Thomist Realism
and the
Linguistic Turn

Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence

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Introduction

Words, Thoughts, and Things

The frontier between explaining the meaning of words and describing the nature of things is easily violated.

—C.S. Lewis

How do our words “attach” to objects in the world? Most assuredly they do. If I ask my five-year-old son to bring me an apple, unsurprisingly, he does; he brings me just what I wanted. If I ask him to bring me an orange, he brings me something quite different than in the first instance, but also just what I wanted. Not only does ‘apple’ attach in some way to certain objects in the world, but ‘to bring’ seems to attach to certain acts, even before those acts are performed and could be called existing things. My son performs the act at my request; he knows what to do even before the doing occurs. He doesn’t turn on the television, or twiddle his thumbs, or needle his sister, unless of course he is disobedient. He gets up from his chair, walks to the bowl with apples in it, picks one, walks to me, and hands it to me. I count my request a success.

I do not mean to suggest that every word we use is like ‘apple’ or ‘orange’ which attach fairly straightforwardly to beings in the world. Words like ‘oh’ and ‘every’ and ‘no’ and ‘but’ do not seem to be as directly related to beings in the world, if at all. But given a moment’s reflection even the connection of ‘apple’ or ‘orange’ to the world begins to take on the appearance
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of something quite odd. If my son randomly picks an apple from the bowl and brings it to me, I do not respond, “That’s not the one I asked for,” since there is in fact no one that I asked for. But if I didn’t ask for a particular apple, what did I ask for, since the only apples that exist are particular apples? How does one ask for an apple without asking for a particular apple?

Even if it is unremarkable that some words attach, or connect, or signify, or refer to things in the world, philosophers have wondered just how this is possible. We all know the fact; what we want to know is the why of the fact. Some philosophers like Plato and Wittgenstein have considered the suggestion that our words should be compared to pictures or images of the things they attach to, though what Wittgenstein meant by a picture in this context is very complex. But as Plato realized in the Cratylus, and Wittgenstein later in the Philosophical Investigations, it is very difficult to make sense of this suggestion.

Other philosophers take particular note that my son does not originally succeed in bringing me an apple. When he is very young, he stands perplexed at my requests, then slowly over time fails less and less, and finally generally succeeds. There is a similarity between his behavior and that of other animals that can be trained to bring me an apple or an orange. Perhaps my son acquires certain dispositions to behave in certain overt ways in the appropriate circumstances and responds to certain vocal stimuli like ‘apple’ and ‘bring’, just like a chimp. The words attach to reality because of the ways in which the behavioral dispositions attach to reality. But this suggestion has also proven very difficult to sustain. The combinatorial possibilities of language use seem to be virtually infinite in their openness to future applications; trained dispositions to behave, on the other hand, do not seem to be so open. And it is not at all clear how this analysis is supposed to handle such statements as “Caesar crossed the Rubicon and started a civil war in Rome” or “the googol root of the googolplex is 10.”

Another suggestion is that we are all born with an innate language of the mind, a lingua mentis that is the same for all human beings, a part of human nature. The innate language attaches to the world because it is causally related to beings in the world, which causal relations fall under certain natural laws. What in my son looks like learning a first language, a native language like English or Spanish, is really not learning how that language attaches to the world. He is born knowing a first language, the lingua mentis, the meaning of its terms and the possibilities for their syntactical arrangement. What he must learn are the translation rules into a native language like English. This suggestion, however, has its own problems with the nature and number of the innate terms of the lingua mentis.
Still others have suggested that spoken words are not translations of mental terms, but attach to reality because of something like a baptism. Someone originally conferred a name upon a being, or type of being, perhaps by pointing to it and designating it ‘Y’ or to be ‘an X’, and then that baptismal name was passed on from speaker to speaker. Perhaps these philosophers have found some literal truth in Genesis 2:19–20. Once the baptism has been performed the term may well have a place in the expression of a very complex structure of relations among beliefs, desires, and actions within and among individuals, about and involving the being so designated; but the attachment to reality is nothing other than the causal-baptismal designation and subsequent community practice. St. Augustine in the *De magistro* and Wittgenstein again in the *Philosophical Investigations* had difficulties with the notion of pointing as a way of attaching words to things. Isn’t pointing itself quasi-linguistic in the sense that it needs to be interpreted, much like linguistic symbols do?

The tradition with which I am mainly concerned in this work—the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition—holds that words express what we understand of things. Words attach to reality because our cognitive faculties attach to reality in some way. There is something about us, over and above a merely causal relation to things, namely, our understanding of things that we seek to communicate with our words. Understanding is itself a kind of becoming identical with the being understood. The concepts that constitute and express understanding are not innate but are acquired developmentally, nor do they constitute an inner language spoken, as it were, to ourselves. No understanding, no words. We may not understand everything there is to understand about an apple; indeed, such comprehensive understanding might be impossible for us. We might be mistaken in many instances when we say of some *A* that ‘*A* is *B*’. Still, unless we understand something of beings in the world, however inchoate, we cannot speak of any beings. We name as we know. Of that which one cannot know, one ought to remain silent; indeed one cannot but remain silent, however much one might babble on.

In this work, I hope to make some progress toward a better understanding of what the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition does and does not claim about the relations that hold among words, thoughts, and things. This tradition has been criticized for trading in a flawed distinction between understanding and linguistic practice. It is not difficult to see why. A striking feature of St. Thomas’s commentaries on the logical works of Aristotle is the assumption of unity embodied in them, a unity that depends upon a prior unity in the various acts of reason. He only wrote two commentaries.
on the logical works, an incomplete one on the De interpretatione (Peri hermeneias in Greek), and the other on the Posterior Analytics. Yet in both commentaries, he begins with very similar prefatory remarks, detailing the overall architectonic of Logic as a rational science. He then explains how Aristotle’s treatises, including those he does not comment upon, exemplify this structure. In his preface to the Commentary on the Posterior Analytics, for example, he emphasizes the unity of Aristotle’s logical treatises by relating them to the order and unity of human acts of reason.

[T]his art is Logic, that is rational science. Which is not only rational from this, namely that it is according to reason (which is common to all arts); but also from this, that it is concerned with the very act of reason as concerning its proper matter.

And so it seems that it is the art of arts, since it directs our reason in act, from which all arts proceed. Therefore it is necessary that the parts of Logic be taken according to the diversity of the acts of reason.

But, there are three acts of reason, of which the first two are of reason considered as a certain act of understanding (est intellectus quidam).

For one act of understanding is the understanding of indivisibles or incomplex things, according as it conceives what the thing is. And this operation is called by some the informing of the intellect or intellectual conception. And to this operation of intellect is ordered the teaching, which Aristotle treats in the book Praedicamentorum (Categories). The second operation of the intellect is the intellect’s composition and division, in which the true or the false is then present. And the teaching devoted to this act of reason Aristotle treats of in the book Peri hermeneias (De interpretatione). The third act of reason concerns that which is proper to reason, namely to conclude one thing from another, as through that which is known, one may come to the cognition of the unknown. And the remaining books of Logic are devoted to this act.

He goes on to include in these “remaining books of Logic” even Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics. As St. Thomas presents these comments, there is no air of discovery or wonder. His text reads like a calm, almost pedestrian analysis. Much the same is written in his preface to the De interpretatione.

These comments are striking to the perspective of a twenty-first–century reader. Nowadays the assumption of unity may seem somewhat naive and a little quaint, and possibly a step toward a serious misreading of Aristotle.

The linchpin of St. Thomas’s claim for the unity of the logical works is human acts of reason. Why should human acts of reason provide the unity
of the logical works? After all, those works seem to be about words. The *Categories* talk about “equivocation,” “univocal predication,” what is “said of but not in,” what is “said in but not of.” The *De interpretatione* treats of “spoken and written signs,” “nouns and verbs,” “enunciations,” and so on. Finally, the *Posterior Analytics* speaks of taking the meaning of a term from the “*usus loquentium*” (the use of the ones who speak) and of the differences among “questions,” “axioms,” and “propositions.” The logical works would seem to indicate that Logic concerns itself with words, statements, and their ordering to one another, not the order of human acts of reason, an order which seems more appropriate to Psychology than Logic.

Why then does St. Thomas say that it treats of the acts of reason? Aristotle himself provides part of the answer to that question in the opening passages of the *De interpretatione*.

Thus, those which are in articulated sound are signs (*notae*) of those passions which are in the soul: and those which are written are of those things which are in articulated sound. And just as letters are not the same for all, so neither are articulated sounds the same: but the passions of the soul are the same for all, of which first (primorum) passions these [articulated sounds] are signs (*notae*), and the things of which these are likenesses are also the same. But these things were spoken of in those which were said of the soul, for that is another work.5

This very brief passage is described by Norman Kretzmann as the single most influential text in the history of semantics. It expresses what traditionally has been referred to as “Aristotle's semantic triangle.” The significance of words is subordinated to the understanding of things via passions of the soul. Indeed, words have whatever significance they have only from their conventional relation to passions of the soul. Aristotle's suggestion that words are *conventionally* related to passions of the soul which are *likenesses* of things would seem to be a reply to the view considered in Plato's *Cratylus* that words have a natural relation to their referents. But passions of the soul are naturally related by likeness to things, and the same for all men. Whatever logical ordering of *words* to one another that there might be, it seems to be derivative upon the logical ordering of *passions of the soul* to one another. *Words, passions of the soul, and things* form the vertices of a "semantic triangle."

Still, to a twenty-first-century reader this partial answer in one of the logical works itself is no less striking than the original statement that gave rise to the question, and for some not a little bewildering. How, after all,
can “passions” have a logical ordering? How can a “passion” be a likeness of things? How can the private contents of one’s mind, one’s thoughts, undergird the public meaning of vocal utterances?

Throughout the history of philosophy there are accounts that attempt to explain how words relate to things that can be said to share a family resemblance with Aristotle’s, namely that words acquire their meanings by somehow being conventionally associated with mental states, in particular with what are often called “mental representations.” Likewise, many of our contemporary philosophers make similar associations of words, thoughts, and things. For example, the lingua mentis view can be understood in that way. In our present idiom of intentionality, these philosophers will assert that the meaning or intentionality of words is derived from the intentionality of mental representations. Jerry Fodor writes:

The idea, to put it in a nutshell, is that it might be possible to pull off a double reduction: First derive the semantic properties of linguistic symbols from the intentional properties of mental states; then postulate a population of mental symbols—mental representations . . . and derive the intentional properties of beliefs and desires from these.  

Given these family resemblances, it is not at all odd for these philosophers to suggest the influence of Aristotle as their remote ancestor. On the other hand, philosophers following Wittgenstein find this way of approaching the meaning of terms deeply troubling and level severe criticism at it.

The thesis that language “hooks onto the world” via the mind has not fared well at all in the hands of these influential philosophers of mind and language. Aristotle is seen as originating a relatively continuous tradition of reflection on language that proceeds through the British Empiricists to recent accounts of language and mind referred to as “mental representationalism.” In Representation and Reality Hilary Putnam explicitly refers to the theses from the *De interpretatione* as “a scheme that has proved remarkably robust” for characterizing meaning and reference, though he ultimately rejects it as fatally flawed. He refers to it broadly as “the Aristotelian view,” and associates its constitutive theses with a number of others purportedly advocated by Mill, Frege, Russell, Carnap, and to a certain extent Chomsky, Fodor, and Searle. Putnam is not alone in this view. Michael Dummett writes:

The vague conception, common, for instance, to both the British empiricists and Aristotle, whereby a word represents an “idea,” and a phrase or sentence accordingly represents a complex of ideas, is
simply too crude to serve even as a starting point; it virtually forces us to adopt the conception whereby the meaning of a word is embodied in a mental image. ⁷

The fundamental criticism is that our language never actually succeeds in attaining the world, but remains trapped in the murky internal depths of the mind. In our apparent talk about trees, we really succeed only in calling to mind our mental representations of trees.

This “Aristotelian” tradition posits inner objects of mind, concepts or ideas, that are supposed to mediate between the knower and the known. By possessing these inner objects, the knower understands the world. When these inner objects that constitute understanding are arbitrarily associated with sounds they constitute the meanings of those sounds, which then become words. To put it crudely, my son has an image of an apple come before his mind, and goes in search of something in the world like it. But no such inner objects can perform this function. Thus, the fundamental structure of the recent objections is that the “Aristotelian view” of language, thought, and world undermines a serious account of the semantic character of language, because it “throws up” mental representations before the mind. The mental representations obtrude themselves in one way or another, either as “primary objects” of signification, or “internal mental entities” serving as obstacles through which language must pass, in order to “hook on to the world.” In principle this approach fails by yoking language to an untenable philosophy of mind.

Lurking in the background here is the problem of epistemological skepticism about the world and other minds. If these mental objects stand between my mind and the world, how can I know that they adequately represent the world? How can I discover the content of another’s mind if it is just another part of the world that may be unknown to me? Are the contents of my mind fundamentally private, while the contents of others’ minds are unknown?

Two Traditions

Philosophy today remains in many ways informed by the issues and difficulties raised by the philosophers anthologized in Richard Rorty’s *The Linguistic Turn.* ⁸ The general methodological position of the *Linguistic Turn* is that philosophical problems are problems of language that can be eliminated either by reforming language to some ideal form or simply by paying greater