



## Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Words

Charles De Koninck

Volume 17, Number 1, 1961

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020000ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020000ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

### ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this article

De Koninck, C. (1961). Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Words. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 17(1), 22–34. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020000ar>

# Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Words

---

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

The Fifth Book of the *Metaphysics*, as St. Thomas understands it, is entirely devoted to the 'intentions of names,' and is preceded by a treatise designed to explain how it is an essential condition of this science that some names should acquire different meanings — by design.<sup>1</sup> This condition is natural to human knowledge, for we can name things only as we know them. Now metaphysics is about things that are *defined* without matter and that can *be* without matter. But how can we know that there are such things, that some do in fact exist without matter whether sensible or intelligible? Knowledge and certitude about them will be either intuitive or demonstrative. If intuitive, then not only the subject of our science but even God, the extrinsic principle of this subject, would be immediately known and accordingly named. But this is absurd, if God can be known only by way of proof from things previously known. Now, if God can be known only from things previously known, these will be named first, and God will be named only with dependence upon the things first known and named. Since the things we name first are in the order of sense experience, all further naming will have to relate in one way or another to these things. In other words, unless the names employed by the metaphysician can be related to earlier impositions that refer to objects in the order of sense experience, they will be meaningless. Yet if such names receive new impositions, if they are more than metaphors, they simply must be ambiguous. And there is the rub.

Analogy, of course, is not an invention of philosophers; they all put words to use that in current usage already carry many meanings. Even those writers who make the most irate attacks upon the

---

1. Can *nomina æquivoca a consilio* be translated 'equivocal by design'? Lord Russell uses the expression 'systematic ambiguity.' It remains to be seen whether it will be generally received. Why not use 'analogous names' without further ado? Both in French and in English, 'ambiguous' and 'equivocal' are predominantly pejorative terms, whereas 'analogous,' when used in philosophy, tends to be technical. However, this is easily dispelled by explaining that an analogous name is simply a homonymous term, having more than one meaning *by design*, as distinguished from a word which has several meanings by mere chance. Still, is there a real need for analogous names? Cf. *Metaph.*, IV, c. 2.

slipperiness of human speech cannot escape the contagion ; in their very condemnations they themselves exploit analogical terms. The difference is that they appear unaware of the ambiguity which analogical terms give rise to, when it begins at home — including the fact that the terms ‘ analogy ’ and ‘ ambiguity ’ are themselves analogous and ambiguous. They avail themselves freely of ‘ experience,’ ‘ meaning,’ and ‘ verification,’ unaware of the many senses each of these terms enjoys. Some *are* aware of the vagueness, and conclude that words are unsuitable for anything but everyday affairs and poetry, not to mention much maligned rhetoric. However, in trying to make this plain they do in fact use words, most of which are analogous — lending themselves to ambiguity when their analogy is not recognized — and in a fashion typical of a brand of rhetoric which would indeed merit their rebuke.

It is all very well to protest exasperating ambiguity, the main truth remains : how could we do without words and yet be political animals ? And how could we get on without the many meanings which the same word acquires ? How prevent its use except by commanding people to shut their mouths ? Except by shooting first, as it were, before the other fellow can get his gun out ?

But the matter is perhaps not so simple as this. There is, for instance, the respect in which, as Hermann Weyl points out, “ you cannot apply mathematics as long as words still becloud reality.” If, in discussing relativity theory, you retain the words *past*, *present*, and *future*, you will generate needless confusion. You must resort to ‘ purely symbolic constructions,’ that will be unambiguous, at least for the time being. There are large areas of science where ‘ natural language,’ as distinguished from symbolic constructions, proves a genuine hindrance, and is even utterly hopeless. But the old question recurs : why must even metamathematics have recourse to words as distinguished from symbols ? Do we pay enough attention to the reason ? Take the following statement from Weyl, where he assumes the distinction that he nowhere else explains : “ The mathematical game is played in silence, without words, like a game of chess. Only the rules have to be explained and communicated in words, and of course any arguing about the possibilities of the game, for instance about its consistency, goes on in the medium of words and appeals to evidence.” (Before proceeding on I would like to call your attention to the fact that each of the following words in his text has many meanings : ‘ mathematical,’ ‘ game,’ ‘ silence,’ ‘ rule,’ ‘ explain,’ ‘ communicate,’ ‘ argue,’ ‘ possibility,’ ‘ consistency,’ ‘ evidence,’ the word ‘ word ’ being most confusing of all. Yet I have read Hermann Weyl for more than a quarter of a century and feel sure that he knew what he was talking about. This I add lest the reader think that I underrate him).

Is the need for imposing new meanings upon the same words really imperative ? Notice I am speaking of words, not of definitions. Words used within the confines of mathematics are univocal, each having a single meaning even though each may apply to widely different objects without a change of meaning. In Euclidian geometry, for instance, the terms are either generic ('figure'), or specific ('circle'). On the other hand, if you take the operational viewpoint of computation, you may ignore what a circle is as well as its name ; you will be concerned only with how a circle can be given, and the result will be a symbolic construction such that to name it will be irrelevant and confusing. Euclidian geometry, too, must resort to construction, but the point is that the constructs, such as the plane equilateral triangle, can be named without equivocation.

Once we recognize the type of names that have been used in mathematics, we see the sense in which here the use of them fails to raise much of a problem. The history of mathematics bears this out. But the issue is quite different in the other branches of philosophy, that is, in the non-mathematical study of nature (if such a study be allowed) and in metaphysics, where words and their very analogy are crucial. Seeing that what it names is so remote from familiar things, metaphysics must show the greatest concern for words lest it turn to sheer verbalism, as Aristotle warned.

How do analogical terms arise ? For the present we may put aside the case of words such as 'seal' and 'bat,' which just happen to have several meanings — I mean by chance, as Aristotle puts it: *hapo tuchès* (*Ethics* VII, 6, 1096 b 27) — as distinguished from those which refer to different things that hold themselves in some proportion or other, having order and reason behind them. Greek, because of its relative simplicity and sparseness of vocabulary, at least as to roots, exhibits most strikingly orderly progression toward new meanings imposed upon the same word ; yet this now dead language did manage to convey a large body of knowledge, while our living tongues are littered with terms (though most of them are now technical) derived from the Greek. Take the words *logos*, *archè*, *aitia* or *aition*, *morphè*, *eidos*, *hylè*, etc., not to mention *einai*. Any sound lexicon, such as Liddell and Scott's, will show how these words acquired new meanings which, far from expelling the previous ones, very often presuppose an understanding of them. In Greek, even more than in Latin, one can see why the same word was retained to convey widely different conceptions and widely different things ; whereas in our living languages as soon as we are faced with a new conception or novel aspect of a thing we are prone to borrow foreign terms instead of imposing new meanings on words already in use. Of course, the world has turned out to be ever so much more complex than the Greeks could surmise, though I suggest our practice may also betray the fact that in our minds the world is quite disjointed, and that we cannot see forest for

trees. At any rate, where the Greeks could say so much with few words, with a vocabulary as scattered as ours, we could hardly recover the order between the many things to each of which we feel compelled to give a different name — as if all the things we name were immediately known and therefore separately nameable — except by verbose circumlocution. (Aristotle's more philosophical works have never been very intelligible in translation, unless the translation is made unreadable. Where he speaks of 'what a thing is,' we translate 'essence,' incurring the risk of being pinned down to the word as no more than a grammatical artifact; and we render 'that for the sake of which' by the so easily discarded 'final cause.')

Let us examine a case in point, such as *hylè* (or even its Latin equivalent *materia*). Lexicons will list several meanings somewhat in the following order: (a) forest, woodland; (b) wood cut down, timber, lumber; (c) the stuff of which a thing is made; generally, materials. Finally the word was extended to mean 'that of which anything is composed,' even though this might be as various as the vapour of a cloud, the sides of a triangle, or the terms of a syllogism. We know, besides, that in Plato this word received a new imposition to be found nowhere else, quite different from the one that Aristotle will be led to. Now the point is that in these last instances, too, the word remains related to those other more familiar meanings, so that the new meaning supposes the old.

In other words, a term (and this word *term* is itself a case in point) may have some original meaning which it is well to know if its later impositions are to be understood, that is, the applications of it to things which either cannot be known readily, or without proof, and therefore cannot be named without reference to something already more known to us. For if words are first signs of what we have in mind regarding certain things, so that they refer to these things only through the mind's conception of them, then, the way in which words signify will not depend immediately on the way in which things are in themselves, but on the way they become known to us and are present in the mind. And hence it is that we can name a thing only as we know it and that, in naming things, we follow the progress of knowledge.

And that we should transfer names of things more known to things less known is reasonable since our knowledge itself proceeds from the more known to the less known with dependence upon the former. (Thus the word *distance* has been transferred from things that are apart locally, to distance in time, distance between simple and complex systems, between ideas, and philosophies). The reason for this procedure lies in the proportion between various coordinated meanings. It should be noted, however, that it is not the historical order of these meanings which concerns us here; the historical order is a matter for philology, it is not the one we are concerned with although it can sometimes reveal orderly progress in knowledge.

Nor are we now attending to words as artifacts, nor to how they achieved the structure now theirs ; in the latter respect, for example, the origin of the word *materia* remains obscure. For the purpose we have in mind, the origin of the word may be relatively unimportant. What is of moment is that we should be cognizant of some primary meaning that can be readily verified. When told that the word *materia* meant 'lumber,' a relative term meaning wood in relation to construction, we are able easily to verify it, since it refers to something we know well. In fact, we grasp this meaning better than that of plain wood as known more distinctly in botany.

The distinction we have just made between philological origin, and reference to something well known such that the term can be immediately interpreted here and now, goes to show that on occasion even an erroneous etymology will do (I have in mind the use Aquinas makes of Isidorus of Seville). For we distinguish *that whence* the name is taken for the purpose of signification (*id a quo nomen imponitur*) and *that which* it is imposed to signify (*id ad quod imponitur ad significandum*). Now, *that whence* may be etymology, as in the case of 'cocktail' or 'bluefish ;' but it may also be some primary meaning, a meaning in the sense of *that which*, as in the case of *materia* signifying lumber. (*Id a quo* and *id ad quod* are plainly distinct in the case of etymology, as can be shown from a word such as bluefish. If, aware that the name is taken from *blue* plus *fish*, we insisted that all blue fish ought to be bluefish, and all bluefish blue, we would create utter confusion in ichthyology. Besides, in some instances, *that whence* the name was taken to signify, and *that which* it signifies, are in fact the same. For, as St. Thomas points out,<sup>1</sup> those things which are known by themselves, such as warmth, cold, whiteness, and the like, are not named from other things : *that whence* the names signify and *that which* they signify are in such cases the same.

Notice that the examples just quoted are of proper sensible objects as distinguished from common, or from incidental, objects of sensation. This does not mean that the identity of *id a quo* and *id ad quod* is found only in such cases, but merely that these are more obvious. 'Length' would be an example of a common sensible object, and 'hand' of an incidental one. To return to words standing for proper sensibles, as artifacts these differ from one language to another, and within a single language they have changed in the course of time and are likely to continue doing so. The point is that what they first signify remains within easy reach and can be readily pointed out. When I say 'readily' I do not imply that I know exactly 'what blue is,' nor that I can define it beyond interpreting the name ; nor do I mean the identity in question to be such that the word 'blue' cannot be an *id a quo* with respect to a further mean-

1. *Ia Pars*, q.13, a.8, c.



ing. Such is apparently the case when I describe blueness by the angle of refraction in a prism. But this is not the same as to define the proper sensible itself, though I observe that what I see and what is refracted are somehow related.

The same holds for 'length.' However, in this case, I can define the word not just by its interpretation, but also define 'what length is,' namely, 'extension in one dimension.' But the imposition of the word appears to change when I say that 'the standard of length has no *length*,' or that 'I can know that a thing has length without knowing what its *length* is,' i.e., without knowing 'how long it is.' And what happens when the same terms are used to signify mathematically abstract objects?

The third example, that of 'hand,' is a more difficult one inasmuch as it refers to an object that is sensible only *per accidens*. We know fairly well what we are talking about when we refer the name to a human hand; but when we refer it to an ape, a beaver, or a squirrel, does it mean quite the same? Or does it become an *id a quo* for an extended meaning? You can see that whatever the point, it is a debatable one, while this was less true in the previous cases. Nonetheless, so long as we confine the word 'hand' to the human hand, this interpretation brings our mind to rest as to *id ad quod imponitur*, however little we may know of anatomy and physiology.

In connection with this word 'hand,' allow me to call your attention to the gulf which can come to separate *that whence* the name was imposed, from a later accepted meaning or *ad quod*. According to my etymological dictionary, our word *manifest* (whether it be taken as a verb, an adjective, or a noun) comes from the Latin compound of *manus* and *fendere*. (The latter appears in our *fend*, *defend*, *offend*, etc.) Now, *manu fendere* meant 'to seize' or 'to smite by the hand.' *Fur manifestus* was a thief caught in the act, hence a 'palpable' thief. Then, *manifestare* became 'to make plain,' 'to make to appear distinctly,' 'to put beyond question or doubt,' etc. From 'palpable' the adjective came to mean, more generally, 'evident to the senses' (especially to sight, the sense of distinction and variety), 'apparent,' 'distinctly perceived;' then, more abstractly, 'obvious to the understanding,' 'evident to the mind;' 'not obscure or hidden.' Notice, again, that knowledge of the etymology is not indispensable, and not always useful, but that if we take the meaning of *manifest* as 'obvious to the understanding,' or 'evident to the mind,' reference to something more known than understanding or mind will prove helpful, to say the least. Plainly, the Latin term referred first of all to something in the order of sensation. This is only natural if sensation is prior to our knowledge of understanding as distinct from sensation.

You can see how anyone who follows Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book V, on the intentions of names, must agree with logical positivists,

empiricists, or analytical philosophers when they insist that if a term is to have meaning it must refer to something that, in one way or another, can be verified in sense experience.<sup>1</sup> Notice the qualification which some of them would not accept (though they do so implicitly as they speak or write), namely, 'in one way or another.' Take, for instance, the terms *light* or *sight*. These were originally imposed to mean that which allows our eyes to see, such as sun or candlelight; and sight meant eyesight. Now, according to common usage the term *sight* extends to all knowledge obtained through the other senses. Thus we say, as St. Augustine pointed out, 'see how it tastes, how it smells, how warm it is.' And so it is with the name *light*, which was extended to mean that which makes manifest according to knowledge of any kind, so that we say such things as 'Let us look at this problem in the light of new evidence,' or 'If we view this question in the light of calculus,' etc.

Such changes of impositions imply that we have grasped a proportion of some kind between the various meanings, such that the unchanging identity of the name, along with its new intentions or relations, established between the name and the different things it names, cannot be haphazard. If they were, such a term would be purely ambiguous, like 'seal,' which may mean the marine animal, or a signet, or some other type of sign. But the term *sight* is not totally ambiguous in this way: while it has many meanings, there is an order among them. It means one thing in 'to see the equilateral chalk triangle on the blackboard,' another in 'to see what the term *equilateral triangle* means.' As regards order, the former is for us the first meaning; the other is not so well known. Still, it refers to a seeing that is in a sense more so than the vision which I share with my cat. The new meaning may come later in our knowing, but what it now refers to, namely this new kind of apprehension, is, absolutely speaking, prior to what is conveyed by the earlier meaning. And by this I only mean that I would rather lose my eyesight than lose my mind.

Such terms, then, have several meanings, and they acquired them not by mere chance, but by design: they are intended to be

---

1. Cf. ST. THOMAS, *Ia IIae*, q.3, a.6: "... Consideratio speculativae scientiae non se extendit ultra virtutem principiorum illius scientiae, quia in principiis scientiae virtualiter tota scientia continetur. Prima autem principia scientiarum speculativarum sunt per sensum accepta; ut patet per Philosophum in principio *Metaph.* [980 b 29], et in fine *Post.* [100 a 6]. Unde tota consideratio scientiarum speculativarum non potest ultra extendi quam sensibilibus cognitio ducere potest." *Q.D. de Veritate*, q.12, a.3, ad 2: "... Quia primum principium nostrae cognitionis est sensus, oportet ad sensum quodammodo resolvere omnia de quibus judicamus; unde Philosophus dicit in III *Coeli et Mundi*, quod complementum artis et naturae est res sensibilis et visibilis, ex qua debemus de aliis judicare; et similiter dicit in VI *Ethic.* (cap. viii in fin.), quod *sensus sunt extremi sicut intellectus principiorum*; extrema appellans illa in quae fit resolutio judicantis."



that way — *a consilio*. The conceptions to which they refer are as many as the things real or ideal which they have been assigned to represent, but these conceptions are related in such a way that the one is not named without dependence on the other. 'The *light* of geometry' cannot be grasped without that earlier meaning of 'light' which is related to sensation. There is no escaping this demand of empiricism. (It is interesting to note that the new positivists are called 'logical,' and that *Metaphysics V* is about the intentions of names, relations that are the works of reason.)

The distinction between a given term as expressing different things that have some sort of proportion between them ('analogy' means no more than proportion; hence 'analogous names') and a term used as a metaphor is not always unmistakable. *Light*, for instance, in the 'light of geometry' can be an analogous term, but can also be taken as a metaphor (*Q.D. de Potentia*, q.4, a.2, ad 3). It is a case of metaphor when its original imposition referring to eyesight is retained without a new imposition that would express an object newly and distinctly seized at the term of some discourse or other. The force of metaphor, in poetry or rhetoric, depends upon using the term in a narrow sense that refers to something well known, as in 'a heart of stone.' Now, notice that the metaphor is based upon a likeness expressed in the mode of identity; by which I mean that the metaphorical term is used in each case with exactly the same meaning, although the same meaning obviously does not and cannot truly apply. And here lies the secret of metaphor's power to startle and stimulate the mind. But the analogous term has at least two distinct, yet interrelated, meanings with dependence of the one upon the other. I want to be plain about this dependence. It is not to be restricted to the dependence of a conclusion upon premisses; it may be a dependence that is based upon mere comparison, or one that is seen in the orderly progression from the more to the less obvious, even within the order of simple apprehension. Instances of the latter would be the various meanings of *principle* in *Metaphysics V*, of *cause* and of *nature*, of *one*, of *one per accidens* and of *one per se* respectively, of *part*, *whole*, etc. In this context, it is not so much history that is the principle of verification, but rather the order of what is more or less known, according to which order the meanings of these terms can be verified here and now.

But the meanings of some words can also depend on a process of reasoning, or on demonstration proper. Such is the case of all divine names in metaphysics, while even these refer to conceptions and things previously known to us, which are *that whence* the names were extended to mean what is proper to God.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Notice the important distinction St. Thomas makes, regarding the proper name of God, in *Ia Pars*, q.13, a.11, ad 1.

Many of the so-called technical terms of philosophy look forbidding (if not pedantic) because they are borrowed from another language, like the word 'philosophy' itself. And they appear all the more remote because they are usually taken from the later, more abstract impositions which had eventually become theirs in that language. In fact many such terms, as we now use them, have no prior imposition and remain up in the air, so to speak. Take the words 'syllogism' and 'abstraction,' for example. Even in Latin, the adverb *sylogistice* (used by Cicero) as well as the low Latin noun *sylogismus*, refer immediately to the extended meaning of the Greek term *sylogismos*, originally *computation, calculation*, from *sylogizomai*, to *compute, to reckon*. These words were in current use, even by the people who condemned Socrates; their etymology was clear. But in Latin, French, and English dictionaries, the first and only meaning of *sylogism* is 'a term of logic,' and reference is made to Aristotle. Actually, the word was once used by the man in the street, who could reckon, and tell you about it, but knew nothing about the extended meaning even though he put A and B together and concluded to C. Yet the passage from the meaning of the ancient Greek word in common use to its extended meaning can be followed as easily as the transition from *light*, as in 'sunlight,' to 'light on this subject of geometry.' Both in French and in English, the disparaging remark 'What does reasoning have to do with syllogisms?' may well draw applause from the gallery. Such resentment is only natural when the borrowed term is used outright to signify that which, without reference to something more known or more knowable to us, can be understood only with difficulty, or not at all. This kind of reference must be provided either by an earlier imposition, or by an etymology that leads to better understanding. Failing this verification, such so-called technical terms take on a fraudulent air which calls for exposure so long as their users carelessly presume to know just what they mean — which appears to be the usual case of metaphysics in our time.

The same holds for the word *abstraction*. Both in French and in English it now means, first and immediately, something far removed from what is well known in the order of sense experience, viz., 'a certain operation of the mind,' or 'the status of something related to thought as distinguished from mere sensation.' This assumes that we already know how and why we are distinguishing thought from sensation. The original Latin, like the Greek *aphairesis*, conveyed 'the act of drawing or separating from,' a meaning very near to the etymology: *ab, abs* (from, away from), and *trahere* (to draw, pull, take away). The sculptor, hewing away stone from stone, performs an abstraction in that primitive sense of the word. (This meaning survives in the noun 'abstract,' meaning a synopsis or summary drawn from a longer work, and in the whimsical use of the verb as

in 'the pickpocket abstracted my wallet.') Contemporary discussions on the nature of abstraction show how bewildering are the consequences of using words intended to mean, from the first, something which can be properly known only with dependence upon something we are more immediately aware of, and upon which the same word had already been imposed.

It is an essential task of the *sophos*, of the *sapiens*, *cujus est ordinare*, to do his best to explain the words he uses by leading them back to meanings that can be verified of things more known and beyond question. This need would not arise if, with Descartes, we could assume that what is most knowable in itself can be equated with what is most knowable to us — which is indeed the case in mathematics. To Descartes, the words 'God' and 'soul' meant something first known and most clearly known to us by intuition. And he believed that he was using the word 'soul' in the sense of Aristotle's *psyche*, according to the extended meaning which it bears in Book III *De Anima* (originally it meant 'the breath of life' — "Lend me a looking glass. If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, Why, then she lives." — And the Latin *anima*, 'a current of air, a breeze.') We do not mean that Descartes had nothing in mind when he used this word, but only that he nowhere provided a means of verification to satisfy the philosopher. Nor would he need to do so if we enjoyed the kind of intuitions with which he credits us. Of course the spiritual soul, like God, was an object of his Faith. But the paths to reasoned knowledge of the intellectual soul followed in Book III *De Anima* are long and devious, and only at the term of these may we rightfully conclude that the same word means the same thing. (It might be said that Descartes was misled in philosophy by an inopportune and all too hasty intrusion of his Christian Faith. He was a Christian philosopher in a sense that St. Thomas most emphatically was not. In Descartes we find philosophy that is never strictly natural science and natural wisdom: a philosophy that cannot abstract from faith.)

If we name things only as we come to know them, the very words we use to signify things never known except by some orderly progression, comparison, or reasoning process, could not possibly attain new meanings without these modes of discourse. Any statement containing, for instance, the word 'soul,' taken in a sense wholly unrelated to sense experience, yet with the assumption that this abstract significance could, or should, be its first imposition, is going to be a word not entirely understood by its author. Aristotle's instance is that of first philosophy when taught to the young. The neglect of meanings relating to experience, most especially in metaphysics, opens the way to a philosophical jargon — such as 'essences,' 'quiddities,' 'being' and 'existence' — that all can repeat but few feel any need to explain.

It has been observed that the original meanings of words have to do with things of rudimentary sense experience and practical life. We have seen examples in *psyche* and *manifest*. Because of the lowly origin of simple words in common use, many believe that to recognize them as relevant to philosophy, either directly or by extension, is to condemn philosophy and abandon it to anthropomorphism — although the whole vocabulary of Greek philosophy, however awesome it may have come to look in modern languages, was derived from such common words. Now such an attitude seems to reject the principle that knowing is progressive, going from more to less known with dependence upon the former, accompanied by suitable naming. Rather than surrender to words in common use, some suggest that the philosopher should create his own vocabulary from the very start, make it out of nothing, so to speak, and so employ only 'technical' terms divorced from usual meanings; much like the computer, or the mathematical physicist, who decides upon his own symbols.

If this assimilation were correct it would imply that philosophy, and metaphysics in particular, is a body of sentences which, even when grammatically correct, are unrelated to that which is actually better known to us. This would mean that philosophy, unlike mathematics, cannot be taught; which would of course be the case if, to be teachable, philosophy had to be a discipline in the same sense that mathematics is, i.e., if *mathesis* had but a single meaning. Like history, understood as a later imposition of the word which meant investigation, philosophy would be a species of narration, with less claim to the status of science than poetry.

If, in effect, philosophy amounted to nothing better than incommunicable intuitions,<sup>1</sup> the principle that words have a special relevance in philosophy — a principle which Aristotle and Aquinas taught and applied consistently, though with moderation, for there is a sense in which *sapientis est non curare de nominibus* — would never come under investigation at all. Now this happens to be the curious position to which we are in fact being led. Cajetan's *De analogia nominum* was a good enough title, but has little if anything to do with the content of his opusculum. Whereas Aristotle faces the subject of homonymous terms at the very beginning of the *Categories* before attempting to deal more explicitly with the realities for which

---

1. That the very word 'intuition' is itself an extremely analogous term has in effect been copiously illustrated by the Reverend Bernard Lonergan, s.j., in his timely *Insight* (Philosophical Library, New York, 1957). He provides, among other, telling instances of what Aristotle called "being constrained as it were by the truth itself" without as yet grasping the reason to account for what is already firmly held. *Physics* I, 5, 188 b 20; ST. THOMAS, *ibid.*, lect. 10 (Leon. edit., n.5); *Metaph.* I, 3, 985 a 10; ST. THOMAS, *ibid.*, lect. 6 (Cathala edit., n. 107). Our textbooks have oversimplified the matter, leaving the impression that all philosophy, ethics included (e.g. Gredt, *Elementa* II, *Ethica*), should be analytical, the way mathematics is.

they might stand, Cajetan immediately engages in metaphysical probings, implying, unwittingly, that the intentions of names as relations of reason depend solely upon metaphysical considerations. This would mean that metaphysics should be taught first, before logic, and even before grammar. But analogy is primarily a logical problem, to be used eventually in analogical naming by the metaphysician — *prout scilicet utimur logica, prout est docens in aliis scientiis . . . Convenit autem hoc proprie et convenienter fieri in logica et metaphysica eo quod utraque scientia communis est et circa idem subiectum quodammodo.* (In Boeth. de Trinitate, q.6, a.1, c. — So that we may sympathize with Heidegger when he allegedly declares that what we need most is not metaphysics, but grammar). Cajetan's method, which puts the cart before the horse, explains why he should reject a case of true analogical naming as abusive; and why, with John of St. Thomas after him, he takes so many analogous terms, such as 'predicable' or 'cause' as univocal, i.e., as if each term had some corresponding notion that is simply one, and as if the order of predication did not hold several widely different kinds of community.

The false position confronting us implies that progress from the more commonly known to the less known, as well as the new impositions of words that attend it, cannot be achieved. Thus a word, by a more original meaning referred to something practical, like 'manifest', as referred to seizing with the hand, could never be used in a proper sense to signify anything but this more original meaning; even 'symbol', which once meant the sign of an agreement, as a wedding-ring, could not be reasonably extended to stand for signs of those collections that cannot be named because they do not have the unity that naming requires. As St. Thomas says, *nomen unum vel nihil significat.* But he also distinguishes widely different types of *per se* unity. According to this axiom, if *unum* were said *uno modo*, once a word has been used to refer to something, whether in the order of sensation, or of action and making, it may never be extended to mean anything else in any proper sense; any new reference must be mere metaphor. If such were the case, admittedly philosophy could not name anything, for the excellent reason that there would be nothing known to need naming.

Philosophical terminology, much like that of common speech, may be ambiguous — but will be so by design and therefore analogous — especially in metaphysics. Although confusion may at times be the result (a confusion which will furnish the sophist with his opportunities), the identity of a typical term, which stands in relation to many things, veils a true orderly progress in knowledge from the more to the less known, supposing the constant dependence of the latter on the former. But whereas the lexicologist has no duty but to report the various meanings of words and origin of these, the philosopher, more particularly in metaphysics, must point out the



special meanings of concern to his science, and must establish how these special meanings follow an order extending from what is more knowable to us to that which is more knowable in itself, though proportionally less knowable to us. It must be added that the names employed in philosophy will never submit to a kind of mechanical handling which would attempt to fasten down each of the diverse meanings and to file them away as in a card-index. In good philosophy words must remain supple and take on nuances and connotations from their context, as proof that they are working in the service of thought. An outstanding instance of this expressive freedom is found in *Metaphysics* XII (7, 1072 b 25): "And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's own actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is the *supreme and everlasting animal*, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God." — Some prefer to translate *zoon* by 'living being.' But if St. Thomas's explanation is correct this is to miss the point entirely. 'Animal' is of course not used here as an analogous term but as an exemplum retaining its only proper meaning exclusively, without *translatio* which is characteristic of the exemplum. In bestowing upon God the name animal, Aristotle spans the gulf that separates the fulness of God's life from the life first known to us. "*Vita enim apud nos in solis animalibus apparet manifeste*" (Lect. 8). Here is striking proof that, even in the advanced sections of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle still bears in mind that which we know first, as essential to what we come to know thereafter.

It goes without saying that explanation in metaphysics is not merely explanation of names.<sup>1</sup> A full account of this difficult science would have to consider how it accomplishes demonstrations, and how it forms definitions, not to mention the very special way in which it uses logic. The modest objective of this paper was simply to draw attention to the truth that no explanation in metaphysics will be adequate — that none indeed will be soundly grounded — unless the need for this simple but thoroughly fundamental investigation of the meanings of words is acknowledged. In this respect Aristotle, and St. Thomas after him, are abreast of the most urgent problems of philosophy in our own time.

CHARLES DE KONINCK.

---

1. This paper — an expansion of some lines which appeared in 'Abstraction from Matter' (*Laval théol. et phil.*, 1957, n.2) — was read at a University of Notre Dame symposium on *Explanation*, toward the end of the first semester, 1959.