

BACK TO THE PRINCIPLES

It's always valuable to revisit the principles, for all our philosophical thinking reflects them and refreshing our grasp of them aids us in avoiding errors.

What are principles? Aristotle gives us the definition in the *Metaphysics*: A principle is *that wherefrom something proceeds in any manner*. In the order of reality, the *ontological* order, the keel of a boat is a principle. Without it, the structure of the boat has no foundation. The wheel is a principle of a bicycle. Without two of them you won't be going anywhere; you won't even have a bike!



Our reasoning involves principles too, *logical* principles. A logical principle is *an immediate truth immediately known able to serve as a major premise in an argument*. Before we consider the elements of this definition we have to study a few preambles.

We know—because God has given us intellect enabling us to do so—universal realities or *universals*. We know, for instance, the universal realities 'dog', 'red', 'hard', 'running', 'good', 'being', 'contingent'. We speak of them in conversation ('*Shep* is a dog'; '*Shep* is running') because we know *what* they are. Only those beings can speak that know *what* each thing is. This is what distinguishes us from the brutes. As I have said before, a dictionary is a collection of universals. It is not really a material thing, like a log of wood; it is more immaterial than material.

Universals, to put it technically, are *blocks of reality common to many as identified with them and multiplied in them*. Through universals we know, at least in the most general manner, the natures of things (not only *that* they are, as the brutes do, but *what* they are). So we know that it is of the nature of a dog to be a living thing, an animal. We know that it is of the nature of running that it is the opposite of being still—of stillness; that it is of the nature of a being to be the opposite of non-being, the opposite of nothing. Let's look, then, at that definition: a logical principle is *an immediate truth immediately known able to serve as a major premise in an argument*.

Immediate truth

An immediate truth is a truth which does not require something beyond subject and predicate to make it be true. Here are two examples.

The clock is on the wall

Kate is in the kitchen

A dog is a living thing

The first is true only because someone has put the clock there; the second because Kate has just gone there. They are true by medium of some action, of someone putting the clock on the wall, of Kate going to the kitchen. The third is true, however, without any medium because it is of the nature of a dog to be something living.

Immediately known

Here is another truth.

Thomas Gray was a fine poet.

Johann Sebastian Bach was a great composer of music.

These truths are known, as to the first, through the medium of Gray's poetry, notably his famous *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard* and, as to the second, through the medium of the marvelous music Bach wrote. In contrast, the truth that a dog is a living thing requires no medium. Once the subject 'dog' and the predicate 'living thing' are understood, the truth is known immediately.

Able to serve as a major premise in an argument

Such a truth permits conclusions to be drawn from it via a fact (the minor premise), as in this simple one:

A dog is a living thing	Principle
But <i>Shep</i> is a dog;	Fact
<i>Ergo</i> , <i>Shep</i> is a living thing.	Conclusion

Thus the argument is founded on its major premise as on a principle.

The more subtle truth that we cited in a previous lesson may be more illustrative:

The spiritual is immortal

This is a logical principle, *immediately true* and, once it is understood—and it calls for careful consideration to tease out its necessary implications (namely, that corruption only befalls material things: that the spiritual is something real which is not material)—*immediately known*. Thus, it is able to serve as a major premise in the syllogism we cited previously:

The spiritual is immortal,	Principle
But the soul of man is spiritual,	Fact
Therefore the soul of man is immortal.	Conclusion

Ontological Principles are the absolutely necessary and universal laws of things because no thing can escape its own nature: no thing can be-not what it is—*there are no exceptions, even by a miracle*. No thing can escape the principles. They bind things by an absolute bond, the bond of their own natures. In reasoning, logical principles are statements of the understood real natures of things. The evidence for them is those very natures (understood).

<i>mind</i>	|	
	=	<i>reality</i>

The mind reflects reality: what we know is what is. Let's repeat the schema on the universal that we have looked at a couple of times already but with some explanatory notes.

			[neither any	
		[a COMMON NAME	[universal	
		[whereby many sing-	[thing	
		[ulars are collected	[
		[(a shorthand name)	[	NOMINALISM
		[so that there is—	[nor any	
	[NOT A	[	[ universal	
	[REALITY,	[	[ concept	
	[only—	[
	[[
	[	[ a common name	[the universal	
	[	[ expressing a com-	[is a mere FIG-	
	[	[ mon concept where-	[MENT of the	
	[	[ by many singulars	[mind,	
DOCTRINES	[	[ are conceived to-	[	CONCEPT-
about the	[	[ gether (a shorthand	[	UALISM
universal:	[	[ concept) for all the	[there being	
THE	[	[ singulars, so that—	[no universal	
UNIVERSAL	[		[ thing	
is—	[
	[	[ exists	[with its universality	
	[A REALITY	[outside	[	PLATONIC
	[as well as a	[thought	[in itself, outside	EXTREME
	[name and a	[	[ singulars	REALISM
	[concept,	[
	[which	[
	[reality—	[	[ outside thought as	
		[	[ singular	MODERATE
		[exists	[	REALISM
			[in thought as	
			[universal	

This schema exposes the three categories into which men have conceived of the universal, those of *nominalism*, *conceptualism* and *realism*, revealing the difference between the attitude taken, respectively, by Plato and by Aristotle. Plato believed the universal to exist as part of material reality. He thought, for instance, that there was a single universal dog of which all the concrete singular dogs of our experience are reflections. In contrast, Aristotle realized that the universal was indeed real, but *not a material* reality; an immaterial reality which exists in thought. St Thomas says that that which the mind contemplates is the nature of the universal; the concept is

that in which it knows the nature. (Cf. G H Joyce, *Principles of Logic*, London, 1916, p. 134, footnote 1)

In contrast with the true understanding of the relation between reality and our knowledge—*what we know is what is*—consider the understanding of nominalists (i.e., materialists) and of conceptualists (i.e., subjectivists). Regrettably, most of our fellow citizens are materialists or subjectivists, or both. The error of the thought processes involved in these errors may be seen in the following logical principle:

A contingent being, if it exists, has an efficient cause.

This is an immediate truth immediately known, as appears from the meaning of the word 'contingent'—*that which can be and be not*—and of the meaning of the expression 'efficient cause', the cause which causes by doing, or making. We might express the principle as 'every contingent being has a maker'. Your evening meal is a contingent being. It can be and be not. You are not going to eat it unless someone, maybe Naomi, makes it, and then she is its efficient cause. The car that carries you to the shops is a contingent being. It is there, outside the door, for you to ride in because someone has made it. It can be and be not. If it has an accident it will cease effectively to be a car. Your trip to the shops is a contingent being. It will not happen unless your mother, its efficient cause, drives you there. If she decides not to drive, you will not be going to the shops.

By denying the universal reality 'contingent', by reducing it to no more than a generalisation of human experience, the materialist closes his mind to his own dependence on a cause other than himself. He denies—in breach of common sense—the reality that *he* has an efficient cause. When challenged, he is liable to respond that the majority of his fellow citizens share his view; how could he be wrong? Here his nominalism (materialism) is buttressed by conceptualism (subjectivism) whose error it is that truth is determined by majority opinion, what the majority thinks.

If his car requires an intellectual maker, the driver himself needs an intellectual maker. And since the driver is infinitely more complicated a being than a motor car, his maker must be an infinitely more powerful intellect than the car maker. How reasonable it is to believe in God, how unreasonable not to do so!

The Supreme Principle

This is the first principle both of being and of thought (*ontological* and *logical*), otherwise known as the *Principle of Non-Contradiction*, expressed here in the form of an example:

A is A;

A is not non-A;

Between A and non-A there is no third.

A is A: being is being. *A is not non-A*. Each thing is what it is (and nothing else). *Between A and non-A there is no third*. Beyond being and non-being there is no third.

We rely on this principle implicitly in all our observing and all our reasoning; in all our reporting and all our arguing. We affirm in our speech the correspondence between *thing* and *think*—for speech is simply the external expression of what is in our minds. Indeed, the word ‘think’ derives from the word ‘thing’. When we think we become, in a sense, the thing!

<i>mind</i>	|	=	|	<i>reality</i>
think	|	=	|	thing

Truth, logical truth, is the identity between what is asserted with what is. But logical truth is founded on ontological truth, the truth found in the thing as it exercises existence.

The two orders, the real (or ontological) and the intentional (or logical) must not be confused because, as St Thomas insists, the mind operates in a manner different to that in which reality operates. So the principle is expressed in different ways in the different orders.

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| <i>Ontological principle</i> | A thing cannot together be and be-not (i.e., being is not non-being). |
| <i>Logical principle</i> | One cannot together affirm and deny the same about the same under the same respect. |

Corollaries

Nothing does not exist. Accordingly, where there appears in creation to be nothing there is something. We may think the air is not material until the winds begin to blow. We may think ‘space’ is nothing because nothing can be detected in it. This is the attitude taken by the vast majority of people as well as a majority of scientists. But, since nothing does not exist, ‘space’ must be something. Even though it cannot be experimentally detected, there is evidence from which reasonable conclusions can be drawn to support the philosophical demand that it is ‘something’. For instance, in order for the eye to see it must, since it is a material organ, be in *physical* contact with the object of its sight. In order for us to be able to see a star, then, there must be an unbroken material continuum to carry its light between star and eye. Understanding what the ‘something’ is that constitutes ‘space’ will provide a key to understanding the universe and, ultimately, the manner in which all things are constituted.

The Logical principle may be expressed in this way: *Of whatever there is, there is a reason of be.* In other words, being is understandable. There is scope here for a further proof for the existence of God. Whoever has made the universe, and man as a part of it, has so constituted man’s faculties that they are equal to the task of understanding what He has made. These truths profoundly moved Albert Einstein.
