

The Completeness of Concepts

INTRODUCTION

Our starting point for this chapter is one of the traits of concepts we discussed in the last chapter, *varying completeness*. Here, we will explore, in a bit more depth, how it is that concepts can be more or less complete in their grasp of reality. Questions that arise when we are faced with the idea of incomplete concepts include: “How is incompleteness of concepts related to truth of judgements?” and “Are concepts any good, if they are so imperfect?” Answering these, we will turn to a consideration of a property of concepts we learned about previously, comprehension, which we might describe as the full degree of completeness of a concept as signified by a term. We begin with completeness, or, rather, incompleteness and its causes.

CONCEPT INCOMPLETENESS

Let us return to the examples we examined in the last chapter in order to see the three underlying causes of concept incompleteness and how each is not due to untruth. First, there is incompleteness of concept due to the imperfections in the objects we experience. This is displayed in our example of a child, who only had experience of dogs with three legs. The child’s conception of dogs as three legged may lead to the false judgement “Dogs are three-legged things,” but the *concept* he possesses is not an untrue conception. It is merely incomplete because of the imperfection of the objects he has experienced. What he has is *of* the real thing, but it is a limited grasp.

A second cause of incompleteness is at work in the example of a person whose experience of humans includes only one or two humans. Again, this person’s concept of humanity is a *real* concept born of his interaction with *real* people, but it is bounded by the narrow breadth of the experience; that is, by the small number of examples. Think of it: If neither of the people can or ever did sing, he would be dumbfounded to hear singing from a human for the first time. If both of the people were men, he would be boggled to learn of the existence of females. If both were dark-skinned, black-haired and short, he would be surprised to meet a very light skinned, red-headed, and tall person. So, the completeness of our concepts is limited by the breadth of our experience.

Finally, our own natures and the limits of our ability to grasp things sets parameters on the completeness of our concepts. St. Thomas writes “But our manner of knowing is so weak that no philosopher could perfectly investigate the nature of even one little

fly.”¹ In other words, though on his account we do get hold of things, our hold is such that we cannot claim that it is perfect even for something so small and easy to understand as a fly. No concept in a mind is ever complete, save for those in the mind of God, who can know things just as they exist in themselves. Our minds, working through the senses, are always on the outside reaching in to grasp. This is hard, time consuming, and not everyone is even equally good at it.

COMPLETENESS AND TRUTH

There are, at least, two things to understand about the connection between completeness and truth. Recall that truth is always a matter of judgment. It comes when we assert “X is Y” or “X is not Y.” Judgment makes errors. There are false judgments. We get things wrong. This is, clearly, a different act from the concept, with a different function in our intellects, but notice that error in judgement is often due to the incompleteness of our concepts. When I do not know much about something, I am more likely to judge it wrongly. Nonetheless, the error is in judgement, not in the concept. What you know, you know. What you don’t, you don’t. A wise man knows the difference and judges accordingly.

Another important thing to notice is that we can and do make judgements about things we have not fully conceptualized all the time. When we describe apprehension as the “first act” of the mind, we might think that judgement cannot happen until apprehension is complete. This is not the case. A funny example that illustrates this point is as follows: imagine that you are out camping in the woods and that you hear a loud roar near your campsite in the middle of the night. Your concept of whatever is out there in the dark is *very* incomplete. You have only the vaguest sense of it. Nonetheless, you will probably make the judgement that it might be a large something that eats people, and then make the inference that you probably should head for the car quickly. Concepts are the basis for the second act, not necessarily as complete concepts, but as the first grasping of something that allows us to render judgements.

ARE CONCEPTS ANY GOOD?

We have been going on and on about how incomplete concepts are. With all of that said, we might ask, “What is the value of intellectual knowing?” Does it really give us something worth having, with all of its imperfection? The answer is a resounding “yes.” To begin with, our grasp is firm, though incomplete. This is evident in our experience of daily life as sensing, thinking beings who are part of and made for the knowing of the knowable world. We have intellect and the world is intelligible (that

¹ Aquinas, Thomas. *Expositio in Symbolum Apostolorum*. Translated by Joseph B. Collins. 1939. Edited and published by Joseph Kenny, O.P. at <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Creed.htm>

is it is knowable by intellect) such that we each make real progress toward grasping much of the order and beauty of its form. This firmness of knowledge is also confirmed by the whole history of man's learning – we know more now about things than we once did. Science is the noble quest for knowledge of ourselves, of the world, and of God, which really moves forward, stumbling often along the way, toward greater understanding.

In addition, it is important not to interpret incompleteness as meaning that the knowledge is bad or faulty. When we say a concept is incomplete, we mean only that it doesn't take in all that is there to be taken in. Concepts grab hold of the actuality and reality of things as they really are in their real natures. Asking if our concepts are good despite being incomplete is like asking if ice cream is worth eating, if we only get to eat part of the bowl? Absolutely! Especially since we know that we can return to eat more ice cream later on. What we do have gives us the real in its astounding beauty, robust authenticity, and wondrous actuality.

Finally, the knowledge of things, though incomplete, is sufficient to provide the basis for coming to know even higher truths. As we reflect upon concepts, reason about truths, and draw inferences, we can move beyond natural science and contemplate greater truths that are not tied to specific physical experiences. We can come to know that there is truth. We can realize the goodness of moral action, that love is the highest task to which we can aspire. We can reason to the understanding that things must be caused by some first and noblest cause, which we call God. All these truths begin to be known in our grasping of the natures of things.

COMPREHENSION

To close out our consideration of completeness of concepts, we turn to the idea of comprehension. We defined this previously as “the completely articulated sum of the intelligible aspects of a thing (basically, a list of all that goes into the whatness of the thing).” When talking about the comprehension of a term, we do not refer to the perfection of our conceptualization of it; rather, we refer to “all the meaning that the term ‘comprehends’ or includes within itself.”² That is, comprehension is the whole intelligible reality of a thing that *could be* grasped in a concept, but that *is* signified by a term. Do not be confused here. The point to get clear about, is that the incompleteness of our concepts is not because of incompleteness in the intelligibility of reality. The term, pointing to the reality, refers to even more than that of which the individual using it is thinking. As we improve, the completeness of our grasp approaches ever more closely to achieving a “completely articulated sum” of what a

² Kreeft, Peter. *Socratic Logic*, page 44. St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana. 2010. Edition 3.1.

thing is. We use comprehension in reference to terms and the objective meaning of the things to which they refer. We have here spoken about *completeness* in reference to our own conceptualization and how nearly it approaches to the whole reality of a thing. The comprehension of a term is always complete.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, our concepts, though incomplete for at least three reasons are firm, good, and the basis for our higher knowledge. Incompleteness of concepts can be the cause for errors in judgement, but importantly incomplete concepts are pretty normal as the basis for judgements. We might typify wisdom as knowing what you know and knowing what you don't know. We closed out our discussion of completeness by mentioning the comprehension of terms. The comprehension is all that a concept (which occurs in the mind of an individual person) could include, if it were complete. It is the articulated list of the intelligible aspects (all the whatnesses) of a thing. We will have the opportunity to look more deeply at how words signify concepts and things, as well as what comprehension, and its partner extension, are, in the next chapter.

EXERCISE 1—READING & ANNOTATION

SKIM ~ First, skim the reading and write out the chapter title and section headings as a mini-outline. Indent the section headings to the right.

1. _____

READ ~ Second, read the chapter all the way through. When you finish, stop, close your eyes and rest your mind for two or three minutes. Then recall for yourself what it was about.

NOTATE ~ Go back through the reading and complete the following tasks.

2. Find the main idea of the chapter and underline it. Write the words “Main Idea” in the margin next to it.
3. Number any important lists on the left-hand side with numbers inside of circles. Like this: ① At the beginning of the list, place a label designating what you are listing in the margin.
4. Find any “key terms” – important or technical words that are used in a specific way in the chapter – place a box around the first usage of the term. If there is a definition given there, underline it. If there is no definition given there, figure one out and write it in the margin.

EXERCISE 2—CAUSES OF INCOMPLETENESS

Identify which of three causes for incomplete concepts is the one most likely to limit the knower when a concept arises in his mind in each example.

- Name the cause: imperfection, breadth of experience, weakness of intellect.
- Then give a brief reason for your choice. Remember that you are assessing only the conceptualization, not the sensing, memory, judgment, etc.

6. A baby sees an aardvark for the first time.

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7. You contemplate the noses of all your cousins.

/

8. Einstein thinks about the nature of numbers.

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9. Aquinas thinks about God.

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10. A zoologist thinks about butter beans.

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11. A vegetarian thinks about meat.

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12. A student thinks about material logic.

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13. A mother thinks about her child.

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14. An artist thinks about color.

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15. A child thinks about the universe.

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16. A philosopher thinks about thinking.

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STUDY GUIDE

Add to the following notes to create your study tools for this chapter. Unpack the key terms, use quotations, make lists, etc. Be thorough, neat, and substantive.

Causes of Concept Incompleteness in Detail:

1. *Imperfection of Objects:*

2. *Breadth of Experience:*

3. *Weakness of Intellect:*

Two Important Connections between Concept Completeness and Truth

1.

2.

Three reasons concepts are good, despite being incomplete

1.

2.

3.

Comprehension: The whole intelligible reality of a thing that could be grasped in a concept, but that is signified by a term.

Explanation:

