

The Relativity of Material Conditions.

Compare the two statements "Twice two is four" and "John is here now." The former has the same meaning, no matter who affirms it, or where he affirms it, or when. The latter has as many meanings as there are persons named John and places and times at which he could be present. Thus, the universal and necessary proposition has of itself a determinate meaning. But the particular and contingent proposition has of itself no determinate meaning and it can acquire a determinate meaning only in so far as a context is somehow assigned to it.

It is to be remarked that assigning a context for particular and contingent propositions is a task that can be performed neither by universal and necessary propositions nor by particular and contingent propositions. It cannot be done by universal and necessary propositions for they say nothing of the particular as particular and nothing of the contingent as contingent. It cannot be done by particular and contingent propositions for none of them has a determinate meaning without a context while a set of indeterminate meanings, no matter how great, will never yield a determinate ~~meanings~~ context. You may assemble all the genealogies and maps and calendars you please and make explicit all the particular and contingent propositions they contain, but you arrive at a determinate context only when you leave the field of propositions and appeal to direct sensible knowledge, only when you say that this person in this genealogy is the man you saw yesterday, only when you say that this place on this map is the place where you are now, only when you say that this date on the calendar is the present time.

We have been arguing that 1) universal and necessary propositions are of themselves determinate in meaning, 2) particular and contingent propositions are not of themselves determinate in meaning, 3) they become determinate only when a context is assigned, and 4) a context can be assigned only by an appeal to sense. As the reader no doubt has surmised, these properties of propositions are fairly obvious consequences of the nature of human knowledge. Intellect knows by the universal and necessary by abstracting from material conditions, that is, from individual matter, from determinate place, from determinate time, and so from the possibility of concrete change. Since intellect abstracts from material conditions, what it knows by abstraction will be in itself and in its statement independent of material conditions. Again, since intellect abstracts from material conditions, it follows that the material conditions are a sensible residue, known indeed by sense, but left behind by intellect inasmuch as it abstracts. Accordingly, when intellect utters a particular and contingent proposition, it is appealing not to its own direct knowledge but to sensible knowledge; but the particular and contingent proposition of itself does not ~~constitute~~ ~~state~~ ~~the~~ ~~sensible~~ reconstitute the sensitive knowledge but only supposes it; hence without this supposed knowledge sensitive knowledge, the particular and contingent proposition is indeterminate and making it determinate, giving it a context, can be done only by going back to the supposed sensitive knowledge.