1. *Extreme Nominalism and Humpty Dumpty*

In his article on “Universals”, Anthony Woozley writes:

In its extreme form, that there is nothing common to a class of particulars called by the same name other than that they are called by the same name, nominalism is so clearly untenable that it may be doubted whether anybody has actually tried to hold it.¹

There is a crude version of this position that is indeed clearly untenable. Let’s focus on predicates. On this construal, extreme nominalism is the view that a predicate, as meant by a speaker, is applicable to an object just in case the speaker feels inclined to apply the predicate to the object. Thus, according to this view, the predicate “cylindrical”, as I mean it now, would be applicable to my pen just in case I now feel inclined to apply the predicate to it. The untenability of this view is hardly controversial. Not only can predicates be applicable to objects that the speaker has never considered. Also, it seems to be an essential component of the notion of predicate applicability that a speaker’s most earnest applications of most predicates can be mistaken. A predicate, as meant by a speaker, can be applicable to an object to which the speaker feels inclined not to apply it. And, vice versa, a predicate can fail to be applicable to an

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1. P. 203.
object to which the speaker feels inclined to apply it. If the extreme nominalist position is construed along these lines, then Woozley is probably right when he surmises that “[p]erhaps the only extreme nominalist has been Humpty Dumpty”.2

But another view would also seem to deserve the label of extreme nominalism. The traditional debate on universals can be naturally construed as concerning the question of what notions need to be presupposed by a satisfactory account of the notion of predicate reference, or predicate applicability. Thus, for the realist, objective universals of some kind need to be presupposed for this task. For the conceptualist, only mental universals need to be invoked. For the resemblance theorist, we can make do with a notion of objective resemblance. Extreme nominalism can be understood as a view on this matter. For the extreme nominalist, none of these notions needs to be presupposed by an account of predicate applicability. Predicate applicability can be explained solely in terms of the notion of speakers’ feeling inclined to apply predicates to some particulars and not to others, or more generally, of their feeling inclined to classify particulars along certain lines. Not everyone has found this view clearly untenable. Indeed, it may have had some advocates on this side of the looking-glass.

C.I. Lewis may have been one of them. On a natural reading of Mind and the World-Order, the work puts forward just this brand of nominalism. On Lewis’s account, whether “cylindrical”, as I mean it, is applicable to my pen depends on whether the pen has a certain objective property. But these objective universals are not among the primitive elements of Lewis’s system. Objective properties are to be construed in terms of certain subjective items – of what he calls qualia.

Notice that his advocacy of a phenomenalist reduction doesn’t by itself make Lewis an extreme nominalist. It is his specific account of what qualia are that grants the ascription of the view to him. Some phenomenalists construed qualia as features of the subject’s perceptual input, whose presence in a particular perceptual episode is independent of the subject’s verdicts on the matter.3 Subjects are,

2. Ibid., p. 204.
3. One of the proponents of this construal was C.D. Broad. In “Is There