

# II\*—TOWARDS A NOMINALIST EMPIRICISM

by José L. Zalabardo

**ABSTRACT** The paper deals with our ability to classify objects as being of a certain kind on the basis of information provided by the senses (*empirical classification*) and to ascribe empirical predicates to objects on the basis of these classificatory verdicts (*empirical predication*). I consider, first, the project of construing the episodes in which this ability is exercised as involving universals. I argue that this construal faces epistemological problems concerning our access to the universals that it invokes. I present the empiricist strategy for dealing with these problems by appeal to sensory qualities, and argue that it rests on a mistake. Then I turn to sketching an account of our faculty of empirical classification and predication which doesn't invoke universals. The account takes as its starting point the nominalist construal of sense experience to be found in the work of C. I. Lewis and Nelson Goodman. I argue that this construal has the resources for explaining some of the central features of the practice of empirical predication.

There are those who feel that our ability to understand general terms ... would be inexplicable unless there were universals as objects of apprehension. And there are those who fail to detect, in such appeal to a realm of entities over and above the concrete objects in space and time, any explanatory value.

W. V. O. Quine, 'Logic and the Reification of Universals'

## I

**C**lassification, Predication and Universals. One of our basic cognitive tools is the ability to classify objects as being of a certain kind on the basis of information provided by sense experience. I exercise this ability, e.g., when I classify a table-top as square by looking at it, when I classify a wine as chardonnay by tasting it, or when I classify a substance as an acid by looking at the litmus paper that I have soaked in it. I shall refer to the episodes in which this ability is exercised as *acts of empirical classification*. This ability has a linguistic correlate in the ascription of empirical predicates. I can decide on the basis of sense experience whether to ascribe to an object terms such as 'square',

\*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society, held in Senate House, University of London, on Monday, 23rd October, 2000 at 4.15 p.m.

‘chardonnay’ or ‘acid’, in episodes to which I shall refer as *acts of empirical predication*.

Acts of empirical classification and predication represent objects as being a certain way. But they wouldn’t have this representational power unless it made sense to speak of them as correct or incorrect. For the notion of representation presupposes a contrast between how things are and how they are represented as being. Hence, barring borderline cases, I will be either right or wrong in classifying a table-top as square, or in ascribing the term ‘acid’ to a substance.

This feature of acts of empirical classification and predication is often explained in terms of universals. The appeal to universals in this context is motivated by the idea that a universal is supposed to effect a classification of objects in a certain range that is objective, i.e. independent of our classificatory verdicts. The property of being square is instantiated by some objects and not by others, and whether the table-top I’m looking at instantiates this property is in principle independent of how I feel inclined to classify it. These considerations suggest that we might be able to explain what makes acts of empirical classification right or wrong if we construed them as involving universals. On this account, when I classify an object as being of a certain kind, I claim that it instantiates a universal. Then the act of empirical classification will be right or wrong according to whether the object instantiates, as a matter of fact, this universal. Similarly, when I ascribe an empirical predicate to an object, I claim that the object instantiates a universal that is associated with the predicate in such a way as to determine its satisfaction conditions. And my ascription of the predicate will be right or wrong according to whether the object instantiates this universal.<sup>1</sup> I shall refer to this account as the *platonist account* of empirical classification and predication.<sup>2</sup>

The platonist account involves a clear commitment to the existence of the realm of universals in terms of which it construes

1. Mark Wilson claims to find a position along these lines in the works of Frege and Russell; ‘Predicate Meets Property’, *Philosophical Review*, 91 (1982), p. 555.

2. I am using the label in a wider sense than is customary in the literature on universals. Here it is meant to apply to any position that construes empirical classification and predication in terms of universals, whether these are thought of as inhabiting a separate realm, as inherent in particulars, or as purely mental entities.

empirical classification and predication. Furthermore, it presupposes that we can establish contact with this realm. Contact has to be established at two levels. On the one hand, I have to be able to single out the universal of which I am claiming the object to be an instance. On the other hand, I have to be able to determine, on the basis of sense experience, whether the object I'm classifying is, as a matter of fact, an instance of this universal. The same requirements apply to empirical predication. On the one hand, I have to be able to single out the universal that will determine the satisfaction conditions of an empirical predicate. On the other hand, I have to be able to determine, on the basis of sense experience, whether this universal is instantiated by the candidate object of predication.<sup>3</sup>

## II

*Awareness of Universals.* The platonist account has been traditionally associated with the view that both kinds of contact with universals are established in conscious episodes. According to this view, I can gain conscious access to a universal and decide to classify an object as instantiating or failing to instantiate it, and then draw on my awareness of the universal in order to determine whether my sense experience provides evidence for or against its instantiation by the object. The same goes for empirical predication. On this account, I can single out a universal as an object of awareness and decide that an empirical predicate, as I mean it, will be satisfied by the objects which instantiate it. Then, when I want to determine whether I should apply the predicate to an object, I can bring this universal to mind in order to determine whether my sensory input supports the ascription of the predicate or the decision not to ascribe it.

This account of how we establish contact with universals raises the question of how a conscious episode could have this kind of power. The question can be made pressing with two parallel applications of a familiar line of sceptical reasoning. Consider first the episodes in which we see ourselves as singling out the universal involved in an act of empirical classification by focusing

3. The claim that the subject has to be able to establish these kinds of contact with universals is not meant to exclude positions which explain these connections in terms of factors that are external to the subject.

our attention on it. If challenged to support our belief that these episodes actually succeed in bringing a universal to consciousness, we would probably have to adduce their phenomenological character—our impression that they feel like the apprehension of universals. But this justification rests on the claim that episodes with the phenomenological features that we have adduced (normally) succeed in bringing universals to consciousness. The sceptic would challenge us to justify this claim, and we don't seem to be in a position to meet the challenge. We would be able to justify this claim if we had an independent way of determining that a conscious episode has established the right sort of connection with a universal. But, on the account that the sceptic is attacking, the only way I can support the claim that a universal has actually been singled out by a conscious episode is with another conscious episode of this kind—with another application of the ability that the sceptic is calling into question.

The same goes for episodes in which I see myself as drawing on my awareness of a universal in order to determine whether my sensory input supports the claim that it is instantiated by an object. Even if we assume that in these episodes I gain conscious access to universals, it remains to be seen whether they generate the right inclinations concerning their instantiation conditions. We would be able to establish the correctness of these inclinations if we had independent access to the instantiation conditions of the universals that these episodes single out. But once again, the only procedure at our disposal for determining whether a universal is instantiated by an object is the kind of conscious episode whose credentials are being questioned by the sceptic.

These lines of reasoning would undermine, if successful, the claim that we establish in conscious episodes the connections with the realm of universals that the platonist account of empirical classification calls for. According to the first, we would not be entitled to treat conscious episodes as singling out the universal that I claim to be instantiated by an object in an act of empirical classification. The conscious episodes to which we ascribe this power may systematically fail to single out a universal as playing this role in each case. According to the second, we would not be entitled to treat the conscious episodes in which we take ourselves to gain access to a universal, in order to determine whether an

object instantiates it, as generating reliable verdicts on its instantiation conditions. Even if these episodes succeeded in bringing a universal to consciousness, they might generate systematically wrong inclinations concerning its instantiation conditions.

Similar sceptical outcomes would ensue for the platonist account of empirical predication. The first line of reasoning would urge us to accept that we are not entitled to claim that a conscious episode can single out a universal for the job of determining the satisfaction conditions of an empirical predicate. The conscious episodes in which we see ourselves as performing this task may systematically fail to link predicates with universals. According to the second line of reasoning, we are not entitled to expect that our conscious access to the universal that determines the satisfaction conditions of an empirical predicate will tend to generate correct inclinations as to which objects to ascribe it to. Awareness of the universal that plays this role may generate systematically incorrect verdicts on the satisfaction conditions of the predicate.

Moreover, in the case of predication a third kind of sceptical worry can be generated. It concerns the reidentification of the universal that the speaker has singled out as determining the satisfaction conditions of a predicate. When he subsequently tries to gain conscious access to it again in order to decide on the ascription of the predicate, he may bring to consciousness a different universal. And once again the sceptic would argue that we are not justified in thinking that such misidentifications don't occur all the time.

### III

*Platonist Empiricism.* A central component of traditional empiricist thought can be seen as an attempt to save the platonist account of empirical classification and predication from these difficulties. It is the claim that Sellars characterised as 'the idea that awareness of certain *sorts*—and by "sorts" I have in mind, in the first instance, determinate sense repeatables—is a primordial, non-problematic feature of "immediate experience"'.<sup>4</sup>

4. Wilfrid Sellars, 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', in H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds.) *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science. Vol. I: The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 286.

Locke, Berkeley and Hume, Sellars tells us, ‘take for granted that the human mind has an innate ability to be aware of certain determinate sorts—*indeed, that we are aware of them simply by virtue of having sensations and images*’.<sup>5</sup> According to the assumption that Sellars identifies in these passages, there is a class of universals to which we enjoy unproblematic access. These are universals instantiated, not by the physical objects of which we have sensory experience, but by our sensory experience itself—not by the table-top I’m looking at, but by the visual impressions that I receive when I look at it; not by the wine I’m drinking, but by the gustatory impressions that I receive when I taste it. I shall refer to these universals as *sensory qualities*.<sup>6</sup>

The empiricist assumption can be brought to bear on the difficulties faced by the platonist account. For the assumption can be construed as the claim that my awareness of sensory qualities does not face the problems that the sceptic has raised for my conscious access to the universals involved in acts of empirical classification. When I have the phenomenology of focusing my attention on the kind of universal that is instantiated in the physical world, I may fail to single out a universal as the object of my awareness. But when I have the phenomenology of focusing my attention on a sensory quality, there’s bound to be a sensory quality on which my attention is focused. Similarly, awareness of a physical universal may generate the inclination to classify as an instance of it an object which as a matter of fact doesn’t instantiate it. But awareness of a sensory quality always generates the right inclinations on its instantiation by my sensory input. If I feel inclined to treat a sensory episode as instantiating a sensory quality of which I am aware, my sensory input is guaranteed to instantiate the sensory quality.

Thus, according to the empiricist thought, sensory qualities would provide us with an unproblematic point of entry into the realm of universals, and we could try to use them to save the platonist account of empirical classification from the sceptical worries outlined above. The idea would be to construe the episodes in which we take ourselves to gain conscious access to a

5. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

6. The empiricist assumption that Sellars identifies only treats as unproblematically accessible *determinate* sensory qualities. In what follows I shall ignore this restriction, as nothing will turn on which sensory qualities are treated in this way.

universal as involving sensory qualities. They would act as intermediaries between our inclinations and the physical universals in terms of which the platonist construes empirical classification. Thus when I see myself as focusing my attention on a physical universal, my immediate object of awareness would be a collection of sensory qualities. A physical universal would then be singled out as the bearer of a certain relation to the sensory qualities of which I am unproblematically aware. Similarly, when I want to determine whether a physical universal is instantiated by an object, I would determine, in the first instance, whether a collection of sensory qualities is instantiated by my sensory input. This would enable me to determine whether the physical universal is instantiated by the physical object by virtue of the connection between the physical universal and the sensory qualities, and between the physical object and my sensory input.

Parallel adjustments could be made to the platonist construal of empirical predication. The conscious episode in which I take myself to pair an empirical predicate with the universal that determines its satisfaction conditions would pair the predicate, in the first instance, with a collection of sensory qualities. Then the physical universal that bears a certain relation to these sensory qualities would be singled out for the job of determining the satisfaction conditions of the predicate. And in the conscious episodes in which I decide whether to ascribe an empirical predicate to a physical object, I would draw on my awareness of the sensory qualities that I have paired with the predicate in order to determine whether they are instantiated by my sensory input. This would enable me to determine whether the physical object satisfies the empirical predicate by virtue of the connections between the sensory qualities that I have paired with the predicate and the physical universal that determines its satisfaction conditions, and between my sensory input and the physical object of predication.

We can see that this strategy for saving the platonist account from sceptical worries rests on two major assumptions. The first is the assumption identified by Sellars to the effect that our conscious access to sensory qualities is unproblematic. The second is the claim that the physical universals that figure in our acts of empirical classification can be singled out as the bearers of a certain relation to the sensory qualities that guide our classificatory verdicts. In terms of predication, the second assumption

translates into the claim that the universal that determines the satisfaction conditions of an empirical predicate can be singled out as the bearer of a certain relation to the sensory qualities that we pair with the predicate when we ascribe meaning to it.

Empiricists in the first half of the twentieth century devoted a good deal of effort to vindicating the second of these assumptions. Some tried to connect physical universals with sensory qualities by means of logical links—by treating the universal that determines the satisfaction conditions of an empirical predicate as a ‘logical construct’ from the sensory qualities that speakers associate with it. Others appealed instead to nomic connections between both kinds of universal. Many philosophers nowadays take a dim view of the prospects of these programmes. In any case, their success would be largely pointless unless the first assumption on which the strategy rests could also be vindicated, i.e. unless we were entitled to treat awareness of sensory qualities as unproblematic. For Sellars, this was far from being the case. He saw this assumption as a fundamental mistake—a version of what he characterised as the myth of the given.

The inadequacy of the empiricist assumption becomes obvious as soon as we consider why awareness of sensory qualities is supposed to be less problematic than awareness of physical universals. The idea behind the assumption is that our proximity to the objects that inhabit our own minds, and to the universals that they instantiate, rules out the possibility of the kinds of mistake that could arise once we move out of the mental realm into the physical world. Our access to particulars and universals in the physical world is subject to all sorts of distorting influences that might lead us astray. But concerning sensory particulars and universals, the thought goes, the possibility of error simply doesn’t arise. The mind is just too close to its own objects to be systematically mistaken in its verdicts about them.

In other words, the difficulties that we face in trying to gain conscious access to physical universals are diagnosed as arising from the fact that they are physical—inhabiting a world beyond the ‘walled garden’ in which conscious episodes take place. If this diagnosis were correct, the problems would not arise so long as we stayed within the bounds of this inner theatre. But the diagnosis is not correct. The problems that we face when we try to gain conscious access to physical universals do not stem from the

fact that they are physical, but from the fact that they are universals. A universal effects a classification of particulars that is objective—independent in principle of our classificatory verdicts. This independence from our inclinations is the only fact that the sceptic needs to invoke in order to drive a wedge between the realm of universals and the conscious episodes in which we see ourselves as gaining access to them. Hence retreating to the mental realm fails to protect our verdicts from the real source of trouble. For the classification of mental objects that a sensory quality effects is no less independent of our inclinations than the classification of physical objects effected by a physical universal. What is supposed to render the former unproblematically accessible is not a lack of objectivity, but our proximity to them. As a contemporary advocate of the empiricist view puts it, ‘The near-infallibility of certain judgements about one’s own experience is not a matter of the judgement establishing the reality, but of the lack of room for error in judgement, given the kind of reality we are talking about, namely, one with which one is directly acquainted.’<sup>7</sup> But the objective character of sensory qualities entails that our apprehension of them is, at least in principle, subject to error. This point was appreciated by some of the leading advocates of the empiricist position in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus C. D. Broad writes:

I do not ... see any reason to suppose that even judgements of pure acquaintance are theoretically infallible. ... All judgements involve universals among their terms, whether they be about sense-data with which we are acquainted or about anything else. And it seems always possible to be mistaken in thinking that such and such a term is an instance of such and such a quality or that such and such a complex is characterised by such and such a relation.<sup>8</sup>

And once the theoretical possibility of mistakes is accepted, we cannot legitimately assume that sensory qualities are unproblematically accessible in conscious episodes, until we have established their agreement with the facts about sensory qualities that they purport to track. But since we can only perform this task by means of other conscious episodes of the same kind, we face with

7. Howard Robinson, *Perception* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 104.

8. C. D. Broad, ‘Is There “Knowledge by Acquaintance”?’ *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 2* (1919), pp. 219–220.

respect to our access to sensory qualities the very same situation that enabled the sceptic to call our conscious access to physical universals into question. This consequence didn't go unnoticed either by some of the leading representatives of the empiricist movement. Thus, according to C. I. Lewis, 'If a sensum has a character which ... can be wrongly apprehended or "not noticed", then a large part of the problem of knowledge concerns our *veridical* apprehension of sensa; the supposition that they simply are in mind or identical with the content of awareness is incompatible with the possibility of erroneous judgement of their ... objective character.'<sup>9</sup> Or, as Nelson Goodman puts it, if the conscious episodes in which we take ourselves to gain access to sensory qualities can generate incorrect verdicts, 'What Guardian Angel or vestige of Original Virtue keeps us from such mistakes?'<sup>10</sup> In sum, once the sceptic is allowed to open a gap between physical universals and the conscious episodes in which we see ourselves as gaining access to them, sensory qualities cannot be called upon to solve the problem.

Needless to say, these considerations don't amount to a full defence of the sceptic's reasoning. Other strategies might be available for vindicating our conscious access to universals in the face of sceptical challenges. Furthermore, even if the sceptic's conclusions were allowed to stand, we might not be forced to abandon the platonist account—provided that we were prepared to give up the idea that our access to the universals that figure in acts of empirical classification takes place in conscious episodes.<sup>11</sup> I shall not try to assess the prospects of any of these strategies for solving the epistemological difficulties faced by the platonist account. I want to consider instead the situation in which we would find ourselves if none of these strategies succeeded—if we had no viable account of our access to the universals that figure in the platonist construal of acts of empirical

9. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World-Order: Outline of a Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 126–127, fn.

10. Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance*, 2nd edn. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 98.

11. This is the route taken by those who attempt to explain predicate satisfaction in information-theoretic terms. According to the information-theoretic model, the property that determines the satisfaction conditions of a predicate is singled out by the nomic connections between sensory presentations of instances of the property and a certain differential response on the part of the speaker, e.g., ascription of the predicate to the presented object. These nomic connections can also be invoked in a reliabilist account of the justification of the speaker's ascription verdicts.

classification and predication. One natural reaction to this predicament would be to abandon the platonist account, and to attempt a construal of these episodes which doesn't invoke universals. In the remainder of this paper I am going to explore the possibility of construing empirical classification and predication along these lines.

#### IV

*The Given without Myths*.<sup>12</sup> The kind of position that I am going to explore enjoys little currency these days. As we are about to see, it had some prominent advocates among empiricist philosophers early in the twentieth century, but the fact that their views have this character is often overlooked. We tend to think of all proponents of the doctrine of the empirically given as making the mistake denounced by Sellars, even though some of them were among the first to see that trying to save our conscious access to universals by recourse to sensory qualities was an utterly misguided project.

C. I. Lewis was one of them. In *Mind and the World Order*, he accuses those who characterise the given element in experience in terms of the apprehension of universals in our sensory input of failing 'to go deep enough and to distinguish what is really given from what is imported by interpretation'.<sup>13</sup> Their mistake lies in failing to notice that 'there is interpretation in calling the *sensum* "elliptical" as much as in calling the *penny* "round"'.<sup>14</sup>

Lewis's own characterisation of the given invokes the notion of *qualia*. Qualia are 'recognisable qualitative characters ..., which may be repeated in different experiences, and are thus a sort of universals'.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, the analogy between qualia and universals cannot be perfect. Otherwise, in characterising the given in terms of the apprehension of qualia, Lewis would be making the same mistake as those that he accuses of not going deep enough. He is aware of this, and indeed he diagnoses the

12. This section expands on the discussion in §1 of my 'Predicates, Properties and the Goal of a Theory of Reference', *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 51 (1996), pp. 121–161.

13. *Mind and the World Order*, p. 62.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

mistake of his opponents as arising from the ‘confusion of the logical universal with given qualia of sense’.<sup>16</sup>

‘Qualia’, he writes, ‘are universals, in the sense of being recognised from one to another experience’.<sup>17</sup> However, ‘The qualia of sense ..., though repeatable in experience and intrinsically recognizable, ... are fundamentally different from the “universals” of logic and of traditional problems concerning these.’<sup>18</sup> How do qualia then differ from universals? ‘The quale’, Lewis writes, ‘is directly intuited, given, and is not the subject of any possible error because it is purely subjective. The property of an object is objective; the ascription of it is a judgement which may be mistaken.’<sup>19</sup> Thus while judgements that ascribe properties can be mistaken, in the apprehension of qualia no mistake is possible.

Hence the apprehension of qualia seems to have the status ascribed to awareness of sensory qualities by those who tried to save the platonist account by invoking them. Isn’t the infallibility of the former as mythical as that of the latter? The reason why mistakes can be made in the ascription of properties, but not in the apprehension of qualia, Lewis tells us, is that properties are *objective*, but qualia are *subjective*. Notice however that the contrast cannot be between features of physical objects and features of mental objects. Remember his remark that there is as much interpretation in calling the sensum ‘elliptical’ as in calling the penny ‘round’. ‘Subjective’ is not to be understood as ‘mental’, for ‘what is not a “thing” or objective, in terms of our knowledge of the physical, may be something objective in the categories of psychology’.<sup>20</sup> This would be so if ‘psychological states are events which modify a substantive thing, the mind’.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, he points out that ‘we needn’t say that what is given is a “mental state” or even “in the mind” in any more explicit sense than is itself implied in [its] givenness’.<sup>22</sup> Mental objects and events, on this

16. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 65. The term ‘subjective’ doesn’t seem much more satisfactory as a characterisation of the given. Cf. p. 63: ‘a distinction between the subjective and the objective ... is irrelevant to *givenness as such*’, and p. 46: ‘In immediacy, there is no separation of subject and object’.

objective construal of the mental, would be ‘a new kind of *Ding an sich*, which is none the better for being inappropriately named so as to suggest its phenomenological character’.<sup>23</sup> Their features are not the kind of thing that we can infallibly apprehend, and hence they are not to be identified with qualia.

We get a hint of the real reason why the apprehension of qualia is infallible when Lewis writes: ‘Apprehension of the presented quale ... is not knowledge in any sense in which “knowledge” connotes the opposite of error’.<sup>24</sup> The suggestion is that the apprehension of qualia is not to be looked upon as a cognitive enterprise, whose success or otherwise will depend on how things stand with the qualia that I purport to apprehend. The alternative account of the character of qualia apprehension that seems to be suggested by Lewis’s remarks is made explicit by Nelson Goodman, when he is developing Lewis’s notion. ‘If I say’, Goodman writes, ‘that the green presented by the grass now is the same as the green presented by it at a certain past moment, ... my statement might ... be looked upon as a *decree*’.<sup>25</sup> On this account, the reason why our verdicts on the presence of qualia are infallible is not that we are miraculously good at avoiding mistakes, or that we are just too close to them for mistakes ever to arise. The reason is that facts about qualia are constituted by the verdicts that we feel inclined to emit. Their existence, identity and instantiation conditions are determined, on this account, by the verdicts that arise from our classificatory inclinations.

Notice that construing qualia in these terms doesn’t make them in any sense *arbitrary*. For, as Goodman indicates, ‘I am not equally inclined to identify the color presented by the grass now with the color presented by the sky an hour ago.’<sup>26</sup> I am not free to choose which verdicts on the presence of qualia I feel inclined to emit. Hence my classificatory inclinations, and the qualia that we can define in terms of them, appear to satisfy Lewis’s definitive criterion of what is given—‘that the mode of thought can neither create nor alter it’.<sup>27</sup>

23. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

25. *The Structure of Appearance*, p. 98.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Mind and the World Order*, p. 66.

Notice, also, that this account doesn't render our verdicts on the presence of qualia irrevocable. As Goodman points out, 'A decree, however safe it may be from disproof, is vulnerable to cancellation by another decree.'<sup>28</sup> This revision may come about 'because of a new impulse of the same sort that led to the original decision'.<sup>29</sup> Revision may also be prompted by the consequences of a decree, since 'our decrees can lead us into such serious trouble as outright inconsistency'.<sup>30</sup>

## V

*Nominalist Empiricism.* The importance for our purposes of the Lewis–Goodman notion of quale lies in the possibility of using it as a central ingredient of an account of empirical classification and predication in which universals are not involved. I shall use for this account the label *nominalist empiricism*. I shall focus on predication, for which the nominalist empiricist account can be more easily presented. Like the empiricist version of the platonist account that we have considered above, nominalist empiricism construes empirical predication as taking place in conscious episodes. But instead of construing these episodes as awareness of sensory qualities, it construes them as instances of quale apprehension. The resulting construal of the conscious episodes involved in empirical predication is structurally very similar to the platonist empiricist construal. But underlying this structural similarity there is a fundamental difference, arising from the contrast between sensory qualities and qualia highlighted in the previous section.

Let's consider the contrast in some detail by looking at a paradigmatic case of the understanding and subsequent use of an empirical predicate. Suppose that someone is teaching me how to decide on the ascription of the term 'chardonnay' to a wine by tasting it. He would give me different wines to taste, indicating in each case whether the wine satisfies the predicate. Suppose that, after a few samples, I feel that I have identified the taste associated with the predicate, and decide to ascribe it to those wines that strike me as having that taste.

28. *The Structure of Appearance*, p. 98.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

For the platonist empiricist, in this conscious episode I have become aware of a gustatory quality, and decided to ascribe the predicate to a wine that I taste whenever I detect this quality in the resulting gustatory input. The nominalist empiricist, by contrast, would describe this episode as the apprehension of a quale and the decision to apply the predicate to a wine whenever I find this quale present in my gustatory input. The difference between the two construals has important consequences. As we saw above, even if this episode exhibits the phenomenological features that I associate with awareness of a sensory quality, I may be wrong in ascribing this character to it. For in spite of how it feels, this episode may have failed to single out a sensory quality as an object of awareness. For the nominalist empiricist, by contrast, the possibility of this kind of error doesn't arise. The fact that it seems to me that I have identified a taste that I can go on to recognize in subsequent perceptual episodes makes it the case that I have apprehended a quale. This is not, as in the mythical version of the doctrine of the given, to ascribe to this episode a power to establish contact with an independent reality. It is simply a direct consequence of the way in which the notion of quale has been construed.

Consider now the conscious episodes in which I decide whether to ascribe the predicate to the wines that I go on to taste. According to the platonist empiricist, in these episodes I bring to consciousness again the sensory quality that I have paired with the predicate, in order to determine whether it is instantiated by my gustatory input when I taste a wine. For the nominalist empiricist, in these episodes I focus my attention again on the quale that I have paired with the predicate, and decide whether it strikes me as being present in my gustatory input. Once again substituting qualia for sensory qualities has important consequences. If these episodes are construed as giving me conscious access to a sensory quality, two further kinds of mistake are possible, even if we assume that I have succeeded in singling out a sensory quality as an object of awareness. First, contrary to what I think, I may have brought to consciousness the wrong sensory quality—i.e. not the one that I had originally paired with the predicate. Second, even if I have focused on the right sensory quality, awareness of it may generate incorrect inclinations concerning its presence in my sensory input. I may feel inclined to find it present

in sensory episodes from which it is absent, or absent from sensory episodes in which it is present. Neither of these kinds of mistake is possible in the nominalist empiricist construal of these episodes. If the wine that I'm now tasting strikes me as having the taste that I had identified in a wine that I tasted in the past, that's all it takes for the quale that I'm now apprehending to be identical to the quale that I had apprehended on the earlier occasion. And that's also all it takes for this quale to be present in my gustatory input. Once again, this infallibility is not a substantive achievement on my part, but a straightforward consequence of the way qualia have been construed.

What we have then is an account of the conscious episodes involved in the understanding and ascription of an empirical predicate in which universals are not involved. The conscious episode in which a speaker comes to understand an empirical predicate is construed as his pairing with the predicate a quale, or a collection of qualia, that he has apprehended, and undertaking to ascribe the predicate whenever it strikes him as present in his sensory input. And the subsequent conscious episodes in which he decides on the ascription of the predicate are construed as his reidentifying this quale or collection of qualia in his sensory input. Let me refer to the quale or collection of qualia that plays this role for an empirical predicate (for a speaker) as its *empirical base* (for that speaker).

A crucial feature of this construal is that it pre-empts the sceptical challenges that the platonist construal of these episodes gives rise to. The sceptic cannot drive a wedge between qualia and the episodes in which they are apprehended because the existence, identity and instantiation conditions of qualia are constituted by the inclinations that these episodes generate.

## VI

*The Practice of Empirical Predication.* The construal of the conscious episodes involved in empirical predication that I have sketched in the previous section is only the starting point of the nominalist programme. The possibility of characterising these episodes without invoking universals wouldn't be of much significance unless this characterisation could sustain a satisfactory account of the practice of empirical predication. On the face of

it, the nominalist will find this task much harder than the platonist. The infallibility of qualia apprehension may be an important asset when trying to counter sceptical challenges. But for the task of accounting for the practice of empirical predication, it seems to be a serious liability. The reason is that the practice seems to acknowledge the possibility of mistakes concerning predicate satisfaction parallel to the kinds of mistake that we can make when we try to gain conscious access to universals. First, the practice treats ascription verdicts as revisable. I may feel inclined to ascribe an empirical predicate to an object which as a matter of fact fails to satisfy it, or, vice versa, I may feel inclined not to ascribe it to an object which satisfies it. Second, the practice seems to make room for the possibility that a speaker inadvertently changes the satisfaction conditions that his understanding assigns to an empirical predicate. Third, the practice seems to acknowledge the possibility that a speaker is wrong in thinking that he has succeeded in assigning satisfaction conditions to an empirical predicate.

Explaining these features of the practice would be completely straightforward if we construed our verdicts on the ascription of empirical predicates as arising from awareness of universals. My ascriptions of an empirical predicate could be wrong because my awareness of the universal that determines its satisfaction conditions may result in the wrong inclinations concerning the instantiation conditions of the universal. I may inadvertently change the satisfaction conditions of an empirical predicate because I may come to base my ascriptions of the predicate on my awareness of a universal other than the one that I had originally paired with it. And I may be wrong in thinking that my understanding of an empirical predicate assigns satisfaction conditions to it because I may fail to bring a universal to consciousness in the episode in which I see myself as performing this task.<sup>31</sup> Obviously, none of these explanations is available to the nominalist, since speakers are infallible concerning the instantiation, identity and existence of the qualia that they pair with an empirical predicate when they understand it. In this section, I am

31. In the empiricist version of the platonist account, mistakes could be explained not only in terms of the fallibility of our awareness of sensory qualities, but also by appeal to the connection between these and the universals that determine the satisfaction conditions of empirical predicates.

going to consider how the nominalist could go about explaining these features of the practice.

Let's start with the revisability of our verdicts on the ascription of empirical predicates. We have seen that the infallibility of our verdicts on the presence of qualia leaves room for a certain measure of revisability. I could, e.g., change my mind on the presence of the quale that I have associated with 'chardonnay' in my present gustatory experience. But we take the revisability of our verdicts on the ascription of empirical predicates to go further than this. We often revise verdicts on the ascription of an empirical predicate without changing our verdicts concerning its empirical base. If our ascription verdicts were based on qualia apprehension, one could argue, we wouldn't treat them in this way.

Let's focus on a specific example of the kind of situation that may raise a problem for the nominalist. When speakers first come to understand the term 'gold', they typically acquire procedures for deciding on its ascription that are based on the presence in objects of certain observable features. Consider Jane, who has learnt to ascribe the predicate to objects with the features corresponding to her predicates 'yellow' and 'shiny'. Jane will ascribe 'gold' to any object she comes across to which she feels inclined to ascribe 'yellow' and 'shiny'. Nevertheless, in some circumstances, she might come to revise these verdicts. She could come to the conclusion that she was wrong in ascribing 'gold' to objects to which she was right in ascribing 'yellow' and 'shiny'.

The nominalist would seem to have trouble accommodating this possibility. He will have to construe Jane's understanding of 'gold' as arising from an episode in which she assigns to it an empirical base consisting of the qualia that she associates with 'yellow' and 'shiny'. And he will construe her verdicts on the ascription of 'gold' as based on her verdicts on the presence of these qualia. But this construal seems to rule out the kind of revision that we have described.<sup>32</sup>

In order to see how the nominalist could try to accommodate these revisions, we need to consider in some detail the kind of circumstances in which they would come about. Jane could come

32. Notice that the problem can't be removed by invoking the social dimension of language, and explaining satisfaction conditions in terms of the predicate-qualia pairings adopted by the experts. For experts, like other speakers, treat their ascription verdicts as open to revision.

to the conclusion that she was wrong in ascribing ‘gold’ to objects to which she was right in ascribing ‘yellow’ and ‘shiny’ if, e.g., she learnt chemistry. As a result of her chemistry training, we would expect her to adopt new procedures for ascribing ‘gold’, e.g., using a spectroscope, and to treat the deliverances of these procedures as overriding any conflicting verdicts that she may have reached by other means. This change of procedures could lead to the kind of revision that we are considering, as Jane may have ascribed ‘gold’ to objects to which she feels inclined to ascribe ‘yellow’ and ‘shiny’, but which fail the spectroscope test.

Notice that the nominalist would characterise this change of procedures for the ascription of ‘gold’ as a change in its empirical base. When Jane adopts the spectroscope test for the ascription of ‘gold’, she replaces the empirical base that she had originally assigned to the predicate with a new one—consisting of the collection of qualia from whose presence she concludes that a spectroscope displays the spectrum that she has been taught to associate with ‘gold’. And Jane’s revision of her verdicts on the ascription of ‘gold’ is a consequence of this change in the empirical base that she assigns to the predicate.

This suggests that the nominalist could try to explain the revisability of ascription verdicts as resulting from the fact that the practice allows for the possibility of changes in the empirical base of a predicate which don’t bring about changes in its satisfaction conditions. We can change a verdict on the ascription of an empirical predicate without changing the verdict concerning its empirical base which led to the ascription verdict because that empirical base may come to be replaced by another—without this replacement changing the satisfaction conditions of the predicate. The practice treats ascription verdicts as revisable, the nominalist would contend, not because they are not based on qualia apprehension, but because changes in the collection of qualia that we associate with an empirical predicate are often treated as leaving its satisfaction conditions unchanged.<sup>33</sup>

Let’s move on now to the possibility that a speaker inadvertently changes the satisfaction conditions that his understanding

33. A similar strategy could be adopted for dealing with the interpersonal analogue of this situation. The nominalist empiricist doesn’t have to commit himself to the claim that if the qualia that two speakers associate with a predicate lead them to different verdicts on its ascription, the predicate has different satisfaction conditions as meant by each of them.

assigns to an empirical predicate. The practice seems to acknowledge the possibility that such changes take place when speakers change the procedures that they employ for deciding on the ascription of an empirical predicate. Even if a speaker thinks that a change of procedures will leave the satisfaction conditions of an empirical predicate unchanged, the practice leaves the possibility open of drawing the opposite conclusion. I want to suggest that the nominalist could try to explain this feature of the practice by looking at the procedures that we employ for deciding when a change in the empirical base of an empirical predicate brings about a change in its satisfaction conditions. The nominalist could point out that these procedures do not require taking the speaker's original impression at face value. New information could become available after the change that would recommend overriding the speaker's initial verdict. Revisions could also be undertaken even in the absence of new information. For the procedures that we use for deciding these questions, the nominalist could argue, are as revisable as the procedures that we employ for deciding on the ascription of empirical predicates. In fact, the former can be seen as a special case of the latter. For '...has the same satisfaction conditions as ...' is just a binary empirical predicate, and changes in its empirical base need not bring about changes in its satisfaction conditions.

Let's consider finally the possibility, which the practice seems to acknowledge, that a speaker is wrong in thinking that he has succeeded in assigning satisfaction conditions to an empirical predicate. For the nominalist, this means that, even if a speaker has paired an empirical predicate with a collection of qualia, his understanding of the predicate may fail to assign satisfaction conditions to it. Once again, the nominalist could try to explain this feature of the practice as arising from the nature of the procedures that we employ for deciding whether a speaker has succeeded in bestowing satisfaction conditions on a predicate. According to these procedures, the nominalist could point out, the fact that I have paired a predicate with a collection of qualia weighs heavily in favour of the claim that the predicate has acquired satisfaction conditions. But these procedures also leave room for exceptions—situations in which I have paired the predicate with a collection of qualia but the right conclusion to draw is that the predicate hasn't received satisfaction conditions. We

may come to realise that a predicate has to be treated in this way by learning more about the situation, or as a result of changes in the procedures for deciding whether a predicate has satisfaction conditions. Once again, the revisability of these procedures can be treated as a special case of the revisability of the procedures that we employ for deciding on the ascription of empirical predicates. '...has satisfaction conditions' is an empirical predicate whose empirical base can be changed without changing its satisfaction conditions.

## VII

*Satisfaction.* Notice that the challenges to the nominalist position that we have considered in the preceding section follow a common pattern. The nominalist has been challenged to explain, with the limited resources at his disposal, aspects of our practice of ascribing empirical predicates. And in each case I have suggested that the nominalist construal of empirical predication might be able to accommodate these features of the practice. No doubt other objections of this kind can be raised against nominalist empiricism, i.e. by pointing out aspects of the practice of empirical predication that the nominalist construal might seem to have trouble accommodating. And vindicating the nominalist account would require showing that, contrary to what may seem, it has the resources for characterising the practice as having all the features that we consider essential to it.

But even if the nominalist could claim total success on this front, his position might still raise a fundamental worry. One could argue that there is an important difference between showing, on the one hand, how speakers can use empirical predicates *as if* there were an objective relation of satisfaction between predicates and objects, and showing, on the other, that such an objective relation actually underlies the practice. Nominalist empiricism, the objection would go, might have the resources for discharging the former task, but for the latter task universals are indispensable. Nominalist empiricism could at best show that universals are not needed for describing a practice involving empirical predicates with the 'grammatical' features that it would have if many of these predicates had objective satisfaction conditions. But it lacks the resources for vindicating the metaphysical reality that is supposed to underlie these grammatical

appearances. This would require showing that there is a relation that some empirical predicates bear to universals, whose instantiation conditions determine the satisfaction conditions of the predicates with which they are associated. I'd like to end by considering how the nominalist could try to answer this objection.

As we have seen, the nominalist doesn't need to deny that speakers who engage in the practice of empirical predication see many of their predicates as having satisfaction conditions, since they see the conscious episodes in which they pair empirical predicates with collections of qualia as having this consequence. Moreover, the nominalist characterisation of the practice sanctions these verdicts as correct. They are subject to revision, since, as we have seen, the speakers might come to the conclusion that, in pairing an empirical predicate with a collection of qualia, they have failed to endow it with satisfaction conditions. But revisable as they may be, these verdicts are sanctioned by the rules of the practice as the right thing to say, until speakers come across what they would treat as grounds for revision.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the nominalist will be willing to accommodate in his characterisation of the practice of empirical predication the speakers' impression that their verdicts on whether a predicate has satisfaction conditions, on whether the satisfaction conditions of a predicate have remained constant, and on whether an object satisfies a predicate, are permanently open to revision. And it would be reasonable to interpret this impression as an implicit commitment to the objectivity of the satisfaction conditions that speakers see their empirical predicates as having. For it amounts to acknowledging that satisfaction facts are not determined by the verdicts to which they feel inclined.

In fact, if the question were raised, whether their empirical predicates have objective satisfaction conditions, we could expect speakers to make this commitment explicit by answering the question in the affirmative. And in giving this answer they would be faithful to the rules that govern the practice, on the nominalist characterisation. Therefore, according to the nominalist, they would be right in asserting the existence of an objective relation of satisfaction linking their predicates with the world—even though their verdicts on which of their empirical predicates enter

into this objective relation, and on which objects each of these predicates is related to, would have to be treated as permanently provisional.

Hence the objection that we are considering could only be pressed by invoking a distinction between the answer that the question would receive 'within the practice', and the answer that it ought to receive if it were raised 'from outside'. The rules of the practice that the nominalist has characterised may sanction an affirmative answer, but whatever these rules dictate, the objection would go, our empirical predicates could actually fail to sustain an objective relation of satisfaction with the objects in the world. And this would be the situation unless there were a relation linking empirical predicates to universals that determine their satisfaction conditions.

Thus the objection presupposes a picture in which there is a meaningful distinction between the practice of ascribing empirical predicates according to our inclinations and the level at which questions of philosophical semantics are raised and adjudicated. According to this picture, the philosopher would have to step outside the practice and consider, from that external vantage point, whether there really is the connection between language and reality postulated by those who engage in the practice. I want to suggest that the nominalist empiricist could answer the objection by questioning this picture. He could insist that the vantage point external to the practice from which the objection would have to be raised is totally illusory.<sup>34</sup> The semanticist is on the same boat as his fellow speakers. He has to decide whether to classify certain objects—our empirical predicates—as being of a certain kind—as having objective satisfaction conditions. And to make this decision he has to proceed in the same way as when he is trying to decide, e.g., whether to classify a table-top as square. He has to apply the procedures that he has adopted for answering these questions, and endorse the answers to which he feels inclined. His verdicts on empirical predicates, like his verdicts on table-tops, will be subject to revision in light of further experience, and of changes in the procedures on which they are based. But it is hard to see how this characterisation of his task

34. I develop these ideas in 'Realism Detranscendentalized', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (2000), pp. 63–88.

could be rejected on these grounds, as we should have been suspicious all along of the philosopher's aspiration to give to our inclinations a level of certainty that seemed unattainable without his help.

*Department of Philosophy  
University College London  
Gower Street  
London  
WC1E 6BT*