

# THE ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM

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Paying a recent call on my old friend Professor Einschwein, Transylvania's former leading logologist, I discovered him busy at work in his laboratory. "How's tricks, Professor?" I asked, noting as I did that he was using a Bunsen burner to melt chocolate letters into a glass flask that was perched on one side of a chemical balance. The opposing balance pan supported a similar flask containing what on closer inspection looked suspiciously like alphabet soup. Einschwein is eccentric, of course, but an acknowledged genius in his subject. His projected opus **Principia Logologica** promises to be a landmark in the field.

"Oh, nothing special," he murmured, gazing fondly at a gently dissolving Z held in his forceps. "It's just another little experiment connected with the alphabet problem. I don't suppose it will lead anywhere."

"The alphabet problem?" I said, looking around me at the clutter of Einschwein's workspace and noting a curious diagram on a nearby piece of paper. "Hey, what is this peculiar pattern of marks here?"

"They are only the serifs of Nottingham," he replied.

"The sheriff of Nottingham? What on earth do you mean?"

"Not sheriff, **serifs**," he said, "they are the serifs of the word NOTTINGHAM, but minus the letters themselves." I looked carefully at the pattern and saw he was right: there were the four serifs of the leading N, a space for the O, two similar triangular groups corresponding to two capital T's, and so on. I could hardly believe my eyes.

"But of what conceivable interest are the serifs of the word Nottingham?" I exclaimed.

"Mmmn...? he responded, his attention still absorbed in the melting Z. "Well, I suppose it is a bit abstruse now that you mention it. I'm afraid it would take a while to explain in detail, but it's all part and parcel of my work on the problem."

"On the **alphabet** problem, you mean?"

"Naturally."

"What problem do you mean? Is there a problem with the alphabet?"

He glanced at me over his pince-nez. "But of course," he said, "the ontological problem. What else?"

"The **ontological** problem? How it first emerged, its history?"

"No, no, that's **aetiology**, theory of causes. I'm talking about the being or essence of the thing, its metaphysical quiddity, abstract substance, intrinsic nature, fundamental reality, what the entity actually **is**."

"What the alphabet is?" I laughed. "Oh, come on, Professor, you've got to be kidding!"

He looked at me with curiosity. "You surprise me," he said, "I'd always assumed that the problem was widely recognised."

"Wait a moment," I said, "maybe I misunderstood. For a minute you seemed to imply that you couldn't describe the alphabet--that you couldn't even explain what the thing actually comprises."

"You have it perfectly."

"You're trying to tell me that you don't know what the alphabet is--that you cannot give a **definition** of the word alphabet?"

"Not any more than you can."

"Not any more than I can? You don't seriously believe that I can't explain what I mean by the word **alphabet**, do you?"

"But that is exactly what I mean!" he replied, laying down his forceps and smiling.

"Let's get this right," I said, "you mean the ordinary, every-day alphabet that we learned at school--the Roman alphabet?"

"The Roman alphabet."

"But for Heaven's sake, Professor," I said, "the alphabet is only a bunch of letters!"

"Now you're being flippant," he said, "pray be precise."

"Very well, I will. The Roman alphabet is a set of conventional typographical signs called letters. There are twenty-six letters in all and they occur in the alphabet arranged in a certain pre-defined order. How's that?"

"Better," said Einschwein. "So the alphabet is an ordered set of twenty-six signs called letters?"

"It is."

"You are sure there are twenty-six?"

"Exactly and precisely twenty-six."

"And what are these twenty-six signs?" he asked.

"The twenty-six signs, my friend," I said, trying hard to keep an edge of sarcasm out of my voice, "are the typographical entities known to us as A, B, C, and so on."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," he said, pushing a pencil and notebook over the table. "Show me."

Taking up Einschwein's pencil, I dutifully wrote out 'A', 'B', 'C', etc. up to and including 'Z'. Having done so I slid the notebook back to him.

"I see," he said, "so these twenty-six typographical symbols here are the things you call letters, and the complete set, arranged in this order, is what you call the Roman alphabet. Have I got that quite right?"

"You have grasped it to perfection, Prof."

"Then tell me," he said, "what exactly would this be?" He drew something on the page and handed it back. I looked at the sheet and saw he had drawn an 'a'.

"It's a lower-case A," I replied.

"I beg your pardon?"

"A lower case form of the letter A," I repeated.

"Are you implying this sign is a **letter**?"

"Of course it is."

"But it is not one of the twenty-six you have showed me."

"No," I said, "I just told you, this is a **lower-case** letter. The ones I wrote out are **upper-case**."

"So the sign I have just drawn **is** a letter but it is not one that is in the alphabet?"

"Not at all. The letters of the alphabet come in two different forms, upper case and lower case. I just happened to write out the upper case forms."

"So you mean there are really **fifty-two** letters in the alphabet?"

"No! Hey, you're deliberately confusing the issue."

"On the contrary," responded Einschwein, "it is you who confuses things. First you tell me that the alphabet comprises 'exactly and precisely' this set of twenty-six signs and no others. Next you imply that although quite distinct from any of your signs, the symbol I have drawn **is** nevertheless a member of the alphabet. What are you trying to tell me, that there are really **two** alphabets, one upper-case, the other lower-case?"

"Of course not. Look, be reasonable, Everyone knows that the alphabet is comprised of twenty-six letters."

"Once upon a time everyone knew the earth was flat. Did that prove that it was?"

"Now wait a minute, that is an empirical question, here we are talking about a **definition**. The alphabet is made up of twenty-six letters, each of which can appear in one of two forms: upper case or lower case. The form may vary but the letter remains the same."

"The form may vary but the letter remains the same? I thought you said that a letter was a typographical sign, which is to say a written symbol having a definite shape?"

"So it is."

"Well, I can see that small variations in form could be overlooked provided the intended shape remains recognizable. But how can you argue that 'A' and 'a' are really the **same** letter, which according to you means the same **symbol**, when their two shapes are entirely distinct? How can the first symbol in the alphabet be both this symbol here **and** that different symbol there?"

"Well, I grant you seem to have a point," I replied weakly, "but until now I guess everybody has always just kind of..."

"Forget everybody. Use your reason. Two distinct typographical signs cannot be one particular typographical sign. So if two distinct typographical signs are identified with a particular thing called a **letter**, then obviously the letter itself must be an entity that is something **other** than either of these two typographical signs."

"Well, all right, it may be that they cannot both be the same typographical sign yet nevertheless they are both **called** the same letter, they both have the same name," I said, "and they both stand for, both **symbolize**, the same thing."

"And what thing is that?"

I hesitated. Einschwein had inveigled me onto unfamiliar ground.

"Well, they both represent the same **sound**, I guess. The sound **ay**. And the sound **ay** is also their name."

"You mean that the two signs are alternative symbols for the sound **ay**?"

"Yes."

"But not symbols for the sound **ah**?"

"Okay, **ah** also. Look, I am not a phonologist. The two letters are alternative symbols for a whole family of different sounds: the **ay** in bay, the **ah** in bath, the **a** in cat...it all depends on context."

"So these **two letters**--you admit the plurality--which are both called **ay**, are interchangeable symbols for a family of possible sounds, among them the sound **ay** itself?"

"You've got it."

"Do you now mean to tell me that the alphabet is really a set of twenty-six families of sounds?"

"No, the alphabet is a set of twenty-six **letters**. What those letters themselves stand for is strictly irrelevant to the problem of what the alphabet really is."

"Very well, I'll accept that. But at least you now seem to see that there is a problem to be faced here. However, you still overlook something."

"And that is?"

"You began by insisting that a letter was a typographical sign."

"It was youthful ignorance."

"Whereas a moment ago you said that although upper-case **A** and lower-case **a** may not be the same typographical sign, they are nevertheless called the same letter and they both symbolize the same thing."

"I did."

"But you now accept that whatever the entity known as 'letter **ay**' may be, it must be something that is distinct from either of the typographical signs '**A**' and '**a**'?"

"So it would seem I am reluctantly compelled to acknowledge."

"Now, assuming you were correct in the first place, doesn't that tell you something?"

"How do you mean, 'correct in the first **place**'?"

"Well, consider. If letter **ay** is a typographical sign, but it is not the typographical sign '**A**' and it is not the typographical sign '**a**', then...?"

"It must be some other typographical sign?"

"Is there any logical alternative?"

"You mean that letter **ay** might really be...the **ampersand**, for instance?"

"Now you are being inconsistent."

"Inconsistent?"

"Well, did you or didn't you insist that letters were members of the alphabet?"

"Of course I did, but I thought you had just overturned that idea!"

"Not at all. All I have done is to refute the notion that letter **ay** is the sign '**A**' or the sign '**a**'. But does that prevent it from being some other typographical sign **in the alphabet**?"

"So letter **ay** might not be the ampersand but it could be...**Q**, for instance?"

"**Q** would certainly fit the bill--provided we could establish that **Q** **was** in the alphabet, of course. At least, if letter **ay** were

Q, and Q could be shown to be a member of the alphabet, then it might clear up our immediate problem."

"Our immediate **ontological** problem?"

"Exactly. Which is only a part--a one twenty-sixth part, you might say--of our general ontological problem."

"But then we would come to the problem of letter **kew**?"

"There's that, of course, but first, what of the validity of your primary assertion?"

"My primary assertion?"

"That letters **are** members of the alphabet."

"You mean they may not be?"

"Well, do you have any firm evidence to offer in support?"

I gripped the table and gazed wildly about me. "Look here, Professor, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"By all means."

"Then may I enquire why you are weighing melted chocolate letters against alphabet soup on that balance there?"

"With pleasure," he said, "but it's an experiment with a complicated background. How versed are you on the theory of letters?"

"The theory of **letters**?--I've heard of the theory of numbers."

"Oh, dear," he said, "I'm afraid this is going to mean a descent to fundamentals."

### **FOREIGN BARKS, SNEEZES (AND OTHER SOUNDS)**

*Back in Feb 1975, Maxey Brooke described how dogs bow-wow in six foreign languages, and he followed this up with a Kickshaws item in Feb 1983 with six foreign ker-choos. In a slender book entitled Hear! Here! (Clarkson Potter, 1994; \$10), Michele Slung has vastly expanded this linguistic byway, presenting 3 to 12 translations of approximately 60 animal noises (quack, tweet, croak, cluck, oink, meow), human vocalizations (kitchy-koo, peek-a-boo, boohoo, tsk tsk, zzzzz) and mechanical sounds (police siren, clock, car horn, boat horn). Some, like meow, are remarkably similar from one language to the next, while others, like the siren, vary greatly (bah-bu, pan-pon, tatu-tata, pee-poh, nino-nino, toh-nee, tut-tut). Curiously, Brooke and Slung don't always agree: does the German dog say haf-haf or wau-wau? Does a Japanese sneeze hakshon or kushami? More research is obviously needed. Foreign comic strips no doubt reduce to print hundreds of additional sounds, some highly specialized (for English examples, see "Onomatopoeia: Things That Go Bump" in May 1991 or "Onomatopoeia: The Daily Grind" in May 1992).*