', respectively. The first group is closely related to the themes - problems of Meaning: Meaning and reference) and deals with the kind of "reality" or "ontological status" that is to be assigned to the connotation (or meanings) of general terms.

The notion of universals has its genesis in attempts directed to different objectives to clarify the use of general terms.However, the

introduction of the notion leads directly to further questions about the sort of "existence" or "ontological status" and also to the questions about how universals are related to particulars. The various positions that have been taken on these ontological issues are frequently divided in to three main types. They are realism (extreme and moderate), conceptualism, and nominalism.

According to the so-called "realistic" view, universals are "objectively real," in the sense that their "existence" does not depend on the presence of human minds. But while the "extreme realism" advocated by Plato maintains that universals exist independently of any spatio-temporal particulars that may embody them, the "moderate realism" of Aristotle holds that universals exist only in particulars.

The Second type of view on the nature of universals is known as "conceptualism." According to it, universals are simply ways of thinking about particular things and do not exist independently of or external to human minds.

Finally, the third type of view on about universals is called "nominalism." It is usually described as the view maintaining that words alone are universals, and that the only attribute common to the things designated by a general term is the common name given to them. That means the common attribute of things is a general term. It is the common name given to the things that have a common attribute. However, it is doubtful whether anyone has consistently held such a thesis. Thinkers who are traditionally classified as nominalists (for example, Hobbs) do not deny that things receive a common name for reasons that are not wholly arbitrary because there are certain resemblances between them. What they deny is that individual objects designated by a general term posses an attribute that is identical in all the objects. They emphasize the conventional character of classification, the indeterminate range of application of most words, and the role played by language in the intellectual organization of experience. Recent thinkers with nominalistic leanings deal with the ontological problem

of universals almost exclusively from the perspective of logical grammar.

For the second group of the problem of universals, it is the epistemological problem. It is concerned with the inclusive question of what the grounds are, for maintaining that the use of general terms can be understood only on the assumption that at least some of them stand for universals. However, philosophers who deal with the question usually do so by discussing a congeries (a collection of items or parts in mass) of more specific ones, some of them are the questions for experimental psychology. Various issues have been raised by philosophers in this connection and some important among them are-(I) what is the function of general terms in acquiring knowledge and in the communication of thought? (2) What are the prerequisites involving sensory or introspective experience for the ability to use general terms and understand their meanings? (3) What mental occurrences are associated with the use of general terms, and how do images, ideas, or other psychic events-which are all particular existents-achieve generality of reference? (4) Does the use of general terms presuppose that things of which they are correctly predicated posses an identical common character? (5) Are there criteria for determining unambiguously the reality of universals? (6) Are assumptions about the existence of universals or other abstract entities comparable to scientific theories that postulate the existence of "unobservable" entities? And what is the ground of assessing the validity or acceptability of such assumptions?

## 4.4 ABSTRACT OBJECTS AND UNIVERSALS: ARGUMENTS AGAINST THEM

**Abstract objects**

In one sense, its most traditional sense, nominalism implies the rejection of universals. In another, more modern sense, it implies the rejection of abstract objects. To say that these are distinct senses of the word presuppose that universal and abstract object do not mean the same thing. Although different philosophers mean different things by universal, and

likewise by abstract object, according to widespread usage a universal is something that can be instantiated by different entities and an abstract object is something that is neither spatial nor temporal.

Thus there are (at least) two kinds of nominalism, one that maintains that there are no universals and one that maintains that there are no abstract objects. Realism about universals is the doctrine that there are universals, and Platonism is the doctrine that there are abstract. Thus one kind of nominalism asserts that there are particular objects and that everything is particular, and the other asserts that there are concrete objects and that everything is concrete.

Nominalism, in both senses, is a kind of anti-realism. For one kind of nominalism denies the existence, and therefore the reality, of universals and the other denies the existence, and therefore the reality, of abstract objects. What nominalism finds uncongenial in entities like properties, numbers, possible worlds and propositions is that they are supposed to be universals or abstract objects. Thus the mere rejection of properties, numbers, possible worlds, propositions, etc., does not make one a nominalist - to be a nominalist one needs to reject them because they are supposed to be universals or abstract objects.

What is an abstract object? There is no standard definition of the phrase. Generally it is regarded that an abstract objects is non-spatiotemporal and causally inert objects non-spatiotemporal, causally inert objects is a reasonably clear characterization (at least as clear as the notions of spatiotemporal object, causation, causal power and related ones are).

**Universals:**

The nominalist about universals rejects universals - but what are they?

Realists about universals typically think that properties (e.g. whiteness), relations (e.g. betweenness), and kinds (e.g. gold) are universals. Where

do universals exist? Do they exist in the things that instantiate them? Or do they exist outside them? To maintain the second option is to maintain an ante rem realism about universals. If universals exist outside their instances then it is plausible to suppose that they exist outside space and time. If so, assuming their consequent causal inertness, universals are abstract objects. To maintain that universals exist in their instances is to maintain an in re realism about universals. If universals exist in their instances, and their instances exist in space or time, then it is plausible to think that universals exist in space or time, in which case they are concrete. In this case universals can be multiply located, i.e. they can occupy more than one place at the same time, for in re universals are wholly located at each place they occupy (thus if there is whiteness in re, then such a thing can be six meters apart from itself).

Thus, both on ante rem and in re realism about universals, universals enjoy a relation with space very different from that apparently enjoyed by ordinary objects of experience like houses, horses and men. For such particulars are located in space and time and cannot be located in more than one place at the same time. But universals are either not located in space or else they can occupy more than one place at the same time.

**Arguments against abstract objects and universals:**

The thinkers who deny the abstract objects have not always based their rejection on arguments. This is the case, for instance, of Goodman and Quine who, in their Steps toward a Constructive nominalism, base their rejection of mathematical abstract objects on a basic intuition (1947, 105). One of the arguments against postulating abstract objects is based on Ockham's razor. According to this principle one should not multiply entities or kinds of entities unnecessarily. Thus if one can show that certain concrete objects can perform the theoretical roles usually associated with abstract objects, one should refrain from postulating abstract objects.

Another common and widely discussed argument against abstract objects is an epistemological argument. The argument is grounded in the

thought that if the abstract objects are causally inert, it is difficult to understand how we can have knowledge or reliable belief about them.

Many of these arguments and motivations for the rejection of abstract objects are also arguments and motivations for rejecting non-spatiotemporal ante rem universals. But Ockham's razor can also be used against universals conceived of as spatiotemporal entities.

There are other, more specific arguments against universals. One is that postulating such things leads to a vicious infinite regress. For suppose there are universals, both monadic and relational, and that when an entity instantiates a universal, or a group of entities instantiate a relational universal, they are linked by an instantiation relation

Other arguments against universals are based on the principles that there cannot be necessary connections between wholly distinct existences and that no two things can be composed of exactly the same parts.

## 4.5 DIFFERENT FORMS OF NOMINALISM

Given that nominalists about universals believe only in particulars, there are two strategies that they might implement regarding the question of the alleged existence of allegedly universal entities like properties and relations. One strategy is to reject the existence of such entities. Another strategy is to accept that such entities exist but to deny that they are universals.

**Types of nominalism about universals:**

The question that realists and nominalists about universals try to answer is: what makes a square thing square? A popular nominalist theory of properties is so-called Trope Theory, which has been held by Donald Williams (1953), Keith Campbell (1990), and Douglas Ehring (2011) among others. Trope theory does not reject the existence of properties, but takes properties to be certain entities usually called 'tropes'. Tropes are particulars, in the same sense in which individual people and individual apples are

particulars. There are other forms of nominalism about universals, two of which are Predicate nominalism and Concept nominalism. The realist about universals admits that the predicate 'scarlet' applies to a scarlet thing. Scarletness is a trope.

For Predicate nominalism there is nothing like scarletness. According to this theory a thing is scarlet in virtue of the fact that the predicate 'scarlet' applies to it. Similarly, according to Concept nominalism (or Conceptualism), there is nothing like scarletness and a thing is scarlet in virtue of its falling under the concept scarlet. These two views entail that if there were no speakers or thinkers, things would not be scarlet.

Because of this many would feel inclined towards another view, called Ostrich nominalism. This view, held by Quine, among others, maintains that there is nothing in virtue of which our thing is scarlet: it just is scarlet (Devitt 1980, 97). But many think that being scarlet cannot be a metaphysically ultimate fact, but that there must be something in virtue of which scarlet things are scarlet.

Another theory is Mereological nominalism, according to which the property of being scarlet is the aggregate of scarlet things, and for which something is scarlet in virtue of being a part of the aggregate of scarlet things. An aggregate, or mereological sum, is a particular. But the theory faces a difficulty with so-called extensive properties like mass and shape. For example every part of the aggregate of square things is not square.

There is another theory called Class nominalism, a version of which was maintained by Lewis (1983). Whether abstract or not, classes are particular on this view. According to Class Nominalism properties are classes of things, and so the property of being scarlet is the class of all and only scarlet things.

One problem with this theory is that no two classes can have the same members, while it does not seem that properties with the same instances need be the same. So there is no guarantee that the identification

of properties with classes is correct.

Another version of Nominalism is Resemblance nominalism. According to this theory, it is not that scarlet things resemble one another because they are scarlet, but what makes them scarlet is that they resemble one another. But the resemblance nominalist does not reify resemblance. When a and b resemble each other does not require that there are three entities there: a, b and a third, relational entity that is their resemblance. The only entities involved in that situation are a and b. Russell (1912, 96-7) and others think that Resemblance Nominalism faces the resemblance regress. But this regress presupposes that resemblances are entities that can resemble one another. Since Resemblance nominalism does not reify resemblances, the regress does not arise.

**Nominalism about abstract objects:**

Nominalism of abstract object is generally is of two types. They are nominalism about propositions and nominalism about possible words.

Nominalisms of propositions -can be divided into those that take them to be structured entities and those that take them to be unstructured entities. Each conception comprises a family of theories.

The most popular conceptions of unstructured propositions are those that take them to be either sets of possible worlds or functions from possible worlds to truth values.

There are other theories of propositions that take them to be unstructured entities. George Bealer has a conception of unstructured propositions according to which they are sui generis irreducible intensional entities.

Among conceptions of propositions as structured entities one can distinguish, roughly, between Russellian and Fregean versions. Both the Russellian and the Fregean conceptions of propositions are families of theories. In general Fregean theories will take a proposition to be a complex

entity with a particular structure whose constituents are senses.

According to the Russellian conception of propositions, a proposition is a complex entity with a particular structure whose constituents are particulars and/or properties and/or relations. Complexes of particulars and properties and/or relations are abstract objects.

One nominalist option is to show that the roles associated with propositions are actually played by concrete objects. One common thought here is to propose that sentences play the roles associated by propositions. This strategy is exemplified by Quine.

Another nominalist option is to deny that there are propositions and any entities that play their theoretical roles. If so, apparently true sentences that entail the existence of propositions are false. Thus this kind of Nominalism about propositions is a sort of fictionalism, called semantic fictionalism (Balaguer 1998).Thus a sentence like 'Nestor believed that the gods do not give men all things at the same time' is not true on this account because (a) 'that'-clauses (like 'that the gods do not give men all things at the same time') are referential singular terms, (b) if anything is the referent of 'that the gods do not give men all things at the same time', this is a proposition, and (c) there are no propositions. Thus talk about propositions is a fiction.

Nominalism about possible worlds-since some philosophers take possible worlds to be abstract objects, a nominalist about possible worlds will be, for the purposes of this section, someone who thinks that possible worlds are not abstract objects, and this will include those who believe that there are no possible worlds.

The question about the nature of possible worlds is a hotly debated topic. Some, for instance Alvin Plantinga, think that possible worlds are states of affairs that are both possible and maximal. Stalnaker naturally takes these properties to be abstract objects.

Another option is to take possible worlds as maximally consistent sets of propositions. R. M. Adams (1974) sketched such a theory. If propositions are abstract objects, then on this theory possible worlds are abstract objects.

For Lewis 'actual' is an indexical predicate so that from the point of view of each world only that world is actual and none of the others are. Thus, unlike Plantinga, Adams, and Stalnaker, Lewis does not take every possible world to exist actually.

## 4.6 CRITICISM

According to Aristotle, the objects of scientific knowledge are necessary and universal. But the defenders of nominalism deny the existence of real universals outside the human mind. According to Aristotle the objects of scientific knowledge are necessary and universal.

Therefore, if universals had only a mental existence, then the sciences would not deal with reality but only with human thought, which would be absurd. For this reason, Heymeric concluded, nominalists can only do logic, which is indeed concerned with human concepts, but none of the sciences dealing with things outside the human mind. As the main representatives of nominalism, he mentioned Wiiliam of Ockham, John Burdian, and Marsilius of Inghen, and considered the first to be the inaugurator of nominalism, who out of jealousy had distorted Aristotelianism and invented an opposing school of his own.

As a rule, in the commentaries on Aristotle written by Albertists, nomonalist authors were not mentioned and their positions not discussed. The most important conversant in their debates were theThomists and to a lesser extent, the Scotists.

At Cologne, the nominalists were also ignored by the Thomists, who as this matter was concerned, shared the critical view of the Albertists.

Albertists and Thomists also made a common stand against nominalism. For example the disputation held at Theological Faculty at the University of Cologne in 1480. Not only in Cologne but also elsewhere was the relationship between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian faith a matter of debate. For many Albertists, nominalism posed a serious danger to the adequate understanding of Christian faith.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** What is the main problem of nominalism?

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**Q 2:** What is the 'realistic' view of universals?

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**Q 3:** What is Predicate nominalism?

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**Q 4:** What is abstract object?

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**Q 5:** What are the different forms of nominalism?

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP:

- Nominalism is the theory that is related to the solution of one of the most important questions in philosophy, which is the problem of universals. It was a favorite subject for discussion in ancient times, and especially in the middle Ages, is still in modern and contemporary philosophy.

- Nominalism comes in at least two varieties. In one of them it is the rejection of abstract objects; in the other it is the rejection of universals.
- Nominalism arose in reaction to the problem of universals. There are at any rate, two groups of questions about universals and are frequently distinguished as 'ontological' and 'epistemological' respectively.
- In its most traditional sense, nominalism implies the rejection of universals. In another, more modern sense, it implies the rejection of abstract objects.
- There are (at least) two kinds of nominalism, one that maintains that there are no universals and one that maintains that there are no abstract objects.
- Nominalism, in both senses, is a kind of anti-realism. For one kind of nominalism denies the existence, and therefore the reality, of universals and the other denies the existence, and therefore the reality, of abstract objects.



## 4.8 FURTHER READING

1. Brandt Richard B., "Languages of Realism and Nominalism," philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. I7 (I957).
2. Nagel E., Brandt R. "Meaning and knowledge." Harcourt Brace and World, Inc. 1965.
3. Srivastava J.S. "From Logic to Metaphysics." Horizon Publishers. Allahabad 1992.
4. Alston William P. "Philosophy of language Prantice-Hall of India, Private Ltd. New Delhi. 1988.



## 4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q 1:** Nominalism is a theory according to which reality is only made up of particular items. It denies the real existence of any general entities such as properties, species, or other categories.

**Ans. to the Q. No. 2:** According to the so-called "realistic" view, universals are "objectively real," in the sense that their "existence" does not depend on the presence of human minds.

**Ans. to the Q.No.3:** For Predicate nominalism there is nothing like scarletness. According to this theory a thing is scarlet in virtue of the fact that the predicate 'scarlet' applies to it.

**Ans. to the Q. No.4:** Although different philosophers mean different things by universal, and likewise by abstract object, according to widespread usage a universal is something that can be instantiated by different entities and an abstract object is something that is neither spatial nor temporal.

**Ans. to the Q. No. 5:** A popular nominalist theory of properties is so-called Trope Theory. There are other forms of nominalism about universals, two of which are Predicate nominalism and Concept nominalism. Another theory is called Ostrich nominalism. This view, held by Quine, among others, maintains that there is nothing in virtue of which our thing is scarlet: it just is scarlet. Nominalism of abstract object is generally is of two types. They are nominalism about propositions and nominalism about possible words.

## 4.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

**A. Very short Questions**

**Q1:** In which period or age Nominalism was important as the theory of universals?

**Q2:** From which word "Nominalism" is derived?

**Q3:** According to Aristotle where do universals exist?

**Q4:** Is conceptualism a theory of universals?

**Q5:** 5. Is an abstract object spatio-temporal?

**B. Short Questions (Write in about 100-150 words)**

**Q1:** Write briefly about different forms of Nominalism.

**Q2:** Distinguish between "universals "and "abstract objects."

**Q3:** Distinguish between Nominalism about propositions and Nominalism about possible world.

**Q4:** What is Trope Theory?

**Q5:** What is the view of Extreme realism about universals?

**C. Long Questions (Write in about 300-500 words)**

**Q1:** Discuss the problem of universal.

**Q2:** Critically explain about abstract object and universal.

**Q3:** What are the different forms of nominalism? Discuss.

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