
Book Review

SHOTTENKIRK, DENA. *Nominalism and Its Aftermath: The Philosophy of Nelson Goodman*. Springer 2009, 174 pp., \$139 cloth.

Reviewed by Nigel T. Gully

In her first book-length work, *Nominalism and Its Aftermath: The Philosophy of Nelson Goodman*, Dena Shottenkirk wages the argument that Nelson Goodman's disparate writings oftentimes fall victim to the cutting board of analytic philosophers who mistakenly dissect his terms and arguments apart from their intricately and intrinsically interwoven contexts. Instead, she argues, Goodman's metaphysics and epistemology should be considered sequentially and as culminating in what is perhaps his most valuable contribution to twentieth-century philosophy: his theory of aesthetics.

The book is divided into three parts, beginning with Goodman's metaphysics. Shottenkirk progresses, highlighting Goodman's prowess, by deftly explaining how the component terms of his first and by far most technical work, *The Structure of Appearance*, serve to construct his phenomenalist axiomatic system, or "uninterpreted symbolic system," as he calls it. Qualia are the ontological primitives specifying color, place, and time with which we cognitively sort through and select from innumerable alternatives based on our pragmatic needs, thus eventually forming repeated patterns of sought qualia in the respective individual, called "properties." By using the properties, predicates are, then, projected onto such individual entities, and symbological systems are constructed and perpetuated—or altered, or entirely abandoned—based on their demonstrability, precision, and entrenchment in their respective communities.

The key to Goodman's metaphysics, Shottenkirk explains, is his strict assertion that anything can be an individual and that classes cannot be accepted. With respect to the former, individuals exist and consist of the semantic significance people have created. Indeed, it is what Goodman calls a "radical relativism," but certainly not a form of postmodernism, where anything goes. Restrictions exist and are set in place by the systems within which they are found. With respect to the latter, Goodman argues that concession to classes would open the floodgates to classes of classes of classes, *ad infinitum*, unmanageable and utterly unknowable. Furthermore, classes rely on inexplicable universals that mystically instantiate particular instances, thus breaking the simple logical test of mutual exclusivity.

In part 2, which treats Goodman's epistemology, Shottenkirk explains that there is no single *a priori* structure of reality that we can access or mimic with referential symbols, but instead many—if there are any. Truth is certain and real, but limited to the realm of logic. Many "monopolistic philosophies," as Goodman calls them, claim to be heir to fully explaining and exposing "reality," though all fall far short of such bombastic claims. For instance, if we side with the physicalist, by no means can we fully know the exact nature of the atoms upon which our understanding of reality is built and predicated. In fact, the term "nature" is merely another relative term among others, which we use to privilege certain selected properties over others.

The basis of epistemology, according to Goodman, is understanding how referential relations of symbols work. This approach, unlike others, provides the highly structured, yet pluralistic, tools needed to evaluate and handle the problems and projects that we encounter on a daily basis—in the arts, the sciences, and beyond.

In part 3, aesthetics is shown to be an integral component of epistemology, in that artworks are orderings of symbols that people decode in order to better understand themselves, their communities, and the world(s) which they inhabit. Unlike classical aesthetic theory, Goodman's does not require art to mirror nature, since there is no such thing as an individual considered in its "natural" form; nor is art meant to evoke emotion, since that claim cannot be demonstrated with any certainty. Besides, many scientific works are emotive, just as many artistic works are not. Shottenkirk explains that Goodman's theory of aesthetics helps us to understand art and, therefore, create semantic meanings through reference—without which, there would be no meaning in the first place.

A salient feature of Shottenkirk's method is that she employs opposing viewpoints or terms—especially the "classes" of platonism—that provide the reader with a firm historical and theoretical background for each topic. She describes in detail Goodman's many influences—such as Russell, Carnap, Frege, and Quine—and carefully shows the development of strains of aesthetic thought throughout twentieth-century philosophy.

Despite its merits, however, the book does have serious shortcomings that appear, oddly enough, in the part that seems to be the zenith of her argument: aesthetics. For instance, she is unacceptably curt in explaining notational systems, devoting fewer than two pages to this intricate and technical topic, while other themes benefit from sustained dialogue. Furthermore, in what appears to be a glaring error, she limits her explanation of Goodman's "symptoms of the aesthetic" to the four explained in *Languages of Art*, ignoring the fifth symptom, which Goodman formally annexed to the list in his later *Ways of Worldmaking*. The author's misleading of readers regarding Goodman's best-known contribution to the field of aesthetics is tantamount to, say, teaching students about Epicurus's "three-fold remedy," if not worse.

Regardless of such shortcomings, *Nominalism and Its Aftermath: The Philosophy of Nelson Goodman* is a valiant effort to bring Goodman's philosophy back into the arena of popular aesthetic debate by posing his doctrines against contemporary issues, showing for instance the consequences of each for the issue of individual aesthetic experience. The work is valuable for students of aesthetics—both at the advanced undergraduate and at the graduate level—who want to understand how Goodman's complex aesthetics is entangled with his metaphysics and epistemology. It is also suitable, albeit pricey, for philosophers of aesthetics looking to bolster their understanding of alternative approaches to traditional western theories of art and aesthetics.

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