

CONCRETE AND ABSTRACT PROPERTIES

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This paper is intended as a contribution to the present discussion concerning the "ontological commitment" of logical theories. It presupposes acquaintance with the distinction between "nominalism" and "platonism" as stated by N. Goodman and W. V. Quine.¹ In my opinion both the nominalists as well as the platonists fail to explain how a predicate expression can be truly or falsely predicated of a given individual. A detailed analysis of the ways in which symbols can be related to what they stand for will suggest an interpretation of what the nominalists might intend when they say that predicate expressions function "syncategorematically." In the course of this analysis concrete properties and relations are distinguished from abstract properties and relations (from classes). The assumption of concrete properties and relations clarifies not only nominalistic semantics, it is also valuable for a platonist because he can prove that these concrete entities provide an adequate foundation for the construction of abstract entities. However the understanding of concrete properties and relations presents special difficulties some of which will be discussed here.

1. When we make statements about Peter, saying, e.g., that Peter is intelligent, that Peter is laughing, etc., we make use of the proper name 'Peter' to denote Peter. The expression 'Peter' stands for a concrete "thing". This is generally admitted and non problematic.

But what of the expressions 'is intelligent,' 'is laughing,' and others,² used in speaking of Peter or Paul? What do they stand for? Here opinions are divided. There are logicians, the so-called platonists, who consider predicate expressions almost as proper names, with this difference only that for them the entities which predicate expressions stand for, are not things but entities of a different type, namely classes or properties. Other logicians, called nominalists, say that although they have been looking for these platonistic³ entities, all they have found are concrete things and "heaps" of concrete things. Thus for them a symbol stands either for a concrete thing like Peter or Paul or the "heap" made up of Peter and Paul together, etc., or else it functions "syncategorematically."

2. Both of these views, the platonistic and the nominatistic one, are in some respect unsatisfactory.