

The Problem of the Universals

THE problem of the universals is perhaps, one of the most difficult problems in philosophy. It is as old as philosophy itself, dating back to Plato, Aristotle and Zeno, all of whom had different theories regarding it. It remained a very important subject of discussion through the Middle Ages, and even to-day, the many schools of philosophy are at variance with regard to the solution of this question.

The medium through which we acquire knowledge is our senses, internal and external. This is done by perceiving, judging and reasoning from the various facts presented to us by entities existing in the world. For instance, I perceive a man and consider his nature—humanity. Now here lies the question at issue; what is this nature, which although *one*, yet stands in the same relation to a multiplicity of members? There are different answers to the question. Some hold that this universal element exists only in the “name,” which is given on account of some apparent resemblance of the objects to which it is applied; these are termed Nominalists. Others hold that the universal is in the mind or concept only, having no objectivity, and is arrived at by the application of innate, “a priori” forms. Such are called Conceptualists. Still others maintain that the objects of our universal concepts are *real*, that they truly exist in nature. These are called Realists.

As we have seen, our knowledge is obtained through the medium of the senses; they perceive individual entities however similar they may seem. But the mind does not grasp this individuality; it rather, by the process of abstraction, seizes the quiddity of the material thing, and it realizes that this quiddity may be reproduced in an indefinite number of individuals. The mind, however, may not immediately perceive this fact, but on reflection and comparison with other ideas, it will realize that this quiddity is communicable. For example, I perceive that a stone is *red*. Of course, the idea of universality does not instantly dawn upon me; but upon reflection, or upon adding “intentio” or the form of universality,

this idea presents itself, and I discern that this *redness* may be referred to an indefinite number of other things. Whenever we come in contact with a number of objects bearing similar characteristics, the idea of universality is immediately brought to our notice. Thus when I say, "John is a man," I attribute to that individual the nature common to human beings, and this nature represented by the concept *man*, may be affirmed of everyone.

It may be maintained, however, that it is the *concept* rather than the *nature* which I affirm of the individual. If this be so, then the statement, "John is a man" is false ; for obviously John is not that universal idea of man existing in my mind. Moreover this predicate, man, contains implicitly the individuating notes proper to the subject John. Therefore it cannot be said that John is human nature itself, but that he is a man; i. e. he partakes of human nature. Hence we see that this nature which is one, and yet is attributable to many, is the nature as it is conceived *in the mind and by the mind*.

Now Nominalists hold that the universal does not exist beyond our mind ; that as a universal it has no reality agreeing with it. The universal is then, merely a name used to denote various individuals. Names however are the *signs* of ideas, and ideas are *signs* of things. But there can be nothing in a sign, which is not, somehow, in the thing signified. Therefore the universal when it is in names, should be in the concepts ; and when it is in the concepts it must be, in some way, in the thing itself. Consequently the theory of Nominalism is contradictory in itself and thus cannot be admitted.

Another theory that is presented is that of Conceptualism which, contrary to Nominalism, admits that universal concepts exist in our minds, but that we cannot tell whether they have any foundation outside our minds ; or whether objects existing in nature possess as realities, the things which we perceive. The concepts therefore have an ideal value, but we are unable to know whether they have a real value. Clearly this system leads to Subjectivism, which maintains that our ideas have no objectivity. Space will not permit a full dis-

cussion on this topic of Subjectivism ; however, I shall set down a short refutation of the doctrine. Subjectivism proclaims that our ideas have no objectivity, and from that it follows that our external senses in referring to the existence of bodies must be false. But this cannot be admitted ; first, because it is natural for us to believe the testimony of our senses, which affirms the existence of bodies ; and nature cannot deceive us. Therefore exterior bodies really exist. Secondly ; sensation can be explained only by the action of exterior bodies, as the senses themselves are indifferent to the perception of one or another object. Thus in perceiving an object they must be determined to that object, and this determination must come from the subject, from God, or from the bodies themselves. But it cannot come from the subject, because it is indifferent to the perception of one or another object. Absolutely speaking, it could come from God, who is omnipotent ; but in such a case, Nature, and thus the Author of Nature, would deceive us, for naturally we believe in the testimony of conscience which attributes the cause of sensation to bodies. Therefore sensation must be attributed to the action of exterior bodies on the senses. But those bodies cannot act upon the senses unless they exist ; for, “ *operatio sequitur esse* ” Therefore exterior bodies really exist, and our ideas have objectivity.

Moreover it has never been explained by Kant nor any of his commentators, why one and the same sensible impression sets in operation now one, and now another category. From this it is seen that Subjectivism, and consequently Conceptualism, are erroneous.

We must now turn to investigate Realism, and first we shall look at Exaggerated Realism. This was the view taken by Plato and the Ontologists, according to which the universal exists formally and actually both in the intellect and beyond it. That is, our concepts are universal and they have objects corresponding to them in nature which are universal. We know, however, that everything that exists is determinate and singular. What is there in the real order about which universality can be predicated ? We may say that man is universal. But this is not true. The *concept* we

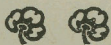
have of human nature is universal ; man as he exists is singular. We can see therefore, that this view concerning the universals, although it easily surmounts the difficulty, is altogether beyond the bounds of reason. The Ontologists say that the universal exists in the mind of God, and that our intellect has direct intuition of it there. But he who sees the Divine mind enjoys beatitude, and beatitude cannot be our portion in this life. Therefore we cannot see the Divine intellect. Moreover, if the human intellect has God as its immediate object, it must be equal to the divine intellect, which is absurd. Therefore the Ontologists also propose a theory which proves to be false.

We have examined three theories with regard to the universals, all of which have failed to give us a proper solution of the difficult problem. Finally Moderate Realism is presented as the only system compatible with reason and common sense. It was the master mind of Aristotle that first formulated this teaching, and later it was accepted and explained by St. Thomas, and adhered to by all the great Scholastics. According to this doctrine the universal exists in the mind and corresponds to the individual thing. This seems contradictory. But we have already seen that the mind does not seize the individuality of the determined thing, but rather it abstracts the quiddity of that thing, and from it forms the universal concept. Therefore the enunciation of this doctrine is, "*Universale formaliter et actu in intellectu existit, et in rebus fundamentaliter et in potentia.*" That is, the foundation for the universal is found in the thing itself, and the intellect seizes that foundation, reflects upon it, and thus it conceives the actual and formal universal.

It is reasonable and necessary that the universal should exist in some form in nature ; for otherwise our science which relates to things really in nature, would treat with the singular. But when we say that, the formula for water is H_2O ; we affirm it of all water that exists or can exist ; we affirm it universally. It follows then, that it is repugnant to say that science is about the singular. On the other hand the actual universal cannot exist as such, for everything that exists

is singular. Therefore the universal must exist formally in the mind, but fundamentally in the individual thing. As a further proof of this we may use the following argument : When we say, "John is a man," it is seen immediately that this same predicate can be affirmed of an indefinite number of similar subjects, v. g., Peter. James, Thomas are men. Thus the nature *man* which is predicated about John is abstracted from its material and individuating principles and considered by the intellect, independent of the characteristics peculiar to John. In this state it can be reflected upon by the intellect, and so the universal concept is formed, which is applicable to Peter, to James, to Thomas, to every man. But this ability to be reflected upon, or this foundation for the forming of the universal, comes from the thing itself. That is, the foundation is in the thing itself "in potentia." Therefore the statement of Moderate Realism, namely, "Universale formaliter et actu in intellectu existit, et in potentia in re," is found to be true in practice, it complies with all the requirements of reason, in a word it is the true solution of the problem of the universals. Hence it is plain that the laws of science, and all our universal statements are affirmed, not about common names as the Nominalists say ; nor about concepts as the Conceptualists tell us ; but about the objects themselves, really existing in Nature, and in which common characteristics are found.

R. V. M '18



Do not keep your noble thoughts for tomorrow's poem ; put them into today's prose.



Be choice in your friendships. You can have but few, and the number will dwindle as you grow older. Select minds that are too strong and large to pretend to knowledge and resources they do not really possess. They address you sincerely.