

THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

Logic is *instrumental* philosophy, that is, that part of philosophy which serves as an instrument to the rest of philosophy. It enables us to exercise our reason to produce conclusions which are certain or, as certain as can be, given available evidence. Logic serves us in all aspects of human thinking.

We can illustrate the way we progress in knowledge by observing what happens when first we begin to know. The first thing that an infant comprehends is existence, the difference between *be* and *be-not*, between something and nothing. This it does through feeling. It touches something, and then nothing. This, *existence*, is the most fundamental of all the realities we grasp. Next the infant moves on to know things as things, that is, essences existing, again chiefly through feel. This illustrates the most fundamental of all distinctions, that between—

[essence or *what* something is
[
[&
[existence *that* something is.

The first act of our minds (intellects) when it encounters some thing is an act of *simple apprehension*. The mind considers the thing our senses (chiefly our eyes) encounter and in that act it understands a quiddity (or essence, or nature), i.e., WHAT the thing is. No affirmation or denial (no judgement) is involved only a simple act of acknowledgement in which the intellect exercises its innate power. We *sense* the individual thing. We abstract (with our mind) the universal essence, whether dog, man, tree, bridge or whatever it may be. Note that the object of this act of the mind is *not* the individual thing but its essence, and we hold it not as singular but as universal. As St Thomas says, “the conceptions of the intellect are the similitudes of things”.



Now first apprehension may be deficient in providing a true *comprehension* of the thing that we know. So, for instance, a native of Papua New Guinea on first encountering a sheep, and not having any other animal with which to compare it, might conceive of it as a type of dog. But in time and with increase in experience and observation (a sheep has hoofs, not paws; eats grass not meat; etc...) the native comes to a better understanding of what a sheep is. This point illustrates that our intellects are feeble and must progress by steps. With repeated observations, the nature of the thing is grasped more perfectly and, with it, the concept becomes more precisely a reflection of the thing known.

In this act of apprehension the mind (the intellect) does something appropriate to its nature as an immaterial power. Let us recall that there is proportionality between—

natures	powers	acts	ends.
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A mosquito has the *nature* of a mosquito, exercises *powers* proper to a mosquito, does *acts* in accordance with these powers, and attains the *end* which is proper to a mosquito.

A man, in contrast, is a rational animal with powers appropriate to rationality, that is, with an intellect that relies on senses for its information and which, because of this limitation, is called reason. But intellect is a reality which is immaterial in its *nature* and has, therefore, *immaterial powers* and does *immaterial acts* for *immaterial ends*.

What the mind, an immaterial entity, does is to produce an immaterial effect, the concept, which represents the essence of the thing it knows. The mind actually *creates*, for it produces something within itself wherein it understands the essence of the thing known. The concept is a similitude or copy. Its existence in the mind differs from the singular existence which the thing exercises in the real for the mind operates in a different fashion to the way things operate in the real.

Note, by the way, that the mind can produce a concept not only for material things but also for immaterial things, like humour, blame, exchange, sorrow, realities exemplified by material things or their operations but which, of themselves, are immaterial. Moreover, it produces concepts not only for things that *do exist*, but also for things that *can exist* (possible essences), and for things that exist, or can exist, in the mind only, such as privations (e.g., blindness, night), logical beings (affirmation, denial, genus, species) and mathematical beings.

From apprehension we proceed to *comparison*. We observe that the universal essence we have extracted from early experience applies to many individuals. 'Dog' not only applies to *Merry*, our first childhood companion, but to others such as *Spot*, *Lucy* and *Holly* and to all individual dogs, whereas it does not apply to *Bob*, a cat.

What Is The Universal?

The question that fascinated the thinkers of the Middle Ages was the problem of just what reality is exercised by universals. Everyone knew that the particular thing exercised a fixed, concrete, real existence. Yet it resembled others of the same sort. It was *singular* under one aspect but *universal* under another, so what was the universal?

	[merely a name whereby many singulars were	
	[collected & was, so to speak, a mere short-hand	
	[way of referring to them all ?	NOMINALISM
	[
	[or, was it	
	[also a concept, universal indeed, but not express-	
Was the	[ing a universal reality & so a mere figment	
universal	[of the mind which stood for the many ?	CONCEPTUALISM
	[
	[or, was it also	
	[a real nature—a block of reality immaterial in its	
	[universal form, represented by the concept	
	[and signified by the name ?	REALISM

The question is as important today as it was back then. *Shep* and *Merry* and *Lucy* and *Spot* is, each of them, a single dog. But each shares in the universal character 'dog'. Do we know only the singular thing? Or do we know no more than a concept, so that we can never be sure whether what we conceive represents what is real? Or do we truly know the thing, and therefore truly know reality?

The answer to the question establishes the value of our human knowledge. Every philosophy, every explanation proclaimed by men in their endeavours to explain the world, is resolved into one or other of these three categories.

We are followers of the philosophy of Aristotle and St Thomas. They teach that what we know is what is; that we truly know reality. Thus,

words are signs of *concepts* (ideas) which are signs of *things*

Or, putting that in vertical format,—

things
↑
concepts
↑
words

Our mind is creative: we produce this thing, *the concept*, through the power of intellect God has given us. The concept is not just something produced for our entertainment—as we produce a bubble by blowing through a ring of soapy water—but it is a means to an end. Indeed, it is a pure means, the medium whereby—*the medium in which*—we know a thing. It represents in its *universal form* an element of reality, on which our mind can work. When we open a dictionary and look up a word, we are doing much more than satisfying our curiosity. We are seeking to know the concept signified by the word and, more importantly, to know that block of reality—*immaterial and universal*—that the concept signifies.

When we speak, or when we write, we give material expression to an immaterial thing, the concept. We turn an *immaterial* thing into a *material* thing, the spoken or written word. So a dictionary, so full of words (material things), is in fact a treasury of concepts, immaterial things, and these concepts correspond to things in their *universal* format. And not just universals which manifest themselves in singular *material* instances like dog, cat, bridge, ladder, boat or gate, but things by their very nature *immaterial*, such as thought, judgement, comparison, soul, play, humour, sorrow, exchange or recreation.

Moreover, when we argue that the *substance* (substantial form) of some natural thing is an immaterial reality, we are speaking of that critical influence which makes the material thing be what it is.
