
Social Justice, Economics, and the Implications of Nominalism

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The social justice movement (SJM) is galvanizing attention to a number of issues, such as racism, discrimination based on sex or gender, environmental exploitation, and economic justice. In terms of the latter, one aspect that SJM proponents have targeted is disparities in the distribution of wealth, as reflected, for example, in the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor, arguing that these disparities are due to discrimination of an immoral kind (Sowell 2018, 21).¹ Yet, interestingly, some key philosophical assumptions behind social justice as it is advocated in SJM have rarely been discussed, let alone assessed. These assumptions include critical theory (CT), with its commitments to materialism and historicism. In addition, CT is wed to *nominalism*, roughly the theory that only particular things exist; unlike in *realism*, in nominalism there are no universal, literally shareable qualities in reality.

With its emphasis upon justice, the SJM necessarily intersects with the field of ethics. Yet in the history of Western ethics since at least the sixteenth century there has also been a decidedly nominalist influence. Moreover, with its interest in just distributions of wealth, the SJM has major implications for economics. Yet economics also

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1. Thomas Sowell distinguishes two types of discrimination. One is the ability to discern differences in the qualities of peoples and things (e.g., which cell phone to purchase), on the basis of which we then choose accordingly. This is not moral discrimination. However, immoral discrimination treats “people negatively, based on arbitrary assumptions or aversions concerning individuals of a particular race, sex, etc.” (2018, 21).

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has been shaped by nominalism, at least in the way economics tries to operate as a science, for science has been deeply affected by nominalism through the Scientific Revolution.

Although it may seem to some that as a metaphysical theory nominalism may be irrelevant to the *practice* of economics and even to the recognition of injustices, nonetheless I argue that justice, economic practice, and the SJM actually presuppose a different view of what is real than nominalism. Nominalism undermines justice itself and even economic practice. Thus, ironically, because of its nominalist disposition the SJM actually cannot hope to give us social justice, including in economics.

To help accomplish this task, first I survey the philosophical assumptions in the SJM, with a focus on CT and its assumed nominalism. Second, I draw connections between the SJM's appeal to justice and how justice has been understood in light of the history of Western ethics since the time of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). In short, ethics (and thus justice) basically has been treated nominalistically, a move that reduces justice to power, as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) foresaw. Third, I explore the importance of nominalism in economics, particularly in light of its influence upon science.

Then, fourth, I assess the impact of nominalism on social justice by examining how nominalism undermines justice. I also show how nominalism subverts economics. Thus, with its dependency upon nominalism, the SJM undercuts itself. However, I then explore a counterargument that even if my philosophical arguments are cogent, nonetheless we still can engage practically in economics and recognize injustices quite successfully. If so, then it seems my philosophical objections might be suited simply for abstract theorizing and ivory-tower disputes. As a concluding suggestion, social justice, including in economics, is not indifferent to ontology. There must be a different theory of what is real other than nominalism that can account for the reality of justice and the practice of economics, one that will constrain and shape the many cries for justice coming from the SJM.

Some Key Philosophical Assumptions of the SJM

One of the central theories informing the SJM is CT, which began in the Frankfurt School in Germany. The school brought together many German philosophers and social theorists working in the western European Marxist tradition, including Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979). CT draws upon the belief that disparities are due to immoral discrimination, usually against groups of people. To achieve social justice, these groups need to be liberated from their oppression by the powerful. SJM supporters focus on social structures and systemic evils embedded within them, which oppress people.

For Horkheimer, a CT seeks “emancipation from slavery,” domination, and oppression, with the goal of liberating humans “to create a world which satisfies the[ir] needs and powers” ([1972] 1982, 246). More than just a philosophical theory, CT aims to be *both* prescriptive *and* descriptive by drawing upon the social sciences

and philosophy in social inquiry. Philosophy provides its contribution by organizing and defining problems from empirically gathered resources toward the objective of “decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms” (Bohman 2005).

Like Karl Marx (1818–83), Horkheimer sees reason as historicized, which stresses the “historical situatedness of each individual consciousness as a particular moment” (Thornhill 1998). CT is a nominalist theory, for historicism emphasizes particulars and rejects the reality of universals. As such, CT focuses on discrete, historical particulars (not abstract, universal ideas or principles), which determine cultural phenomena.

As a historicist, Horkheimer denies that we can access reality directly. We instead always work from our situated, historically located standpoints, being unable to transcend them and gain direct access to reality. Thus, all our knowledge is *as-pectual*, having been drawn from contingent, limited, and particular vantage points.

Also like Marx, Horkheimer embraces materialism in ontology. Foreshadowing more contemporary arguments, he claims that “materialism requires the unification of philosophy and science” ([1972] 1982, 24). In addition, Horkheimer sees individual humans as concrete particulars and not in terms of a universally common nature. Their freedom is grounded in their holistic relation to social totality and nature (Bohman 2005). Humans seem to be holistically embedded in nature, as though they are nothing but material beings.

So far we have seen how CT stresses the nominalist emphasis upon particulars. Yet nominalism has some additional features that distinguish it from realism. First, I explore realism. Consider two red delicious apples. On a realist view, the two apples *literally share the same qualities*: both have the same nature, and both have the same red color instanced in them. Or consider two people who have the character quality of being just. On Aristotle’s realist virtue ethics, they literally share the same virtue, justice, which is instanced in both of their souls. These shareable qualities are called *universals*: each one is one thing in itself, yet it can be instanced (be present) in many individuals. So, for example, there is a quality of justice, yet this very same quality can (and should) be instanced in many people. For this reason, a universal often is called a “one-in-many.” Plato’s universals (the “forms”) *are metaphysically abstract*; that is, they *themselves* are not located in space and time as such. Justice, redness, and “appleness” are examples of his universals. Nevertheless, they can be instanced in many particular humans or apples, respectively. Furthermore, there seem to be essential natures to universals, for there is an essence to each instance of these qualities that makes them all that kind of thing.

In contrast, nominalism denies that universals exist. Only discrete, particular qualities and things exist. Although we may use a *word* to speak of two just humans, they literally do not share the identical quality. Moreover, on nominalism, properties are not metaphysically abstract; thus, all things are located in space and time. As such, we would expect what is real to be empirically observable. Moreover, on nominalism,

particular things are just *one* thing (i.e., metaphysically they are *simple*). In contrast, on realism, particular just humans are a *complex* unity of a universal (justice) and a particular (human₁, human₂) that instances the universal.

It should not surprise us, then, to see that CT also stresses nominalism in ethics. Because all knowledge is drawn from particular, socially embodied settings, and because humans are particular beings who are embedded holistically in nature and those settings, ethics, too, is socially based. It is not based on universally valid moral principles or virtues that exist objectively in themselves. There are instead many discrete actions that we group together, yet they do not share anything literally the same except perhaps a word we use for them (for example, *justice*).

This nominalist approach to ethics and thus to justice in particular is not unique to CT. Rather, it fits with a decidedly nominalist turn in Western ethics, starting at least with Hobbes and continuing through the present.

Nominalism in Ethics

Hobbes influenced the Scientific Revolution with his mechanical atomism and nominalism ([1651] 1964, 16 and chaps. 1–6). Given his ontology, goodness and badness need to be defined mechanistically and atomistically. For him, motions *toward* something cause our desires for it, and what causes desire in us is good. In contrast, motions *away* from something cause aversions to it in us, and so that thing is evil (chaps. 6 and 15). Yet, given his nominalism, these interests and desires are particulars to each individual. There is no universal, objectively real moral property such as justice that is applicable to all people.

Hobbes also rejected rights and justice as “inalienable,” arguing instead that they are creations of the sovereign (Smith 2014, chap. 4). If justice were inalienable, then it would seem to be a universal and transcend our particularity. Yet, consistent with his nominalism, Hobbes’s rights are human products and thus are contingent and historically located.

After Hobbes, David Hume (1711–76) rejected any literal identities between two or more things, even experiences. Moreover, for him, reason is slave of the passions; reason does not tell us what is moral or move us to action (Hume 1738, bk. II, part III, sec. iii). He instead treated morals as particular *sentiments*. So moral statements would seem to be just expressions of feelings. Justice, then, would not be a subject of rationality. Moreover, as a nominalist, Hume saw the sentiments and passions as highly individualistic.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) continued on the nominalist path, even though he thought our maxims should be *willed* to be universal for all. For him, morals command us absolutely and thus are what he called “categorical imperatives.” Despite this belief, he did not embrace a form of realism. He believed “all our knowledge begins with experience,” yet experience only tells us how something appears to us (Kant 1993, 25). Further, what we experience by the senses is contingent. If so, then it seems there are no knowable, universal, necessary features to all our experiences. Because,

according to Kant, all of our experiences seem to be particular, Kant, too, seems to be a nominalist.

After Kant, the utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), followed. Consistent with nominalism, they tried to develop their ethical theories in light of empiricism. On utilitarianism, we determine the rightness or wrongness of a particular action based on its net utility. As a result, there are no intrinsically valid moral principles or virtues; their moral status depends completely on the sum of the consequences. Further, utilitarianism has no place for universals as moral properties, for we cannot know immaterial, metaphysically abstract moral principles by the five senses. Thus, morals are not objectively real. They are just particular principles that we *treat* generally.

Historically, the next major set of moral theories that arose in the West was naturalistic. Although these theories accept the reality of natural, physical facts, they must reject any intrinsically moral facts, including any morals on a realist interpretation. Moreover, as naturalist Wilfrid Sellars claims, “a naturalist ontology must be a nominalistic ontology” (1979, 109).

Naturalists suggested many ethical options that fit with nominalism. For example, Nietzsche rejected Kant’s universalizability of morals, arguing instead that our claims about reality, including ethical ones, just reflect “our artificial (though convenient) *linguistic-conceptual shorthand* for functionally unitary products, processes, and sets of relations,” including identities (Schacht 1999, 615, emphasis added). Indeed, our appeals to universal morals actually reflect our will to power, a view that CT has adopted.

Although we may consider many different examples of naturalism, there is a pattern among them. Christine Korsgaard expresses this pattern well when she admits that because brute reality is material, there is just matter and what we *count as* good and valuable. We do this by imposing our concepts and willings upon matter (1996, 4–5). Thus, morals end up being our constructs, and as such they are located in space and time and are not intrinsically moral. Thus, they are nominal.

Ethical relativism also clearly is nominalist, for it rejects any universally valid morals. Morals are just particulars, applicable to individuals or cultures if they accept them as such. Moreover, ethics done in light of the postmodern turn also reflects nominalism’s emphasis on historically located particulars. For instance, Alasdair MacIntyre asserts there is no rationality or language as such. He also raises the prospect that there are rival conceptions of justice, each of which is particular to some tradition (1988, 356–57). Nor is there a universal vantage point from which we can know reality directly. There are only particular standpoints from which we access and understand reality (357–58).

Thus far, we have seen the nominalist emphasis in CT, which the SJM embraces, as well as the general nominalist trend in Western ethics. On these views, it seems justice is a particular moral virtue of a historically located, particular group of people. Moreover, if ethics, justice in particular, is just about how we impose our concepts upon brute

reality, then it seems Nietzsche was right after all: ethics is all about our impositions of power. Now I turn to an exploration of how nominalism affects economics, which is crucial for the SJM's calls for economic justice.

Nominalism in Science and Economics

Supporters of the SJM raise many concerns about economic justice. However, in so doing, they presuppose that we can make sense of the practice of economics. To address the question of the adequacy of nominalism to preserve and account for economics, I now explore how nominalism has affected science and thus economics as it tries to operate as a science.

Before the rise of the Scientific Revolution, the Scholastics followed Aristotelianism and emphasized metaphysics, with its commitment to the reality of universals and essential natures. Owing in part to this commitment, Aristotelianism fit with a more a priori, deductive approach to science. However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Scientific Revolution introduced several key shifts. First, natural philosophers rejected Aristotelianism, developing instead a more a posteriori, observational approach. Second, Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), and Hobbes welcomed *mechanical* philosophy, on which the universe is a large-scale machine. Third, Gassendi, Hobbes, and others adopted Greek *atomism*, according to which atoms are ultimate and the material world is constituted by them. Gassendi and Hobbes also followed in the direction of William of Ockham (1287–1347), embracing nominalism. Thus, on this family of views, atoms are particular, material things without any universals or an essence to them.

The *mechanical atomists* of the period combined these two views. They included scientists such as Galileo Galilei (1564–1642); Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and Robert Boyle (1627–1691), both of whom were nominalists; and Isaac Newton (1642–1727), who was a nominalist in mathematics (see Bacon [1620] 1863, bk. 2, no. 2; Osler 1992, 185–86; Sepkoski 2005, 36). However, many in this era bracketed a “spiritual” world from their atomism. The spiritual could include, for instance, minds, souls, angels, and God. For Boyle, mechanical philosophy could not explain our spiritual faculties.

A further distinction arose from Galileo's and Boyle's views. Matter has only *primary* qualities, including size, shape, location, and quantity. This distinction relegated other qualities, such as colors, tastes, and odors, to being merely subjective qualities in an observer's mind. Or they could be just words we use, a move in keeping with nominalism. These *secondary* qualities, along with Aristotelian universals, would be very hard to reconcile with what mechanical atomism taught as real, a result closely fitting with nominalism.

So the new scientific methodology embraced empirical observation of concrete, particular material things, which was due in part to nominalism's influence. Today, the effects of these shifts are still being felt, with an assumed nominalism and naturalism in

science.² Moreover, in order to maintain the prestige that has been granted to science, scientific practice must be done according to today's orthodoxy, *methodological naturalism* (Smith 2016). On that view, scientists must bracket any immaterial entities or agents and focus just on empirically observable entities, causes, and effects. Thus, methodological naturalism fits with an assumed nominalism.

It should be no surprise that insofar as economics has tried to function as a science, these influences upon science and scientific methodology should affect economics as well. For one thing, according to the received “fact–value split,” whereas science gives us knowledge of facts, ethics and religion give us mere opinions. Thus, one influence upon economics is a pressure to separate itself from ethics. An example of this is the Cambridge School, which, under the influence of John Neville Keynes (1852–1949), separated economics from morality.³ For another, the mathematical approach taken to economics by Alfred Marshall (1842–1924) contributed to its being more technical and scientific (*Economist* 2016).

In light of the influence of nominalism, it should not surprise us that economists often focus on empirically observable, quantifiable results, causes, and effects. Moreover, although economists may generalize their findings by how they conceive of them, nonetheless on nominalism their findings cannot be objectively existing, universal principles or laws, for then they would have essential natures, which would not fit with orthodox science and its assumed nominalism.

In this expository portion of my argument, I have tried to show how nominalism has a deep influence upon the SJM through CT and ethics. I also have explored how nominalism has shaped science and thus economics significantly. Now I turn to assess the implications of nominalism for justice and economics.

Assessing Nominalism for Justice and Economics

Nominalism and Justice

According to nominalism, there are only particular things. Indeed, particulars are metaphysically *simple*: they are just *one* thing. In contrast, universals are a one-in-many, and when universals are instanced in particulars, these particulars become *complex* entities.

Now let us consider an objection to nominalism. Because a nominalist particular (e.g., justice₁) is simple (it is just one thing), there cannot be distinct grounds in it for its individuation (the “I”) and qualitative content (justice). Yet it seems that is how nominalists speak of properties as *particular qualities*. Because the individuator and the quality of a particular cannot be ontologically different, it seems we can eliminate either one without loss of being.

2. By “naturalism,” I mean the ontological view that, roughly, all that exists is natural; there is no supernatural realm.

3. In contrast, economics had typically been treated as part of moral philosophy.

Let us apply this finding to justice. If we eliminate the individuator, then we have justice, but it seems to be a general, abstract quality, just like with universals. Alternatively, if we eliminate the quality, we are left with just an individuator, yet it individuates nothing. However, that makes no sense; we do not find bare individuators in reality. They always individuate *something*. Nevertheless, because the distinction between the individuator and the quality is not metaphysically real, but just a distinction we make by our reason, we can eliminate the quality without any loss in reality. By extension, nominalism cannot sustain *any* qualities, *including justice*.

This explanation fits with what we have seen in the development of Western, nominalist ethics. On it, ethics *has* to be something we construct. Thus, nominalism leads to what Nietzsche and others realized: that all our moral claims are just our constructs. Without any objectively real, universal standards to which to appeal, our constructs can easily reflect our will to power, which is drawn from our limited, perspectival knowledge. Coupled with actual injustices perpetrated by people in positions of power, this realization seems to lend much credence to the claims made by the SJM.

Nevertheless, nominalism has a far more devastating impact on ethics, justice in particular. Simply put, there is no room for justice to exist, even as our construct, for justice has qualities. Furthermore, on nominalism, all qualities whatsoever can be eliminated, including all other moral ones and even any qualities assigned to us as people. Therefore, there is no room for us to exist, much less as just people. Yet that implication radically undermines the SJM's objectives.

Further, if ethics is basically about power, and if on CT we are either oppressors or the oppressed, then it seems necessary that our constructs will be power moves. Unfortunately, that conclusion triggers another problem. On CT, it seems cycles of violence and rampant injustice will never end. Those who are oppressed and yet later are liberated will turn into oppressors, for there is no other option. Then those who are newly oppressed will need to be liberated, and so on, with no end to injustice and violence. Justice will be crushed.

Finally, SJM proponents realize correctly that people should embody justice and that people oppressed by injustices should be freed from them. The latter realization presupposes that people *should* be treated with dignity. However, nominalism eviscerates that moral principle of its content. Nor, according to nominalism, would there be anything about us that is worthy of moral protection; at best, that we should be treated with dignity is simply our construct. As with justice, it seems human dignity cannot be sustained on nominalism.

So nominalism undermines justice and other moral principles and qualities, along with us as moral subjects. By relying heavily on nominalism, promoters of the SJM actually undercut their entire position.

Nominalism and Economic Reasoning

What, then, are the prospects for economics on nominalism? As we might suspect, economics, too, will be undermined. Not only would there not be any economists or

even people engaging in exchanges, there would also not be any observable qualities to be studied or exchanged. Moreover, as we will see, there are effects upon the very ability to reason economically.

Consider examples of reasoning in the works of Alfred Marshall and John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946). Marshall believed that economics should be understood primarily mathematically. Keynes addressed probabilistic reasoning employed by science. Concerned with how to justify the “innumerable arguments in science . . . which are believed to be rational in some sense, but which are not deductively conclusive,” he attempted to develop “a logical conception of probability in which probability was concerned with logical relations between propositions, the typical case being that of an argument in which the premises lend only *partial* conclusion” (as explained in O’Donnell 1990, 334, emphasis in original).

In addition, Marx embraced a historicist approach. Yet he rejected G. W. F. Hegel’s (1770–1831) appeal to the historical development of ideas, arguing instead that history is the succession of modes of production. Drawing upon his historicism, materialism, and his observations and interpretations of capitalism in his period, Marx predicted that communism would be the final synthesis of human development.

These are but a few examples of reasoning in economics. However, now let us consider nominalism’s impact on principles of reasoning themselves. Consider the principle of noncontradiction (PNC): something cannot be both p and $\sim p$ (not p) at the same time and in the same sense. Marx seems to presuppose the PNC in his dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Now, on nominalism, one and the same PNC cannot be invoked in a discussion; there would be just PNC_1 , PNC_2 , PNC_3 , and so on. Moreover, there would be (at best, it seems) just a series of empirically observed sensory phenomena that we *conceive of* as instances of the principle. Accordingly, PNC and other first principles would be “no longer laws of being, of reality, but only of phenomena” (Garrigou-LaGrange 2015, 28). Furthermore, because nominalism cannot sustain actual qualities in the world, then there simply would not even be p , $\sim p$, or even the PNC. Therefore, although Marx seems to treat his dialectical process as a universally valid one, yet on nominalism that claim cannot be sustained.

The same kinds of problems seem to repeat themselves for other principles of reasoning. Although generally inductive reasoning is a good principle to follow, nominalism seems to undermine it, including J. M. Keynes’s use of it. Induction involves an inference from observed instances to predict the likelihood that the next instance shall be like the former ones. However, that inference does not seem justified on nominalism, for there would not be any qualities to compare.

Consider, too, Marshall’s application of mathematics to economics, such as in his use of supply-and-demand curves. However, the very ability for one factor to influence the other depends on there being *real* qualities and features at work in a real market. Without them, there are no things upon which supply and demand can exert their

influences. There would not even be any supply or demand because there would not be any products or people on nominalism taken consistently.

This discussion serves to make a general point: if nominalism is true, then our abilities to reason will be undermined, which subverts economic practice. Moreover, without any real qualities in the world to be observed, nominalism would make economics impossible. Combined with the finding that nominalism also eviscerates moral principles and virtues, including justice and respect for human dignity, this discussion indicates that nominalism thereby destroys the possibility for any kind of justice, including in economics, which undercuts SJM proponents' many claims.

So what can said in response to the assertion that a nominalist foundation weakens the SJM? To that question I now turn.

Objection: The Practical Irrelevance of Nominalism for Economic Justice

Despite the severity of these criticisms of nominalism and their implications for economics and justice, surely there remains a *practical* objection to this *principled* line of reasoning. Quite simply, because we are able to do good economic work and recognize clear cases of (in)justice, what practical difference does this assessment make? It seems the problems posed by nominalism are just the result of mere theory and metaphysical speculations that are irrelevant practically for economic justice.

By way of response, I grant that, practically speaking, we can do economic analyses and recognize clear cases of (in)justice, whether anyone ever created the theory of nominalism or not. However, these practical abilities would not be possible if nominalism were true. That realization should make us pause, for, as we have seen, social and economic justice, as advocated by SJM proponents, depends significantly on CT, the reigning view of what counts as scientific orthodoxy, as well as on contemporary ethical theories, all of which are intertwined with nominalism.

Conclusion: Implications for Social Justice

Social justice, in particular economic justice, is not indifferent to ontology. There must be a view of what is real different from nominalism that can account for the reality of justice and the practice of economics. It is beyond the scope of this essay to make a full-blown, positive case for realism about universals,⁴ so I highlight a few examples that are vital for social and, in particular, economic justice.

First, SJM advocates want others to realize that there are indeed *actual* injustices, something that anyone should be able to recognize and not merely what SJM

4. However, see, for example, Moreland 2001.

proponents interpret as being unjust from their contingent, historically situated viewpoints. Indeed, they presuppose there is universal content to justice that makes these actions unjust. Second, SJM proponents presuppose that their concepts can be received and understood by others. Yet this good expectation presupposes that these concepts are universals. Third, realism about universals helps explain the presumed human dignity that each person should enjoy, which is presupposed in CT and the SJM.

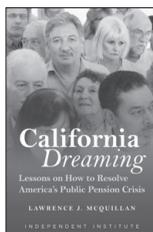
These points offer a few suggestive lines for further inquiry into the reality of universals. Nevertheless, for a viable and sustainable case for social and even economic justice to be made, it cannot be wed to nominalism.

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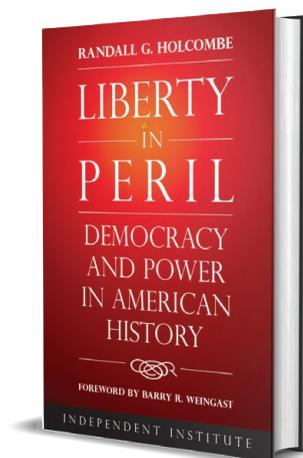
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