

OBJECTS AND PROPERTIES

In metaphysics, philosophers try to understand the nature of objects and the properties of these objects. According to metaphysics, the world is made up of things, known as objects or particulars, that can be either physical or abstract. These particulars share certain qualities or attributes in common with one another, and philosophers refer to these commonalities as universals or properties.

When philosophers attempt to explain whether properties can exist in more than one place simultaneously, they run across what is referred to as the “problem of universals.” For example, a red apple and a red car can exist simultaneously, so is there some kind of property that exists that is “redness”? If redness does exist, what is it? Different schools of thought answer that question in their own ways:

- According to Platonic realism, redness does exist, but it exists outside of space and time.
- According to moderate forms of realism, redness exists within space and time.
- According to nominalism, universals like redness do not exist independently; they exist as names alone.

These ideas of existence and properties lead to one of the most important aspects of metaphysics: identity.

REALISM

The theory of universals

Realism is the philosophical theory that claims universals exist in the world independent of mind and language.

Philosophical Definitions

UNIVERSALS: First introduced by Plato, universals are repeatable and common characteristics that exist in the world and are often divided into two categories—properties (like squareness, for example) and qualities (like similarity). Though few, if any, properties and qualities are shared by everything, realists assert that universals do reveal a genuine commonality in nature and provide a systematized order to the world.

So, according to realism, a red apple and a red cherry have a universal essence of “redness.” Realists claim that the property “redness” does, in fact, exist even if there are no minds to perceive it. In this example, the apple and the cherry are particulars. In other words, they are not themselves universals, but are said to represent

them

TYPES OF REALISM

There are many different types of realism that touch on morality, politics, religion, science, and metaphysics.

Two of the most well-known forms of realism include:

1. **Extreme Realism:** This is the oldest form of realism, initially created by Plato. To Plato, universals (which he refers to as Forms) are immaterial and exist outside of space and time.
2. **Strong Realism:** This form of realism rejects Plato’s idea of Forms, and instead claims that universals not only exist in space and time; they can also exist in many entities at the same time. The redness in the apple and cherry is actually the same universal redness, and not distinct from entity to entity.

NOMINALISM

Rejecting certain elements

In philosophy, nominalism has two meanings. The more traditional definition of nominalism, which came about during the Middle Ages, involves a rejection of universals, entities that can be represented by different objects. The second, more modern, use of the word pertains to a rejection of abstract objects, objects that are not temporal or spatial. Therefore, nominalism can be seen as the opposite of realism (the belief that universals do exist) and as the opposite of Platonism (the belief that abstract objects do exist). It is possible for one to believe in one type of nominalism and not the other.

Both types of nominalism deal with antirealism because they both deny the existence of universals or abstract objects, and therefore also deny the reality of these things. In dealing with things that are alleged to be abstract objects or universals, nominalism takes two approaches:

1. Nominalism denies that the alleged entities exist.
2. Nominalism accepts that the entities exist, but claims the entities are not concrete or particular.

ABSTRACT OBJECTS

There is no set definition of what an abstract object is; however, the common explanation is “an object that does not exist in space or time and is causally inert” (it is assumed that only objects that exist in space and time can partake in causal relations). This definition, however, is not without its flaws. For example, while language and games are abstract, they are both temporal (since languages can change, develop, and come into being at different times). While philosophers have provided other definitions of an abstract object, nominalism is driven by the rejection of spatiotemporal objects that are causally inert.

UNIVERSALS

Nominalists distinguish between universals and particulars. According to nominalism’s definition, universals refer to anything that is instantiated (meaning represented through an actual thing) by multiple entities. If it is not, then it is a particular. Both a universal and a particular can instantiate an entity, but only a universal has the ability to be instantiated by multiple entities. For example, objects that are red cannot have an instance, but with the universal “redness,” any object that is red is an instance of that universal. Realists consider properties (like redness), kinds (like the material, gold), and relations (like between-ness) to be examples of universals. Nominalism about universals rejects this notion.