



Verities of Nominalism

PHI 202 (Western Metaphysics)

Topic: Nominalism

Semester2, M.A. Philosophy

Instructor: Dr. Sreejith K. K.



Nominalism

- View that attempt to account for objects and their properties without appeal to universals.

Predicate nominalism

- ❑ For x to be F is for the predicate 'F' to apply to, or be true of, x .
- ❑ What makes it true that x and y are both F is that 'F' applies to both x and y .
- ❑ Thus, what makes it true that a sphere is red is simply that the predicate 'red' applies to that sphere.

Objections to Predicate nominalism

First criticism

- There are surely properties in the universe that we will never discover, and for which there exists no natural language predicate.
- Predicate nominalism seems constitutionally incapable of acknowledging the possibility of such properties.



Second criticism

- ❑ Predicate nominalism seems to put the cart before the horse.
- ❑ Intuitively, x 's being F does not consist in ' F ' applying to x ; rather, ' F ' applies to x because x is F .
- ❑ If X is F (say, a mountain is a certain height), x would still have been F even if no language had existed.

Class nominalism

- ❑ According to class nominalism, for x to be F is for x to belong to the class of F s.
- ❑ What makes it true that x and y are both F is that x and y are members of the class of F s.
- ❑ Thus, what it is for a sphere to be red is for the sphere to be a member of the class of red things.

Objections to class nominalism

- ❑ Class nominalism avoids the first objection to predicate nominalism.
- ❑ Whether an object is a member of a certain class does not depend on whether we have discovered the class or have a word for it. (The class of electrons existed before we knew of it).
- ❑ However, the second objection seems to apply.
- ❑ Intuitively, x is a member of the class of F s because x is F , not *vice versa*.

Two additional objections

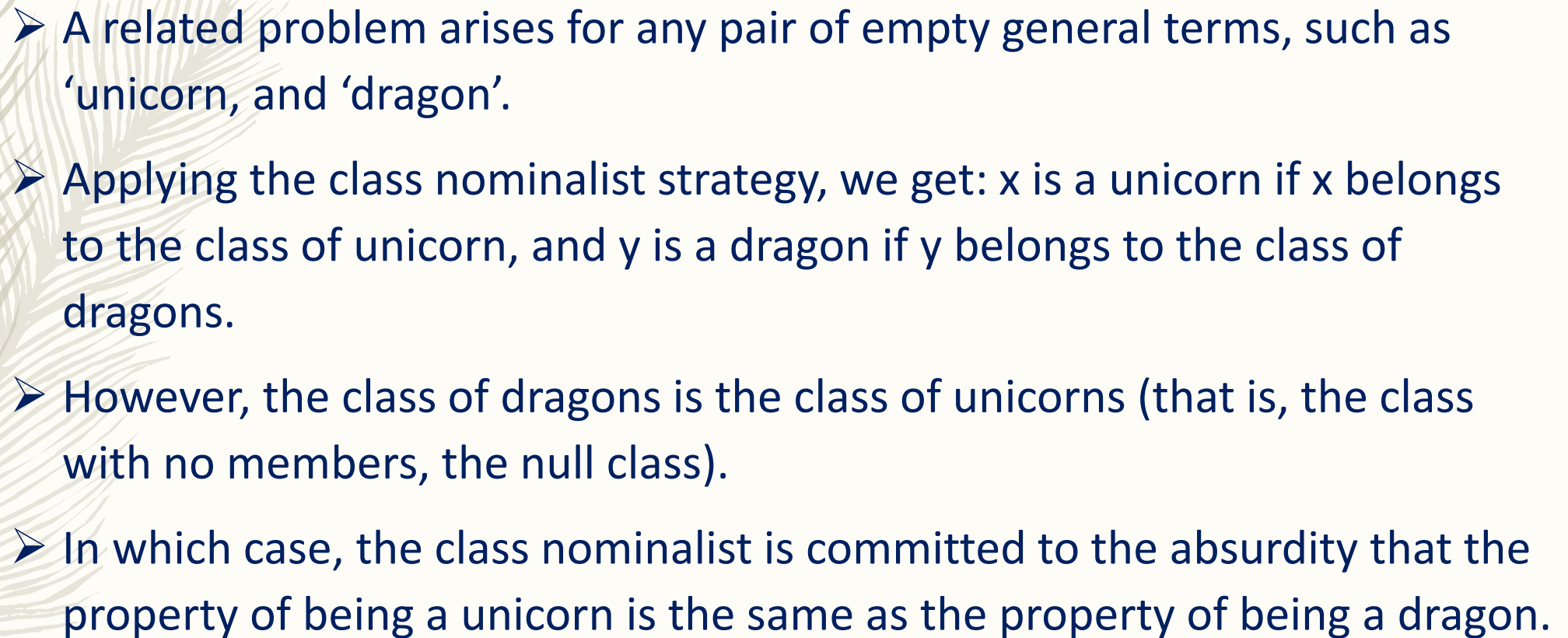
❖ First

- The relation of class membership is itself a universal, instantiated whenever an object is a member of a class. Hence class nominalism is implicitly committed to universals. So, it fails to be a genuine version of nominalism.



❖ **Second**

- Suppose that all and only Fs are Gs (e.g. suppose it were the case that all and only red things were round)
- Since the class of Fs is the class of Gs, it follows, on class nominalism, that the property of being F is the property of being G. It is an absurd result.

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- A related problem arises for any pair of empty general terms, such as 'unicorn, and 'dragon'.
 - Applying the class nominalist strategy, we get: x is a unicorn if x belongs to the class of unicorn, and y is a dragon if y belongs to the class of dragons.
 - However, the class of dragons is the class of unicorns (that is, the class with no members, the null class).
 - In which case, the class nominalist is committed to the absurdity that the property of being a unicorn is the same as the property of being a dragon.

Resemblance nominalism

- According to resemblance nominalism, for x to be F is for x to be a member of the a class of objects which resemble each other, where 'resemblance' is treated a s primitive, unanalyzable relation.
- What makes it true that x and y are both F is that they resemble each other.
- A sphere is red because it is a member of a class of resembling objects.

Objections

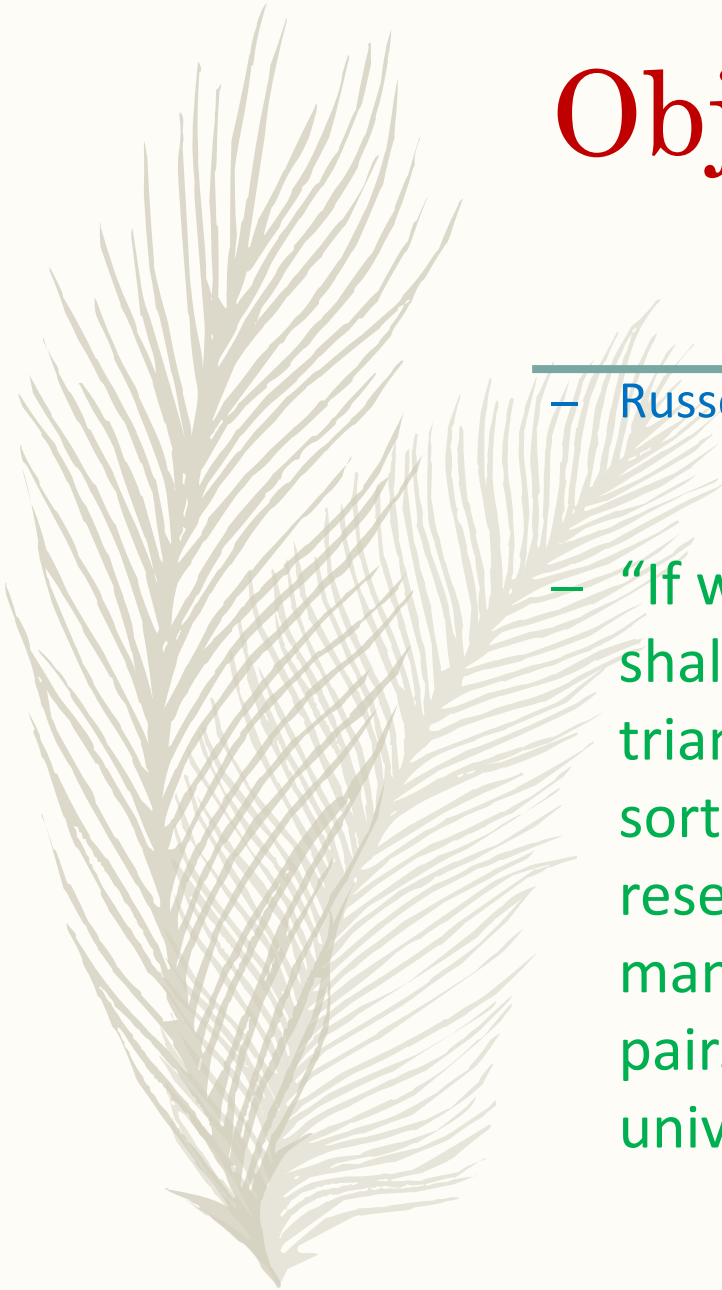
- There are three problems with this view.

Objection 1

- An object such as red sphere is a member of a number of resembling classes.
- E.g. it is a member of the class of red things and a member of the class of spherical things.
- Yet, clearly, the sphere is not red in virtue of resembling spherical things; it is red in virtue of resembling red things.
- That is, it is red because it resembles other objects in respect of colour (rather than shape).
- In which case resemblance is no longer an unanalysable relation.

Objection 2: Russell's criticism

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- Russell argued that the relation of resemblance is a universal
 - “If we wish to avoid the universals whiteness and triangularity, we shall choose some particular patch of white or some particular triangle, and say that anything white or triangle if it has the right sort of resemblance to our chosen particular. But then the resemblance required will have to be a universal. Since there are many white things, the resemblance must hold between many pairs of particular white things; and this is the characteristic of a universal”.



Objection 3

Problem of uniquely instantiated general terms

- According to resemblance nominalism, an object is spherical if it resembles other objects in respect of shape. What if the universe had contained a single sphere and nothing else? Surely it would have been spherical? But the resemblance nominalist must deny this since there is nothing in the world for the sphere to resemble. This is an acceptable consequence.

