UNIT: 14 NOMINALISM (HOBBES AND HUME)

UNIT STRUCTURE

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14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the theory of Nominalism
- discuss Milder nominalism of Hobbes
- explain Hume's theory of nominalism

14.2 INTRODUCTION

As discussed in the previous unit, universal is something which is common to and shared in common by all the members of a particular class, and is the ground of their being grouped into the same class and called by the same name. Then regarding the exact nature of that 'common something' different philosophers gave their views differently. Hence we have several theories that deal with the question 'What is universal?' Nominalism is a theory that finds the answer in observed similarity among the things of a group.

14.3 NOMINALISM: WHAT THIS THEORY SAYS

Nominalism thoroughly denies the objective metaphysical universals. For this theory, there is not any identical thing which resides in a group of particular objects at the same time. According to this theory, the problem of

universals can be solved by the mere fact of observed resemblance among different particular things of a group. Thus nominalism defines universal in terms of resemblance or similarity such that the particulars are required only to resemble each other in being called by the same name. Hence this theory is also called the resemblance or similarity theory.

According to this theory, the attributes of any particular object are as particular and localized as the object itself. Nominalism denies the realist theories of universals, both in their Platonic and Aristotelian form. A universal, this theory holds, is not an entity at all — substantive or adjectival. This theory, which has several variations, defines universal in terms of particulars and of the relation of resemblance between them. Thus in one sense, this theory is closer to Aristotle than to Plato, as a universal is definable in terms of particulars, and hence cannot be found in the absence of instances. But it is unlike Aristotle in holding that a universal is not a feature reproduced in a number of particulars as numerically identical in each of them. Thus Nominalism does not deny that things have a common name. What this theory denies is the particular objects as designated by a general term possess a feature which is identical in all of them. The supporters of this theory are the Buddhist, William of Ockham, Hobbes, Berkeley and Hume.

The Western theory of nominalism finds its fullest expression in the hands of some empiricist thinkers. They stress on the observance of the particulars and the avoidance of abstract speculation. Instead of upholding objective metaphysical universals, this theory considers the observed resemblance among various particulars as enough to work out the problem of universals. This view has its origin in the philosophy of William of Ockham. His theory is popularly known as the principle of Ockham's razor. For him, it is wastage of time to employ a number of principles when it is possible to use a few.

14.3.1 Hobbes' view

Nominalism is found in its explicit form in the thought of Thomas Hobbes. Thomas Hobbes advances his nominalism in a milder form. He holds that a group of particulars resemble each

other in being called by the same name and that each of these particulars is called by the same name as the rest because it resembles the rest in some other way besides merely being called by the same name. According to Hobbes, there is no universal but a general word, or, there is nothing common to a group of things except their being called by the same name. His theory rejects not only realism but also conceptualism. Universal is not anything that exists in nature, nor is it any idea formed in the mind. It is always the name of some word.

However, Hobbes, in his nominalism, seems to have failed to distinguish between 'type' and 'token'. 'Type' and 'token' have a significant difference between them. The following two sentences exemplify how the same word 'red' is used in the senses of 'type' and 'token' in two different occasions.

(i) 'Red' occurs ten times on this page, and

(ii) His red handkerchief hung down from his pocket.

In uttering the first sentence, the speaker is referring to the type 'red'. Here it has the same meaning wherever it occurs. In uttering the second sentence, the speaker is referring to the token word 'red', i.e., to one of the particular occurrences of the type word 'red'.

Now, as Hobbes fails to make the distinction, he is unable to find that the sense in which a name is common to a set of particulars each of which is called by it is a type sense, and also that each time a different token is used in naming any one of the group. If he made the distinction between 'type' and 'token', he would have known not only the fact that a numerically different token is used each time, but also that tokens of a single type may vary qualitatively, too. Moreover, to think that there is something literally common to and identical in each instance of a given word is not only to blot out the distinction between type and token, and to reject the qualitative variations in tokens of the same type, but also to reintroduce the Aristotelian theory with its difficulties making the universal not a

common feature of a group of instances, but a single identical name common to them.

Thus Hobbes' theory of universal faces some serious questions: Why are different things called by the same name? Is calling certain things by the same name the basis of classification? When everything in the world is singular, how can Hobbes be consistent in talking of the name being the universal? All these difficulties are must to face for anyone holding extreme nominalism. Hobbes seems to have understood this, so he takes the stand of milder nominalism. He takes resemblance between individual things as the basis of their being called by the same name. One universal name is applied to several things because of their similitude in some quality or other. 'A man' refers to any one of the multitude of men and 'a cow' denotes any one of the multitude of cows. There is a relation of similarity between 'this man' and 'that man', and between 'this cow' and 'that cow'. When Hobbes says that a general word is a name common to a group of particulars, what he means to say is a similar token word as used for each of the particulars belonging to the group. The similitude of objects is the basis of classification. Classification is not merely naming, it has a specific foundation, i.e., similarity between things. Thus Hobbes' theory stands or falls with the theory of resemblance.

Hobbes' nominalism differs from the Buddhist nominalism (apohavada). Like the latter, Hobbes' nominalistic position is not extreme. The Buddhist does not recognise any positive similarity amongst particulars. Only the unique particulars (sva-laksana) are real and similarity, names etc. are all mental constructions. Similarity or identity does not have any room except in our imagination. Neither things can be said to be similar, nor can the words be said to be the same. 'Sameness' and 'similarity' — all these are make-beliefs. The Buddhist denies identity or similarity of any kind, for he, being a consistent nominalist, knows that the acceptance of identity or similarity on any plane would be to entertain the realism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 State whether the statements are true or false (True/False)

a) According to Nominalism, universal is essence. (True/False)

b) Hobbes Nominalism is a milder Nominalism. (True/False)

c) Buddhist Nominalism is called apohavada. (True/False)

Q 2: Define Nominalism.

Q 3: What is type?

Q 4: What is token?

Q 5: How does Hobbes define universal?

14.3.2 Hume's view

Hume's account of general words is found in his celebrated work "A Treatise of Human Nature". Hume holds that general ideas are particulars used in a representative way. He developed this idea— which is pretty similar to that of Berkeley— by formulating the disposition or propensity theory and resemblance theory. Hume starts his doctrine with the view that we cannot generalise without having a particular image in mind. He is against the view of abstraction. For him, the general idea itself is a particular concrete individual. The ideas are the copies or faint images of impressions in thinking and reasoning. Hume does not regard them to be intellectual idea apprehended by reason. There are only those ideas which copy impressions.

Hume appreciates Berkeley's assertion that universals or general ideas are nothing but particular attached to a certain word which assigns them a more extensive signification and makes them remember in cases of other individuals similar to them. He maintains that corresponding to every general word there must be a particular mental idea. While Berkeley holds that a word becomes general by its relation to a particular but representative idea, Hume states it the

other way round. For him, a particular idea becomes general by being added to a general term.

Hume puts forward three arguments in support of his view. They are—

Firstly, we cannot have an image of a line which is not of some particular length. Thus we cannot form any idea of quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of degrees of each.

Secondly, since an idea copies impression and every impression being determinate and definite, an idea must be determinate and definite, even though it is fainter than the impression from which it is derived.

Thirdly, in nature, whatever exists must be individual, i.e., a precisely determined particular. For instance, no triangle can exist without its particular characteristics. It is an absurdity to postulate an existent triangle which is at the same time all and none of the possible kinds and sizes of triangle.

While Berkeley had contended himself with maintaining that an idea becomes general by representing all ideas of the same sort, Hume goes further to give an account of how a particular idea represents others. He finds this explanation in his Resemblance theory. He gives two accounts of resemblance. First, two things resemble when they have one or more elements in common. This is the traditional account of resemblance. Secondly, resemblance may occur where there are no elements in common. This is Hume's additional theory which provides the foundation for the resemblance theory proper. The first theory asserts that two composites are said to resemble each other when at least one simple amongst the simples of which they are formed is found to be common in them. To take an example, if a composite A consists of a b c d and another composite B consists of a b e f, then the composites A and B may be said to resemble each other as they have in common the simples a and b. But this account of resemblance involves a difficulty. For this theory can be observed only in cases of composites possessing

common components in the sense explained above and it implies that simples cannot resemble each other and consequently we cannot generalise in their case.

Realising this problem, Hume says that when we find resemblance among several things observed by us, we are in the habit of applying the same name to all of them. For instance, having observed the cows frequently and having noticed resemblances among them, we apply the same word 'cow' to all of them, in spite of the differences among jersey cow, local cows, white cows, black cows, brown cows, tall cows, short cows, and so on. In this way, we may generalise without discovering common elements but by counting resemblance where there are no known identical common qualities. Thus, according to Hume, generalisation is done by finding resemblances. His new account is applied in the cases of composite also.

However, Hume's theory of resemblance in simples is not free from question. Regarding the question what enables us to group all simples together under the abstract term simple idea, Hume holds that they resemble each other in their simplicity. Now, if we go to interpret the term as per the similarity theory, this would mean that the simplicity of one simple idea resembles, but not identical with, the simplicity of another simple idea. Yet this is not the meaning of what Hume amounts to say. He surely means that the simplicity in both simple ideas is identical. Thus resemblance theory seems failed to keep Hume's position firm.

Again, in Disposition or Propensity theory, Hume discussed vividly about the association of ideas on the one hand and of belief on the other. Hume illustrates the Disposition theory by certain analogies. And by these analogies he wants to establish the following points in relation to the use of general words:

(1) We have to acquire a certain technique in order to use general words successfully. This is a technique of using word to

cover a number of things much of which is not in our thought at the time of using the word.

(2) The general word revives a habit. It acts as a stimulus. By using a single word we can revive several instances of habits. For instance, a man who cannot remember the verses can be put in remembrance of the whole by that single word or expression with which they begin.

(3) When we use the general word, its meaning cannot be said to be fixed. It is not precisely defined; it is used in somewhat loose manner. Yet it is not used foolishly, it is used intelligently and significantly in thinking and conversation with others. By conversation and reading we are accustomed to use them properly in appropriate situation, though we can hardly define them precisely.

Thus Hume's theory begins with the finding of resemblances and Hume has also shown that it is possible to observe a resemblance without discovering a common character. Hume replaces the abstraction of a common character by custom and the natural association of ideas. He says that when we find resemblance between the things we come across, we are accustomed to apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences they may have. After we have acquired the habit of applying the same word to the things resembling one another, the hearing of that word revives the idea of one of these things and makes the imagination conceive it. The hearing of the word can call up only one of the things. It cannot call up ideas of all things to which the word applies. But it, at the same time, brings in action 'a certain custom' to produce any other thing resembling this idea, if the occasion demands it. That is, the hearing of the word or name produces them all before it, though potentially and not actually. They are not present really to the mind, but only in power. We do not place them distinctly in imagination. What we do is to keep ourselves in a readiness to produce any one of them when the situation demands. Generally only a few ideas are recalled. In fact, the

recollection of all ideas to which the word or name may be applied is almost impossible. For our mind not only recalls, but also rejects. It is ready to reject anything which it is not accustomed to.

Hume's Disposition or Propensity theory may be regarded as a protest against the view that there is always a conscious selection of common qualities followed by the formation of a universal before the use of general words. We can generalise without discovering the common characteristic or characteristics, and simply by noting resemblances where there are no identical common qualities. Hume was the first among the empiricists who explained the use of general words at the level of daily life below the scientific level. We cannot think in cases of children that they first set out to isolate common characteristics and then abstract them to frame the universal. Here custom is the predominant thing in their cases as in the cases of adults. When the mind observes recurrence of certain resemblances among several things, then it, almost without our knowledge, groups them whose links are strengthened by the assertion of the common name. While determining the meaning of the word 'figure' we may not rest on one image or idea, rather we may revolve in our minds the ideas of circles, triangles, squares, rectangles, parallelograms of different sizes and proportions. Here the mind is doing explicitly what the custom for the most part does for it unknowingly. Thus the mind determines the meaning of the word 'figure' according to what the custom brings forth. Giving much importance on custom and habit debars us from saying that the central feature of the theory is taking one particular and making it stand for all others of the same sort. Here the important thing is not the taking of one particular; rather it is this custom-induced suggestibility of the mind, this habit or 'propensity'.

Hume holds that logic cannot be wholly divorced from psychology. For him, a concept must be thought of in terms of the conceiving of a concept. Conceiving a concept is having a particular expectation on hearing a name, a certain readiness to recognise an

instance and to reject that is not an instance. A universal should not be regarded as a solid ideal content possessed by the mind, but as a readiness and expectation which has an emotional aspect along with its cognitive one.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: State whether the statements are true or false (True/False)

a) Hume's view of universal is known as resemblance or similarity theory. (True/False)

b) Hume is associated with Disposition or Propensity theory. (True/False)

c) For Hume, a particular idea becomes general by being added to a general term. (True/False)

Q 7: Write one similarity between Berkeley and Hume regarding universal.

Q 8: Define Hume's Nominalism.

Q 9: What does Hume want to prove by Propensity theory?



ACTIVITY 14.1

- Is resemblance or similarity theory tenable as a theory of universal? Give reasons in support of your answer.

Ans. .....

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14.4 LET US SUM UP

Thus from the foregoing discussion it is evident that Nominalism thoroughly denies the objective metaphysical universals. It is not ready to admit any identical thing which is supposed to be present commonly at the same time in a group of particular objects. Rather this theory defines universal in terms of resemblance or similarity such that the particulars are

required only to resemble each other in being called by the same name. Thomas Hobbes advanced his theory in a milder form. And Hume handled the problem of universal with the formulation of Disposition or Propensity theory coupled with similarity theory.

Some main points of this unit are:

- Nominalism denies outright the common essence identically present in a group of things.
- According to this theory, it is the resemblance or similarity that brings the things in a particular group.
- Hobbes' milder nominalism asserts that a group of particulars resemble each other in being called by the same name and that each of these particulars is called by the same name as the rest because it resembles the rest in some other way besides merely being called by the same name.
- Hume, through his Disposition or Propensity theory, tries to prove that we can form universal without discovering the common characteristic or characteristics, and simply by noting resemblances where there are no identical common qualities.



14.5 FURTHER READING

1) Aaron, R. I. (1952): *The Theory of Universals*: Oxford.

2) Hume, D. (1967): *A Treatise of Human Nature*: Ed. by L. A. Oxford:Selby-Bigge:

3) Sarma, Dr. Ramala (2013): *Theory of Universals*: Guwahati: N. L. Publications:.

4) Woozley, A. D. (1982): *Theory of Knowledge*: New Delhi: B. I. Publications:.

14.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q no 1: a) False b) True c) True

Ans to Q no 2: Nominalism is a theory that defines universal in terms of resemblance or similarity such that the particulars are required only to resemble each other in being called by the same name. Hence this theory is also called the resemblance or similarity theory.

Ans to Q no 3: A word is type when it has the same meaning in all its occurrences.

Ans to Q no 4: A word is token when it refers to its particular occurrence.

Ans to Q no 5: Hobbes' nominalism is a milder one which asserts that a group of particulars resemble each other in being called by the same name and that each of these particulars is called by the same name as the rest because it resembles the rest in some other way besides merely being called by the same name.

Ans to Q no 6: a) True b) True c) True

Ans to Q no 7: For both Hume and Berkeley assertion that universals or general ideas are nothing but particular attached to a certain word.

Ans to Q no 8: According to Hume, universals or general ideas are nothing but particular attached to a certain word which assigns them a more extensive signification and makes them remember in cases of other individuals similar to them. He holds that corresponding to every general word there must be a particular mental idea.

Ans to Q no 9: Hume's Disposition or Propensity theory may be regarded as a tool to protest against the view that there is always a conscious selection of common qualities followed by the formation of a universal before the use of general words. We can generalise without discovering the common characteristic or characteristics, and simply by noting resemblances where there are no identical common qualities.



14.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Objective questions

Q1: Is Hume a nominalist?

Q2: Who is associated with the theory of Ockham's Razor?

Q3: Name some supporters of Nominalism.

Q4: What is the Buddhist theory of universal known as?

Q5: Give an example to illustrate 'type' and 'token'.

Q6: Which theories did Hume formulate to articulate his view of universals?

B. Short questions

Q1: Write short notes on Nominalism.

Q2: What is Ockham's Razor?

Q3: Why is Nominalism is called Resemblance or Similarity theory?

Q4: What is the difference between Hobbes Nominalism and Buddhist Nominalism?

Q5: Write briefly on the analogies which Hume used to illustrate Disposition or Propensity theory.

Q6: **'A** particular idea becomes general by being added to a general term.' What are the arguments put forward by Hume in support of this view?

C. Long questions

Q1: Hobbes Nominalism is a milder Nominalism. Elucidate the statement.

Q2: Give an account of Hume's theory of universals. How does he differ from Berkeley?

Q3: Explain critically Resemblance or Similarity theory of universals.

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