

NOMINALISM (The Philosophical Theory that there Are No Universals)

Key Verses: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’” (John 14:6a)
 “The truth of the LORD is everlasting” (Psalm 117:2b)

INTRODUCTION Many people today think there are no absolutes, nothing that is 100% totally true and universal. Many of these people also think this idea that there are no universal absolutes is a new “modern” idea. Surprisingly, this is not a new idea at all; it is a limited old worldview. Nominalism has been around in one form or another for hundreds of years and debates over it can be traced back over millennia 2,400 years to the days of Plato and Aristotle.

Why does this matter? Why should we bother to think about this? For one thing, nominalism affects all of us daily because we live in a culture where it permeates our politics, education, entertainment, business and religion. It drives how many people in places of power operate and try to affect the lives of others, including us, with morals laws, commercials and entertainment that are relativistic and constantly shifting. It erodes our sense of worth and confidence in the fact that there are universal truths that give us meaning, purpose and stability.

Secondly, nominalism is an important key to understanding the history of modernism and postmodernism or what some are calling “liquid” or “fluid” modernity. The postmodern or liquid modern worldview is very common among people today, especially young people, with whom we associate daily or hear from through social media, news and entertainment. These in turn have become major forces in educating, conditioning and defining people’s values. Though they are not “schools” in the formal institutional sense, media and the individuals who drive them and communicate through them are having a huge impact in “educating” people indirectly with their values, whether their value sets are good or mote likely bad.

Perhaps most importantly, people with nominalist worldviews will have to make major changes in their thinking in order to begin to understand and know God who *is* absolute truth. God created the physical universe and the moral absolutes of His kingdom by which we are to live as we prepare for eternity with Him. Nominalism in religion is very common in liberal denominations and evangelicalism. Nominalism in religion tends to water down, reduce and largely ignore fundamental truths of God which are essential to truly knowing God, YHWH, the Creator of the universe and the Father of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel and Jesus Christ, the Lord of lords and King of kings.

Some Relevant Definitions

Nominal: “a theoretical size that varies from the actual, something existing in name* or form only vs. in reality”

*Name in Greek is *onoma*, in Latin *nomen*. An example of a “nominal” size is “2 x 4” lumber. This is the nominal size, that is its name only. A “2 x 4” is actually 1.5” x 3.5” or 38mm x 89mm.

Nominalism: “A theory of knowledge (epistemology) which insists that universal concepts or essences (man, tree, etc.) have no separate and independent reality but are simply names used by the mind to organize individual things with similar characteristics into one class” (Van A. Harvey’s definition; reference below).

“A theory that there are no universal essences in reality and that the mind can frame no single concept or image corresponding to any universal or general term; the theory that only individuals and no abstract entities (as essences, classes, or propositions) exist” (Miriam-Webster *Dictionary*).

Essentialism: “The acceptance that things exist with their own essences that are universally accepted as being perceived by the senses.”

Realism: “The view that a universal concept is more real than any individual manifestation of it” (Van A. Harvey). Realism is rooted in fact. Christianity is realistic because it is rooted in the facts of God’s existence, His character, commands, the reality of His creation, His sovereignty over all humankind and His acts in history. Universal truths exist in the mind of God and He moulded them into the particulars of the physical universe He created as He pleased.

Historical Highlights, People & Teachings

Plato (ca. 428-347 BC) and **Aristotle** (384-322 BC) Plato and Aristotle “held that forms, ideas, universals, were real things existing either apart from objects or in them and in some way determining what they are” (S. E. Frost, see references below). Early Christians accepted the fact that the essential eternal structures are grounded in the mind of God, the Logos (Word). What is most real are the universal truths and principles that govern life. This view of reality was dominant through to the Middle Ages. (Interestingly the science of physics eventually discovered that the entire universe runs according to law, principle and encoded information; this “DNA” of the universe as it were governs the movement of everything from atoms to galaxies). As we noted above, Christianity is grounded in realism and universal truth. The worldviews of nominalism, modernism and postmodernism see the universe as based on particular things emphasizing the individual vs. universal truths. In truth, God’s world and the kingdom of heaven are based on both: particulars and universals. Universal truth works in all the particulars of life.

Porphyry (ca. AD 234-305) A Neoplatonic philosopher from Tyre who supported the classic philosophers and logic of

realism but was vehemently opposed to Christians. His “Introduction” became a standard textbook up until the Middle Ages and helped set up the Medieval debate over realism and nominalism, particulars only vs. universals.

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) Raised by his Christian mother Monica, Augustine left the faith at 17, lived with a concubine for 15 years and experienced a dramatic conversion in his 30’s. Augustine believed that experience can teach us particular things that are helpful in practical living but that the important universal truths we need most are revealed to us by God Himself. Universal truths are revealed, not the result of experience.

Roscelin of Compiègne (northern France; ca. AD 1050 –1125) French theologian and philosopher considered an early founder of nominalism. Roscelin taught that the only real things in the universe are individual objects. A man, for example, is real, but the idea of mankind is more a figment of the imagination, just a name for the collection of people. Any general ideas we have are simply the combined results of particular experiences. Roscelin fuelled the debate over what is real: only the world we can experience with our senses or the world we can think of in our minds and the eternal mind of God. Roscelin’s thinking came to have profound implications with respect to the authority of the state and individuals. If the state is only a thing in name and the individual is the real thing, then what really matters is the individual’s authority not the state’s. This is a surprising portent of our own age of self-centred individualism and lack of respect for collective authorities such as the church and the state.

Scholasticism (ca. AD 1100-1700): As much a method as a movement, Scholasticism applied rules of logic to systematically examine ancient texts in efforts to identify their underlying meaning and resolve any apparent contradictions. Scholasticism in Christendom began to separate systematic theology from Scripture. Many early “schoolmen” who lead this movement, such as Anselm, Peter Abelard, Bernard of Chartres and Thomas Aquinas, were realists. Aquinas wanted to show that the universal truth that exists in the mind of God is also reasonable. Nature is a union of universals and matter. The universal exists in each particular thing. For example, “tree-ness,” the qualities of a tree, exist in every tree in addition to its own matter. In attempting to reconcile the essential duality of the Greek philosophers regarding God and matter, scholasticism inadvertently opened the door to those wanting to separate them and denounce the existence of God as beyond reason, the ultimate criteria of modern thought.

William of Ockam (a.k.a. Occam; ca. 1285-1347) English Franciscan friar and scholastic philosopher, “father of nominalism.” William asserted that universals don’t exist at all in reality but only in the human mind. All that is real is particular objects we perceive. Only these make up the universe. He was very critical of the RC church and the pope and was excommunicated and expelled from his order. William thought knowledge was based on the intuition of the human mind vs. God’s universal truth and was partly responsible for paving the way to a more non-spiritual scientific and secular view of reality. From the 14th century on this view came to dominate in most universities.

John Wycliffe (ca. 1324-1384) initiated and directed the first complete translation of the Bible into English. He was a master of Balliol College Oxford and served as a Roman Catholic priest. Central to Wycliffe’s motives was the belief that God has given us absolute truth and every English-speaking person should be able to read the Bible in their own language vs. the Vulgate, the dominant Latin Bible at that time. Wycliffe’s position put him at odds with much of the religious and philosophical establishment of his time.

Some Helpful Further Reading with Concise Definitions and Short Bio’s:

Van A. Harvey. *A Handbook of Theological Terms: Their Meaning and Background Exposed in over 300 Articles.*

E. A. Livingstone. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church.*

S. E. Frost. *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers.*

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS	NOMINALISM
<p>Universal Truth: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Jesus is the embodiment of God’s truth which is eternal (Psalm 117:2). God reveals His eternal truth objectively and within us by His Spirit (Romans 1:19; 1 John 2:20).</p>	<p>There are no universal truths, only particulars that we experience. Without the particulars, there is nothing left. No universal truths exist by themselves.</p>
<p>The State: God is creator and sovereign over all nations (Acts 17:26-31). All authority comes from God and He has established governments to maintain order and safety in society (Romans 13:1-7).</p>	<p>The individual is supreme. The state is a secondary collection of individuals. Laws are constantly changing to suit the rights of individuals.</p>
<p>People: God made us in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). We live in Him, are redeemed by Him and are sustained by Him (Acts 17:28; Colossians 1:13-17).</p>	<p>People exist independently as free agents who decide their own moral destinies. Individuals are not responsible to a supreme being or any overarching authority.</p>
<p>The Universe: God’s creation reflects His power and glory (Psalm 19:19-20; Romans 1).</p>	<p>The universe is a collection of particular objects. The only sure thing is what can be observed by the senses.</p>
<p>Future: God is moving history forward to the return of Jesus and His new heaven and earth for eternity (Revelation 21-22).</p>	<p>Whatever happens is the result of individual human desire, control and intuition. There is no eternal plan.</p>