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# The Philosophical Catbird Seat: A Defense of Maritain's *Philosophia Perennis*

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## Introduction

As the title of this article announces I intend to offer a defense of Maritain's claim that Thomism, as he interprets it, is the perennial philosophy. The inspiration for this project came from Father McCool's learned and stimulating book, *From Unity to Pluralism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), wherein he presents the development of Thomistic philosophy and theology from the time Leo XIII issued *Aeterni Patris* up to the time of the initial decades of the twentieth century. The title of Father McCool's book gives his thesis in a nutshell: contrary to the assessment of Leo XIII and other "Thomists," such as Maritain, the development of Thomistic thought since *Aeterni Patris* reveals a plurality of theological and philosophical systems, not an exclusively single Thomistic theology and philosophy that is true for all times and places.

I mention this not only to provide a context for my presentation and not only because it gives me the opportunity to acknowledge, at the outset, how greatly I have profited from Father McCool's incisive and illuminating handling of the subject; but also to explain the apparently narrow focus of my presentation. Constraints of time make it impossible to do justice to the players in the drama, Le Blond, Rousselot, Maréchal, etc. I have therefore decided to confine myself to a critique of a single topic: the claim that "the judgments through which the first principles of metaphysics are affirmed" are "immutable," but the concepts through which these judgments are made are "contingent" and "mutable" (*From Unity to Pluralism*, p. 211).

You may have noticed that above I referred to this concentration as an "apparently narrow focus." I say "apparently" because it seems to me that this topic is anything but narrow in its consequences. I am convinced that the whole question of whether there is, or can be, a single Thomistic philosophy, a *philosophia perennis*, turns on the question of the human intellect's capacity to form concepts that are necessary rather than contingent, immutable rather than mutable. If any debate can be said to have galvanized Maritain's return to philosophy as a young man and his subsequent philosophical investigations, it is that one.

### The Concept

What does it mean to say that “the judgments through which the first principles of metaphysics are affirmed” are “immutable,” but the concepts through which these judgments are made are “contingent” and “mutable”?

All concepts originate in our perceptions of the sensible world. The objects of these perceptions are concrete, particular things. Granted, these things are contingent, for nothing in their essential being necessitates that they exist. Here two points command attention. First, although their existence is contingent, they are not devoid of necessity. For if Joe Montana exists, certain necessities follow. As a member of the human species, he is necessarily rational, autonomous, capable of laughing, learning, and teaching; hence, his existence bespeaks contingent necessity; not absolute necessity, to be sure, but necessity nonetheless. Thus to know that Joe Montana is a man is to possess certain and necessary knowledge about him: the man, Joe Montana, who exists on 25 October 1990, is necessarily rational, autonomous, and risible.

Second, it is not absolutely necessary that Joe Montana be the quarterback for the San Francisco “Forty-niners” in 1990, since he might never have been born, might have chosen never to play football, and having chosen to play football, might not have recovered from the back injury he suffered in 1987. But he was born, did choose to play football, did become the quarterback for the San Francisco “Forty-niners,” did recover from the injury of 1987, and has been playing at that position for the “Forty-niners” ever since. Consequently, it will *always* be true that Joe Montana was quarterback for the San Francisco “Forty-niners” on 25 October 1990. If Joe Montana is quarterback for the San Francisco “Forty-niners,” on 25 October 1990, it is *necessarily* true that he is the quarterback for the San Francisco “Forty-niners” on 25 October 1990. Because finite, material beings enjoy only a contingent existence, they come into existence and pass out of existence: they exist but do not have to exist. But to exist at a given time is to be *actually* existent at that time; to pass from one state of being to another is to have been *actually* in those states at the successive moments. For all time, it is *necessarily* true that they were *actually* what they were when they were actually what they were.

These observations lead me to conclude that the only plausible meaning that can be assigned to the assertion that our concepts are contingent is this, that they are the human intellect’s expression to itself of contingent things. You can, of course, say that any knowledge of contingent things has an object that is subject to change and that therefore, if the object of knowledge is subject to change, so must the



knowledge of these objects be subject to change. But since change is the passage of a thing from one actual state at t1 to a different actual state at t2, and because everything is what it is and not another thing, it follows that at t2 the thing was *necessarily* what it actually was at t1.

The impossibility, or at least dubiety, of there being a perennial philosophy, such as Maritain's Thomism, cannot accordingly be supported by the appeal to "contingent" and "mutable" concepts. From the contingency and mutability of the *object of the concept*, you cannot legitimately infer that the *concept of the object* is contingent and mutable.

### Historical Conditioning

Might not the claim that our concepts are contingent and mutable find support in the fact that we are creatures of time and place and thus that our concepts are historically conditioned? Advocates of this position might argue that our concepts are contingent and mutable in the sense that they are shaped by the worldview of our particular historical epoch so that we impose on our perception and interpretation of things the presuppositions of our culture. We would thus know things in a particular historical context and our concepts could only express things in the manner we have been conditioned to express them. Because historical contexts change, it would follow that our concepts are contingent and mutable in relation to changing historical contexts.

If the claim that our concepts are historically conditioned is to support the claim that all our concepts are contingent and mutable, it must be joined with the premise that it is impossible for us to transcend our particular historical context to arrive at concepts that express the essential being of things. Thus our concepts would be contingent and mutable because:

- (i) one cannot know outside of an historical context;
- (ii) the concepts that we derive from our perceptions of the world vary as the historical contexts in which these perceptions occur vary.

From these two premises, however, it does not follow that we cannot derive veridical concepts; that would require the addition of one or another of the following:

- (iii) the historical context distorts our concepts so that what we take to be veridical is not;
- (iv) the historical context does not in itself distort our concepts of things but rather restricts us to a limited perspective, when in fact there are other possible perceptions, thereby permitting us to form veridical concepts

which are only perspectival, so that seemingly competing conceptions of the same thing might be equally veridical since they represent different historical perspectives;

(v) the historical contexts of the various epochs offer us various concepts of things, but since we can never extricate ourselves from historical context, there is no way to tell which, if any, conception is veridical.

Premise (iii) cannot be reconciled with premise (i) since, if we cannot obtain concepts except from within historical contexts, there would be no way to tell which concepts are veridical and which not. Premise (ii) is also incompatible with premise (i) for the same reason: if the historical context conditions our concepts, as its proponents insist, where do we find the criterion for judging which concepts are veridical and which not, even in the qualified sense of premise (iv), namely, that it is veridical from the standpoint of the historical context in which it is obtained? Insofar as both premises (iii) and (iv) presuppose a criterion that is historically unconditioned, they contradict premise (i), namely, that all our concepts are historically conditioned. But we have seen that premise (i) is absolutely necessary to the claim that all our concepts are contingent and mutable.

This leaves us with the final candidate, premise (v). But it presupposes an assertion that is not evident, namely, that *any* historical context is incompatible with the formation of veridical concepts.

But from the proposition that our concepts vary as our historical contexts vary it does not follow that none of these conceptions is veridical. The history of Western philosophy testifies to the dependence of the human mind on historical context. The fifth century B.C. was indeed a privileged era. Its auspicious social, economic, political, and general cultural conditions no doubt allowed the flowering of the Greek genius for observation and clear thinking. In a different historical context, the Greeks might never have discovered the *logos*, the pure idea, and Plato might never have beheld so clearly the difference between knowledge and sensation. In a context different from that produced by the interaction of Christianity and Greco-Roman civilization, the West might never have seen the dignity of the human being as a person or understand God as the First Efficient Cause, the creator and conserver of being. Nevertheless, the statements "Knowledge depends on historical context" and "We can attain veridical concepts of things" are not mutually incompatible. If all my concepts are derived in one or another historical context, the most that can be inferred from this is that context is a *necessary* condition for the acquisition of veridical concepts. But a necessary condition is *that without which the result or end cannot be realized*. It does not ensure the result, for it is not the *sufficient* condition. On the



face of it, it is equally plausible that auspicious cultural conditions permit us to acquire concepts that express the essential being of things veridically. Of all the possible cultural conditions, it is neither conceptually evident nor experientially established that there are no cultural conditions which, when combined, enable us to derive veridical concepts. In other words, if it is necessary that we derive all our concepts in some historical context, it is not therefore necessary that that context prejudice the veridical nature of those concepts.

For my own elucidation, I thought it necessary to enter upon the above analysis before adverting to a more fundamental difficulty with historical contextualism. The challenge to the possibility of our obtaining veridical concepts based upon historical contextualism is nothing more than a variant of good old-fashioned philosophical relativism. Just as the latter self-destructs in trying to appropriate to itself mutually contradictory propositions, so does contextualism. I have argued above that the only defensible sense of historical contextualism rests upon three premises: (i) it is impossible for us to derive concepts outside an historical context and thus our concepts are historically conditioned; (ii) the concepts that we derive from our perceptions of the world vary as the historical contexts in which these perceptions occur vary; (iii) the historical contexts of the various epochs offer us various concepts of things, but since we can never extricate ourselves from historical context, there is no way to tell which, if any, conception is veridical. These premises bring us face to face with historicism's fatal flaw. It is simply a variant of relativism and thus suffers from the latter's fatality; it contradicts itself. You cannot assert that all our concepts are historically conditioned without either one or the other of two decidedly infelicitous consequences. Either you are committed to an assertion whose concepts are conditioned by the inevitable context in which you advanced it, in which case you are scarcely in a position to make transhistorical assertions; or you make a transhistorical assertion, in which case you contradict the assertion that all our concepts are historically conditioned. Clearly, the historicist wishes to make an assertion about all human knowledge: he claims to occupy the catbird seat after he has already denied its existence. It won't do for him to try to dodge this fatality by appealing to the meta-language/object-language distinction since that distinction—as when one speaks about the formal rules governing the validity of a given proposition in mathematical logic from within a universe of discourse not governed by those rules—can only apply to a specific area of knowledge, not to the very nature of the concept. Statements about knowledge itself are transcendental, which is to say, *transhistorical*, statements.

But if we are capable of forming veridical concepts, and if we cannot form them outside a historical context, and if historical contexts vary, what is the criterion of the veridical? The heart and soul of realism is that *things are the measure of mind; mind is not the measure of things*. There is no way of demonstrating that we form veridical concepts since demonstration operates entirely in the realm of pure concepts, and you cannot use concepts to justify the veridical nature of other concepts. For what could the putative confirmatory concepts display that the dubious concept lacked? On the contrary, the only way that concepts can be identified as veridical is by the primitive and direct apprehension of their veridical nature. I am persuaded that what makes this criterion seem an unwarranted assumption to the historicist is a failure to appreciate what it means to say that, for the epistemological realist, epistemology *follows from* our knowledge of things and is the rationally systematic *reflection* on that experience. If you do not start philosophizing with that primitive, direct experiential knowledge, you are left with the intellect and its concepts as your starting point. In the introduction to his book on Kant's theory of causality, Ewing draws the telling analogy that Kant's philosophical method was like that of an astronomer who, rather than starting with the study of the stars by scanning the heavens, starts with an examination of his telescopic apparatus to determine just what kind of data the latter is capable of attaining. I have never taken the time to find out how far this analogy can be pressed, but it seems to me an apt characterization, at least, of Kant's procedure. But while it obviously makes sense to check out the design and operation of your equipment before using it to make sure that it does not produce distortions or illusions, that procedure does not work so well in epistemology. By starting within the intellect, you have walled yourself in with concepts. You are then left with the task of trying to determine whether your concepts match any extramental reality. And this, as I have noted above, is impossible. Perhaps you have seen the commercial currently being shown on television wherein two groups of cats are shown standing eagerly in front of what seems to be two tanks containing fish. A spokeswoman for the advertisement, who happens to be one of the current film celebrities, informs us that only one of the fish tanks is real; the other apparent tank is, in fact, merely a picture of a tank containing fish on a television screen. Her sponsor's television sets produce such clear and vivid pictures, we are told, that even the cats are fooled into supposing that they are gazing at real fish. We, the television viewers, are, of course, in no position to know why the one group of cats is clustered in front of the television screen. But given the peculiar organization of the cat's eye, it is highly improbable that the cats in question



would be attracted to, let alone deceived by, a two-dimensional representation. At all events, the reason that we are deceived, the reason that we see no difference between the real fish tank and the television depiction of a fish tank is that, on *our* television screen, there is no difference between them, for the simple reason that they are both pictures. Neither one bespeaks any more affinity with the real than the other. We must therefore accept the spokeswoman's word that one is real and the other a mere picture on a television screen.

This example exactly parallels what happens when you start your epistemological inquiry with concepts rather than with things. You are inevitably forced into a representationalist epistemology, since being walled in by concepts, you can never get into the catbird seat which would allow you to compare your concept with the object it allegedly expresses to see if the former is a veridical expression of the latter. The concept of the object and the object of the concept have become one!

This explains how one could be led to suppose that our concepts are contingent and mutable. If the object of my knowledge is the concept, if what I know is the concept, then either one of two conclusions follows: (i) all I can be said to know is myself and my ideas; I have no way of knowing if there are other intellects or, if there are, whether they know the same things that I know; or the weaker conclusion, (ii) other people may have different subjective experiences from mine, but, because all members of the human species have the same intellectual structure and consequent a priori concepts and principles, we can be said to have objective concepts that are universal to us all. The first conclusion is subjective and solipsistic; the second is Kantian and intersubjective.

Either conclusion is consistent with the claim that our concepts are contingent and mutable in the sense that they would or might vary from individual knower to individual knower or vary from one species of knowers to another. Recall Kant's observation in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that while we can know things only as they appear to us and not as they are in themselves, there may be rational beings elsewhere in the universe who know things as they are in themselves.

These considerations lead me to say that the claim that our concepts are contingent and mutable is incompatible with the essential tenet of epistemological realism, namely, that *things are the measure of mind; mind is not the measure of things*. For, as I have argued above, the only defensible sense in which concepts can be said to be contingent and mutable is as the intellect's *representations* of things. As representations, they inevitably interpose themselves between the knowing subject and the putatively known thing. The object of knowledge thus becomes *intramental* rather than *extramental* and this destroys the claim that the

intellect knows *things*, for it cannot be reconciled with the claim that the intellect knows things directly.

Representationalism also accounts for the challenge to the claim that there is, or can be, a single Thomistic philosophy that is true for all times and places, a *philosophia perennis*. Whether the representationalist embraces either subjectivism or Kantian intersubjectivism, he can only know what is an object of knowledge for him or for intellects like his. Consider the following premises:

- (i) What I know are not things but my *representation of things*; thus, my *representation of things*, not the things themselves, is the only object of my knowledge;
- (ii) the criterion of the veridical is the conformity between the intellect and the thing known; but the thing known is *by representation* of the thing;
- (iii) it follows that all my concepts are *relative* to the unique knowing subject that I am (subjectivism) or to the intellectual structure peculiar to the human species to which I belong (Kantian intersubjectivism);
- (iv) consequently, I have no rational basis for declaring that there is, or can be, for the human intellect, an exclusively single philosophy that is true for all times and places.
- (v) therefore, representationalism is inimical to the very notion of a *philosophia perennis*; the latter requires an epistemological realism, that is to say, one which affirms the principle, *things are the measure of mind; mind is not the measure of things*; and this, in turn, requires the affirmation that our concepts are veridical; for, as I have argued above, if they are veridical, they must be necessary and not contingent.

### The Concept in Epistemological Realism

As I noted already, realism takes our experiential knowledge as a given: we know and what we know are things, and *we know* that we know things. Philosophy, in this instance epistemology, is an act of reflection on that experiential knowledge. Therefore, contrary to the Kantian methodology, realism does not start philosophizing with an examination of the intellect and its mechanism and then proceed to discover what and how this mechanism can know. Rather it starts out with knowledge of things and then proceeds to ask how this knowledge takes place.

From the premise that our knowledge of the sensible world is certain and evident, you cannot avoid the conclusion that our concepts are immaterial, for there is no other way to account for our knowledge of extramental things since this latter requires the formation of veridical concepts by our intellects. And here is the nub of the whole controversy surrounding the concept: if our concepts are not immaterial expressions



of extramental things, they are material expressions of them; and if they are material expressions of them, then they cannot be veridical. The materialization of the intellect underlies every representationalist epistemology because it is matter that predisposes a faculty to operate according to individuating conditions, as our external senses are specified so as to apprehend only one or two properties of things. To hold the position that our concepts are shaped, not by the essential being of the thing known, but by the biases of the knowing subject, whether they be the inherent operations of the intellect or a culturally determined psyche, is to affirm, at least implicitly, that the intellect is a material organ.

But, on the realist's premise that we know extramental things and that we know that we know them, the intellect must be immaterial. Such knowledge would be impossible otherwise. How else could it perform a substantially immaterial operation, the formation of veridical concepts? To know that the being emerging from the locker room of the San Francisco "Forty-niners" is the man Joe Montana is to apprehend in his material being the essence man or manness. I can form this concept only because my intellect can free the intelligible structure, that is the specific essence of Joe Montana, from the constrictions of matter. By doing so, the intellect raises that intelligible structure to its own level of immaterial being.

Now to say that these concepts are veridical is to say that they are objective. And if knowledge is objective, that must mean that the intellect *becomes*, on the *intentional* level, the thing known. The alternative—that the intellect does not know the thing directly but instead knows the concept of the thing—is absolutely incompatible with epistemological realism insofar as it interposes a third thing between the knowing subject and the known. In short, the veridical nature of our concepts and the objectivity of our knowledge go hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other.

### Ontological and Sensational Knowledge

None of the above denies the influence of historical conditioning of our knowledge. That we are creatures of time and place, let there be no doubt. Our perceptions, concepts, and way of experiencing the world are powerfully shaped by our time and place in history. So decisive is this shaping power that it is often, if not always, impossible for me to perceive, conceive, or experience objects of another time and place as they were then and there confronted. As a child, I believed in Santa Claus, but do so no longer. If I dedicated myself to the task, I could by

intense reflection arrive at an increasingly more accurate understanding of what it was like for me to entertain that childhood belief. But I could never recapture that exact experience because too much water has gone over the dam between then and now. Although I am the same person, too much has changed, both within me and in my environment, to enable me to retrieve my childhood objects of experience and to perceive, conceive, and experience them as I did then. If I cannot accurately recapture my own past experiences, how could I hope to recapture those of other people, living in other times and places?

For example, as a sailor in the United States Navy, I would walk patrol in Keelung with Frank Chi, a master sergeant in the Taiwanese Army. We would frequently pass the long evenings on patrol by exchanging accounts of our respective cultures. How much did we each really understand about the other's culture? No doubt, the concepts I formed of Chinese culture, as Frank Chi related them to me, were sifted through the cultural presuppositions of my Western and American heritage, leading me to impose meanings on his descriptions that were, I am sure, frequently different from those that he wished to impart. Born and raised in San Francisco, the first-generation son of Irish, Catholic parents, I could not possibly have experienced and thus conceived the world into which he was born and raised, pre-Communist Shanghai.

Not to put too fine a point on the topic, we surely do not conceive the body politic the way the Athenians of Socrates' day conceived the *polis* or conceive the relation of God to his universe as a fifteenth-century Florentine did.

These limitations occur within the polarity of intellect and imagination, concept and image. My images originate in what I have directly experienced and in the personal and cultural environments that have conditioned me to associate particular experiences with particular images. Although anachronistic, Rembrandt's painting of Aristotle in Renaissance attire does not overwhelm the artist's conception of a great genius engaged in inquiry.

Our difficulty in overcoming spatio-temporal conditioning originates in the fact that we are not pure intellects but materially embodied intellects that must gain their concepts by abstraction from repeated contact with individual, material things. That is a significant limitation. We cannot know the subjective experiences of others, and even our own previous subjective experiences become increasingly opaque to us because we cannot enter into our former states of mind. Such experiences must be lived to be known.

If all our knowledge consisted of the perception of mere sensible properties, we would, indeed, be slaves of our historical context. But our



perceptions of the sensible world convey to us more than mere sensations; they convey the *being* of things: essence, existence, and the principles of being as well. Such knowledge—what I mean by “ontological” knowledge—escapes enslavement to historical context. No matter how things differ and vary, no matter how often they change from one state to another, they remain *ways of being*, and what belongs to *being as being* cannot be reduced to the prejudices of historical context and its material conditions.

This is not to say that we can know being perfectly; even the being of the humblest individual thing has so far defied our efforts to know it exhaustively. But, on the ontological plane, our knowledge of things progresses, not so much by the acquisition of new sensible data, as occurs in the sciences, but by the ever-deepening penetration of our intellects into the metaphysical core of being. That, I take to be Aristotle’s meaning when he says that “In the beginning children call all men ‘father’ until they learn the difference.”

Although there is very much more to say about the nature of ontological knowledge, I believe that I have said enough since the task of this presentation was to show the indefensibility of the claim that our concepts are “contingent” and “mutable,” and I am persuaded that I have accomplished it.

### Conclusion

I said in the introduction that the question of whether there is, or can be, a *philosophia perennis* turns on the question of the human intellect’s capacity to form concepts that are necessary rather than contingent, immutable rather than mutable, which is to say, concepts that are veridical rather than not. It seems to me that this assertion can now be inferred, as a conclusion, from my ensuing argument. I have tried to show that if we cannot derive from our perceptual experiences of the world concepts that are veridical, then it follows that not only are our concepts contingent and mutable, but they are representational as well. And if they are representational, then it follows that there will be as many philosophical interpretations of the world as there are representations. Not being able to peek around these representations to see if they match the things of which they are the putative representations, there is no catbird seat upon which we can perch to observe what is veridical and what is not. The representationalist cannot simultaneously be a realist; whoever holds that our concepts are contingent and mutable is a representationalist; therefore whoever holds that our concepts are contingent and mutable cannot simultaneously be a realist.

Finally, whoever is not a realist is not a Thomist; for, by any reasonable interpretation, whatever else Thomistic philosophy may be, it is a realism. Therefore, any attempt to argue, by appealing to the position that our concepts are contingent and mutable, that there is, or can be, a pluralism of Thomistic philosophies fails because it is an appeal to what is the antithesis of realism.

I have chosen to argue in my own terms on behalf of Maritain's claim that there is a single, Thomistic philosophy, a *philosophia perennis*. But, if you wish to see how much importance Maritain attached to the role of the concept in this matter, you can do no better than to consult his book, *From Bergsonian Philosophy to Thomism*. In that youthful work, he takes off the gloves and slugs it out with Bergson and others who deny that our concepts are veridical. I say that Maritain won by a knockout.