

THE REDISCOVERY OF THE UNIQUE

H.G. Wells

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THE original title of this paper was "The Fallacy of the Common Noun." This was subsequently altered to the present superscription, which the author considers to be equally expressive and far preferable on account of its quiet grandeur. Either will convey the suggestion of our intent to most of our readers, but there are possibly a few, here and there, to whom both are unmeaning. To these we may perhaps, by way of introductory advertisement, or prospectus, address a few remarks on the scope, value, and necessity of our matter.

The Rediscovery of the Unique is the rediscovery of a quite obvious and altogether neglected common fact. It is of wide—almost universal—interest, and of quite universal application. To altogether practical people it is of value as showing the criminal injustice of cab regulations and an inspection of weights and measures; to those who love the subtle subjective rather than objective crudities, and who find it impossible to repeat facts, it is an inestimably precious justification; while to scientists it is important as destroying the atomic theory. It startles the philosopher dwelling in pure reason by giving logic such a twist as tall towers sometimes get from lively yet conservative earthquakes. It should, it will, decimate every thoughtful man's views as a pestilence thins a city. Among other things, after half a century of destructive criticism, it reinstates miracles and prophecy on their old footings. It shows that those scientific writers who have talked so glibly of the reign of inflexible law have been under a serious misconception. It restores special providences and unverified assertions to the stock of credible things, and liberty to the human imagination. To clergymen, forced to controversy in urban parishes; to classical scholars who as schoolmasters find Spencer's Education a curse and a threat; to the softer and illogical sex everywhere, this rediscovery comes as a special boon and blessing. Properly financed it might be established as a cult; and those refuges for the feeble refined from vulgar and militant scepticism, the congregations of Theosophical Buddhism and mystic Catholicism, have a third rival. A new saying might be, and as a matter of fact is, being started in the market-place: "Let us be unique"—in shoals; for the ambition of our young men and maidens to be at any sacrifice "lively and eccentric," is the unconscious moral aspect of this great rediscovery.

The bare thing itself, like the theory of gravitation, may be expressed in a sentence, though like that theory it is the outcome of many centuries of thought. In a sentence it is, All being is unique, or, nothing is strictly like anything else. It implies, therefore, that we only arrive at the idea of similar beings by an unconscious or deliberate disregard of an infinity of small differences. No two animals, for instance, are alike, as any bird or dog—fancier or shepherd can tell. Any two bricks, or coins, or marbles, will be found on examination to differ in size, shape, surface, hue—in endless details as you make your investigation more searching and minute. "As like as two peas in the pod," is a proverb which, like most proverbs, embalms a misconception: one can easily see for oneself when peas are in season. And so in the smallest clod of earth and in the meanest things of life there is, if we care to see it, the unprecedented and unique. As we are taught in the vision of Saint Peter, and more dimly by Wordsworth, there is really nothing around us common and negligible. Thus, with a brief paragraph and a minute's thought, the scales drop from the reader's eyes and he makes the rediscovery of the unique.

Its logical consequences are so enormous that we would beg his patience for a moment to make sure of our position before proceeding to them. We may imagine some objections to what we have said. The case of two bullets following each other from a mould might perhaps be raised by an unscientific person, but actually the same mould never turns out two bullets alike: it has gained or lost heat and expanded or contracted; there is just a little more wear since the last bullet was cast; the lead itself is rising or falling in temperature, and its impurities vary. Again, the little crystals of a precipitate seem identically alike till we test them with micrometer, microscope, polarizer, and micro-chemical tests; then we find quite acceptable individualisms of size, imperfection, strain, and so on. The stars of heaven and the sands of the sea are not evidently unique beings only on account of distance and size respectively. Everywhere repetition disappears and the unique is revealed as sense and analysis grow keener. And since adjectives are abstracted from nouns, it follows that uniqueness goes beyond

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things and reaches properties. The red of one rose petal seems the same as the red of another, because the man who sees them is blinded through optical insufficiency and mental habit. Put them side by side, is the shade the same? If you think so, take counsel with some artist who can really paint flowers. All learning nowadays tends to become practical, and we may yet see schools of metaphysicians in the fields, engaged severally in plucking daisy petals apart.

Hence the common noun is really the verbal link of a more or less arbitrarily determined group of uniques. When we take the term distributively the boundaries grow suddenly vague. It is the constant refrain in the teaching of one of the most eminent of living geologists that everything passes into everything else by "insensible gradations." He holds up to his students a picture of the universe not unlike a water-colour sketch that has fallen into a water-butt and "run." The noun "chair," for instance, is definite enough to the reader—till he thinks; then behold a borderland of dubiety! Rocking chairs, lounge chairs, settees; what is this nondescript—chair or ottoman? and this—chair or stool? Here, again, have we a garden chair or seat, or a cheval-de-frise? and where do you draw the line between chair and firewood? But the ordinary person, when he speaks of a number of chairs, never feels the imminence of this difficulty. He imagines one particular unique sitting apparatus with which he is familiar, and, taking a kind of vicious multiple mental squint at it, sees what is utterly impossible in the real world—so many others identical with it.

For, on the theory of our rediscovery, number is a purely subjective and illusory reduplication of uniques.

It is extremely interesting to trace the genesis of this human delusion of number. It has grown with the growth of the mind, and is, we are quite prepared to concede, a necessary feature of thought. We may here remark, parenthetically, that we make no proposal to supersede ordinary thinking by a new method. We are, in harmony with modern biology, simply stating a plain fact about it. Human reason, in the light of what is being advanced, appears as a convenient organic process based on a fundamental happy misconception, and it may—though the presumption is against such a view—take us away from, rather than towards, the absolute truth of things. The *raison d'être* of a man's mind is to avoid danger and get food—so the naturalists tell us. His reasoning powers are about as much a truth-seeking tool as the snout of a pig, and he may as well try to get to the bottom of things by them as a mole might by burrowing. This, however, is outside the scope of the present paper, and altogether premature.

The first substantives of primitive man were almost certainly not ordinary common nouns. They were single terms expressive of certain special relationships between him as the centre of the universe and that universe. There was "Father," who fed him; "Home," where he sheltered; and "Man," the adversary he hated and plotted against. Similarly, in the recapitulatory phases of a child's development, it uses "Pa," "Ma," "Pussy," strictly as proper nouns. Such simple terms become common as experience widens and analogies appear. Man soon exhausted his primitive stock of grunts, weird mouthings, and snorts; his phonetic, in fact his general, memory was weak, and his capacity of differentiation therefore slight; he was in consequence obliged to slur over uniqueness, and lump similar-looking things together under what was, for practical purposes, the same sound. Then followed the easy step of muddling repeated substantives into dual and plural forms. And then, out of a jumble of broken-down substantives and demonstratives grew up the numbers—grew and blossomed like a grove of mental upas trees.

They stupify people. When we teach a child to count, we poison its mind almost irrevocably. When a man speaks of a thousand of bricks, he never dreams that he means a unique collection of uniques that his mind cannot grasp individually. When he speaks of a thousand years, the suspicion never crosses his mind that he is referring to a unique series of unique gyrations on the part of the earth we inhabit; and yet, if he is an educated man, he knows perfectly well that the shape of the earth's orbit and the earth's velocity are things constantly changing! He is inoculated with the arithmetical virus; he lets a watch and a calendar blind him to the fact that every moment of his life is a miracle and a mystery.

All that is said of common nouns and number here has an obvious application to terms in logic. It is scarcely necessary so say more to strictly logical people, to convince them of the absurdity of being strictly logical. They fancy the words they work with are reliable tools, instruments of steel, while they are rather like a saw or axe of ice when the thermometer fluctuates about zero centigrade.

The most indisputable corollary of the rediscovery is the destruction of the atomic theory. There is absolutely no ground in human experience for a presumption of similar atoms, the mental entanglement that created one

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being now unravelled, and similarly the certainty of all the so-called laws of physics and chemistry is now assailable.

Here a most excusable objection may be anticipated and met. "I grant," the scientist will say—in fact, does say—"that any presumption in favour of identically similar atoms disappears upon analysis; I grant that our original suspicion of such atoms arose from a mental imperfection; yet I still keep my theories intact with experimental verification." Thus the whirligig of time brings round its revenges; here is science taking up the cast-off armour of religion and resting its claims on prophecy! The scientist predicts a planet, an element, or a formula, and the thing either comes almost as he said, or—he makes a discovery. Now the unique fact of averages explains the whole matter.

It is a well-known fact that at any theatre during the run of a fairly successful piece, on every recurring Monday, Tuesday, or other day in the week, almost exactly the same number of people will come nightly and distribute themselves in almost exactly the same way through the house. So many will go to the pit, so many to the dress circle, so many to the boxes, so much "paper" stuffing will be required to give a cheerful plumpness to the whole. The manager can give all these numbers beforehand within a very small fraction of the total. Yet not one of these spectators is exactly the same as another; each one has his individual cares and sorrows, desires and motives, and comes and goes in accordance with the necessities of his unique life. Now and then there is a break in the even succession of attendances; a madman, perhaps, comes to the theatre, fires off a pistol and clears out the gallery; but take a sufficiently large theatre, a sufficiently large number of times, and it becomes impossible to define the result of average attendance from the sum of the actions of a number of imagined indistinguishably similar persons. So with atoms—it is possible to think of them as unique things each with its idiosyncrasies, and yet regard the so-called verification of the atomic theory with tranquillity. But when the mad atom comes along, the believer in the unique remains tranquil, while the ears of the chemist get hot, his manner becomes nervous and touchy, and he mumbles certain unreasonable things about "experimental error." Or possibly, as occurred lately with an antic atom on a sensitive plate, he fancies jealous or curious spooks are upsetting his experiments.

We may here call attention to the unreasonable width of "margin of experimental error" allowed to scientists. They assert, for instance, in illustration of this atomic theory of theirs, that in water, hydrogen and oxygen invariably exist in the definite and integral ratio of one to eight. Any truthful chemist, if the reader can get one and "heckle" him, will confess that the most elaborate and accurate analyses of water have given fractional and variant results; the ratio of the compounds gets wrong, theoretically speaking, sometimes to the left of the decimal place. The chemist gets results most satisfactory to himself by taking large quantities and neglecting fractions. The discrepancies so often noted by beginners in practical physics and chemistry between experimental and theoretical results are frequently extremely startling and instructive in this connection. At the beginning a student is naïve—honest; but presently he gets into the way of manipulating his apparatus—a laboratory euphemism.

Leaving the scattered atoms of the ordinary chemist, we may next allude briefly to the bearings of the rediscovery on morality. Here we are on ground where we modestly fear almost to tread. There is the dire possibility of a wakening the wrath and encountering the rushing denunciations of certain literary men who have taken public morality under their protection. We may, however, point out that beings are unique, circumstances are unique, and that therefore we cannot think of regulating our conduct, by wholesale dicta. A strict regard for truth compels us to add that principles are wholesale dicta: they are substitutes of more than doubtful value for an individual study of cases. A philanthropist in a hurry might clap a thousand poor souls into ready-made suits all of a size, but if he really wanted the people properly clothed he would send them one by one to a tailor.

There is no reason why a man who has hitherto held and felt honestly proud of high principles should be ashamed of sharing a common error, provided he is prepared for a frank abandonment; but though a principle, like a fetich, may be still convenient as a missile weapon, or entertaining as a curiosity, its supposed value and honourableness in human life vanishes with our rediscovery.

Finally we may turn away from proofs and consequences and note briefly how this great rediscovery grew to a head. The period of darkest ignorance, when man turned their backs on nature and believed in mystic numbers, has long passed away; even the skulls of the schoolmen have rotted to dust by this time, and their books are in tatters. The work of Darwin and Wallace was the clear assertion of the uniqueness of living things; and physicists and chemists are now trying the next step forward in a hesitating way—they must take it sooner or later. We are on the eve of man's final emancipation from rigid reasonableness, from the last trace of the trim clockwork

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thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The common chemist is a Rip Van Winkle from these buried times. His grave awaits his earliest convenience, yawning.

The neat little picture of a universe of souls made up of passions and principles in bodies made of atoms, all put together so neatly and wound up at the creation, fades in the series of dissolving views that we call the march of human thought. We no longer believe, whatever creed we may affect, in a Deity whose design is so foolish and little that even a theological bishop can trace it and detect a hundred soul. Some of the most pious can hardly keep from scoffing at Milton's world—balanced just in the middle of those crystalline spheres that hung by a golden chain from the battlements of heaven. We no longer speculate

"What varied being peoples ev'ry star,"

because we have no reason at all to expect life beyond this planet. We are a century in front of that Nuremberg cosmos, and in the place of it there looms a dim suggestion of the fathomlessness of the unique mystery of life. The figure of a roaring loom with unique threads flying and interweaving beyond all human following, working out a pattern beyond all human interpretation, we owe to Goethe, the intellectual father of the nineteenth century. Number—Order, seems now the least law in the universe; in the days of our greatgrandfathers it was heaven's first law.

So spins the squirrel's cage of human philosophy.

Science is a match that man has just got alight. He thought he was in a room—in moments of devotion, a temple—and that his light would be reflected from and display walls inscribed with wonderful secrets and pillars carved with philosophical systems wrought into harmony. It is a curious sensation, now that the preliminary splutter is over and the flame burns up clear, to see his hands lit and just a glimpse of himself and the patch he stands on visible, and around him, in place of all that human comfort and beauty he anticipated—darkness still.