

### Formal and Material Objects in Maritain's Critical Realism

One reason we have failed to grasp the significance of the thing/object distinction may be this. Maritain tells us "We would say in Thomistic language that the thing is the 'material object' of the sense and intellect, whereas what we are calling object in this context . . . is their 'formal object.'" (93) When we read that, there is a temptation to think we know what we need to know about the thing/object distinction, because we understand the scholastic distinction between formal and material objects. And if that is all there is to the thing/object distinction, we have good reason to think that Maritain exaggerated its significance for epistemological problems. In fact, it is hard to see how Maritain can use that distinction against the skeptics and idealists he addresses in "Critical Realism" without begging their questions.

For the scholastics, it is true that "material object and formal object are grasped at a single stroke and indivisibly by the very same perceptions" (93), because formal objects "are aspects (it would be better to say 'inspects') of elements of knowability in certain ontological nuclei called things." (92) But for the modern epistemologist, these claims about the relation of our objects to things are precisely what stand in need of justification. The modern epistemologist will grant that our awareness relates us to objects, but she wonders about the relation of our objects to extramental things. If she is a skeptic, she may not doubt the possibility of their being extramental things, but she will doubt whether our consciousness gives us accurate information about things. If she is an idealist, she may not doubt that our consciousness gives us accurate information about things, but she will doubt whether these things have an existence that is other than being known.

Maritain, of course, did not seek a "justification" of knowledge in the sense of a direct

proof that our awareness reaches things in their extramental existence. He sought no more than to be able to reduce the opposite position to absurdity. He can prove realism without making our awareness of things indirect, because it is the proof that is indirect. But he claimed that the thing/object distinction allowed him to reduce the skeptic or idealist to absurdity. And it is difficult to see how the scholastic distinction between formal and material objects can serve to do that.

But while Maritain's analysis of thing and object is consistent with the scholastic use of the material object/formal object distinction, his analysis goes further, or rather, deeper. He asks us to consider what we are doing when we call something an "object" of consciousness; what conditions are necessary for calling something an "object." The subject-object polarity is a fundamental fact of consciousness, encountered in our reflective self-awareness. We can ask epistemological questions only because we are aware of our own consciousness. And this reality we call "consciousness" is a relational reality, a way of relating to terms non-identical with itself that we call its "objects." Maritain saw that the conditions necessary for recognizing the situation we call consciousness's relation to objects provide a reduction to absurdity of the positions of the skeptic and the idealist.

xxx formal and material objects, March 9, 91

In asking what we are doing when we call something in "object," he is telling us, in effect, don't just think about what you learned about formal and material objects when you read Aquinas, Cajetan and Poinsoot. Think about something deeper, something presupposed to what they say. And since it is presupposed to what Aquinas says, historical consistency with Aquinas is not the issue. Aquinas cannot say what he says without doing what Maritian says he does, namely, doing

whatever is necessary to call something and "object," whether a formal or a material object.

December 8, 90

To state that an object is what ever of a thing is made manifest to knowledge is true but does not show us how the thing/object distinction AIDS us in solving the problem of realism and can even appear circular as an attempt to solve that problem. What is missing is just what it means to call something and "object." What we achieve in calling it that is to relate it to knowledge. We "throw it against" knowledge and the knower, as the Latin root of "object" suggests.

Another argument that the thing/object distinction is not just the material object/formal object distinction: the thing/object distinction is essential to the problem of our knowledge of truth. This goes beyond the material/formal object distinction, at least beyond its application to distinguishing diverse modes of knowing, sensory, physical, mathematical and metaphysical.

Maritain, truth, thing-object, formal objects and material objects, Aug. 21, 94

Maritain seems to immediately identify the thing-object distinction with the material object/formal object distinction and to take the latter for granted. As I point out in "The Problem of Thing and Object in Maritain," what he is really doing, when he introduces the concepts of material and formal objects is to begin an argument(s) that concludes to the identity of formal objects with material objects. Taking a cue from that footnote in The Material Logic of John of St. Thomas, that I quote in TPTOIM: maybe the argument goes this way:

First, truth requires that objects be identical with things that are more than objects. But that means that objects are not, or need not be, the whole of things. In fact, in human knowledge, our objects could not be the whole of things. If an object were the whole of a

thing, we could not identify it with another object, which is what humans must do in order to know the truth. So human knowledge of truth requires what the Scholastics expressed by the doctrine of formal and material objects. The formal object must never be alone; it is always known as an aspect of something more than an object and so something (at least potentially) more than the way it is objectified by the formal object.

Thing/Object - AA - BIG 11-12-91

See the handwritten note of this weekend (11-9 or 10) about the relation between the thing/object and material object/formal object distinctions. What I say there about how the relation is developed in Maritain and Simon is correct, but the relation can be put even more simply.

Idealists and Skeptics grant that our awareness has objects. So the only question is the (known or knowable) relation of those objects to extramental things. To ask that question amounts to the same thing as asking, in Scholastic language, whether we know material objects by means of knowing formal objects. Why? because to ask the relation of objects to extramental things is to ask whether they are identical, in whole or part, with what extramental things are, whether they are identical with one of an extramental thing's ways of being a thing. It is to ask whether they are aspects of what a thing is, in whole or part. And when we translate those ways of asking the question into scholastic language, the "aspects of things" become "formal objects" and the things become "material objects."

Still, that is not to say that the scholastic language is helpful in the sense of providing the logical foundations for refuting idealism and skepticism. It is really only helpful in the sense of relating the question to issues that Maritain's scholastic readers would be familiar with as issues in their tradition.

So Maritain is saying, in effect, look, when I am asking (dialectically) about the relation of objects to things, and when I am arguing about the identity of objects to things, I am talking about something you should be familiar with even though what I am talking

about may \*seem\* unfamiliar. To start from the fact that skeptics and idealists grant that we have objects and to argue that these objects are known to be identical with ways of being extramental things (actually or possibly) is in effect to ask and argue whether the formal objects of our acts of knowledge, which the opponents admit that we have, reveal material objects because they, formal objects, are always known as identical with what actual and possible existents are.

And those existents are extramental existents, because existence is the primary element in "more than objects" making them more than objects. Actual or possible existence is a feature they possess as more than objects, because every other feature of that kind they possess includes a relation to existence, a capacity for existence, as part of its identity, as part of what constitutes its being more than an object.

[I'm not at all sure about the following:

Maritain - AA 12-2-91

The question whether a perceptual object is real or phenomenal is not the question whether the object is an aspect (formal object) of a thing (material object). It is the question whether the perceived object as a whole, the perceived thing, has an existence that is other than being known.

Maybe the strict idealist's problem, the problem of Berkeley and Husserl, should not be stated in the material object/formal object vocabulary. Maybe only the skeptic's problem should be so stated. The idealist does not deny that the immediate object attained is an aspect of a larger thing; she denies that the existence of this thing is other than being-an-object. She denies that its existence is other than being-attained. But Maritain would say that what is attained, strictly and formally, is always less than what the "thing" is alleged or believed or hypothesized to be. So maybe Maritain is saying that the idealist denies in fact, whether or not intentionally, that we attain a material object when we attain a formal object.]

May. 31, 95

Maritain introduces the thing/object distinction immediately following his discussion of the nature of truth. Now he is talking about whether we can know the truth. In effect, he is saying: If (hypothetical) we can know truths about things, we certainly can't do it if we have to know things completely; for we can't know things completely. So if we can know any truths about things, our objects must be objectified as, knowable as, aspects of possible things. The question of actuality does not arise yet. All we have to know at first is that this object is presented as an aspect of a possible thing. Hence our formal objects are presented as aspects of possible material objects.

Xxx Maritain - T/O - BIG- AA 7-10-91

Quote Simon on the difference between the correspondence between thought and thing and the correspondence between object and thing. That is the point Maritain learned from Noel's article on the Intelligence and the Real! To know the truth requires knowing the relation between the objects thought about, not the relation between thought and the objects thought about. If we know the relation between the objects thought about, the relation of our thought to those objects follows!

So Maritain starts with a definition of truth in terms of a conformity between thought (i.e., a construct of thought, a proposition) and things. But then how do we know truth? He realized between Reflexions and DOK that knowing the truth required knowing that the object thought about, not the thought, was identical with a thing. So that is why, in DOK, he says a new problem, the problem of thing and object, confronts us. Why does it confront us? Because that is how the truth is KNOWN! This interpretation is confirmed by Simon's treatment.

But of course, objects are not always identical with things, because propositions are not always true. But the next sections of DOK look at this from different angles. First, from the angle of what is "analytically" first in intellectual knowledge. Objects are not always

identical with things. But in the case of the principle of non-contradiction, there is no possibility of lack of truth, i.e., of lack of identity of objects with things. Likewise, there is no possibility of our primary concept, being, not being identical with things, at least with possible things.

Next, if and when sensation occurs, there is identity between the object and an actual thing.

Next, the argument can be extended to intellectual knowledge in general, not just our "analytically first" intellectual knowledge. Every concept represents a possible being. And every judgment requires identity between object and things. So the end of that section goes to prove the assertion made at the beginning, namely, that truth requires thing/object identity.

In all these cases, he is saying that there is a formal object attained. If not, the consciousness to be evaluated in terms of the goal it reaches would not even exist to be evaluated. But in each case, analysis of the formal object and the way it is attained will show that the formal object is attained as a feature of a material object. We can distinguish the formal object only as a means by which something more than itself is attained.

But also note that when Maritain justifies his claim that the t/o problem is the nub of the critical problem, he does not make use of the f/m object aspect of the t/o distinction. He only makes use of the more-than-an-object aspect of the distinction. That is more basic than the f/m object aspect, because it is presupposed to calling f/m objects objects. But the f/m object distinction is itself a case, an instance, of what is an object being more than an object. For what is describable in relation to a mode of consciousness as "formally attained by that consciousness" is never attained by that consciousness in isolation so that what is attained by that consciousness is solely what is formally attained by that consciousness. It is never attained as it is described when called "what is formally attained." For as so described, it is distinguished from what is more than so attained. And the formal object is always more than what is describable as formally attained; for the formal object is always

attained as an aspect of a thing, a more-than- formal-object.

It's almost as if Maritain saw the importance of the t/o distinction from Noel and then looked for a traditional "justification" for using the distinction. He found that justification in the f/m object distinction. But the latter distinction had gone beyond Aquinas by the time of Cajetan and Poincot. Poincot, in particular, emphasized the "logical" character of the abstraction that distinguishes the sciences. That is, by Poincot, the logical nature of the characteristics objects acquire as objects was recognized. So the t/o distinction was the one Maritain needed to express Noel's insights, and the t/o distinction developed, historically, out of the f/m object distinction. But the t/o distinction went beyond the latter distinction, even by the time of the commentators.

Maritain transforms the t/o distinction the way Aquinas transformed the act/ potency distinction. In Aquinas, t/o may be equivalent to the f/m object distinction. In Maritain, the latter is subordinate to the former. I.e., when there is an object of a certain kind of knowledge relation, the object must possess certain properties to be the object of that kind of relation. I.e., that kind of relation needs a certain kind of object as its extrinsic formal cause.

Thing and object, truth, Maritain, DOK, material and formal objects, Jan 5, 1998

A comment on the logic of Maritain's introduction of the concepts of thing and object in *The Degrees of Knowledge*: First, he explains the definition of truth. Then, he says that truth requires that diverse objects of knowledge be identical other than as objects, or as more than being objects. So truth requires that every "object" be more than an object; i.e., truth requires that awareness of a formal object *logically include* awareness of a material object. Truth, and so knowledge of truth, requires that awareness of an object be



awareness of it as more than an object, as more than what is made an object in *this way*, where "what is made an object in this way" refers to the formal object.

So he is not begging the question by assuming the scholastic doctrine of formal and material objects. He is saying that that doctrine follows necessarily from the definition of truth, if there is to be truth and if we are able to know it.

Feb 24, 1998

If we didn't get a material object along with a formal object, we couldn't even ask whether "Snow is white" is true; we couldn't even contemplate its being true; we couldn't even understand the sentence. In other words, if we were not from the beginning aware of a formal object as an aspect of a possible material object, then we couldn't even ask . . .

### Thing/object

Maritain tells us that by "thing" and "object" he means the material and formal objects of knowledge, respectively. That statement is true, but does not reveal Maritain's contribution. He asks us to consider what it means to call something an object of knowledge and what conditions are necessary for us to recognize an object of knowledge as such. "Object of knowledge" is a relative concept; it describes something as a term of a knowledge relation. But if what is first known about something is that it is an object of knowledge, the term of the first knowledge relation is another knowledge relation, since that is what it is to know that something is an object of knowledge. And what is the term of this other knowledge relation? Short of infinite regress, therefore, what is first known must be known as something other than "an object of knowledge."

Recognizing that something is an object, therefore, is a reflective act bearing on a prior act that recognizes something that is more than an object, i.e., recognizes it as a thing.

After we reflect, we can call what is first known an extra-objective or metalogical thing, to distinguish what we first know about it from what is known on reflection. But that which is first known and that which is reflectively known as a object are identically the same thing. To be a thing and to be an object are really distinct. But that which is a thing is only logically distinct from that which is an object.

And when a thing is known, predicates accrue to it describing its status as object that are other than the predicates that describe its status as a thing. For example, the same human nature is universal in its status as object of conceptual consciousness and individual in its status as the nature of Socrates. This distinction between what is known to be true of something as a thing and what becomes true of it as an object when it is so known is necessary for understanding what Maritain's description of the object of metaphysics as possible and abstract and as belonging to the "degrees of abstraction.

Formal and material objects: diverse objects can be identical as things only if each object is an aspect (formal object) of something more than an object. (Maybe put in a footnote to Possenti how to justify the link between thing/object identity and material objects and formal objects.) So the question at the end of the first paragraph of the thing/object section, namely, how is it possible for us to know the identity of thing and object, which is required if we are to know the truth, links immediately with the material object/formal object analysis. Knowledge of thing object identity is not even possible unless objects are what the scholastics called formal objects and things are what they called material objects.

From there Maritain goes onto argue that formal objects do in fact present material objects and that formal objects are unthinkable except as doing so for a variety of reasons, reasons which differ somewhat for intellectual and sensory objects. E.g., merely contemplating the truth of a statement requires understanding each object as presenting something potentially more than an what is objectified in this way, and hence potentially identical with another object.

Maritain - T/O - AA 7-9-91

Another approach. Maritain gets behind the f/m object distinction to what it presupposes, i.e., what it means to call something an object. How do we get from what it means to call something an object to the f/m object distinction? To be an object is to be term of a knowledge relation. If we assume something is an object, we are assuming it is term of a knowledge relation. Or, if we assume there is a knowledge relation, we are assuming it has a term. Now go from this abstract description to a concrete knowledge relation, like seeing. For a relation of seeing to exist, there must be a term for this relation, something must be attained by the relation. But certain things are true of this term that are not true of the terms of other knowledge relations (epistemology evaluates what is attained by different knowledge relations and compares them), e.g., it is individual and colored. What is attained by conception, on the other hand, is universal and need not be colored. But in both cases, what is attained must be more than an object. So what is attained cannot include features, like universality, defined solely by reference to objects as objects.

Also, the fact that seeing requires color to be attained does not mean color is the sole thing attained. For a knowledge relation to exist, something must become an object in some way, by some means, through some feature. But the intrinsic causes of that feature may require that, if it is attained, other aspects causally related to it are attained at the same time. And the causal structure of the act of sensation requires that the real existence of the object be attained.

Try this: what is objectified must be more than an object. But is it the whole thing? Yes and no. What is attained as object need not be described as the whole thing, if and when we are describing it as object. Blue or a patch of blue cannot exist separately from a blue thing. But it can be considered separately and described separately without distortion, when we are describing it as object \*in specific opposition to\* describing what is true of it

as a feature of a thing. But even the preceding statement needs the qualification that one of the things true of blue or a patch of blue as object is that it is objectified as a feature of a thing.

The object must be more than an object, but can it be less than a thing? Only in the sense in which the formal object is less than a thing, but the formal object is never the whole object. The whole object is always more than an object. But the formal object is that about it by means of which it becomes an object, by means of which it is term of a knowledge relation.

Thing/object, formal and material objects, 3-17-95

How get to formal and material objects from the strict definition of "object": The mind has objects. Idealism is not skepticism; so the object is a potential thing, a potential real existent. But a thing, even a potential thing, is never objectified by the whole of itself, and so it is objectified by means of features which constitute formal objects through which a material object is made known.