

## THE POSSIBILITY OF NOMINALISM

Michael Mitton

A realist with regard to universals claims that universals exist (in some sense) independently of human thought.<sup>1</sup> One of the most influential supporters of this position has been Bertrand Russell. His argument, however, as formulated in *The Problems of Philosophy*, fails to prove his case. Further, the argument actually seems either to beg the question or to support the claim that universals are mind-dependent. Rather than elaborating on the ontological status of universals, I want to move simply to the nature of universals. At this point, I will argue for a more or less nominalist position on the nature or composition of universals.

### Bertrand Russell and Realism

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell argues that universals exist mind-independently. The argument goes something like this: In the proposition "Edinburgh is north of London," there is a spatial relation described between two places. This relation subsists independently of any human thought, for even if no thinking thing ever existed the place where Edinburgh now stands would still be north of the place where London now stands. That Edinburgh is north of London is a fact whether or not any minds exist at all. Since this fact is mind-independent and since the universal "north of" is part of this fact, it follows that the universal "north of" is mind-independent (Russell 152-53). To quote Russell, "Hence we must admit that the relation, like the terms it relates, is not dependent upon thought, but belongs to the independent world which thought apprehends but does not create" (153).

There is, however, a problem with Russell's argument, because he has not yet established that "north of" is a universal.

In Russell's own words, "A *universal* will be anything which may be shared by many particular" (Russell 145). A universal, then, must have more than one instantiation. Further, due to the biconditional nature of definitions, more than one instantiation is required before

---

<sup>1</sup>This essay was awarded second prize in the David H. Yarn Contest.

there is a universal. If I speak of the Eiffel Tower, or of any other proper noun, I am not speaking of a universal. There is only one particular, namely, that steel contraption in Paris, that the term "Eiffel Tower" designates. Therefore, that term is not a universal. Similarly, if I point at my cat and say "Ginger," the word "Ginger" has only one referent, namely, the cat who controls my house; therefore, "Ginger" is not a universal.

Where I point at my cat, Russell points at Edinburgh and London and at one particular spatial relation between them. With only one spatial relation, Russell has not established a universal. With the words "north of," he has only designated the spatial relationship that Edinburgh is here and that London is there. Just as my word "Ginger" refers only to my one cat, Russell's words "north of" refer only to one spatial relationship between Edinburgh and London. Since a universal requires that it have more than one instantiation, and since Russell has only one instantiation with his relationship "north of," he has not established a universal. He has only established, loosely speaking, a proper noun: North of London. It follows easily at this point that Russell's claim for the mind-independence of universals is unfounded, for he does not yet have a universal.

Russell might respond: "If you want more than one instantiation before you'll give me a universal, I will give you another. Portland is north of San Francisco. Now you have two mind-independent facts that both use the term 'north of.' 'North of' is now a universal, and it is mind-independent because it is part of mind-independent facts." Such a response, however, has still not established a universal; it has established only another particular spatial relationship: that Portland is here and San Francisco is there. If my neighbor brings over her cat, points at it, and says "Ginger," between the two of us we have not established that "Ginger" is a universal; we have established only that two particular cats happen to have the same verbal label designating them. When my neighbor says "Ginger," it applies only to her cat and not to mine. When I say "Ginger," it applies only to my cat and not to hers. Similarly, "north of," in "Portland is north of San Francisco," refers to that one particular spatial relationship between Portland and San Francisco, while "north of," in "Edinburgh is north of London," refers to that one particular spatial relationship between Edinburgh and London.

Russell might object to my reductionistic interpretation of the term "north of," saying that he is referring to more than simply that one spatial relationship. Perhaps he means that the spatial relation

ship participates in the universal "north of" (in which case, he begs the question) or that it is in some way related to other spatial relationships to which we also give the term "north of"; that is, it designates a particular kind of spatial relationship. But in this latter case, he must first face the problem of comparing or relating one spatial relationship to another; that is, he must show that the "north of" in the Edinburgh case and the "north of" in the Portland case are both instantiations of the same universal.

Following this latter case, before one can consider "north of" a universal, the several particular spatial relationships must be in some way combined (compared, related, grouped, etc.). For now, I will not consider how it is that particulars are combined; the important point is only that many particular relationships need to be combined before there is a universal. Russell can bring up as many mind-independent facts as he wants, but until those facts, those particulars, are either combined in some way or shown to be instantiations of the same universal, Russell cannot speak of the universal "north of." It is this requirement, that particulars be combined before there is a universal, which necessitates that universals are mind-dependent under Russell's argument. The reason for this is simple: No matter what the method is for combining universals, be the method combining, grouping, defining, aggregating, or whatever else one decides, it can only be accomplished by something conscious. Only a sentient being can recognize that different particulars are instantiations of the same universal. Certainly something which requires the activity of a consciousness cannot be mind-independent.

Under my reductionistic interpretation of his term "north of," Russell's claim for its universal status becomes problematic. When he tries to add anything to this interpretation in order to get something resembling a universal, he either begs the question or he necessarily finds himself in the area of mind-dependence. We, as minds, certainly do not have difficulty with using the term "north of" as a universal, for at least we are able to combine particulars. But Russell cannot establish the mind-independence of universals through this argument because of the necessity of grouping instances in order to form universals. I have not intended to prove the mind-dependence of universals, for it may actually be the case that the added element when we use the term "north of" as a universal is that it participates in north-of-ness. I have only intended to show that Russell's argument using a world devoid of minds fails to show the existence of universals.

### An Argument for Nominalism

In the first half of this essay, I attempted to answer one of Russell's realist arguments in order to keep the door open for nominalism, since nominalism certainly requires the mind-dependence of universals, whatever those entities might be. I will now consider some problems raised with nominalism outside of the mind-dependence debate and then offer an example of a clearly nominalistic universal.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that our universals are governed by "family resemblances" rather than some one single thing in common between the instantiations. Wittgenstein writes:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic-games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "there *must* be something common, or they would not be called "games"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. . . . And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than "family resemblances." (as cited in Bambrough 351)

I can see no way of getting around Wittgenstein's example and returning to a rule of some one thing in common. I considered charging that we simply equivocate on the use of the word "game" in certain instances, but such a move seems entirely *ad hoc*. There are, of course, things which all games have in common, (for example, they are all activities) but these things are irrelevant. In taxonomy, it is not the fact that a particular species shares the same genus with all of the members of its own species that makes it its own species, for many different species have the same genus. The genus similarity is irrelevant insofar as the species is its own species. I believe that Wittgenstein has successfully shown that there need not be some one thing in common for our universals. There may be some one thing, but this is not necessarily so.

Wittgenstein has taken a step towards nominalism, but whereas Wittgenstein found an example which disarmed the notion that each of our universals must have some one thing in common, I believe that I

have found an example which shows that our universals need not even resemble each other, that we really can construe any set of particulars into a universal, regardless of similarities or differences. In his essay "Universals and Family Resemblances," Bambrough sets out a similar project which he then refutes. My example, however, seems to avoid his criticisms.

Bambrough designates the term "alpha" to refer to a set of objects,  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , which have nothing in common except that they are called (or are) alphas. This is what traditional nominalists want to do with all universals. But such a move, says Bambrough, is to use a general term in a completely different way than such terms are typically used. He makes three criticisms of this "alpha" case. First, the selection of particulars to be subsumed under "alpha" is totally arbitrary. "In giving a list of chairs I cannot just mention anything that happens to come into my head, while this is exactly what I do in giving my list of alphas" (Bambrough 357). This criticism is hardly devastating for the nominalist. With "chair" one must certainly follow a rule before calling a particular a chair, but that is also the case with "alpha." For chairs, the rule is that the particular must be (roughly) something which humans can sit in. For alphas, the rule is that the particular must be subsumed under the term "alpha." As for the choosing of, or formation of the terms originally, the nominalist could easily claim that "chair" is just as arbitrary as "alpha." It only happens to be the case that the particulars under "chair" fit a certain extra rule, that we sit in them, in addition to the fundamental rule that all chairs are subsumed under the term "chair," while the particulars under "alpha" do not fit any such extra rule and only fit the fundamental rule. Bambrough is right in that universals generally do follow an extra rule, but this is an empirical claim and not a claim of necessity.

The second criticism Bambrough makes of the alpha example is a good one. He notes that "alpha" is a closed class.

Once I have given my list I have referred to every single alpha in the universe, actual and possible. . . . I cannot aspire to complete the enumeration of all chairs, as I can arbitrarily and at any point complete the enumeration of all alphas, and the word "chair," unlike the word "alpha," can be applied to an infinite number of instances without suffering any change of use. (Bambrough 357)

This seems to be a devastating criticism of the alpha example, for it seems to show clearly that "alpha" is not even a universal as we think

of universals in that it has only a finite number of possible instantiations. However, the example I will give in a moment avoids this criticism. Before continuing in that direction, however, I will deal briefly with Bambrough's third criticism.

His third criticism of the alpha example is this: "I cannot teach the use of the word 'alpha' except by specifically attaching it to each of the objects in my arbitrarily chosen list" (357). This seems only to be a variant of the first criticism. To restate my response, the nominalist can simply say that it only just so happens that the word "chair" can be learned by pointing to similarities and differences and eventually to some criterion for discerning all chairs. That we teach terms without pointing to all the specific objects which instantiate the term is again an empirical claim and not a claim of necessity. In other words, Bambrough seems to beg the question.

Moving to my example: suppose, contrary to the facts, that I am married. Before we were married, both my wife and I were avid book collectors and we each had a library of more than two hundred volumes. After our marriage, although we put all of our books randomly on our common bookshelf, they are still "my books" and "my wife's books." "My books" is certainly a universal; the word "my" functions as the word "strawberry" functions in front of the word "jam," identifying a particular class of jams, but a class which is still a universal in its own right. Following Russell, "my books" has more than one instantiation.

This universal "my books" avoids the criticisms that Bambrough made of the "alpha" example. Those books which constitute "my books" do not make up an arbitrary list. If one approaches the bookshelf, one cannot point to just any book and have it be "my book," for it may very well be "my wife's book." Further, "my books" potentially contains an infinite number of particulars. Of course at any given time there may only be a set number of "my books," but that is also the case with "chairs."

Now, is there anything in common, or is there any particular family resemblance shared between "my books"? Certainly, they are all books, but that is beside the point, just as the genus is irrelevant in forming the species as noted earlier. Simply the fact that something is a book does not (unfortunately) make it "my book." Of course, I cannot point at my bike and call it my book, but this does not entail that there is a rule which defines the set of "my books." In other words, if there is a set,  $y$ , whose elements are prohibited from being subsumed under another set,  $x$ , then it does not follow that there is some rule which defines what  $x$  is; there is only a rule which shows that  $y$  is not  $x$ . Moving on, suppose now that my

wife and I have a daughter and I allow my daughter to read "my books," but my wife does not allow our daughter to read "my wife's books." Is there anything in common about "my books" which would differentiate them from "my wife's books"? Neither my wife nor I have made any markings on the books and our taste in books is fairly random, so that the books cannot be differentiated thematically. If one approaches our bookshelf, there is no way one could tell which were "my books" and which were "my wife's books." Such a case is not inconceivable; it is, in fact, the case in my own home. For myself, my wife, and our daughter, the only way that we can learn which books are "my books" and which are "my wife's books" is through memorization. There is no "family resemblance" or "rule" which could ease the learning of "my books." In each and every case, "my books" must be memorized. The only thing that "my books" have in common is that they are (or are called) my books.

This seems to me a convincing example that our universals can be formed without regard to rules, similarities, differences, or family resemblances. But this example does not show, nor did it intend to show, that all of our universals are of this type, for it is certainly the case that we do have universals which follow a rule. But this example does serve, for instance, as a counterexample to the realist claim that all instantiations of a universal have something in common other than the fact that they are instantiations of that universal. Certainly most, and I am using a very strong most, universals follow at least a "family resemblance" rule if not a "something in common" rule. "My books" is an unusual example, but its unusualness does not prevent it from making the case for nominalism.

Perhaps the fact that most of our universals *do* follow some sort of rule led to the mistaken belief that *all* universals must follow some sort of rule. The nominalism that I advocate does not deny that instantiations of a particular universal may have some extra thing in common besides the fact that they are all called instantiations of the universal; it only denies that they must have some extra thing in common.

There are, in fact, good reasons why universals nearly always have something in common. In the case of "my books," the only way the term could be learned is by memorizing each instantiation of the term. This process is tedious, time consuming, and boring. There are other things I would rather be doing with my time. If my wife and I were smart, we would write our names in each of our respective books, or put blue bookmarkers in "my books" and red bookmarkers in "my wife's books." After such a move, I would need only remember that my books have blue bookmarkers instead of remembering which particular books were mine.

I am extending the example only loosely at this point, for certainly what determines whether it is "my book" depends on whether it is my book and not on whether there is a blue marker or a red marker. But the example does show why our universals have an overwhelming propensity to follow a rule: It is easier. And it is a lot more useful than random collections of things.

But returning briefly to the subject which began this paper, what does this argument have to say about the mind-independence of universals? Certainly in the case of "my books" there is no mind-independent universal. It is clearly a conscious being which forms the term; further, when I speak of my books, I speak of nothing more than those books contained in the set of my books. Thus, the realist's claim that all universals have some kind of ontological status is necessarily false. However, the nominalist's claim that all universals have no ontological status in a world devoid of minds is not necessarily true, though it does remain possible.

In this paper I have shown how Russell's argument for realism breaks down by either begging the question or by actually supporting the claim that universals are mind-dependent. I have further tried to rescue nominalism from some common criticisms that do not concern mind-dependence. Finally, I have provided an example of a universal which fits only the nominalist view of universals. The first two points attempt to show the possibility of nominalism, while only the last point attempts to show the actuality of nominalism.



**Works Cited**

- Bambrough, Renford. "Universals and Family Resemblances"  
*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60 (1960-61): 207-22. Rpt. in  
*Reality in Focus: Contemporary Readings on Metaphysics*. Ed. Paul  
K. Moser. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990. 350-59.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. London: Thornton  
Butterworth, 1936.