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What Is Simple Apprehension?

_____ **Introduction.** This book is mostly about concepts, or ideas: what they are and how we use them. In this chapter, we will discuss the first of the three parts of logic, *simple apprehension*, since this part of logic is about concepts. Much of what we will study in the first part of material logic assumes a knowledge of what simple apprehension is; therefore, we will define it here.

Let us try to explain simple apprehension by way of an illustration. Let us say that we have a simple apprehension of a chair. What happens in our minds when we have a simple apprehension of a chair? Generally speaking, three mental moves occur. First, we perceive it with our senses; second, we form an image of it in our minds; third, we conceive its meaning. All three of these mental moves occur when we have a simple apprehension. However, it is only the final move that is properly called "simple apprehension." If and only if we conceive the meaning of the chair can it be said that a simple apprehension has occurred. The same can be said of any other object that we apprehend.

Additionally, in this chapter you may find the phrase "simple apprehension" used in two senses. The first sense refers to the three-step process outlined above that includes sensory perception, mental imaging, and conception of meaning. The other sense simply refers to the concept itself. Unless otherwise indicated, it is this latter sense that we are referring to.

_____ **What Is Sense Perception?** Perhaps another illustration will assist us in understanding *sense perception*. Although there

Three things generally occur during simple apprehension: we perceive it with our senses, we have a mental image of it, and we conceive the meaning of it.



are five different senses, for clarity and simplicity the illustration only uses the sense of sight. When you look at a chair, your sense of sight presents a chair to your mind. At this point, as you look at the chair, you are having what is properly called a sense perception. In other words, you perceive the chair with your sense of sight. This sense perception is present when you are looking at the chair, but it goes away when you stop looking at the chair. You will continue to have a sense perception of the chair as long as you look at it. When you stop looking at the chair, your sense perception ceases.

There is a crucial point that you must understand to have a proper grasp of sensory perception. The sense perception *of* the chair is different from the chair *itself*. The sensory perception occurs in the mind, while objects like chairs exist outside of the mind. That is to say, sensory perception is an internal mental process, and the objects of sensory perception are external and mind-independent. Therefore, the sense perception cannot be equated with the object being perceived. The sense perception lasts as long as you see or hear or smell or taste or touch an object, and it stops when you stop doing these things. Here is a definition of sense perception:

Sense perception is the act of seeing or hearing or smelling or tasting or touching.

_____ **What Is a Mental Image?** When you have a sense perception of something—when you see or hear or smell or taste or touch an object—an image forms in your mind. For example, when you visually perceive a chair, an image which has color and shape forms as a result. However, when the sense perception ceases, the residual impressions *from* the sense perception have a certain effect on the mind. The result is the capability to form a mental image. Consider again our example of the chair. When you stop looking at the chair, the mental image can occur in your mind even if you are not looking at the chair. This is true at any given time that you begin thinking about the chair again. Every time you remember something that you have seen before, mental imaging occurs.

Like the sense perception you had when you looked at the chair, the *mental image* of the chair is different from the chair *itself*. The chair exists outside the mind, while the mental image exists inside the mind only. Furthermore, this mental image of the chair



is different from the sense perception because while the sense perception lasts only as long as you are looking at the chair, the mental image can be present even when you are not perceiving the chair through your senses.

In closing, two points about the mental image must be noted. First, the mental image is different from the chair. Second, the mental image is different from the sense perception. Here is a definition of mental image:

Mental image is the image of an object formed in the mind as a result of a sense perception of that object.

What Is a Concept? The third aspect of simple apprehension is the *idea*, or the *concept*. Both terms should be understood as synonymous. When you look at a chair, there is something that happens in your mind other than a sense perception and a mental image. It is the *idea*, or *concept*, of the chair. When you grasp the *concept* of an object, like a chair, you understand what a chair is. That is all we mean by *concept*.

Although the concept of a chair in your mind may be accompanied by the sense perception of a chair or by the mental image of a chair, it does not have to be. You can have the concept without the sense perception and without the mental image.

For example, you may be reading this book right now but there is no chair nearby to look at. Yet you can still understand what is meant by the word "chair." In other words, you don't have to look at a chair to understand what a chair is. Similarly, you may be reading this book right now and not even have a mental image of a chair and still understand what the word "chair" means. The point is that you are actually able to understand what a chair is without having a picture of a chair in your mind.

Understanding what we mean when we talk about a concept is important for understanding what we mean when we talk about simple apprehension. Properly understood, simple apprehension *is* the grasping of a concept. Remember also that apprehending or understanding a concept is different from making a judgment about it. Simple apprehension takes place prior to making a judgment. Here is a definition of simple apprehension:

Simple apprehension is the act by which the mind grasps the concept or general meaning of an object without affirming or denying anything about it.



Chapter 2

Simple apprehension is the act by which the mind grasps the concept, or general meaning, of an object without affirming or denying anything about it.

_____ **Concept vs. Image.** While a mental image is representative of something tangible and material (for example, it has shape and color), a simple apprehension is the grasping or understanding of something intangible and immaterial. A simple apprehension itself does not have shape or color. Rather, it involves understanding a universal meaning.

When we have a simple apprehension of an object or, in other words, when we understand it, we do not just get a glimpse of the sensible qualities of it, such as its color and shape. We also grasp the *essence* of the thing, which simply means that we understand the meaning of the thing.

This becomes clearer when we consider terms like "man" (meaning "human being"). When we think of the concept "man," we usually have some kind of image in our minds. For example, an actual man may be tall, have blond hair, blue eyes, and light skin. But when someone else thinks of the concept "man," he may have a completely different image in his mind. He may think of an actual man who is short, with dark hair, brown eyes, and dark skin. Although the mental images we have when we think of the concept "man" are completely different, that does not mean that both fail to understand the same concept "man." We may have exactly the same understanding of what "man" is, yet have very different mental images that we associate with it.

_____ **Abstraction.** The process by which a simple apprehension is derived from a sense perception and mental image is called **abstraction**. Through abstraction, an object, such as a chair, is lifted from the level of the senses to the level of the intellect.

_____ **Simple Apprehension vs. Judgment.** There are three mental acts of logic: simple apprehension, judgment, and deductive inference. Keeping in mind our example of the chair, simple apprehension is the first mental act and no affirmation or denial about the chair should occur. If we affirm or deny anything about a simple apprehension of the chair, then we are going beyond simple

The process by which a simple apprehension is derived from a sense perception and a mental image is called **abstraction**.



apprehension and engaging in judgment, the second aspect of logic. In other words, if we think, "The chair is brown," then we are engaging in judgment and have moved to the second mental act of logic. This happens anytime that we affirm or deny something about the chair. But if we simply think "chair," that is, if we merely have an idea of a chair, then we are engaging in simple apprehension.

_____ **Summary.** In this chapter, we have discussed the meaning of simple apprehension. We said three things generally occur during simple apprehension: we perceive an object with our senses, we have a mental image of it, and we conceive the meaning of it. We also said that simple apprehension is an act by which the mind grasps the concept, or general meaning, of an object without affirming or denying anything about it. Finally, we said that the process by which a simple apprehension is derived from a sense perception and a mental image is called *abstraction*.