

MILL ON UNIVERSALS

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I shall give attention to J. S. Mill's pronouncements concerning universals; and, in the course of doing this, compare or contrast his views with those of others. In this last objective, I rely heavily upon Richard I. Aaron's well-known work, *The Theory of Universals*.¹

It may be said that the problem of universals is philosophy's oldest problem; philosophy may have started with it. In any case there is truth in Aaron's averment that the problem "is still fundamental and urgent; for to understand universals is to begin to understand thinking."² For Mill, however, the phrase "problem of universals" probably appears nowhere in his works; he calls it the problem of the concept or general notion. The seventeenth chapter of his *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* contains his only treatment of the problem in what might be considered systematic. This chapter is entitled "The Doctrine of Concepts or General Notions." It is my main source.

Let us first see how, in Mill's view, a concept originates in the mind. First, our minds are presented with the rude materials of sense, which are then elaborated by the mind. These objects, facts, phenomena, are presented directly to consciousness as sensations; and these can be represented in idea. J. S. Mill follows Hume and James Mill in, as J. S. Mill says, "The general partition of human consciousness between sensations and ideas [or thoughts]."³ Second, comparison is applied to the materials furnished the mind, and certain qualities are judged to be similar or to resemble. That is to say, classification occurs: the similar is separated (abstracted) from the dissimilar. Third, by an act of volition "called Attention," consciousness is concentrated upon specific qualities; e.g., blue. And this concentrated attention involves a similar concentration of abstraction, for these are "the two poles of the same act of thought." Fourth, attention is further concentrated so that the similar objects are synthesized into "an exclusive object of thought." These many having become one, we now have the concept. Fifth, we now give to this "combinations of attributes, or the class of objects which possess them, a specific name." That is, we "create an artificial association between those attributes and a certain combination of articulate sounds, which guarantees to us that when we hear the sound, or see the written characters corresponding to it, there will be raised in the mind an idea of some object possessing those attributes, in which idea those attributes alone will be suggested vividly to the mind, our consciousness of the remainder of the concrete idea being faint."⁴

A concept, then, is "a mere creation of the mind," Mill asserts. "It is the mental representation formed within us of a phenomenon; or rather, it is a part of that mental representation, marked off by a sign, for a particular purpose."⁵ A "concept does not exist as a separate or independent object of thought," as the conceptualists suppose, "but is always a mere part of a concrete image, and has nothing that discriminates it from the other parts except a special share of attention, guaranteed to it by special association with a name."⁶ Most of our thinking is done by means of these names, that is, by words only. When thought is thus completely symbolical, "the meaning of the word is eliminated from thought, and only the word remains."

The following formula, appearing in an early page (p. 45) *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, can be thought of as governing Mill's empirical pronouncements on concepts. One "of the most unquestionable of all logical maxims," he says, "is that the meaning of the abstract must be sought for in the concrete, and not conversely." This surely does not seem to be a *logical* maxim. But Mill may have in mind here the process of thought involved in conception as taught him by his father. When I conceive, writes James Mill, "I take together." When I conceive a horse I combine the several ideas which constitute the "compound" or complex idea that is conventionally marked "horse." Here is a suggestion, incidentally, as to why J. S. Mill frequently favors the concept being designated a "bundle of attributes." Anyhow, James Mill held that the term "concept" is "applied exclusively to cases of the secondary feelings; [that is] to the Idea, not the Sensation [the primary feelings]; and to the case of compound, not of single ideas."⁷ Assuming this stance, it would logically follow I suppose that the meanings of concepts rest on the primary more concrete feelings. It may have been this sort of thing Mill has in mind in his "logical" maxim. At any rate, Mill's assertion that a concept is a "complex idea of a concrete object" may be an instantiation of the formula mentioned, i.e., "the meaning of the abstract must be sought for in the concrete."

A second emphasis of Mill involves the term "parts." The abstraction and the concentration of attention upon *parts* of a complex idea yields the concept. He says, for example: "The only reality there is in a Concept is, that we are somehow enabled and led, not once or accidentally, but in the common course of our thoughts, to attend specially, and more or less exclusively, to certain parts of the presentation of sense or representation of imagination which we are conscious of."⁸

A third term Mill emphasizes is "concrete image"—indeed overemphasizes in my opinion. It is only in imaginative thinking that the universal is exemplified in the use of an *image* as a principle of grouping. In fact,

however, a very great deal of our thinking is predominantly verbal, relying very little on imagery—certainly not directly upon imagery and sometimes not at all on imagery. As Aaron says: “The concept of a quality or a relation is never to be identified with a mere percept or a mere image.”⁹ H. H. Price subjects the question to what is probably an even more searching scrutiny than does Aaron, and Price concludes that the most that introspection reveals by way of concrete images in a “generic image.”¹⁰ An example of a generic image would be what a child draws when asked to draw a house, say, when not in the presence of the object. But a generic image is not a concrete image of course.

On the basis of what has been set forth respecting Mill’s position, we cannot characterize it as nominalism in the sense that “there is nothing general except names.”¹¹ Words or signs are important for Mill, but these always point to a reality (i.e., phenomena) beyond themselves. For instance Mill says that a concept is “an abstract name for the aggregate of objects [sensed or sensible] possessing the attributes included in the concept: and whether that aggregate is greater or smaller does not depend on any properties of the concept, but on the boundless productive powers of Nature.”¹² For Mill, “nature” is the “permanent possibilities of sensation,” and not a mind-independent reality. Yet the names mentioned are abstractions from what Mill calls an “objective” reality—the presentations to consciousness.

And he certainly thought he was not a conceptualist. According to Mill, conceptualism emphasizes that generality “is not an attribute solely of names, but also of thoughts.” All external objects are individual “but to every general name corresponds a General Notion, or Conception, called by Locke an Abstract Idea. General Names are the names of these Abstract Ideas.”¹³ But intellectual processes are not operations “practised upon concepts,” Mill insists, as if these supposed entities were “complete, rounded off, distinct and separate possessions of the mind, habitually dealt with by it quite apart from anything else.”¹⁴

And it is scarcely necessary to note that Mill was not a realist in a Platonic or Aristotelian sense. As to Aristotelian realism, Aaron gives us the following succinct characterization.

On this theory [of Aristotle] a universal is something we discover; it is part of the objective world of nature. Not that it is an object in nature, one amongst other objects, as is the chair or table; it is rather a common quality *in rebus*, a quality of this table, for instance, which is also a quality of that table . . . and is as real as the tables themselves. Common relations, too, may be said to be universals in this sense. . . . Knowledge of universals in this sense gives us a basis for classification. Things which have certain qualities or relations in common are perceived to form a class which we may know. . . .

Perhaps Mill’s position, insofar as he sets forth a consistent one, could be characterized as a variety of conceptualism. He identifies the universal with the concept abstracted from experience and used by the mind in the formation of patterns of meaning in thought and discourse. But, on this view, concepts are not apprehended abstract *entities*, or internal accusatives of which the general word is a name. Mill’s conceptualism, if it may be so termed, is not traditional conceptualism.

Or Mill’s opinion might be called abstractionism, the doctrine that a concept is acquired by a process of singling out in attention some one feature given in direct experience, abstracting it and ignoring the other features simultaneously given.¹⁵ His emphasis upon abstracting *parts* from presentations of sense gives some plausibility to this interpretation. But I think abstracting has to do more with means than ends, and it is not therefore a very satisfactory term to designate a general view. I think Mill’s view, groping and inadequate as it was—at least as judged by a work like that of Aaron—is more conceptualistic than anything else. But the “concepts” would not be, for him, *entities* “complete, rounded off, distinct and separate possessions of the mind”; they would be more like dispositions or potentialities functioning on the occasion of appropriate sense presentations.

Aaron lists three main interpretations of recent vintage as to what a concept is.¹⁶

Most precise is Frege’s that the concept is the reference of the logical predicate term; [second] in contrast to it is the traditional view that the concept is ‘whatever is before the mind’ excepting only all particulars perceived and all memory images of particulars as particulars; thirdly, the concept is presented not as an object before the mind, there to be thought, but as itself part of the thinking, a capacity, a disposition, or possibly an attitude.

For the most part these have little direct similarity to Mill’s observations. But perhaps Aaron’s own position is more relevant to Mill’s adumbrations. Aaron states the conclusion of his inquiry as follows.

The universal is not an image and it is not a concept, that is, an abstract, internal entity. Nor is there any suggestion that it is a word, or even a general word. It is a principle of classification. Such principles rule our thought as we use imagery and general words to think about our world, to classify the objects within it, and to relate the classes with one another. Without the principles we should be tied to immediate experience. . . .

We have seen that Mill rejects concepts *as* internal entities. And it true that Mill says much about words in connection with the general notion, but these are only artificial means to facilitate usage of the mental products some call concepts. Though Mill does not say so in so many words, his concept or general notion—since it is not an internal entity—is really a disposition or principle of classification. Mill’s most radical deficiency is

that he does not give sufficient attention to the distinction between thought and things (images). It seems Aaron is right in distinguishing principles that rule our world of thought from subsidiary facilities (images, words) that enable us to order the objective world, "observed natural recurrences" for instance. Aaron closes his book by insisting that "the question 'What is a universal?' cannot be answered in one sentence, but needs two. *Universals are natural recurrences; universals are principles of grouping or classifying.*"¹⁷ As we have seen, Mill said something similar: the "abstract name for the aggregate of objects possessing the attributes included in the concept" is one thing, but "whether that aggregate is greater or smaller does not depend on any properties of the concept, but on the boundless productive powers of Nature [i.e., Aaron's 'natural recurrences']."¹⁸ Mill and Aaron would doubtless mean something quite different by the term "Nature," but this is not now directly to the point. Some of Mill's insights on the problem of universals still retain plausibility; his deficiencies are mostly on the side of overemphasizing the place of images in the thought processes.

NOTES

¹ Richard I. Aaron, *The Theory of Universals*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1967).

² *Ibid.*, p. vii.

³ James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, ed. John Stuart Mill, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1878 [2nd ed. first pub. 1869]), 1:160—note by J. S. Mill.

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 5th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1878 [first pub. 1865]), p. 395.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 419.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

⁷ James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 1.234, 236.

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Examination of Hamilton's Philosophy*, p. 400.

⁹ Aaron, *Theory of Universals*, p. 193.

¹⁰ H. H. Price, *Thinking and Experience* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969) p. 330.

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *Examination of Hamilton's Philosophy*, p. 381.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 437.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

¹⁴ Aaron, *Theory of Universals*, p. 217.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 190. Geach holds that no concept at all is acquired in this supposed process.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

¹⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Examination of Hamilton's Philosophy*, p. 437.

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