

# SOFT IMPEACHMENT DISOWNED

BY

W. V. QUINE

**M**Y views regarding the reality of universals have been frequently misunderstood and, I like to think, even more frequently understood—increasingly so down the years. Misunderstanding does indeed linger, and even in high places. Armstrong, I fear, is not alone in it. Here then is my further effort, brief but vigorous, to set the record straight.

Armstrong espouses a realism of universals, and he objects to what he calls my ostrich nominalism.<sup>1</sup> Ostrich nominalism is indeed objectionable, and not unknown. I could name names. What Armstrong does not perceive is that I, like him, espouse rather a realism of universals.

I have explained early and late that I see no way of meeting the needs of scientific theory, let alone those of everyday discourse, without admitting universals irreducibly into our ontology. I have adduced elementary examples such as 'Some zoological species are cross-fertile,' which Armstrong even cites, and Frege's definition of ancestor; also David Kaplan's 'Some critics admire nobody but one another,' an ingenious example whose covert dependence on universals transpires only on reduction to canonical notation.<sup>2</sup> Mathematics, moreover, and applied mathematics at that, is up to its neck in universals; we have to quantify over numbers of all sorts, functions, and much else. I have argued that there is no blinking these ontological assumptions; they are as integral to the physical theory that uses them as are the atoms, the electrons, the sticks, for that matter, and the stones. I have inveighed early and late against the ostrich-like failure to recognize these assumptions, as well as the opposite error—"mirage realism," in Devitt's phrase<sup>3</sup>—of unwarranted imputations of ontological assumptions. Such was the burden of my "Designation and existence" (1939)<sup>4</sup> and "On what there is" (1948).<sup>5</sup> An explicit standard was needed of what constitutes assumption of objects, and it was obvious enough: values of variables.

How far could one push elementary mathematics without thus reifying universals? Goodman and I explored this at one point.<sup>6</sup> The formalist, we remarked, was already involved in universals in treating of expression types (a point Armstrong thinks I may have overlooked). A formalism of tokens afforded considerable mileage, but stopped short of full proof theory. Nominalism, ostriches apart, is evidently inadequate to a modern scientific system of the world.

Where then does Armstrong differ with me, misinterpretations aside? For one thing, he differs in failing to suggest a standard of what constitutes assumption

of objects, and he imputes assumption of objects in cases which, by my standard, would not count as such. His want of a standard in this regard has the startling incidental effect of reviving in his pages Bradley's old worry about a regress of relations. All those relations of Bradley's are real, but there is no regress, for we can define each of them, from the outermost inward, without referring to those farther in. This is because the use of a two-place predicate is not itself a reference to the relation, however real, that is the extension of the predicate. Such reference would be the work rather of a corresponding abstract singular term, or of a bound variable.

Armstrong differs with me also in neglecting the problem of individuation of universals. Under the head of universals we think first and foremost of properties, or attributes. I make no distinction here. I dropped the one term for the other long ago because of a traditional usage, which I feared might be confusing, that limited properties to essential attributes. This is no longer a connotation that obtrudes. Very well; how are attributes to be individuated? When are they to be counted identical? I have argued that no adequately intelligible standard presents itself short of mere coextensiveness of instances. I have stressed further that classes are abstract objects on a par with attributes, that they are equally universals, and that they differ none from attributes unless in their enjoyment of this clean individuation. So I have individuated them thus and called them classes.

At this point, according to Armstrong, I have "moved beyond [my] original position to some form of Predicate and/or Class Nominalism." Original position? My explicit acceptance of classes and predicates as objects dates from my earliest pertinent publications. But Predicate and/or Class *Nominalism*? Such a nominalism would be an ostrich nominalism indeed. It goes with weasel words like 'aggregates' and 'collections' and 'mere,' said of classes, and with crossing the fingers. In "Identity, ostension, and hypostasis" (1950)<sup>7</sup> I stressed the impossibility of construing classes as concrete sums or aggregates, and the point has been stressed before, surely, and since. I am a Predicate and Class Realist, now as of yore; a deep-dyed realist of abstract universals. Extensionalist yes, and for reasons unrelated to nominalism.

Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>D. M. Armstrong, "Against 'Ostrich Nominalism': a reply to Michael Devitt," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (October 1980), pp. 440-449.

<sup>2</sup>W. V. Quine, *Methods of Logic*, third edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), third and later printings, pp. 238f.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Devitt, "Ostrich nominalism or 'mirage realism,'" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (October 1980), pp. 433-439. I appreciate his able defense.

<sup>4</sup>*Journal of Philosophy* 36, pp. 701-709.

<sup>5</sup>Reprinted in W. V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1953).

<sup>6</sup>Nelson Goodman and W. V. Quine, "Steps toward a constructive nominalism," *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 12 (1947), pp. 97-122.

<sup>7</sup>Reprinted in *From a Logical Point of View*.