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AGNOSTIC NOMINALISM: RESPONSE TO OTÁVIO BUENO

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Abstract: Otávio Bueno gives a positive and accurate summary of my defense of Platonism, with special emphasis on the epistemological issues. He criticizes “skeptical nominalism”, and proposes instead an “agnostic nominalism”, which treats mathematical objects as “objects of thought”, and neither rejects nor accepts abstract entities. In my response I argue that the main problem for nominalism is to account for abstract properties and relations, and that treating mathematical objects as objects of thought does not provide a satisfactory solution to that end.

Keywords: Truth. Proof. Nominalism. Platonism.

NOMINALISMO AGNÓSTICO: RÉPLICA À OTÁVIO BUENO

Resumo: Otávio Bueno apresenta um resumo positivo e correto de minha defesa do Platonismo, com ênfase especial nos aspectos epistemológicos. Ele critica o “nominalismo cético” e propõe um “nominalismo agnóstico” que trata os objetos matemáticos como “objetos de pensamento”, sem rejeitar ou aceitar entes abstratos. Em minha réplica argumento que o problema principal para o nominalismo é dar conta das propriedades e relações abstratas, e que tratar os objetos matemáticos como objetos de pensamento não é uma solução satisfatória para esse fim.

Palavras chave: Verdade. Prova. Nominalismo. Platonismo.

Otávio gives a very sympathetic and accurate summary of my defense of Platonism, with special emphasis on the epistemological issues. He criticizes what he calls “skeptical nominalism”, and proposes instead an “agnostic nominalism”, which neither rejects nor accepts abstract entities.

1. ABSTRACT ENTITIES

Otávio centers almost all of his discussion on mathematical Platonism, and does not discuss the issues concerning abstract entities in general. My discussion of mathematical Platonism, on the other hand, is subordinate to the more general discussion of abstract properties. In fact, I emphasize in various places that the crux of the matter, both in mathematics and in general, is not the existence of abstract *objects*, but the existence of abstract *properties*. This is relevant to Otávio’s discussion because even if we agree that mathematical objects can be treated as objects of thought—although I have some doubts as to what this means—there still remains the question of the properties of objects, properties of properties, etc.

If I state that 2 is less than 5, or that Quine was taller than Napoleon, what is the status of the *less-than* and the *taller-than* relations? And if I state that the *less-than* and the *taller-than* relations are transitive, what is the status of *transitivity* as a property of relations? Are they objects (or entities) of thought as well? Are all properties and relations, whether mathematical or not, objects of thought? What about the property of being an object of thought, is it an object of thought as well? Is it part of agnostic nominalism to suspend judgment about the reality of *all* properties and relations?

I do not ask these questions merely as rhetorical questions, for it seems to me that the main issue in the dispute between Platonism and nominalism is not the existence of mathematical *objects*, but the existence of properties and relations.

2. ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Otávio distinguishes quantifier commitment from ontological commitment, and argues that we can quantify over objects that do not exist. This involves a distinction between existence in the sense of the existential quantifier—and of quantification in general—and existence interpreted as a predicate. I am puzzled by some of the remarks Otávio makes about this distinction, and cannot avoid the impression they involve an attempt to eat one's cake and have it too. I am all in favor of having an existence predicate, which I introduce at the very beginning of my book and defend against objections by Quine and others. What I don't find clear in Otávio's paper is the interpretation of quantification. He says, for example (p. 422-423), that we "regularly quantify over entities in whose existence we have no reason to believe," and on page 425 offers the following explanation:

But what does it mean to quantify over objects that don't exist? It means that we are taking these objects simply as *objects of thought*. This doesn't mean that we thereby make up these objects. It simply means that we are intentionally focusing on them, considering them, and in some cases, describing them. We can do all this easily without any commitment to the existence of these objects.

I agree that we use quantification in fictional contexts, for example, but does that mean we quantify "over entities"? What is the proper interpretation of quantification in such a context?

Consider the statement 'Zeus is more powerful than any other Greek god'. The view I defend in my book is that this statement is neither true nor false, because, among other things, it contains the non-denoting name 'Zeus'. I agree, of course, that the statement is true relative to Greek mythological discourse, but this does not mean that "there are some non-existing objects over which I am quantifying" that make the statement true. Nor does it mean

that I am “mentally focusing on these objects.” I am focusing on the mythological discourse, which includes the statement in question—or, at any rate, includes statements that imply the statement in question.¹ The only real objects are the discourse itself and our thoughts about it. In this respect I agree with Goodman (1970) that the focusing is a rhetorical focusing, not an objectual focusing.

This may also be Otávio’s point when he talks about objects of thought, but then I return to my earlier questions. Can all our discourse about properties, relations, properties of properties, etc., be interpreted as being purely rhetorical? And if it can, wouldn’t this involve a re-interpretation of our discourse about properties along the lines sought by traditional skeptical nominalists? In other words, how should one characterize the distinction between skeptical nominalism and agnostic nominalism in relation to our discourse about (abstract) properties?

REFERENCES

GOODMAN, N. “About”. *Mind*, 70, pp. 1-24, 1961. Reprinted in *Problems and Projects*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972.

¹ I discuss this issue in relation to propositional logic in Chapter 16, pp. 189-190.