

## THE TWO RABBITS

or *The Metaphysical Conundrum of Substance*

*Abstract from an address of Prof. A P S Solomon at a recent symposium<sup>1</sup>*

“I have here, as you can see, two rabbits [holding them up]. Well, one live rabbit and one recently deceased. They are—or rather *were*—siblings: same colour, same thick fur, same weight, same provenance, same odour! Only now one has something the other has not. One is still a rabbit; the other is, well, little more than a bag of meat, bones and gristle. Yet there is no *material* difference between them. The reality which still gives life to this one [raising his right hand] and has been removed from this one [raising the other] does not admit of measurement. The scientist will discover nothing in the one that is not present in the other. The reality that gives life to the rabbit has no weight, no colour, no measurable dimensions. No scientific instrument is capable of identifying or isolating it. We know it, and science knows it, only through its effects: it causes this rabbit, as you can see [indicating], to wriggle and to resent my holding it up for observation or limiting its activities. The other couldn’t care less.

“What is the difference between them, the one still a rabbit, the other no longer so? What does the one have that the other does not? Before we answer that question we should note some history.

“Some 450 or so years ago the world lost the sense of meaning of a number of words, meanings that had been in use for centuries. The thinkers of the time re-invented the words, gave them new meanings. They didn’t do it straight away; in fact, they hardly realised they were doing it. The influence behind the shift was, curiously, not literary, or poetic, or philosophical, or pragmatic, but theological. Men’s minds underwent what we might call a sea-change about God and the deference they owed Him. Instead of adhering rigorously to what God had revealed, the truth of which he had established by performing acts unprecedented in the history of mankind (miracles; bringing the dead back to life), the men of the time decided that they would rather make up their own minds about what they would, or would not, believe.

“Now God was the one who had made them, who kept them in existence and who (as he made clear in his revelation over the centuries) had also redeemed them from the perdition which had become as it were part of their nature as a result of the fall of Adam. If you were utterly dependent on someone you would think it appropriate to follow his directions, especially when so much of what he had said had to do with his own inner life. But these men preferred their own view and, like Adam in the garden, they decided they knew best. This revolt against authority was plain silly, a revolt against reason, and it was this secondary effect, the irrationality of it, that led men to alter the meanings of various words then in common use.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle Plato Socrates Solomon Ph. D, S.T.D., Q.R.S, T.U.V. etc...

“We can demonstrate this shift by identifying in one word the reality that this one rabbit retains and the other has lost. What is it? *Substance*. This one, still wriggling (!) has the *substance* of a rabbit; the other does not. The one, in virtue of its possession of—or rather *its possession by*—this immaterial reality, is a rabbit. The other is a rabbit no longer.

“That the meaning of the word ‘substance’ as used formerly has been lost is easily shown. Anyone who has a little Latin can see it. The word *substance* comes from the Latin verb *substo substare* which means ‘to stand under’. *Substance* correctly understood signifies something that *stands under* certain appearances. It is not the appearances; it is what underlies them. The dead rabbit *Billy* here and the live one *Bertie* there both have the same appearances but those that *Billy* used to enjoy will quickly disappear as his body resolves into its elements. If not skinned and put into a pot within the next 24 hours he will soon be on the nose.

“A *substance* is not, as the modern world thinks, a body taken without regard to kind or type. It is the underlying reality that makes the body be this or that thing. It is not its matter, it is the *immaterial* reality that keeps the matter together in an identifiable entity. What makes a rabbit a rabbit is not fur, bones, ears and a twitchy nose but the *substance* rabbit. In fact it is the *substance* that gives it the fur, the bones, the ears and the twitchy nose!

“Now give the business just a few moments thought and you will see that of the two—the matter and this immaterial reality—the immaterial reality is far and away the more important. For it is the immaterial reality that makes a rabbit be a rabbit. The *matter* is useless except as something to be determined. It’s the same when we consider the things we make. If I want to build a house I follow a house plan; the *matter*, the wood, bricks, tiles and roofing iron are merely the elements used to bring about the reality represented in the plan. The influence that determines matter to be this thing or that has a technical name, *form*. Hence, substance’s full title is *substantial form*.

“But identifying the *substance* of a thing leaves a lot to be explained. ‘Okay,’ I hear you say, ‘*substance* goes to its subsistence, but what about the fur, the bones, the ears and the twitchy nose?’ And even before we get to these ‘bunny’ characteristics, we might add to that question, ‘Where, if its *substance* is immaterial, does it get its very material body?’

“Well, first of all, a rabbit’s *substantial form* is not any substance at all: it is not, for instance, the substantial form of a dog, it is not that of a man, or that of an angel; it is the substantial form of a rabbit. Next, the substance comes with a number of *accidental* forms, the first two of which, *quantity* and *quality*, set the rabbit up for life. *Quantity* gives it a body, which the philosophers refer to technically as *extension*, and parts and *quality* in a number of guises gives it the various attributes proper to a rabbit (properties) among which are the fur, the bones, the ears and the twitchy nose! *Quantity* does something else too; it determines that a rabbit is *this* rabbit. So *Bertie’s* quantity determines that he is *Bertie* and not the late lamented *Billy*.

“Let’s summarise. What determines a living creature to be *what it is*—its essence or quiddity—is its *substance* (substantial form) not the matter out of which it happens to be made. It is the accompanying accidental form, *quantity*, that provides it with a body, and second accident, *quality*, that gives it the various characteristics our senses recognise when we spot a rabbit. Even at these secondary levels—of *accidental* rather than *substantial* form—let us note that matter *contributes nothing* but that which is determined.

“The principles exposed by this consideration of our two rabbits help us to understand further truths. Let us take three of them at, respectively, the biological level, the philosophical level and the theological.

“First, **the biological**: Aristotle was one of those thinkers who could, with a line, set you thinking for hours. Here is one such line: *For living things to live is the same as to be*. Take from a rabbit its life, i.e., its substantial form, and you take from it its very existence. None of us would have any trouble with that. But consider the corollary: *The source of its life is also the source of its existence*. The influence that causes it to live, that gives it its *substance*, also causes it to be. Now only a creator can give a thing existence, make something to be. All man’s productions, his ‘creations’, come about through his working with natural, i.e., pre-existing, things which are a sort of *matter* for the artificial *forms* he imposes on them. Man cannot create anything. What follows? All the assertions one hears in the scientific community that one day man will produce life are exposed as nonsense.

“Second, **the philosophical**: what determines a thing to be the thing that it is, whether a rabbit, or a tree, or a lump of granite—animal, vegetable or mineral—clearly is not *the matter* out of which it is made but the *substantial form*, that of rabbit, or tree, or granite. In other words, what makes a thing to be *what it is*, its essence or quiddity, *is not material but immaterial*. While its matter must be apt (*secondary* matter such as carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, or their compounds) to ensure the specimen is healthy and resilient it can have no effect on what the thing is. What follows? Any assertion that the *essence* of a thing results from mere material development is nonsense. Therefore the Darwinian theory of evolution is nonsense.

“Third, **the theological**: how many Catholics have a proper grasp of the mystery of the Church’s doctrine of transubstantiation? It will be responded, and rightly, that the acceptance of this doctrine concerning the Blessed Eucharist is not a matter of reason but of faith. Yet a mystery, as the late Frank Sheed once remarked, is not something we know nothing about but something we know a little about, but not everything. Now if Catholics understood that the *substance* of bread and the *substance* of wine are, neither of them, material they would see that their replacement after the words of consecration—instantaneously through the force of the words of the priest—by the *substance* of Christ involves no contradiction of what their senses perceive. For the accidents (the appearances) of bread and wine are retained, miraculously.

“A signal mark of the descent in the sixteenth century of the Catholic faith into Protestantism was the public rejection by Queen Elizabeth (illegitimate daughter of Henry VIII) at Mass after the death of her half sister, Mary, of the deference owed to the Blessed Sacrament. Thereafter Protestantism’s devotees would mock the priest’s consecration at the altar as ‘hocus-pocus’. The *formal*, that is, the *immaterial*, reality achieved in the sacrament was lost to them in the very imposition of their own will on what God had chosen to reveal. What was left? *Only the material*.

“Here, in the Protestant revolt, is the source of the corruption of the meaning of certain critical words in our language. Here is the reason our modern thinkers cannot lift their minds above the *material* to the infinitely more important *immaterial*...”

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