

Published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 9th July 2004

Sir, – Dean Zimmerman, in his review of my book on resemblance nominalism (May 7), makes two points. The first is that if resemblance nominalism leads to modal realism, as it does, “few will be buying”, and that modal realism makes monstrous any view that implies it. This is not a philosophical point but, at most, an observation about the preferences of most contemporary philosophers. It would have been desirable that Zimmerman explain why one should not accept modal realism. Talk of monsters masks lack of philosophical argument.

Zimmerman’s second point is that relation R^* is not a relation of overall resemblance but a relation of resemblance in a respect. He tries to support this conclusion by means of an example of two pairs of objects whose members are two feet apart. His thought is that the two pairs must resemble one another in virtue of this fact but they don’t need to stand in R^* , since the members of the pairs may be intrinsically dissimilar. This, he thinks, establishes that R^* is a relation of resemblance in a respect.

But it doesn’t. As I defined it, two pairs stand in R^* to one another if and only if the members of each resemble one another. So if the members of two pairs are intrinsically dissimilar, the pairs in question do not stand in R^* (assuming that Zimmerman was thinking of unordered pairs, to interpret him charitably). Of course we may want to say that such pairs resemble one another. But if so, we are thinking of a different resemblance relation, not R^* . And that there other resemblance relations is something my resemblance nominalism can perfectly live with. Indeed I explicitly recognised at least one other relation of resemblance that may be used to account for determinable properties (*Resemblance Nominalism*, p. 66).

That the two pairs considered by Zimmerman do not stand in R^* shows only that R^* is precisely defined. That a resemblance relation is precisely defined does not make it a relation of resemblance in a respect. Neither does the fact, if it is indeed a fact, that R^* can be grasped only by means of the notion of two objects sharing a property make it a relation of resemblance in a respect. For as I said in the book (p. 65), what is ontologically prior need not be conceptually so. Zimmerman is confused about this.

Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra
Hertford College, Oxford.