ARISTOTLE AND ABSTRACT TRUTH—A REPLY TO MR. SCHILLER.

THERE are two problems raised by Mr. Schiller's paper on 'Aristotle's Refutation of Aristotelianism,' *MIND*, N.S., No. 89, which may with convenience be discussed separately. First, do the discrepancies alleged between the various passages treating of the relation of universal to particular really exist? Secondly, is the weapon fashioned out of these more or less thorny passages useful for the purpose for which it is required—the belabouring of Formal Logic?

In answer to the former question I submit that Mr. Schiller has misinterpreted Aristotle's meaning throughout, identifying ἀπλῶς with 'in general,' in fact equating it with καθόλου. In particular I should point out that the passage in *Topics*, 115 b 12 f., has been miscomprehended. In the chapter (xi.) in which this passage occurs, Aristotle discusses the effect of πρόσθεσις and (to omit the earlier part of the chapter) arrives at the case in which something added (προσθεῖν τι) to the original thing (τι ὑπάρχον) makes it to be in a greater degree what it was before, *e.g.* good. What really is *better* of course, is the whole (το ὅλον 115 b 1) which results from the addition.

Next Aristotle points out that if a thing is capable of becoming better in virtue of some addition, then it is ἀπλῶς good, *i.e.*, irrespective of the addition, for if it were not good (to some extent) to start with, it could not be described as more or less good.

Now comes Mr. Schiller's passage—similarly if the thing (which may acquire some modification of character by the addition of something to it) has a character (*e.g.* good or right) κατὰ τι or ποτὲ or ποῦ, it has this character ἀπλῶς *i.e.* not in virtue of the addition. The reason given is similar to that given before (the case of more and less); if it could not have the character ἀπλῶς, it could not have it κατὰ τι or ποτὲ or ποῦ.

Obviously this passage has nothing to do with the relations of the I and A or E and I propositions. The τόπος in question is just the assertion that a thing of which you can say that it has a certain character on occasion or at a particular time or in some respect has that character (not *may have*) itself and not in virtue of some addition made to it.

Immediately afterwards follow the ἐνστάσεις as Mr. Schiller has narrated them. The two with which Aristotle deals at length are (1) the case of the Triballi, and (2) drugs being ἀπλῶς not beneficial

but yet beneficial in unhealthy localities. Now the form of the argument (115 b 24 f.) makes it perfectly clear that these two objections are refuted, and no doubt Aristotle could have produced similar refutations for the other cases. When we say that among the Triballi it is right to sacrifice one's father we are not really asserting that *in some places* it is right to do so; we say that is right *for the Triballi* wherever they are; i.e., our alleged case of πού is not a case of πού but of τισίν. Similarly with the beneficial nature of drugs; it is not a case of their being *sometimes* beneficial but of being good for a person in a particular condition of health. In fact these two statements 'It is right for the Triballi to sacrifice their fathers,' and 'Drugs benefit the sick,' are examples of assertions κατὰ πρόθεσιν, which may easily be true while a corresponding assertion made ἀπλῶς is false; as appears from the passages quoted by Mr. Schiller from the *Ethics*, and from the *Sophistic Refutations* also, if we may equate κατὰ πρόθεσιν with the ἐν μέρει λεγόμενον of 162 b 38. But 'It is right to honour the gods' is a statement made ἀπλῶς.

Thus it appears that the point to be established and the objections refuted in this passage are practically verbal, and there is no ground for the assertion that Aristotle is here trying to distinguish 'general truths which are absolutely true and such as become false when a qualification is added'. No doubt he would have admitted that when the god honoured was a 'fiendish' god and the rites by which he was honoured were 'beastly' it was not right to honour such a god. All he asserts in this passage is, that when you say that to honour the gods is right, you mean that the predicate attaches to the subject as it is itself and not in virtue of some special reason.

But—it will be at once objected—is not this to assert that the proposition is an unconditional truth? By no means. We did not assert that it was always right to honour the gods, but that *in the circumstance in which it was right*, it was to the honouring of the gods that the predicate right attached. The truth then is only a 'general truth' in the sense of one which holds for the most part and not unconditionally. It is true indeed that Aristotle once opposes ἀπλῶς and ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ (*Phys.*, 198 b 6); but, as we shall see, there are reasons for his so doing. But it might be at once objected that if a predicate attaches to a subject in certain circumstances only, then it does not attach to the subject as such but to the *whole* composed of the subject *plus* these circumstances, and therefore not ἀπλῶς. The reply to this seems to be that when Aristotle talks of a predicate belonging ἀπλῶς to a subject, the circumstances in which it so belongs can only be described negatively as the *absence of those conditions under which it would cease to attach to the subject*. This seems to be certainly the case in what Mr. Schiller calls his most striking example, *Eth. Nic.*, vi., 1, 9, which had, however, been anticipated in *Soph. El.*, 180 b 9 f., the

case of the things that are ἀπλῶς ἀγαθὰ. Health and wealth are 'unqualified' goods, but not for the person who does not use them properly. The condition which makes them not good is the existence of such a person and the circumstances in which they are good consist in his absence. What is true ἀπλῶς, then, is what we should call an 'abstract' truth; and indeed with Aristotle κατὰ πρόθεσιν is exactly the opposite of ἐξ ἀφαιρέσεως. Thus it might be 'abstractly' true that the internal angles of the triangles I draw are equal to two right angles, but in view of my bad drawing this might not be true. Nevertheless this abstract truth is not an unconditional truth, for it depends upon the condition of perfect drawing being fulfilled. Neither will it be in the ordinary sense a merely general truth (ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ), for it is not in respect of the embodiment of the figures in sensible lines which may sometimes be successful and sometimes not (in fact in this case probably never) that the mathematical proposition is true. An investigation of the way in which ἀπλῶς ὄν is used in the *Metaphysics* (cf. 1028 a.31 *et passim*) would, I think, confirm this view. 'Unqualified' being there is πρῶτως ὄν, i.e., being in the primary sense, but not being unconditionally. The distinction between ἀπλῶς and πῇ seems to be always that between abstract existence conceived as being primary and that concrete reality which is due to the mere conjunction with the primary of secondary and complicating characters. Often in the *Sophistic Refutations* the distinction seems to be extended in a popular and uncritical way to cases in which it can hardly be used philosophically. Thus it appears (163 a 11 f.) that ἀπλῶς the Ethiopian is black, but πῇ he is not i.e. in respect of his teeth! I suppose all that Aristotle meant is that from the popular point of view, however white his teeth are he is a nigger after all! But he admits that you get into difficulties when a thing is half white and half black. Which is it ἀπλῶς? Either both or neither. It is clear, however, that to Aristotle's mind all apparent contradictions between assertions made *simpliciter* and those that are *secundum quid* are due to our passing from the abstract to the concrete or from one level of abstraction to another, and that they do not affect the relations of propositions in the sciences, each of which is, so to speak, concerned with objects at the same level of abstraction, and in which judgments are at least intended to be unconditional truths, i.e. propositions not true merely *apart from* complicating conditions, but *whatever other circumstances may prevail*.

I come now to the second question raised, viz. the light this throws upon the theory of the syllogism. Mr. Schiller, pointing to Aristotle's admission that an 'abstract' truth does not imply the same statement made with a qualification or, to express the same thing in another way, is quite compatible with the falsity of the qualified statement, roundly asserts that we never get anything

else but such abstract truths as the major premises of our syllogisms, and that the conclusion is merely the same statement made subject to a qualification. Hence the major premise never implies the conclusion drawn from it and is quite compatible with the contradictory of that conclusion.

But mere assertion will not make things so. It is surely clear at least that the major premise of a syllogism is never intended to be a mere abstract truth, a statement true in general but not unconditional. We do not draw conclusions from 'abstract' truths unless we confuse them with unconditional laws (Aristotle's fallacy of *secundum quid*) and where we feel confidence in our inference we presume that the major premise is unconditional. If I believe that the assertion 'water under less than mean atmospheric pressure boils at under 100° C.' is an unconditional truth, it does imply (granting the minor) that 'water at the top of a mountain boils at under 100° C.'. The major premise of a syllogism then is not a statement made without the qualifications that are necessary to a belief in its truth. But neither is the conclusion an assertion in which a condition is added which was not specified in the major premise. To assert that this is so is an unjustified assumption. If I conclude that triangles X and Y are equal in area because they are both respectively equal in area to a third figure, their *being triangles* is no condition of the truth of this conclusion, which holds of them only as quantities. Similarly being at the top of a mountain is no condition of the truth of the proposition that water at the top of a mountain boils at less than 100° C. It is really irrelevant, since the same phenomenon would occur in a balloon, or in certain circumstances at sea level. Mr. Schiller's theory would involve the extraordinary doctrine that every determination of a particular subject is a condition of every assertion that can be made about it, e.g., that X's red hair was a condition of his weighing twelve stones!

But no doubt Mr. Schiller will regard the preceding answers as trivial. He will probably admit that the syllogism *intends* to employ major premises which are unconditional and infallibly determine the particulars which conform to the conditions they prescribe whatever the other 'accidents' of these particulars are. He will reply that no such major premises exist (*cf. Formal Logic*, p. 206 f.). He might ask either of two questions, *viz.*—(1) How is it possible to *believe* that any proposition is unconditionally true without having first examined all the particular cases which the syllogism professes to infer from it? (2) How is it possible to *know* that any proposition is unconditionally true without having first examined the particulars? The conditions under which any truth holds are apparently infinite in number, and *any* fresh case may disclose one that is new.

The answer to the first question is easy. Why not? Many things are believed without any justification at all. As a matter of

fact Mr. Schiller seems to believe that it is unconditionally true that all Formal Logic is nonsense; yet since some systems of Formal Logic are, no doubt, still in the making (in spite of all his efforts), he cannot have examined all the instances. Further I am quite sure that, on taking up the next treatise on Logic, as soon as the cloven hoof of formality is detected, he will at once infer the erroneousness of the teaching of the new specimen. If none of the previous exponents of Formal Logic have been red-haired he will not, on learning that the new author is red-haired, feel compelled to read to the end of the book!

The second question is more serious, *viz.* how can we know propositions to be unconditionally true? I can suggest no better answer than the old one which points to mathematics and its self-evidence. This answer will not satisfy Mr. Schiller, but he must produce some better reasons for his dissatisfaction than those in his last article. It is sheer irrelevance to point out that mathematics, like other sciences, may at times and for special purposes employ assertions that are true only in the majority of cases. It may at times be convenient to overlook the exception of the limiting case of the tangent and assert that all the lines in a plane that meet a circle cut it in two points. Somewhat in the same manner physics might declare that all liquids expand on being heated, omitting the case of water below 39° F. There is indeed not so much justification for the assertion in physics for, so far as I am aware, the behaviour of water has not been shown to be a limiting case, *i.e.*, one coming at the end of a series of instances and marking the transition to another series and so capable indifferently of being ranked along with either. But, however that may be, no science confuses sweeping assertions that disregard limiting or exceptional cases with unconditional laws. Both classes find a place within the science which recognises the 'risk' in arguing from the former and the necessity of the conclusion deduced from the latter.

Again it is useless for Mr. Schiller to remind us of the well-known fact that words shift their significance, *e.g.*, that the application of the term triangle has been widened so as to include curvilinear figures. Though the verbal term may change its meaning, the 'term real' does not change its nature and the extension to fresh species of the word triangle does not falsify or render conditional the ascription of its properties to the rectilinear triangle. The conditions under which they hold can be enumerated.

So far nothing has been done to rescue the laws of physical science from the doom of conditionality. But we need not allow Mr. Schiller a complete triumph even here. Some physical principles even have been acclaimed as self-evident and hence unconditional. Apart from this the whole of the modern theory of induction is a serious attempt to show how the unconditional nature of physical laws may be established apart from their self-

evidence. In any case there is a strong presumption that many of them are unconditionally true, and even though the whole of the conditions, under which the laws of nature hold, may not in any case have been positively enumerated, we are often able at least to characterise them negatively. Thus, though we may not be able to state all the conditions which must be fulfilled when water boils at less than 100° C., we may know that the undiscovered conditions do not lie among optical or acoustical or psychical phenomena. We may know that the truth is unconditional *relatively to these*. Accordingly though the climber shivering at the top of a mountain says he wants his egg cooked in three minutes, we are justified in expecting that the water will boil cold in spite of him. Or, to illustrate from psychology, we may be unaware why it is true that philosophers are impractical, yet we may know that the conditions under which this rule holds have nothing to do with Pragmatism. So (supposing the Pragmatists to have established their title) we should not feel justified in refusing to infer that a man was impractical merely because he was a Pragmatist.

In this brief article I have not attempted to reply to all Mr. Schiller's questions. He asks what is the *formal* difference between a conditional and an unconditional truth. I am sure I don't know, and I cannot see why Logic should attempt to find a formal difference between them, i.e., a difference in expression. As well might it try to find a formal difference between the true and the false. Mr. Schiller is continually trying to foist upon Logic the claim that it is able to do the work that properly belongs to the sciences whose procedure it criticises.

Mr. Schiller appeals to our sporting instincts by maintaining that 'real thinking' always 'takes a risk'. Now much of our thinking does take risks, e.g. when we work out the consequences of an hypothesis as yet unverified. We put our boat into the water to see if it leaks. But that is for the purpose of making it a better boat. Yet, when we have made it seaworthy, it may let us visit strange scenes and give us quite as much excitement as we want. Apparently, however, according to Mr. Schiller, when we do real thinking we go to sea in a sieve.

Perhaps I have not comprehended the real nature of the new non-formal Logic, but so long as it describes the nature of real thought only negatively, i.e. as being non-syllogistic, it is liable to miscomprehension. So far as I can see the only positive contribution of 'humanism' to the science up to the present consists (in the illustration of conclusions) in the substitution for the historic Socrates of the insular Smith (*Formal Logic*, p. 170).

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