Notes on Nominalism, Realism, Conceptualism

History of Philosophy -- Dr. Ess

...including theological issues at stake

as escaping the dilemma between realism and nominalism

NOTES ON CONTEXT

As Jones points out, the medieval controversy over the status of universals is a controversy already apparent in the work of Plato and Aristotle -- but as taken up in the medieval context,

a) the discussion takes place without the advantage of access to the Greek texts and thus to Greek (especially Aristotelian) solutions to the problem, and

b) the discussion takes place within the framework of a specifically religious framework and the correlative doctrinal issues and disputes. That is:

- 1) DOCTRINAL ISSUES:
  because a pre-existing framework of "orthodox" doctrine, consisting of a series of claims about reality which are accepted as correct (because of their putative roots in revelation and the authority of the church), operates as the context of any "philosophical" discussion --

  2) GENERAL RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK:
  and because, more generally, the intellectual universe is defined by the religious agenda and orientation of "orthodox" Christianity
  any philosophical discussion takes place within the confines dictated by this agenda and associated doctrinal commitments. This means that any "solution" arrived at will have to be both philosophically sound and compatible with orthodox doctrine.
  [Remember the Thomistic/Medieval trajectory towards the complimentarity of reason and faith!]

At the same time, resolution of this controversy is critical for the subsequent course of medieval philosophy -- and this for two reasons:

a) VALIDITY OF REASON ITSELF:

it is not altogether false to think of reason as a process of "computing" or "calculating" -- a process which involves ideas, concepts, general principles, etc., as its "tokens" (i.e., as the content of its operations). As these are manipulated by reason to discern valid argument, derive new conclusions, etc.
In order for reason -- and thus philosophy -- to stand as a legitimate mode of inquiry, the status of the universals must be resolved. Most simply:

if, as the nominalists argued, universals are meaningless terms (because they have no referent in the sensible order) ...

http://www.drury.edu/ess/history/modern/nominalism.html

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-- then reason's manipulation of these tokens is equally meaningless.

b) COMPATIBILITY OF FAITH WITH REASON:

If this controversy, further, cannot be resolved in such a way as to not only "save" reason (i.e., to establish the validity of reason's calculations) from nominalism -- but also in such a way as to arrive at a conclusion compatible with religious dogma -- then it would appear that reason, even if valid in some way, is fundamentally antithetical to faith. In a rigorously religious framework, this consequence would be fatal for reason, and with it, philosophy. (Consider the parallels offered here by the project of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to "save philosophy" in the face of the dilemma presented by Sophistic relativism and the Old Religionists.)

Finally, note as well that there is a dramatic shift here not only in terms of the general context of doing philosophy -- but also in terms of the basic methodology. There is a shift from metaphysics (the primary interests of classical Greek philosophy) to logic and predication (i.e., how language is used, how words are said -- an approach inspired especially by Aristotle's Categories.

MEANING

It appears that both the Realists and the Nominalists accept a basic understanding of how words have legitimate meaning. Simply, following the model of a proper noun (e.g., a personal name such as "Jason" or "Heather"), terms are thought to have meaning insofar as they refer to a particular entity (in this case, the person Jason or the person Heather, respectively). It is important to note this shared assumption -- and to be aware that this "meaning of meaning" will change dramatically in the 20th century under the influence of various linguistically-oriented philosophies, including that of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

REALISM

Consistent with Platonic and Neoplatonic positions -- the Realists argued that universal terms derive their meaning by reference to real universals (the equivalent of Plato's forms or ideas).

THEOLOGICAL ADVANTAGES:

It would appear that this doctrine fits neatly with:

- a) the "otherworldly" emphasis of (late Roman/early medieval) Christianity. That is, just as this version of Christianity focuses on such entities as soul, God, heaven, and an afterlife as the primary points on the human agenda -- points which, clearly, are not the immediate objects of sense-knowledge -- so it would seem rather easy for the mind prepared to accept the reality of such religious entities to accept the reality of universals as well. And vice-versa. (Indeed, in this way, especially the interpretation of Plato as teaching the Forms understood in this way serves as a rational philosophy that is compatible with and reinforcing for religion qua Christian [especially Augustinian] orthodoxy stressing an "otherworldly" agenda.)
- b) the (Augustinian) doctrine of Original Sin. Using realism, one can easily and nicely understand and explain the claim made in this doctrine (that human beings are born with the strong tendency to choose evil over good). If what makes a human being is his/her participation in the universal "humanity," -- then, conversely, the universal defines the essence of each individual. And if that universal includes the proclivity to choosing evil, then of course, each of us qua human will be

marked by this tendency (simply in virtue of our participation in the universal "humanity").

By contrast, if, as nominalism argues, there are only individual and particular entities -- then it is impossible to see why, for example, Augustine's proclivity to choose evil (especially, from his standpoint, as it revolves around women and sexuality) has any relevance whatsoever for determining the nature of any other human being.

THEOLOGICAL DISADVANTAGE:

BUT -- thought out more carefully, the Neoplatonic version of realism (the primary "version" of realism available during the so-called "dark ages") in fact lands its defenders squarely in a position which, judged from the standpoint of Christian "orthodoxy," must be considered heretical.

That is, Neoplatonism's insistence on the ultimate reality of "the One" (and thus, on both the ontological and epistemological primacy of "the One" -- i.e., it is both the most real entity and the entity which makes knowledge of all subordinate entities possible) further issues in pantheism. Simply, there is only "the One" and the rest of reality as an emanation of the one. While the rest of reality (including human beings) are in some sense "less real" than "the One" -- in an equally important sense, they also are identical with "the One." In short, all things are God ("pantheism" = "all/God-ism").

This belief, as a logical consequence of the Neoplatonic version of realism, runs squarely against the doctrinal insistence in "Orthodoxy" on God's transcendence -- i.e., on the irreducible difference between God and God's creation.

(And, as we are about to see, nominalism, as the alternative viewpoint, also runs into such a theological/doctrinal roadblock.)

NOMINALISM

Nominalism can be understood as compatible with a thorough-going materialism (only matter -- that "stuff" which can be detected by the five senses -- is real) and correlative empiricism (only knowledge of material entities is legitimate knowledge).

Specifically, nominalism takes the model of meaning discussed above as the sole and sufficient model of meaning. That is, if a universal term as a name is to have meaning, it can only have meaning by way of reference. But, as we have seen in the Platonic arguments for the reality of the Forms, universals (e.g., the definition of a triangle) are not found in the material domain as objects of sense-knowledge. In this domain, instead, we find only particular entities -- and, by definition, universal terms do not refer (directly) to such particulars. But,

- if there exist only particular entities as the objects of sense; and
  if legitimate meaning can be had for a term only if it refers to a real entity; then:
    - a) no universal entities exist, and
    - hence any universal terms which appears to mean "something" by way of referring to "something -- in fact refers to nothing -- and
    - hence universal terms are meaningless.

Correlatively, nominalists ask the question the question which Plato himself raises as a critique of a putative theory of Forms: if universal entities exist -- where do they come from?

THEOLOGICAL DISADVANTAGE:

Realism, as it asserts the ontological and epistemological primacy of a universal such as "humanity" over the individual particulars which embody "humanity" in diverse ways, asserts a one-many relationship now familiar to us:

- -----------------  
  _ HUMANITY _  
  --  
  / \  
  Jason Heather Liz

Notice that the doctrine of the Trinity (that God is One -- but somehow equally present in three forms) requires a similar conceptual scheme:

- -----------------  
  _ GOD _  
  --  
  / \  
  Father Son Holy Ghost

Without a conceptual scheme of this sort -- and in the light of nominalism's insistence that only particular terms have meaning (by way of their reference to particular things) -- the doctrine of the Trinity evaporates, only to be replaced by either one God indeed or three separate "gods." Again, this is not philosophically unsettling -- but it directly clashes with the doctrinal commitment of "Orthodoxy" to the doctrine of the Trinity.

CONCEPTUALISM -- ABELARD

Abelard begins by accepting the ontological claim made in nominalism -- that no universal entities exist (and thus he avoids a central problem in realism -- i.e., how would such universal entities exist "in" particular things?)

Instead, he argues that there are universal words -- words which are legitimately predicable (= they can be said) of many things.

But if such universal words are to have meaning by way of reference -- what do they refer to?

By definition, they cannot refer to particulars given in sense-experience. They refer instead, according to Abelard, to what he calls an "abstract concept" (which, as it turns out, is also very much like Aristotle's notion of the form which "in-forms" matter).

The abstract concept is formed as the mind is capable first of "abstracting" (= abstrahere, Latin for "to draw from, separate) the particulars given through sense-experience, in order to separate out from an image or impression especially those characteristics which a given entity shares in common with another

entity.

For example, using the diagram of the form of humanity (above), Abelard argues that the mind is the creator of "humanity" as an abstract concept, one made up of the likenesses shared by individual human beings. The mind creates this form as it is capable, through the process of abstraction, of separating out those likenesses from the distinguishing characteristics which mark each human being as different from others.

The universal term hence has meaning as it refers to this abstract concept — a concept clearly grounded in the sense-experience of particular entities. Notice, however, that this abstract concept requires that Abelard expand nominalism both in terms of

- 1) how words can have meaning, and
  2) the available flavors or levels of reality (metaphysics/ontology).

1) He argues, in effect, that the nominalist model of meaning is too narrow: in addition to particular words which derive meaning through reference to particular entities — there are also universal words which have meaning in a different (but related) way. That is, they have meaning as they refer not to particular entities given in sense-experience, but as they refer to the abstract concepts "built out of" the particulars of sense-experience, where these concepts exist only in the mind (not as entities existing independently of particular entities given in sense-experience). This retains the basic model that meaning = reference —

2) but it expands the available referents by arguing for two "flavors" or levels of reality, namely,

- a) the level of sense-experience and its particular objects, and
  b) the level of abstract concepts, constructed in and known by the mind.

Notice, finally, that

- 1) this account remains philosophically unsatisfactory — and indeed,
  2) the debate between nominalism and realism extends into our own day.

1) To say that the mind creates the abstract concepts as it "focuses its attention on common likenesses" is to beg the question. This is to assume that the mind has the ability to create the entities to which universal terms refer -- and that these exist as based on "likenesses" further assumed to exist in particulars, and further assumed to be obvious to the mind when it chooses to focus its attention on them.

But this is just the original philosophical question at stake in the debate: are there universal entities apart from the particulars of sense-experience, and if so, in what sense do they exist, how do they relate to the particulars, etc.

So, while conceptualism is to be admired as an elegant resolution between the nominalist and realist camps — and one that "works," perhaps, if our doctrinal focus in this period concerns us more than philosophical soundness — conceptualism remains philosophically problematic.

2) And not surprisingly so, if we keep in mind that this debate still goes on today.

For example, if I use the term "society" in a sociological account, so as to say something like

• SOCIETY causes BEHAVIORS

-- a nominalist will ask, "What can 'SOCIETY' mean here?" In the face of the question, it becomes hard to find what 'SOCIETY' may mean "above and beyond" just the set of behaviors which we claim it causes. Is there "anything left over" to which 'SOCIETY' refers, apart from just the set of behaviors and individuals which make up the members of a society?

In sociological theory, this is called the problem of the emergent phenomenon -- and it is directly the issue we have seen confronted in the nominalism/realism debate, i.e., what, if any, meaning do universal terms have, above and beyond the individual, particular instances to which they apply?

In the above example, if the nominalists are correct, and the only terms which have meaning are terms referring to particulars -- then 'SOCIETY' means only just the set of behaviors belonging to a set of individuals who make up a given society. But this means:

• SOCIETY causes BEHAVIORS
  == (BEHAVIORS) cause BEHAVIORS

That is, if the nominalists are right, and there is no "emergent phenomenon" ('SOCIETY') apart from a set of behaviors, then our "explanation" is simply an empty circle.

On the other hand, for the explanation to avoid becoming circular -- what does the term 'SOCIETY' refer to, above and beyond a set of behaviors? Is there some sort of universal to which it refers -- and if so, is it an abstract concept, as Abelard would have it?

[Fast Forward: see - including the association between in Hobbes, and the parallel association between in Hobbes;]