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The Impersonal Judgment:

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By SIMON FRASER MacLENNAN

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The consideration of such expressions as "ὕει, χρή, pluit, mich hungert, it grows, fire," has excited much interest from the days of the Greeks. The name—impersonal or subjectless propositions—which has been given them will serve to explain this. Aristotle, the father and oracle of formal logic, asserted, upon the basis of an analysis of propositions, that every judgment must have a subject and a predicate. After his day attention was directed to the impersonal because it did not appear to conform to the rule of judgments. Thus arose a controversy which has come down to us.

This state of affairs suggests several thoughts: (A) When theories presuppose and destroy one another there is a necessity of looking for some presupposition underlying and determining the various points of view. (B) An historical review of the field of controversy is also called for. By means of it we shall obtain the various types of theory which have been held, together with their relations to one another and to the presupposition. (C) The way will then be left open for an intelligent and thorough criticism of former investigations and a method for a new investigation provided. These thoughts indicate the natural divisions into which our subject falls.

A. PRESENTATION OF THE PRESUPPOSITION UNDERLYING PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS.

The presupposition common to all views, with the exception of one or two, may be stated in a few words. Investigators have accepted without question the statement that impersonal expressions are judgments. And again they have admitted that the normal judgment must have a subject and a predicate. The result has been that the more systematic and logical minds have been forced to seek a subject which has eluded them at every turn. On the other hand, those who have had facts more in mind than theories have pointed out that the various subjects brought forward have been formal and empty, or have been gained through twisting the form and meaning of the proposition. It is, therefore, not to be wondered at that controversy has brought the problem no nearer to solution.

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But we shall be asked on what basis the above thorough-going assertion has been made. Proof of our assertion must, therefore, be brought forward. Several reasons may be given :

I. Following the historical development several conclusive proofs with reference to antiquity present themselves :

1. Aristotle gave to formal logic that systematic form which it has retained almost without change to the present day.[1] In the hands of the rhetoricians it was made the instrument of argumentation, and was regularly taught in the schools established in the towns and cities.[2] By the time of the Middle Ages, formal logic had become the universal method of investigation, and by its use the doctrines received on the authority of the church were elaborated and defended.[3] Although beginnings of inductive research are noticeable early in Greek thought, it was not until the dawn of the modern era that they were set on an independent footing. Toward a formulation of inductive inquiry the two Bacons did much, but it remained for our own century and Stuart Mill to make, in England, a systematic presentation of the method. And even yet science is not fully conscious of its own inner method of procedure. These facts, which are now commonplaces in the philosophic world, make it evident that all ancient criticism proceeded (and necessarily so) upon the basis of formal logic. This thought becomes more forceful when we remember how the spirit of speculation in and of itself died out after Aristotle. Thought turned more and more to ethical and religious questions. Logic busied itself mainly with matters of detail, until in the skeptic movement it seemed to be devoid of all content whatever. In the succeeding period authority supplied the content, but formal logic gave the method for the manipulation of this content both in the religious and secular schools.

Now formal logic has always insisted that every judgment or proposition must have both a subject and a predicate. Aristotle first made this assertion upon the basis of an analysis of the Greek sentence. The assertion next took the form that predication necessarily involved something of which it was predicated, i. e., a subject. Further, there was no doubt that impersonals (with the exception of such expressions as χρή, which proved too refractory to the methods of reduction then

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[1] See Prantl, Geschichte der Logik im Abendlande.
[2] Hatch, Hibbert Lectures, 1888, pp. 25 ff.
[3] See histories of philosophy in general ; also Prantl, Gesch. der Logik.

known) were genuine judgments. Hence the search for a subject was a matter of pure consistency.

On the other hand, those who most strenuously opposed the logicians never brought the general doctrine of the judgment into question, but simply asserted that the logicians were perverting language in their attempts to find a subject.[1]

2. The fact which directly proves our assertion is, that in both ancient and modern times (with few exceptions) the impersonal has been regarded as an anomaly.[2] It indeed seemed to be a freak of thought, and all endeavor was turned toward explaining its peculiar nature. This fact is so evident that no detailed proof is necessary. From the time of Quintilian until the present day the impersonal has remained something strange and uncouth. The long-sustained controversy stands as testimony to the fact that this form of expression is sufficiently individual to baffle the most earnest endeavors to bring it consistently under the general form of mental assertion.

Putting the two proofs together there can be no doubt that a presupposition, such as we have described, underlay all investigation of the impersonal judgment in ancient times.

II. When we come to modern times the nature of the presupposition becomes very evident. It is true that of recent years logic has begun to be reconstructed more upon a psychological basis, but much of ancient tradition still remains, and this shows itself particularly in regard to the judgment. Most logicians assert with confidence that all judgment must be twofold, must have a subject and a predicate, while the few who stand for a new interpretation are regarded as quite erroneous.[2] With regard to the treatment of impersonals the recognition of the presupposition determining investigation is quite complete. Erdmann says,[3] "In all of them (impersonal judgments) a cause, be it ever so undetermined, is presented . . . . since an event without a substrat, a quality without a subject, is altogether unpresentable." Kaindl,[4] although endeavoring to solve the problem on traditional lines, recognizes very clearly the basis on which most of the investigations have been made. His words are worth quoting: "The

[1] For details see below, pp. 8 ff.

[2] For details see below, pp. 8 ff.

[3] Logik, p. 304.

[4] Wesen und Bedeutung der Impersonalien, p. 278. *Cf.* Schuppe, *Zeitschr. für V., Psy. u. Sprachwiss.*, Bd. 16, pp. 244 ff.; Venn, Empirical Logic, p. 233; Steinthal, *Zeitschr. für V. Psy. u. Sprachwiss.*, Bd. 4, pp. 235-7.

question as to the essence and meaning of impersonals is old. The
ground of interest lies near enough. While, according to grammar,
each proposition must have a subject and a predicate, and, according
to logic, of a subject, a predicate notion is affirmed or denied, in the
expressions, ' Es donnert,' ' Es ist mir wohl,' 'Es ist Tag,' the subject
seems to be lacking. Now, since from the grammatical standpoint it
could not be denied that ' Es donnert,' etc., were propositions, from
the logical point of view they had to be considered as judgments.
Thus there arose a contradiction which gave rise to many attempts at
explanation." Kaindl spoke truly when he remarked that contradic-
tion seemed to be the only outcome of previous investigation. This
makes it all the more evident that a criticism of the underlying pre-
supposition is necessary to further investigation of the impersonal.

B. HISTORICAL RESUMÉ.

The various theories of the impersonal may be classed under two
general heads : (I), doctrines which emphasize the place where the sub-
ject is to be sought ; (II), doctrines which are characterized by the kind
of subject which must be sought.

I. The first general division falls into several minor parts :

1. The subject is sought in the grammatical form. This view is
peculiarly characteristic of ancient thought, and the reason is not far
to seek. The clear-cut distinctions which moderns make between the
subjective and the objective, between thought and expression, or, again,
between judgment and proposition, are a late acquisition.' At first the
mind recognizes no distinction between them and interprets both from
the objective side. Thus Aristotle derived his doctrine of the judg-
ment from the analysis of propositions. The logicians who followed
him were rhetoricians as well as logicians, and for a great length of
time logic and rhetoric were inseparable. Hence the early form of the
controversy under consideration was concerned with the possibility of
finding a subject in the structure of the proposition. Three types of
this view appear : (a) the Greek, (b) the Latin, (c) the Italian.

(a) The Greek grammarians thought that a nominative should be
supplied, and for this purpose "Zeus" seems to have been the favorite
— Zeus rained, thundered, snowed. This points to a comparatively
advanced stage in thought, a stage in which particular gods (and finally
one god) were supposed to be the causes of natural changes in general,

'See Burnett, Early Greek Philosophy, Introduction.

and especially of those not referable to some known, finite cause. These verbs were denominated θεῖα ῥήματα,[1] on account of their reference to the deity as the cause of the events they indicated. A number of exceptions (e. g., Δεῖ, χρή) were found to this rule. In these Zeus could not very well be taken as the subject. To obviate the difficulty such verbs were straightway interpreted as adverbs, and the Greek logical conscience seems to have been satisfied.

(b) In the main the Roman investigators expounded and defended the position of the Greek grammarians; in all things literary the latter were always the inspiration of the former. About the only contribution made by the Romans was in seeking the subject in the infinitive. Quintilian,[2] who set Roman rhetoric upon a firm basis, remarked upon the difference between the personal and the impersonal forms. He perceived a difference between "panditur interea domus omnipotentis Olympi" and "totis usque adeo turbatur agris." In the latter a starting point, an "initium," is lacking. According to Priscian,[3] he who wishes to understand the impersonal must seek a subject in the nominative of the activity implied in the verb. For example, when we say "curritur" we mean "cursus curritur," also "eventus evenit," etc. That is, Priscian accepts the position, but finds the subject otherwise than in Zeus.

The opponents of those who sought a subject in the grammatical structure of the proposition contented themselves with pointing out that a real subject was lacking, and that every attempt made to supply such a subject had vitiated the original meaning. Here we may cite Maximus Planudes and Augustinus Saturnius. Planudes[4] said, "There are certain verbs that in no respect signify a subject or a person (which indeed we are also want to call impersonals), having the appearance or form of the third person, but belonging to none." Saturnius,[5] in combating Priscian, gave the key to the ordinary objection in ancient days: "The gods destroy you, Priscian, with this doctrine of yours. In the first place you annihilate all impersonals with passive terminations; for those verbs to which one supplies such a nominative (i. e., nominative of the activity implied) are manifestly of this sort. Then, afterward you attribute to all of them a passive meaning. But in truth this, your principle, if it be true, must also be understood

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[1] Apollonius (Egger), p. 174.
[2] Miklosich, Subjectlose Sätze, p. 7.
[3] Priscian, 2 : 230, 2 : 231.
[4] Bachmann's Anecdota Græca, 2 : 47.
[5] Sanctii Minerva, p. 305.

throughout the whole conjugation of the verb. And so, whatever nominative is understood (or the nominative of a verb in the passive tense), this of course must be understood throughout all the remaining forms of its declension. Wherefore, when Tacitus says 'procursum est ab hoste,' here I beg you, Priscian, can that nominative of yours be rightly understood for verbs of the perfect tense?"

(*c*) In the Italian school we have the connecting link between the ancient and modern schools. Rinaldo Corso approached the subject principally from the objective, grammatical standpoint, but there was in him also a tendency to view the matter subjectively. A short quotation will give his view succinctly:[1] "That verb is impersonal with which there does not belong some person first, second, or third, but which, by means of the semblance of the third person, indicates some phenomenon in a general manner."

All these theories show clearly that great difficulty was experienced by ancient and mediæval logicians and grammarians in explaining impersonals. So long as they thought simply of the grammatical structure, the most natural interpretation was that the impersonal was really subjectless. As logicians, however, they were forced to search for a subject, and this led to constructions of propositions which to the ordinary, non-logical eye were fantastic and impossible. The tendency to pass from the proposition to the judgment, from the outer world to the inner, was necessitated by these contradictions, and was in direct agreement with the movement in the whole world of thought at the time. The first clear application of this to the impersonal was made by the Germans.

2. Having searched in vain for a subject in the grammatical expression, investigators began to turn their attention to the psychological structure. There was reason for this movement. As we have seen, thought had at first an objective outlook. But gradually the inner life differentiated itself from the outer expression, and a study of it for itself began to be made. This movement first made itself felt[2] in later Greek life and philosophy, but it was not until the Christian era that personality and the inner world came clearly to consciousness. Throughout the Christian ages the human soul was the great center of interest. However, it was not the structure of the soul in and of itself which was interesting. To the church

[1] In Venetia, 1562, 8, parte quarta, p. 365.
[2] See Windelband, and histories of philosophy generally.