

WORDS, CONCEPTS, THINGS

Let's repeat in schematic form, the question mentioned in the last lesson whose answer determines the value of human knowledge:

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

Following Aristotle, St Thomas teaches that the third solution is the correct one, that what we name and conceive of is something real, a block of reality, a thing. It is bereft of the particular characteristics of the singular that falls under our senses. It is 'universal', immaterial, but real, and it reflects what is real in the particular thing. His doctrine is called *Realism*, or more precisely, for reasons which I will not go into at this point, *Moderate Realism*. It is the common sense answer to the question. It is the doctrine whose content, though they do not realize it, men instinctively embrace.

This teaching resounds with the point I have stressed in our earliest lessons, that any natural or artificial thing begins its existence in the mind—whether in the mind of God or in our own mind—and that its existence there is a real existence, real-conceptual, if you like, rather than real-real. *What it is*, its formal constitutive, (its essence, quiddity or nature) first exists in this universal form before it comes to exist in the reality of the singular thing. And so, when we set out to make something, we first *conceive* it (say, a table or a dress) and then proceed to fix that universal idea in matter. Then that quiddity is fixed, it becomes *this* table or *this* dress.

Nominalism

There flourished in the century following that in which St Thomas lived, a philosopher named William of Occam (1280-1349), a Franciscan who got into trouble with the Church. He argued that, since it is always the singular thing which is the object of our enquiry, only the singular thing is real. The universal has no existence in the world of reality. We do not know real things by the work of the mind abstracting. The concept is but a representation which the mind constructs for itself and has no correspondence with the real, and the word we use does no more than

represent that substitute. He did not say that the universal is only a word, a name, but the effect of his teaching was a type of Nominalism.

His thought was attractive because it offered a simple solution to a complex question. Listen to any scientific program on the radio or television and you are bound to hear a commentator praising Occam. You will hear repeated, as if it was a great philosophical truth, 'Occam's Razor', *Entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate*, that is, entities are not to be multiplied without necessity. That maxim contains, as we will show some other time, the seeds of Occam's error.

Occam's teaching led to distrust of the ability of the mind to reach certitude in the most important problems of philosophy. With its refusal to acknowledge immaterial essences and indeed, immaterial realities it reduced the human intellect to the level of a sense. What follows if you diminish the proper power of intellect is scepticism, doubt that we can ever know reality as it is. Occam led thinkers away from speculation to concentration on scientific observation. Needless to say, the precursors of the modern natural scientist are philosophers of the Occamist school.

In favouring material explanations for what the senses observed and our minds addressed it laid the foundations for the blend of materialism and subjectivism which we suffer today in every variety of modern philosophy. Moreover, it affected the teaching of logic.

If when we use a word it does *not* express a universal reality, as Nominalists maintain, it is inappropriate to argue as if it did. Hence it is not appropriate to argue—

Man is mortal
But, John Pat is a man
Ergo, John Pat is mortal—

because there is no such reality as 'man'. There are only individual men. Accordingly, the argument should be expressed like this—

All men are mortal
But, John Pat is a man
Ergo, John Pat is mortal.

So effective was the influence of Occam's school of thought that it is hard to find a modern text book of logic in which the syllogism is not expressed in this Nominalist fashion.

Having achieved this victory, Nominalists then went on to attack the argument they had precipitated. They said: "Since John Pat is simply one of the 'all' in the first premise, the argument proves nothing. It is simply an elaborated statement of fact." AND THEY WERE RIGHT! The Nominalist version of the syllogism is not really an argument at all. They were, thus, able to reinforce the scepticism, the doubt, about whether man could ever know the truth about anything, to which Occam's theories gave rise.

Let us insist, then, against Occam and all Nominalists, that—

words are signs of *concepts* (ideas) which are signs of *things*—
it being understood that ‘things’ includes immaterial things such as universals.

Extension & Comprehension

The concepts we use in Logic vary in their force. Some are more extended than others, but comprehend less. Others are less extensive, but more comprehensive. Here is a list of *concepts*—not things, but concepts of the things to which they refer—which illustrates the movement.

<i>less comprehensive</i>	creature	<i>more extensive</i>
↓	animal	↑
↓	man	↑
<i>more comprehensive</i>	negro	<i>less extensive</i>

The concept *negro* in the table refers to a more particular reality than the concept *man*. But it comprehends more than the concept *man*, for it specifies *man* plus skin colour. Likewise, *man* comprehends more than the concept *animal*, for it refers to a particular type of animal, that which has the power of reason. And *animal* comprehends more than the concept *creature*, which is so extensive that it includes all plants and the minerals and their compounds as well as animals no matter what their variety, and men and negroes.



Now, the nature of a concept is taken not from its *extension*—as if one must go about and discover all the instances under which *animal* can be found in order to determine it—but from its *comprehension*, what it is that best states the reality ‘animal’. And it is this that we encapsulate in its definition. ‘Animal’ is that being which moves itself, not only as regards the *execution* of its acts but also according to the *form* of its acts, through sensed knowledge. In the definition we express, as best we can, the essence of a thing, the sum of the constitutive notes of its nature (whether clearly or obscurely) as presented to the mind.

Inevitably, the followers of the Nominalist school were drawn to the view that *extension* in concepts was more important than *comprehension*. This favoured the material explanation for the concept at the expense of the formal, for their rejection of the immaterial reality of the concept (the universal) included a rejection of the formal, and this included a rejection of the influence of the formal cause, that intrinsic cause in a thing that makes it be what it is.

But, enough of this for the moment; we must look now at what we do with our concepts.
