1. To maintain Nominalism whilst ignoring the One over Many argument is not to be an Ostrich Nominalist; rather to adopt Realism because of that argument is to be a Mirage Realist.

Establishing this thesis would not, of course, show Realism to be unjustified (let alone false): there might be problems independent of the One over Many argument for which Realism is a possible solution. Armstrong thinks there are. I agree. To the extent that he is responding to those problems he is not a Mirage Realist. My thesis about him is as follows:

2. Armstrong is largely though not entirely a Mirage Realist.

Correspondingly, a Nominalist could be an Ostrich by putting his head in the sand as real problems loom. However correct his stand on the One over Many argument he could otherwise commit the sin that Armstrong complains of. I don’t know whether there are any Ostrich Nominalists, but the only philosopher Armstrong alleges (tentatively) to be one, Quine, is not:

Argument for Thesis 1

According to Armstrong, the problem posed by the One over Many argument is that of explaining “how numerically different particulars can nevertheless be identical in nature, all be of the same ‘type’ ” (p. 41). What phenomena are supposed to need explaining here? I take it that what Armstrong is alluding to is the common habit of expressing, assenting to, and believing, statements of the following form:

(1) $a$ and $b$ have the same property (are of the same type), $F$-ness.

To settle ontological questions we need a criterion of ontological commitment. Perhaps Quine’s criterion has difficulties, but something along that line is mandatory. The key idea is that a person is committed to the existence of those things that must exist for the sentences he accepts to be true. What must exist for a given sentence to be true is a semantic question to which our best theory may give no answer in which we have confidence. Furthermore the sentence may, by its use of quantifiers or singular terms, suggest an answer which the person would want to resist. Hence, in my view, the importance of Quine’s mention of paraphrase in this context. Suppose the given sentence seems to require for its truth the existence of $G$’s yet the person can offer another sentence, which serves his purposes well enough, and which is known not to have that requirement. This is known because our semantic theory can be applied to this other sentence, in a way that it cannot to the given sentence, to show that the sentence can be true even though $G$’s do not exist. We can then say that the person’s apparent commitment to $G$’s in the given sentence arises from “a mere manner of speaking”; he is not really committed to them.

"OSTRICH NOMINALISM" OR "MIRAGE REALISM"?

Now in the ordinary course of conversation a Quinean is prepared to express or assent to the likes of (1). (1) seems to require the existence of an $F$-ness for it to be true. So he appears committed to that existence. To this extent the One over Many argument does pose a problem to the Quinean Nominalist, but it is a negligible extent. He has a suitable paraphrase readily to hand:

(2) $a$ and $b$ are both $F$.

When the ontological chips are down, he can drop (1). There is no problem about identities in nature beyond a trivial one of paraphrase.

Armstrong will not be satisfied by this, of course: “You have simply shifted the problem. In virtue of what are $a$ and $b$ both $F$?” The Quinean sees only a trivial problem here too. It is in virtue of the following:

(3) $a$ is $F$;
(4) $b$ is $F$.

Armstrong will still be dissatisfied: “In virtue of what is $a$ (or $b$) $F$?” If the One over Many argument poses a problem it is this. That was historically the case and, though Armstrong always states the problem in terms of identities in nature, it is the case for him too. If there is no problem for the Nominalist in (3) and (4) as they stand then he has an easy explanation of identities in nature.

The Realist who accepts the One over Many problem attempts to solve it here by claiming the existence of a universal, $F$-ness, which both $a$ and $b$ have. The Nominalist who accepts the problem attempts to solve it without that claim. The Quinean rejects the problem.

The Quinean sees no problem for Nominalism in the likes of (3) because there is a well-known semantic theory which shows that (3) can be true without there being any universals:

(3) is true if and only if there exists an $x$ such that ‘$a$’ designates $x$ and ‘$F$’ applies to $x$.

So (3) can be true without the existence of $F$-ness. There is no refusal here “to take predicates with any ontological seriousness.” The Quinean thinks that there really must exist something (said as firmly as you like) that the predicate ‘$F$’ applies to. However that thing is not a universal but simply an object. Further, in denying that this object need have properties, the Quinean is not denying that it really is $F$ (or $G$, or whatever). He is not claiming that it is “a bare particular.” He sees no need to play that game.

The Realist may reply that this is a mistaken statement of the truth conditions of (3) and that the correct one does require the existence of $F$-ness for (3)’s truth. Until a good argument for this reply is produced the Quinean is entitled to go on thinking he has no problem.

All of this is not to say that there is nothing further about (3), or about a being $F$, that might need explanation. I can think of four possible problems here. None of them pose any special difficulty for the Nominalist: they are irrelevant to “the problem of universals.”
(5) a has F-ness.

An obvious question arises: how is (5) to be explained? The Realist feels that the one-place predication (3) left something unexplained, yet all he has done to explain it is offer a two-place predication (a relational statement). If there is a problem about a being F then there is at least an equal problem about a having F-ness. Furthermore, the point of this manoeuvre for the Realist is to commit us to universals. In ontology, the less the better. Therefore this sort of Realist makes us ontologically worse off without explanatory gain. Any attempt by him to achieve explanatory power by explaining (5) seems doomed before it starts: it will simply raise the same problem as (5); he is in a vicious regress. If there is a problem about (3) this sort of Realist cannot solve it.

Armstrong calls the doctrine we have just considered "relational Immanent Realism," and rejects it for reasons not unconnected to mine (pp. 104–107). In its place he offers us "non-relational Immanent Realism." This doctrine is obscure. Armstrong offers us (5), or the similar, 'F-ness is in a,' and simply declares it to be non-relational and inexplicable: particulars are not related to universals but bound to them in a metaphysical unity (pp. 108–111). We have just seen that (5), taken at face value, cannot explain any problem about (3): it is a relational statement and so any problem for (3) is a problem for it. Armstrong avoids this grievous difficulty for Realism by fiat: (5) is not to be taken at face value. How then is it to be taken? Do we have even the remotest idea of what the words 'in' and 'have' mean here if they are not construed as relational predicates? Armstrong's Realism replaces the explanatory failings of relational Realism with a complete mystery. I suspect that Armstrong views sentences like (5) as attempts to speak the unspoken: to talk about "the link" between particulars and universals without saying they are related. (Note the scare-quotes around 'in' on p. 108 and the use of a special hyphenating device on p. 111.)

Talk of "particulars" and "universals" clutters the landscape without adding to our understanding. We should rest with the basic fact that a is F. Even the alleged unity of particular and universal can be captured without mystery: a predication must involve both a singular term and a predicate; drop either partner and you say nothing. For the Nominalist the unity of predication is an unexciting linguistic fact. The move to relational Realism loses the unity. Armstrong's non-relational Realism attempts to bring it back with metaphysical glue. These are "degenerating problem shifts" (Lakatos).

Armstrong sees the One over Many argument as posing a problem for Nominalism and offers a Realist solution. If his solution were real then the problem would be real. The solution is not real. So it throws no doubt on my earlier argument that the problem is not real.

Indeed the Quinean can gain much comfort from Armstrong's book; it is a powerful argument for thesis 1. We have just demonstrated the failings of Armstrong's response to the One over Many argument. Armstrong himself carefully, and convincingly, demolishes every other known response to it. This chronicle of two thousand years of failure makes the task seem hopeless. The alternative view that there is no problem to solve becomes very attractive.