

## Essays Units 4-6: Number 4

**‘... So it may look as if what we were doing were Nominalism’. What is so wrong with being a Nominalist? In what way is the doctrine of ‘meaning is use’ meant to improve on the traditional Nominalist response to the problem of universals?**

Traditional nominalism was a response to the problem of universals. Plato is the earliest western philosopher to clearly put forward the existence of universals, and famously articulated a theory of ‘forms’ (a type of universal) to answer questions like ‘what is justice?’ or ‘what is beauty?’ or ‘what is cold?’. Plato was trying to move beyond particular positions allegedly put forward by Socrates’ contemporaries, especially Protagoras, that these ‘entities’ were related to how each person perceived them. Their alleged arguments led directly into a philosophical relativism, of the type encompassed in the famous phrase ‘man is the measure of all things’. Plato’s approach was based on the premise that these ‘entities’ must have a perfect ‘form’ or metaphysical reality and that differences in use or application or understanding of the terms describing the entities must be due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of their pure form. Among the problems raised by Plato’s theory are i) If the forms ‘exist’ where are the forms? ii) How can we have access to the forms? How do we know that our knowledge of them is accurate?

Nominalism is a term used to describe a philosophical response to the metaphysical minefield that Plato had created. Nominalists argued that these so called ‘universals’ did not exist anywhere, but were just names (hence the use of the term nominalism). Nominalism has had several forms, but the core point is that a general term used to describe different objects (say for instance the word ‘red’) is just a ‘word’ used to point out resemblances, and that there is no ‘universal red’ out there beyond the word used. The same logic can be applied to all abstract concepts like ‘justice’, ‘hope’, ‘thought’ etc. The problem with nominalism is that it doesn’t help explain why language users appear to recognise the widespread application of these terms. When we talk about ‘red’ we seem to be able to apply the term to many situations, variations and applications in a way that is understood by other language users. How is it possible that we seem to perceive the ‘universality’ of ‘red’ so easily if all we are doing is just saying a name or pointing out a resemblance? What is the attachment of the word to that resemblance? How can we appear to agree so readily on something being ‘hope’ or ‘justice’ if all we are doing is saying a name that has no ‘real’ meaning attached to it? If the issue is resemblance how might the meaning attached to a word change over time? Is it because the resemblances no longer hold? In what way can we understand what this last question would mean?

One way of looking at the debate is to see it as a debate about the philosophy of language. In seeking to account for the ‘meaning’ of words Plato hypothesised that they were related to a special metaphysical reality. This is a type of realism about semantics, about meaning. Nominalists opposed this conception of meaning, but their conception also poses problems for understanding in our agreement about words and our attachment of meaning to them.

Wittgenstein has put forward a philosophical approach that is different to both approaches. The doctrine that ‘meaning is use’ helps us to unravel (at least part of) the issue. The meaning of a word is found in its use by a community of language users, who share a set of implicit (and some times explicit eg dictionary) rules for the use of a word. In using the word ‘red’, one can only prove one’s grasp of the meaning of the word by using it appropriately so that other language users will know what you meant and the implications of your use of the term. If I point to the sea and say that ‘it looks red today, just like the colour of my lawn’ then other English language users standing by will not be able to comprehend what it is that I am trying to do with the language. But if I say to my wife that I saw a beautiful tray of ‘red’ apples at the supermarket then she will be able to comprehend what I am saying, even if she never saw them herself. The ability to prove your correct ‘understanding’ of a term, according to Wittgenstein, is in the correct application of the use of words in a community of language users.

Hence nominalism is not an accurate description of language, since under Wittgenstein’s approach we can comprehend how a language community can correctly use abstract terms like ‘hope’ or ‘love’. In addition, Wittgenstein’s approach shows that the meaning of our words is not dependent on a metaphysical set of forms, since the locus of meaning is not in some extra plane of existence but rather within the language community itself. Wittgenstein’s theory also gives adequate explanation to how the ‘meaning’ of words can change and evolve over time. If what we conceive of as ‘just’ now is not the same as it was 2500 years ago, then it is not because our access to the forms improved (or worsened), or because we are simply calling things ‘just’ as we see fit, but rather because the language community’s perception of the application and use of that term has changed.