

CAN BERKELEY BE CALLED AN IMAGIST ?

Berkeley has recently been described as an imagist.¹ Commentators so qualify him perhaps because of his account of thinking which is closely connected with his theory of universals. An imagist holds that mental images are the basic symbols which we use in our thinking. All other symbols, e. g., words in particular, are secondary or derivative. Thus the imagist does not deny that words have meaning, but he insists that they have it only indirectly, as substitutes for images. He argues that these substitutes are necessary because words can be manipulated much more quickly and easily than images can be. Thus words, according to this theory, are used in an *uncashed* manner which is precisely their function and unless our words are cashable by means of images we could not think at all. The imagist, therefore, emphasizes on the aspect of image thinking only and underestimates value and significance of verbal thinking.² Above all, he thinks that the *generic images* will play the role of universals.

My purpose in the context of the present paper is to show that Berkeley cannot be called an imagist and that what we attribute to him as imagism is, in fact, nothing but conceptualism blended with objective resemblance. The theory of objective resemblance is, in the ultimate analysis, a mixture of this with an Aristotelian theory of real universals in things as common characters.

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I

There is no gainsaying that Berkeley has been called as an imagist primarily because of his conflicting philosophical positions and his utter obsession of rejecting abstract ideas of Locke. But the fundamental point is whether he is consistently an imagist. His literature, as we are about to consider, does not presumably project him to be so.

Berkeley writes : "Now if we will annex a meaning to our words, and speak only of what we can conceive, I believe we shall acknowledge, that an idea becomes general, by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort " ³ It may be observed that if Berkeley is designated as an imagist, then he ought to mean by 'idea' in this context an image, or as he would put it, 'an idea of imagination'. But there are reasons to doubt whether he actually intends to use 'idea' here to mean image. A further reflection will help us to fortify position. "To make this plain by an example, suppose a geometrician is demonstrating the method, of cutting a line in two equal parts. He draws, for instance, a black line of an inch in length, this which in itself is a particular line... represents all particular lines what-soever." ⁴ So it is palpable that Berkeley understands by an 'idea' mainly an idea of sense, in this case a diagram, a sketch of a line.

The above illustrations seem to exonerate Berkeley from the charge of being an imagist. The withdrawal of this title is significant at least in respect of liberating him from one of the charges often levelled against the imagist, namely, that of failing to admit other primary symbols besides images. For we have pointed out that Berkeley, in fact, refers to thinking with the help of sensible diagrams. However, we need to mention that although Berkeley cannot be called an imagist, he need not be held to deny our ability to think with the help of images. Rather,

he could allow that an imaged triangle and a triangle drawn on paper perform the same directive function in our thinking.

We have pointed out that the imagist unduly depreciates the importance and significance of verbal thinking. Even recognizing the possibility of this sort of thinking, he feels at home to think in terms of images. Now it may be held that Berkeley certainly says some hard things about language. But he also remarks that 'words are of excellent use'. It then appears that in so far as Berkeley attacks language it is only on a basis of profit and loss. Language has, no doubt, much to commend it, but it has been so abused that it is better to dispense with it in so far as we can. Indeed, Berkeley's consideration here engenders pernicious error, because it is weighted mainly by his desire to avert the vicious regress of language—abstraction—matter. Nevertheless, he seems to be certainly aware of the advantages of verbal thinking. However, we may admit that he decides simply wrongly that these advantages are brought at too high a price.

We have further noted that an imagist supposes that the *generic image* will play the role of universals. But what is a *generic image* ? It has often been compared to Galton's 'composite photograph.'² It emphasizes on the resemblances and cancels out the differences, between the faces of all the members of a family, say, of the Churchill family, when photographed on the same plate. The picture has what may be called a *typical resemblance* between the family faces of the Churchill family. However, it is different from an *exact copy image*, e. g., a dog-image. The imagist claims that in respect of thinking what we use are not the exact-copy images but generic ones. The exact-copy image has a *typical resemblance* to all the members of a class but an *exact resemblance* to none. For that reason it is justly required to serve as a symbol for a class. Thus the imagist contends that it is generic images, not exact-copy ones, which

are used in image thinking: and it is by generic images that words are cashed in absence.

But this account of the generic images is open to serious objections. The moderate realists may react to it by arguing that the generic image, however vague and impressionistic it may be, is still a particular image. It may be said that, on broader grounds, a further count may be added. Besides, though the generic images, as opposed to exact-copy ones, are often used in thinking, yet they do not serve our purpose for all classes. The workability of the generic images depends on the nature and degree of unlikeness which exists between the sub-classes under it. Galton's generic images will work for thinking of crocodiles, which do not very much differ from each other, and perhaps they will just suffice for thinking about dogs which differ a great deal from each other. But they will not suffice for triangles—the class which gives Locke and Berkeley so much trouble. The analogy of a composite photograph does not seem to work here. We may suppose, for instance, that there are fifteen triangles drawn on paper—five equilaterals, five isosceles and five scalene. They all have different areas—the isosceles one differ from each other in sizes of their triangles, so do the scalene ones. Now, if we photograph them on the same plate the result will not be any kind of picture but just a mess—a mere blur. It cannot be held that the features they have in common, viz., three sides, three angles, etc., will be emphasized cancelling out the other in which they differ. For we do not conceive what a picture can be like in which three sidedness is emphasized but no sides are visible. Again, for the class of colour it is difficult to find a Galtonian generic image. And Berkeley does not fail to ask, what would be the colour of the abstract man? Obviously, the colour can be neither black, nor white, nor tawny; and a mixture of these colours also can hardly do. However, there are other

properties which lend themselves less easily than colour to generic imagery. Hence it is clear that the generic images would have serious limitations if they are allowed to perform the role of universals. It may further be added that if imagism does imply a generic image account of universals, we have here also other cogent argument for considering it important that Berkeley should not be called an imagist.⁶ The title rather is a misnomer for him.

II

Now the question arises : If Berkeley is not an imagist, what is he ? He cannot obviously be called a realist because he pronounces that general words stand not for general things but for particulars. Also, he cannot apparently be called a conceptualist, for he denies that general words stand for abstract general ideas. But the question crops up whether Berkeley really succeeds in eliminating abstract ideas altogether. We shall now consider the question by examining Berkeley's account of 'sortal' knowledge and his polemic against the notion of abstract ideas.

Berkeley, like Locke, means by the 'sorts' primarily the natural 'sorts'. Things in nature are grouped in sorts or they appear to be so grouped. The problem now concerns us is whether the 'sorts', for Berkeley, are objective existences, or, in other words, whether there are natural classes.

In the *Commonplace Book* Berkeley is not very much explicit on the question of 'sorts'. In an early note he denies that the 'sorts' are the work of the mind and only in the mind; he says that 'certainly genera and species are not abstract general ideas'. But later he connects the problem of 'sorts' with that of abstraction; that is genera and species are soon grouped along with abstract general ideas. Hence no clear answer emerges from the *Commonplace Book* if the 'sorts' and species are mere figments of the mind.

In the *Draft*, identifying genera and species with abstract general ideas, Berkeley admits, "By abstract ideas, genera, species, universal notions all which amount to the same thing."⁷ This, however, does not clearly show that the 'sorts' are also such abstract general ideas. But he further says, "This abstract, general idea, thus framed the mind gives a general name and lays it up and uses it as a standard whereby to judge what particulars are and what are not to be accounted of that sort; those only which contain every part of the general idea having a right to be admitted into that sort and called by that name."⁸ This passage, of course, indicates that the name of the general abstract idea is also the name of the sort. But it does not clarify whether they are identical, or whether they should be distinguished, in the language of extension and intension, by saying that the sort is the extension and the abstract idea, the intension. Hence the passage badly needs further clarification—which Berkeley does not furnish, instead when he comes to re-read it later he erases it.

Again, in the *Draft*, Berkeley speaks of the 'sorts' while explaining what he means by a general word. He holds that a general word is a sign not of an abstract idea, but of 'a great number of particular ideas, between which there is some likeness, and which are said to be of the some sort'. At this point he feels the necessity of explaining what he means by a 'sort'. And, in effect, he says, "But these sorts are not determined and set out by Nature, as was thought by most philosophers. Nor yet are they limited by any precise, abstract ideas settled in the mind, with the general name annexed to them as is the opinion of the author of the Essay."⁹ Thus, although Berkeley endeavours to reject the 'realist' and the 'conceptualist' accounts of the 'sorts', he surprisingly does not put any positive account in their place.

Rather on an after-thought Berkeley discerns the absence of any positive view and deletes it.

Berkeley finds the problem of 'sorts' too difficult to settle. Aaron rightly remarks that the *Draft* discussion in particular reveals Berkeley's failure to solve the problem of 'sorts' and explains the silence of published *Introduction*.¹⁰ He turns his attention from 'sorts' to 'singling'. But can 'singling' be carried out in any way *without* solving the problem of 'sorts'? The use of general words, Berkeley reiterates, involves abstraction which is a process wherein the mind "observing that the individuals of each kind agree in some things, and differ in others, takes out and singles from the rest, that which is common to all."¹¹ The problem of 'sorts' is, of course, bound up with this notion of something 'common to all'. Hence Aaron concludes, "the charge can be made against Berkeley that in the *Introduction* he turned his back upon the main problem, that of the status and nature of what he called the 'sorts'. In the *Common-place Book* and *Draft* he had touched on the problem but found it too difficult. Yet the argument of the *Introduction* is incomplete without a discussion of this matter and lacks a foundation."¹²

In the *Introduction* Berkeley lays stress on what he considers to be the psychological errors in Locke's theory of abstraction – the errors which appear to him as the 'killing blow'. We can frame abstract idea of, say, man by taking the abstracted common qualities observed in man. Berkeley proposes to demolish this theory of abstraction. Instead of concentrating on the common element – the univesal – Berkeley concentrates on the 'singling'. We may suppose that if the flaws of the account of 'singling' are evinced, the theory of abstraction would then be equally rebutted. Hence the questions which Berkeley tries to

answer in his polemic are : Is 'singling' psychologically justifiable? Can the common element, whatever may be its nature, be abstracted? He remarks to argue: "... the idea of man that I frame to my self, must be either of a white, or a black, or a tawny, a straight, or a crooked, a tall, or a low, or a middle-sized man. I cannot by any effort of thought conceive the abstract idea above described"¹³. Thus Berkeley emphasizes that the 'singling' or 'mental separation' which is alleged to give an abstract idea is psychologically impossible. To think of abstract general idea is to think some sort of self contradiction. This is how Berkeley ventures to subvert the edifice of abstract idea with the rejection of 'singling out' certain common quality from a cluster of qualities.

It is now occasion to examine the validity of the above psychological criticism. In fact, it seems quite safe to say that we cannot *imagine* a man who has some colour but no particular colour. But this does not justify the view that to *think* of man is always to *imagine* a man of a particular colour or height or anything else of the kind. The fact that we cannot imagine a particular man who is neither white, nor black, nor tawny, does not at all prove that we cannot speak of 'man' meaning white, black and tawny men at one and the same time. Thus Berkeley's criticism applies to imagining only, and not to conceiving. And he appears to make confusion between the two.

Again, is Berkeley's psychological analysis correct? We may ask, cannot we think of the rectangularity of the paper ignoring its brownness, when a rectangular piece of brown paper is before us? Certainly, we can and do. However, when we first think of the rectangularity, the other qualities may also come to mind and when we try to recall *this* rectangularity, we perhaps may not keep them aside altogether. They may remain vaguely in the back-ground. Nevertheless, we can certainly go on talking signi-

significantly of rectangularity as such *without* talking of other qualities. This is not a question whether we have the ability to conceive or think about one concept independently of another, but it is a question whether the instantiations of the concepts can exist without the 'properties' in question. And the answer, as a matter of fact, seems to be in the affirmative. Hence Berkeley's psychological analysis does not seem to be correct.

Over and above, what Berkeley says about 'singling' seems doubtful psychologically, for he himself concludes by admitting that one can single out, say, *triangularity*. In the *Introduction* he himself apprehends the necessity of singling and in the *Errata* to the first edition he admits that 'singling' or 'mental separation' is possible in some cases—that one can after all consider some particular qualities separated from another. Unfortunately, he gives no instance of such qualities. But if he is thinking of the colour, extension and motion of an object, as he seems to be doing, then certainly the mind can abstract. Surely the mind can abstract, for example, the shape from the colour and movement, and concentrate on it alone.

In the *Draft* Berkeley holds that universality consists 'in the relation it bears to the particulars signified or represented by it'. He illustrates this by saying that when we prove something of *triangle*, we do have a universal idea of triangle 'in view' though not an abstract general idea. And the universality of this particular idea lies in its capacity to represent other particular triangle, yet it holds of any other. It can hold of any other because, Berkeley says, the differentiating features of this triangle are not 'concerned in the demonstration'—'there is not the least mention made of them in the proof of the other proposition' ¹⁴. Hence what is true of this triangle is true of all.

It appears that Berkeley is now affirming that, though we make use of a particular triangle, our real object is after all not that

particular triangle but rather that which is common to all triangles including that one. He thus seems to be aware of 'triangle in general'. However, he does not explain what exactly he means by it, and simply to say that it is a particular triangle having a representative capacity is not to explain its nature. But it is significant to note that Berkeley admits that a man may abstract so for he considers a figure merely as triangular without attending to the particular qualities of the angles or relations of the sides. And though he does not admit this to be a proof that thus 'he can frame an abstract general inconsistent idea of a triangle', we may take, as Aaron suggests¹⁵, the risk of granting this point. What is really significant is that, Berkeley now admits, we *can* abstract the triangularity. That is, we can abstract or 'single out', looking at the shaped coloured patches before us, the shape triangle and concentrate on it, ignoring the other distinctive features of the patches. We can direct our attention on the triangularity of certain of the patches and think about it as such. This is the abstract idea of *triangularity*. All the particular triangles share this triangularity and thus they make up one 'sort'.

Thus we see that Berkeley's polemic against abstract ideas ends with the admission of the universal abstract idea, *triangularity*. But we must note that while it is one thing to acknowledge the existence of abstract general ideas, it is another to give an account of them. And, in fact, we find no satisfactory account of these ideas in Berkeley.

Now, if Berkeley is not successful in eliminating the abstract general ideas for which the general words are said to stand, then can't he be called a conceptualist? Once again we may consider Berkeley's view that the image of a particular triangle is made to represent all triangles, i. e., all figures of the sort. But what is meant by 'the same sort'? To know the 'sort', we

must have a concept before our mind of what it is to be a triangle. And this concept must not be an image. Hence an image can be used, as Berkeley claims, in its representative capacity only if we already know what a 'sort' is. But surely to know what a 'sort' is involves having a concept of a common property. Hence we are back with conceptualism.¹⁶ We have argued that Berkeley's polemic against abstract ideas ends with the acknowledgement of the abstract general idea that is the concept of *triangularity*. To have the concept of triangularity is to have in mind the defining characteristics of triangles. And having this concept which is abstract is not the same as having an image which is particular. We have argued above that having a concept does not involve having any image and, in fact, we do have concepts with no accompanying imagery. Thus there are far more than images in our minds when we use general words. There are concepts over and above any images that we may have – concepts for which general words stand. Hence it appears that Berkeley must slip into conceptualism if he is to work out a satisfactory account for the meaning of general words. Certainly, Locke's theory of abstraction and generality does not deserve Berkeley's mockery.

III

But conceptualism cannot be held in a pure form, i.e., pure conceptualism is implausible. For it confines thinking to objects which are 'in the mind' and are subjective. Such conceptualism must lead to scepticism. Whatever account we give of concepts or general ideas, if we bring objects in relation to them, this cannot be the whole explanation and justification of our applying the same general term to these objects. But this would be to say that classification is totally arbitrary. So conceptualism is, never held in pure form, always associated with some kind of resemblance theory. As with Locke's theory of conceptualism

we find him admitting that there are multitude of objective resemblances between things and classification of things is made by paying selective attention to some of these natural and objective resemblances and ignoring others.¹⁷

Now if we are right in holding that in Berkeley we are back again with conceptualism, then it too must be held in association with a resemblance theory. And it is not impossible to attribute such a theory even to Berkeley, as to Locke. However, it must be granted that Berkeley says little about resemblance, the relation which we consider to be fundamental in our account. But in his criticism of abstraction he does show his awareness of the relation. It is evident from his reiteration that : "the mind having observed that Peter, James, and John, resemble each other, in certain common agreements of shape and other qualities,..."¹⁸ It is resemblance that provides the basis for the 'sorts'. And no doubt Berkeley considers the fact of resemblance so obvious that it does not require to be stressed.

However, the theory of resemblance cannot suffice without depending on the Aristotelian notion of the 'thing-having-property' form. For when the resemblance theory speaks of one thing's being like another, it makes the fundamental fact a 'relational' one. This fact presupposes the existence of at least two things. But what is important is to note that surely just one thing has characteristics or properties by itself and logically it would have those properties whether there were any other things or not. A thing is said to be of this, that and other sort in respect of those intrinsic properties, whether or not there are other things to form these 'sorts' with it. Now if each of two things has thus a certain property by itself, then it is a logical consequence that they will resemble each other in that respect. In other words, it is only as a logical consequence of each one's having a certain feature on its own that two things can have the

relation of resemblance in a certain respect. 'Each thing's having qualities on its own' is indeed the fundamental reality to which the Aristotelian view draws our attention. Mackie thus says : " For every case of thing's having a certain quality or intrinsic property, we can think of possible worlds in which this situation survives without any corresponding relations of resemblance, but we *cannot think* of possible worlds in which a relation of resemblance survives *without* any corresponding situations of the thing-having-property form. Any conceivable reductive analysis of this fundamental reality will fail through circularity : we shall have to *postulate* items of this thing-intrinsically-of-a-certain-sort form among the data of any explanation we attempt to give ".¹⁹

Berkeley, therefore, cannot be called an imagist; rather in him we again come back to conceptualism. And Berkeley's conceptualism is a mixture of this with resemblance theory which, in turn, depends on the Aristotelian doctrine of real universals in things as common characters.

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NOTES

1. H. H. Price, *Thinking and Experience*, 2nd Edn. (London : Hutchinson & Co., 1962), pp. 234, 239-40, 297, 306.
2. *Ibid*, p. 239.
3. G. Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction, in *The Works of George Berkeley*, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London : Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1949), Sect. 12, pp. 31-32.

4. *Ibid.*, sect. 12, p. 32.
5. H. H. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 284.
6. E. J. Furlong, "Abstract Ideas and Images", in *Berkeley and Modern Problems*, The Symposia read at the joint session of the *Aristotelian Society* and the *Mind Association* at Dublin (London: Harrison and sons, 1953), p. 133.
7. G. Berkeley, *First Draft of the Introduction to the Principles*, in *The Works of George Berkeley*, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jossop, *op. cit.*, sect. 7, p. 123.
8. *Ibid.*, sect. 7, p. 123.
9. *Ibid.*, sect. 12, 1. 128.
10. R. I. Aaron, *The Theory of Universals*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 50-51. Please see Aaron for details, pp. 50-55.
11. G. Berkeley, *First Draft of the Introduction to the Principles* *op. cit.*, sect. 7, p. 123.
12. R. I. Aaron, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
13. G. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction *op. cit.*, sect. 10, p. 29.
14. G. Berkeley, *First Draft of the Introduction to the Principles*, *op. cit.*, sect. 16, p. 132.
15. R. I. Aaron, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
16. Cf. J. Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1977), p. 362.
17. J. L. Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 109-110.
18. G. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction, *op. cit.*, sect. 9, p. 28.
19. J. L. Mackie, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-37. Italics mine.

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