NOMINALISM

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 26, 2025

NOMINALISM

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy (Metaphysics, Ontology, Philosophy of Language)

1. Core Definition

Nominalism is a central doctrine within metaphysics and ontology asserting that abstract entities, specifically philosophical universals, do not exist independently of the individual, concrete objects we experience. This position maintains that only **particulars** (individual things, events, or instances) possess genuine, substantial existence. Consequently, shared qualities or types--such as "redness," "justice," "beauty," or "humanity"--are not real things or properties inherent in the world, but are instead mere linguistic conventions, names (*nomina*), or labels that humans apply to groups of similar particulars. The essence of nominalism lies in its radical ontological parsimony, denying the existence of any entity that is neither a particular nor a physical arrangement of particulars, thus avoiding the complex metaphysical baggage associated with Plato's Theory of Forms or Aristotelian essentialism.

This philosophical stance directly addresses the ancient and enduring "Problem of Universals," which asks whether properties shared by multiple distinct things (e.g., the roundness shared by a ball and a coin) exist as an entity unto themselves, and if so, where and how they exist. The nominalist answers unequivocally that they do not exist, except insofar as they are mentally constructed or linguistically assigned. For instance, when one observes that both a rose and a stop sign are red, the nominalist asserts there is no single, unifying entity of **Redness** that both objects participate in; there are only two distinct particular objects, both of which happen to be labeled "red" by human language due to their similarity in color perception. This makes Nominalism fundamentally an anti-realist position regarding universals, contrasting sharply with philosophical realism, which posits that universals are real, existing either within the particulars (Aristotelian realism) or separate from them (Platonic realism).

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Nominalism** derives from the Latin word *nomen*, meaning "name." Although the formal debate flourished during the medieval period, the roots of nominalist thought trace back to antiquity. Early predecessors included thinkers like Antisthenes, a student of Socrates, and some Stoic philosophers, who expressed skepticism about the independent reality of abstract concepts. However, it was during the tumultuous philosophical period of the Early Middle Ages, roughly between the 11th and 14th centuries, that nominalism crystallized into a defined doctrine, largely in response to the resurgence of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics.

The initial high-profile proponent of early nominalism was the 11th-century theologian Roscelin of

Compiègne, who controversially applied nominalist principles to Trinitarian theology, arguing that the three persons of the Trinity could not be one substance, as substance (the universal) did not exist. His extreme position--often dubbed **Extreme Nominalism**--suggested that universals were mere breath (*flatus vocis*), sounds without substance, which generated significant criticism and condemnation from figures like Anselm of Canterbury. Despite these setbacks, the debate continued to evolve, moving beyond mere linguistic reductionism to more sophisticated forms that recognized the role of mental concepts, often termed Conceptualism, which is sometimes seen as a moderate form of nominalism.

The definitive and most influential articulation of nominalism emerged in the 14th century through the work of William of Ockham. Ockham's sophisticated approach, often called Terminist Nominalism, recognized that while universals do not exist externally, they do exist internally as mental concepts or predicates--the psychological response to perceived similarities in particulars. Ockham's commitment to ontological simplicity and the strict rejection of superfluous entities (famously summarized by **Ockham's Razor**) provided a powerful methodological framework that propelled nominalism to the forefront of late medieval scholasticism, setting the stage for the intellectual shifts that characterized the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution.

3. Key Characteristics and Varieties

Nominalism is not a monolithic doctrine; it encompasses several distinct approaches that all share the core commitment to denying the objective existence of universals. The primary variations relate to how they account for the undeniable fact that we use general terms successfully in language and thought.

One fundamental characteristic is the insistence on **Ontological Parsimony**. Nominalists believe that if a philosophical question can be resolved without appealing to abstract entities (universals), then those entities should be discarded from our ontology. This commitment forms the basis of Ockham's Razor: "Entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily." Secondly, Nominalism relies heavily on similarity, arguing that while there is no universal "Redness," there is a primitive, irreducible fact that specific red things resemble each other. This resemblance is brute and does not require a shared universal to explain it.

The three main variants of nominalism include:

Predicate Nominalism: This is the most literal form, arguing that what makes two particulars belong to the same category is simply the fact that the same predicate (word or label) is truly applied to both. The truth condition of the statement rests purely on linguistic rules and usage, not on an underlying metaphysical structure.
Concept Nominalism (Conceptualism): A more moderate position, often associated with Ockham. Conceptualists agree that universals do not exist externally, but they assert that they

exist internally as mental concepts or ideas (*intentiones*). These concepts are the means by which the mind groups particulars. While these concepts are themselves particulars (mental events occurring in an individual mind), they function universally in relating to external objects.

Trope Theory: A highly influential modern form. Trope theory denies the existence of traditional universals but maintains that properties are real, existing as abstract particulars called **tropes**. A trope is an individual instance of a property (e.g., the specific, unique redness of *this* apple). Tropes are particulars, not universals, yet they are abstract. Similar objects resemble each other because their respective tropes (the redness of apple A, the redness of apple B) are exactly similar, a relationship that avoids positing a single universal entity.

4. The Influence of William of Ockham and Logical Simplicity

William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347) is arguably the figure most closely associated with the intellectual victory of nominalism in the late medieval period. His methodology profoundly influenced later philosophical and scientific inquiry. Ockham's key contribution was not just the denial of universals but the rigorous application of the principle of ontological commitment--the idea that one should only commit to the existence of entities for which there is compelling empirical or logical necessity.

Ockham utilized the famous methodological rule now known as **Ockham's Razor** (*lex parsimoniae*), which states: "Plurality should not be posited without necessity." In the context of the Problem of Universals, Ockham argued that the concept of a universal entity is entirely unnecessary to explain human communication and cognition. We can fully explain why we group similar objects simply by appealing to the objects themselves and the mental habits we form. Positing an additional, non-physical entity (the universal) to explain this similarity is a metaphysical overreach--a violation of the principle of parsimony.

This radical methodological stance had widespread theological and scientific implications. By eliminating unnecessary abstract entities, Ockham cleared the theoretical ground for a greater focus on empirical observation and the study of individual, perceptible phenomena. His nominalist perspective helped foster an intellectual climate that prioritized contingent facts about the physical world over necessary metaphysical truths derived from pure reason, contributing indirectly to the rise of modern Empiricism. Ockham's legacy ensured that subsequent philosophical inquiry, especially in Britain, remained deeply skeptical of grand, comprehensive metaphysical systems built upon abstract universals.

5. Impact on Modern Philosophy and Science

The impact of nominalism extends far beyond medieval philosophy, serving as a significant intellectual precursor to several dominant strains of modern thought, particularly within analytic

philosophy and the philosophy of science. The nominalist commitment to observable particulars aligns closely with the foundational tenets of Empiricism, especially the work of John Locke and David Hume, who emphasized that all knowledge originates in sensation and individual experience.

In the 20th century, nominalism found fertile ground in the philosophy of language and logic. Many schools of thought, including logical positivism and certain forms of contemporary analytic philosophy, implicitly or explicitly adopt a nominalist ontology. For instance, philosophers working on formal semantics often attempt to construct rigorous systems of meaning that rely only on concrete objects and set theory, meticulously avoiding commitment to abstract properties or propositions existing independently of sentences and speakers. Figures like Nelson Goodman and W.V.O. Quine have presented compelling arguments for a strictly nominalist approach to mathematics and set theory, urging philosophers to eliminate abstract entities wherever possible to maintain a clean, scientifically rigorous ontology.

Furthermore, Nominalism has had a subtle but pervasive influence on scientific methodology. The scientific drive to operationalize concepts--to define entities in terms of observable, measurable procedures--reflects a nominalist preference for particulars over abstract definitions. A scientist studying gravity is concerned with the specific, measurable acceleration rates of particular objects under certain conditions, rather than debating the metaphysical reality of the universal property of **Gravitas**. This practical emphasis on individual, testable phenomena reinforces the nominalist view that the world is fundamentally composed of unique events and entities, which are then categorized by useful but non-real labels.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its methodological appeal and simplicity, nominalism faces persistent philosophical challenges, primarily centering on its ability to adequately explain similarity, predication, and the concept of "natural kinds."

The primary criticism leveled by realists is the **"One Over Many" Argument**: If two objects, A and B, are both red, what accounts for their shared characteristic? The nominalist must reply that A and B merely resemble each other, or that the predicate "red" applies truly to both. Critics, however, argue that resemblance itself is a universal. If A resembles B, then the relation "resemblance" is shared by many pairs of objects. If the nominalist must introduce an infinite hierarchy of resemblance relations to explain similarity, the initial economy gained by rejecting universals is lost, leading to an explanatory regress.

Another significant challenge involves the concept of **Natural Kinds**. In science, we often assume that nature is divided into stable, objective groupings (e.g., gold, water, electrons). A robust realist position argues that these groupings exist because the objects share an underlying essence or

universal structure. A nominalist must maintain that "gold" is merely a label applied to a collection of particulars that happen to resemble each other. Critics contend that this undermines the objectivity of science, making the difference between natural classifications and arbitrary classifications (like "things in my desk drawer") merely a matter of human convention, rather than reflecting the real structure of the cosmos.

Finally, critics argue that sophisticated nominalist theories, such as Trope Theory, often reintroduce the complexity they sought to avoid. While tropes (individualized properties) are particulars, the theory requires an explanation of why distinct tropes are exactly similar. If this similarity is explained by yet another abstract concept of "exact similarity," the realist claims that this is merely a relabeled universal, forcing the nominalist back into a circular debate about whether the resemblances themselves necessitate a universal explanation.

Further Reading

Nominalism (Wikipedia)
Nominalism in Metaphysics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
Trope Theory (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
William of Ockham (Wikipedia)