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Is Communication From God Really Possible? A Conceptual Problem

The medievals believed that we had been equipped with a God-given ability to conceptualize the world as God had ordered it. Since the beginning of the modern era, we have become ever more aware that many, if not most, of our concepts are the product of culture and of our own creation rather than being God-given. If God's concepts are different from our own, how could He communicate His concepts to us, since whatever words He would use would signify human concepts rather than His own. In light of this, is communication from God through human language possible, or if possible is it limited to God expressing Himself through our concepts rather than His own? This paper examines this question and offers an explanation of how God could communicate His conceptual understanding to us in spite of the fact that His concepts are nothing like those concepts which are given us by our language community and for the most part make up our understanding.

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Throughout the history of western monotheistic religion, the supposition has been that a personified God in whose image and likeness we were made would be capable of communicating with human beings. But is such communication really possible?

Today, it is generally held that words, with the exception of proper nouns, have meaning or signification as they refer not to things but to concepts or, to use the contemporary vernacular, mental representations. These concepts are general ideas that unite and organize our experience into species or kinds of things. By grouping our experiences, which are always particular, these concepts allow us to think and communicate in ways that would be otherwise impossible. The vast majority of these concepts are the product of our language communities and as such change with time and culture. By contrast, God's concepts are not the product of any language community and do not change with time or culture. Thus, to what extent can an eternal and transcendent God communicate to human beings using their languages, since whatever words God would use would signify our concepts rather than His intentional meaning? Certainly with much of what God might wish to communicate no more than human concepts might be necessary, but if God wished to express concepts which revealed an intentional meaning very different from the concepts which the words of human language signify, would such communication be possible through human language?

Of course, in communicating with man through human language, God would choose words whose concepts were as close as possible to His own. The problem, however, is that we would have no way of knowing which human words signify concepts very close to His intentional meaning, and which, although very remote, were the closest our human language has to what he wishes to express.

This has not always been thought to be a problem. For the most part the Ancients and Medievals believed that our concepts or mental representations were correct, and that a benevolent God had not only equipped us with powers of perception that accurately reflect His creation, but that He had also equipped us with the ability to conceptualize things correctly as well. Whether through innate Platonic ideas of the forms that we come to know through a process of recollection, an Augustinian notion of illumination, or an Aristotelian active intellect; it was believed that we were equipped to conceptualize the world as God did.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), provides an example of such a Medieval view. Aquinas, like Aristotle before him, not only thought that there was a natural order whereby particular things were organized into kinds, but that we had the ability to know such an order. What establishes such an order are God-established forms or essences that all members of particular kinds share. Trees all share the form of tree or treeness, and horses all share the form of horseness. Besides creating these essential forms that unite sense qualities into substances, and substances into kinds, Aquinas also believed that God had equipped us with an active or agent intellect that allows us to discern these essential forms. The way this happens is the active or agent intellect acts upon the phantasm or appearance and, stripping it of its individualizing features, abstracts the essential form. In brief, it leaves behind those characteristics that are unique to the individual and abstracts the essence that a particular thing shares with other members of the same kind. With the essence abstracted from the experience, we have a universal or idea that represents the entire kind. The discerning of this essential form allows us to group particulars according to their God-established kind.

It was believed that the existence of such an active intellect was evident upon careful observation and reflection. When we examine the particular things that we join together into a kind, we see that there are essential characteristics that run throughout all the members of that species. Thus, an active intellect was posited to explain how those essential characteristics were selected and the concept of a kind or species formed¹. It was argued that if an essential form or concept of a kind existed in the mind, then that form or essence must have been caused by, and originated from, an object that had that form. The essential form that exists as an idea within our mind must be the same as the form that exists

1 Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Ed. Anton C. Pegis. (Vol. 1) New York: Random House (1945), p. 749.

within the object, since it was the form within the object that ultimately caused that idea within the mind².

Further, the intelligible is to the intellect as the sensible is to the sense. But the sensible species which are in the senses, and by which we sense, are caused by the sensible things which exist actually outside the soul. Therefore the intelligible species, by which our intellect understands, are caused by some things actually intelligible, existing outside the soul. But these can be nothing else than forms separate from matter. Therefore, the intelligible forms of our intellect are derived from some separate substances³.

Such reasoning has the consequence of inferring that for every kind for which I have an idea or concept, there must be an actual kind within the world of God's creation. Thus, my concept of a black race means that such a kind actually exists and is not a mere human invention.

At the beginning of the Modern Era, support for the idea of an active intellect began to wane. For one thing, the emergence of the corpuscular philosophy, and later atomic chemistry, established a completely different basis for God-established kinds. With these new philosophies, the real essence which establishes the nature of a thing (at least in regard to material substances), is an imperceptible internal structure rather than an Aristotelian form. Thus, it is ever more difficult to believe that God would equip us with an active intellect in order to perceive an essence which was not really the essence of a thing. It is therefore not surprising that early believers in the corpuscular philosophy were led to abandon the idea of an active intellect and instead turned to a nominalism concerning our concepts of everyday experience. John Locke (1632–1704) is an example of such a corpuscularian who turns to nominalism.

The Modern View

According to Locke the essences by which we denominate things for the sake of our understanding are not the real essences or the imperceptible corpuscular structures by which God has actually ordered the world. Since our concepts are not based upon these real essences, the essences upon which our concepts are based are nominal and of our own creation.

For Locke, the mind is a *tabula rasa* or passive intellect, which merely records the simple, uncompounded sensations that are given in experience⁴. Since there is no active intellect, there is no union of sensations in the original experience, and sensations enter the mind singularly. Thus, we must make judgments that certain sense qualities are attributable to one substance rather than another.

2 Adams, Robert Merrihew. 'Where Do Our Ideas Come From? Descartes Vs. Locke.' *Innate Ideas*. Ed. Stephen P Stich. Berkeley: University of California Press (1975), pp.73–74.

3 *op. cit.*, Aquinas, p. 801.

4 Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1975), p. 164.

The fact that we need to make such judgments is obvious in regard to sense qualities like sounds, smells, and tastes, for we have all experienced mistakes whereby we attribute an odor or sound to the wrong object. But without an active intellect to discern a particular form in which the sense qualities were already united, Locke maintained that all sense qualities, or what he called simple ideas, were given individually in experience and needed to be joined into complex ideas like substances by judgments. Of course, we are aided by experience in making our judgments. To create the complex idea of a material substance like a rabbit, our judgment is aided by the fact that we experience the rabbit's color, shape, texture, etc. all moving together. So there is a criterion by which we establish our judgments concerning ideas of substances like animals. Experience gives us not only sensations or simple ideas, but also helps us in putting those simple ideas together to form the complex ideas of 'substances.'

the Mind in making its complex *Idea* of Substances, only follows Nature; and puts none together which are not supposed to have a union in Nature.⁵

Or,

the Mind of Man, *in making* its complex Ideas of *Substances*, never puts any together that do not really, or are not supposed to co-exist; and so it truly borrows that Union from Nature ...⁶

The very fact that substance is defined as that which exists independent of all else, tells us that there is a perceived distinction between the sense qualities that make up a particular substance and the sense qualities that make up its horizon. Thus, the fact that our ideas of things like substances are the product of judgments rather than an active intellect does not prevent us from having a knowledge of substances, for in the vast majority of cases the experience itself affords us very little liberty in making our judgments. Although it is a judgment rather than an active intellect that tells us that the rabbit's furriness, shape, brownness, etc. are all part of the same substance, the fact that they all move together leaves us little freedom to make any other reasonable judgment. At the level at which we form concepts, however, we are afforded a great liberty in our judgments.

For Locke, abstraction is, as it was for Thomas Aquinas, the process by which we create our concepts. But Locke's idea of abstracting essential characteristics is a matter of human judgment and not the product of a God-given active intellect. Without an active intellect, to discern essential forms within single individuals, the essence of a thing can only be abstracted after the grouping has been established. Once we accept the kind 'tree,' we can then, through observation and reflection, detect essential characteristics. But, in the absence of an active intellect, we must first have the idea of the group before we can pick out an essence from among individual members of that kind. Without an active intellect, the essence is dependent upon the group, and:

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 455.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 456.

particular Beings, considered barely in themselves, will be found to have all their Qualities equally *essential*; and every thing, in each Individual, will be *essential* to it, or, which is more true, nothing at all.⁷

Given a group that includes a telephone pole, my wife's mahogany rolling pin, and a dark wine bottle, we can abstract certain common characteristics or an essence. All members of such a grouping are dark in color and cylindrical in shape. Such an essence, however, does not necessarily represent a God-established kind, but is the product of a natural liberty we have to make a vast variety of groupings that will yield essences and thus concepts. Unlike judgments concerning substances where experience prevents alternative judgments, here there is an almost infinite realm of possible alternatives. Because of the liberty we have in making these groupings, we cannot be sure that our concepts represent God's concepts. Thus, even if God were to speak to us, the concepts to which those words would refer would be the product of our own judgments and conventions rather than the concepts God might wish to communicate to us. Of course, not all the moderns were quick to accept this view.

Berkeley's Divine Language

George Berkeley (1685–1753) believed that God was able to communicate with us. In fact Berkeley believed that the sensible world was a visual language through which God was speaking to us. Berkeley was an immaterialist who rejected the idea of matter and material substance, and argued that the sensible entities of the physical world were no more than perceptions or ideas created by the mind of God. Consequently, physical things are not properly things, but, as the direct product of God's mind, they are no more than signs. Clouds are a sign of rain and not the cause of rain. Rain is caused directly by God and not by clouds. The physical universe then is a series of signs, and as a series of signs it constitutes a divine language through which God is communicating to us⁸. In *An Essay toward a New Theory of Vision* he says,

I think we may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the author of nature...⁹

Or, as he says in *Alciphron*,

Upon the whole, it seems the proper objects of sight are light and colours, with their several shades and degrees; all which, being infinitely diversified and combined, form a language wonderfully adapted to suggest and exhibit to us the distances, figures, situations, dimensions, and various qualities of tangible objects.¹⁰

7 *ibid.*, pp. 441–442.

8 Moore, James. 'The Semiotic of Bishop Berkeley – A Prelude to Peirce?' *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal of American Philosophy*. Vol. XX, No. 3, Summer (1984), p. 327.

9 Berkeley, George. *An Essay toward a New Theory of Vision*. Ed. A. A. Luce. Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson and sons Ltd., Vol. 1 of *The Works of George Berkeley*. Eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (1950), sect. 147.

10 Berkeley, George. *Alciphron*. Ed. T. E. Jessop. Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson and sons Ltd., Vol. 3 of *The Works of George Berkeley*. Eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (1950), sects. 4.10.10–15.

Berkeley is not merely claiming that the visual world is like a language. Rather his is 'the much stronger claim that the proper objects of vision are a language'¹¹. As with language, where sounds or marks on a page signify something beyond what we actually perceive, with the visible world what we actually perceive are 'light and colours'¹², but those perceptions signify something more than themselves.

As in reading other books a wise man will choose to fix his thoughts on the sense and apply it to use, rather than lay them out in grammatical remarks on the language; so, in perusing the volume of nature.¹³

Using distance as an example of a concept that is signified by the visual language, Berkeley says,

... we perceive distance, not immediately, but by mediation of a sign, which hath no likeness to it, or necessary connexion with it, but only suggests it from repeated experience, as words do things.¹⁴

Hence, God communicates the concept of distance to us not through a direct experience of distance but through signs (or more specifically signifiers) that are only arbitrarily connected to what they signify, and the connection is established merely through repetition. Likewise, meaning or signification with normal language is not understood directly but through the use of signifiers (sounds or marks on a page) which are only arbitrarily connected to their meaning or signification, but come to be known through repeated experience¹⁵.

Of course, just because the things of this world are signs does not mean they constitute a language. What we experience with our other senses are signs as well but they do not constitute an actual language the way the visual world does¹⁶. In order to be a true language the arbitrary signs we come to know merely through experience must constitute an extensive series of interrelated signs or signifiers. Furthermore, the experience which brings us to an understanding of language is not the simple experience of 'light and colour with their several shades and degrees'¹⁷, but rather the fact that such signifiers are interrelated or 'combined'¹⁸ in such a way that an understanding is possible because of the combination and arrangement of an 'infinite diversity'¹⁹ of elements. Thus, even in the event that specific signifiers (either colors or sounds) are unclear, meaning can still be derived because of the way we experience the signifiers habitually combined.

11 Creery, Walter E. 'Berkeley's Argument for a Divine Visual Language.' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. 3 Winter (1972), p. 212.

12 *op. cit.*, Berkeley, *Alciphron*, sect. 4.10.11.

13 Berkeley, George. *The Principle of Human Knowledge*. Ed. T. E. Jessop. Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson and sons Ltd., Vol. 2 of *The Works of George Berkeley*. Eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (1950), sect. 109.

14 *op. cit.*, Berkeley, *Alciphron*, sects. 4.8.8-11.

15 *ibid.*, sect. 4.10.

16 *ibid.*, sect. 4.12.

17 *ibid.*, sect. 4.10.11.

18 *ibid.*, sect. 4.10.12.

19 *ibid.*, sect. 4.10.12.

Like Saussure, Berkeley thinks that language has meaning because of the way signifiers are structurally arranged and juxtaposed with other signifiers, and not because of the atomic meanings of individual words. From Berkeley we get the idea of an actual rabbit because certain shapes and colors are arranged in a certain way (namely that they move together) and are contrasted with other shapes and colors that make up the rest of the world. Thus, the way meaning or signification is added to the sensations of light and color is as Berkeley says, 'solely from experience, custom, and habit'²⁰. What we actually experience are certain habitual arrangements of lights and colors from which we have learned to take meaning, just as when we read and take meaning from the arrangement of visual marks on the page of a book. If the shape or colors of the letters varied, meaning is still possible, just as we can alter the shape or color of a rabbit without losing its meaning. The letters r-a-b-b-i-t suggest the idea of a rabbit, just as the letters *r-a-b-b-i-t* also suggest the idea of a rabbit, and so too do varying degrees of brownness, furriness, and roundness suggest the idea of a rabbit. With both a written language and the visual world an infinite variety of shapes and colors are all we actually see, but custom and habit have taught us to extract meaning from such perceptions.

Locke too thought that we only perceive sensations and we form ideas of things like substances out of our own judgments. For instance I make the judgment that a substance like a tree ends with those sensations (i.e., those lights and colors) that make up the roots, rather than the sensations that make up the trunk; or that the brownness, furriness and roundness of the rabbit are part of the same thing because they move together. The second example might seem like an obvious judgment but it is nevertheless a judgment rather than an observation²¹.

Berkeley thinks that if physical substances are the product of human judgment, why suppose them to have a substantial existence at all? For Berkeley, the idea of a rabbit is not so much the result of a judgment but the result of a communication from God. God arranges certain shapes and colors in such a way as to all move together and thereby signify a rabbit which is something beyond the actual perceptions themselves. Berkeley thinks this is identical to the way we arrange the shapes and colors that make up letters in such a way that they signify the idea of a rabbit.

No sooner do we hear the words of a familiar language pronounced in our ears, but the ideas corresponding thereto present themselves to our mind So closely are they united that it is not in our power to keep out the one, except we exclude the other also. We even act in all respects as if we heard the very thoughts themselves. So likewise the secondary objects, or those which are only suggested by sight, do often more strongly affect us, and are more regarded than the proper objects of that sense.²²

20 *ibid.*, sect. 4.10.32.

21 *op. cit.*, Locke, pp. 313–314.

22 *op. cit.*, Berkeley, *Essay*, sect. 51.

Although Berkeley's structuralism appears very contemporary, and indeed it is, it is quite different from the twentieth century structuralism of someone like Saussure. Saussure maintained that signifiers signify not particular things, but concepts. Locke had a similar notion and for him concepts had been abstract general ideas. Berkeley denied the existence of abstract general ideas²³ and thus the signifiers or sense qualities of his visual language signify individual objects instead. True, Berkeley does give us the example of distance which is a concept that is formed through the repeated experience of shapes and colors, but that is the exception and, for the most part, the signification of Berkeley's signifiers is on the level of individual objects and not concepts. This seems to present a problem for Berkeley's visual language. Since he rejects the existence of abstract general ideas and believes instead that words do not refer to 'one precise and definite signification annexed to any general name, [but rather] they are all signifying indifferently a great number of particular ideas'²⁴, we must ask on what basis does a single word refer to so many different particular instances or ideas? Berkeley's answer is that although there are no abstract general ideas which make such a link, there are definitions which serve that purpose.

It is one thing to keep a name constantly to the same definition, and another to make it stand everywhere for the same idea; the one is necessary, the other useless and impracticable.²⁵

But do definitions really provide an explanation of how the particular things that are signified by visual experience are joined and united into kinds or species? It seems I was able to form concepts and join things into species or kinds long before I understood anything like a definition.

Locke of course had claimed that the joining of things together into species or kinds was accomplished by general ideas which we form through a process of abstraction.

Words become general, by being made the signs of general *Ideas*: and *Ideas* become general, by separating from them the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other *Ideas*, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence. By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more Individuals than one; each of which, having in it a conformity to that abstract *Idea*, is (as we call it) of that sort.²⁶

By abstracting only what is common to all members of the species, and leaving behind what is unique to the particular members of a species, we have a general idea. Berkeley maintained that such general abstract ideas were a fiction and impossible to imagine. Every triangle we imagine is a particular triangle. It is impossible to imagine a triangle that is neither scalene, isosceles, nor equilateral. In contrast to Locke, Berkeley says,

23 *op. cit.*, Berkeley, *Principles*, sect. 6.

24 *ibid.*, sect. 18.

25 *ibid.*, sect. 18.

26 *op. cit.*, Locke, pp. 410–411.

... universality, so far as I can comprehend, not consisting in the absolute, positive nature or conception of anything, but in the relation it bears to the particulars signified or represented by it.²⁷

So although there are no abstract general ideas which unite particulars into kinds, Berkeley does believe in universals, and universals serve as the unifying factor in place of abstract general ideas. A universal, however, is not an idea of a thing but a 'relation it bears to the particulars signified or represented by it'²⁸. Thus, a universal is a relation like 'father' which is not a thing or substance but a specific relation between individuals based upon some common characteristics. This is true of all species and genres and marks a considerable break from the Aristotelian tradition which saw some species as relational (e.g., father), and other species and genres as substantial²⁹ (e.g., horse or animal). For Berkeley, all of what we think of today as concepts, or what Locke thought of as general abstract ideas, are merely relational characteristics which mark a connection between particulars, and they arise as he says, 'solely from experience, custom, and habit'³⁰.

This appears true according to the example Berkeley gave us with the concept of distance. But that example was well chosen, and not all concepts are of that kind or are formed in that way. Language is multifarious and so are its concepts. Some concepts are the product of innate mental or linguistic hardware, as are the concepts of Kant or Chomsky. There may also be certain experiences which themselves create concepts because we are not afforded any liberty concerning how such experiences are to be organized or arranged (this may be the case with distance). Still others form through language acquisition, and indeed, this seems to be the way the majority of our concepts form.

A child's first concept of dog might be a very general notion which includes many kinds of pets, or it may be very narrow and include characteristics unique to the child's own dog. It is only as more and more instances are identified by the signifier *dog* that the child's concept of dog is molded into something that replicates that of the language community.

Thus, it seems that many, if not most, of our concepts are forced upon us by our culture. This might at first appear to negate the liberty Locke saw at the base of our concepts, but the fact that a child's first concept of dog may be very different from that of her language community is evidence of that liberty.

Words do have conventional meanings, meanings established through use by a language community... . The child's experientially based concepts might be quite different from that of the language community... . For example, the child might begin with a concept of 'small four-legged house animal' rather than individual concepts of 'dog' and 'cat.' Then the term dog will be

27 *op. cit.*, Berkeley, *Principles*, sect. 15.

28 *ibid*

29 Aristotle says they are secondary substances but substances nonetheless.

30 *op. cit.*, Berkeley, *Alciphron*, sects. 4.10.32.

extended to cats as well. Such over extensions of words to close category members are frequent during this period, ... (Dromi, 1987; Nelson et al., 1978; Rescorla, 1980). But the child's concept of 'dog' also might include specifications relating to the child's own pet, such as 'friendly, excitable, chews socks.' These are legitimate characterizations of a particular dog, and are also generalizable to some subset of the category of dogs. However, they are not legitimately part of the conventionally accepted 'meaning' of the term *dog* in the parent language.³¹

In time the acquisition of language forces us to take on the concepts of our language community, but there is an initial and underlying freedom always present. It is this freedom that allows for the possibility of philosophy whereby we reject a concept as given by our language community in order to form a more ideal concept. It is also this freedom that accounts for the fact that different cultures conceptualize the world differently.

If words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true. French uses *louer (une maison)* 'let (a house)' indifferently to mean both 'pay for' and 'receive payment for,' whereas German uses two words, *mieten* and *vermieten*; there is obviously no exact correspondence of values.³²

A great amount of anthropological evidence supports this fact that different people conceptualize or divide up the world differently, and

different concepts are lexicalized in different languages, or especially that different lexical cuts are made across the same conceptual field.³³

For some time we have been aware of the fact that different people groups conceptualize the world differently and organize their experiences into ideas of kinds in different ways³⁴. Call to mind the often cited case of Eskimos distinguishing several different kinds of snow, while other cultures distinguish but one³⁵. Furthermore, none of the Eskimo words for what we would call snow refer to just plain snow as we know it (i.e., snow as a genus which unites the more refined concepts of snow does not exist at all for them)³⁶.

Obviously, there is a liberty which underlies the formation of many of our

31 Nelson, Katherine. 'Concepts and Meaning in Language Development.' *Biological and Behavioral Determinants of Language Development*. Ed. Norman Krasnegor, Duane Rumbaugh, Richard Schiefelbusch, and Michael Studdert-Kennedy. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers (1991), pp. 94-95.

32 Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library (1959), p. 118.

33 *op. cit.*, Nelson, p. 98.

34 Whorf, B. L. 'The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language.' *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*. Ed. Leslie Spier. Menasha, WI: Sapir Memorial Publication Fund (1941), pp. 75-95).

35 Whorf, B. L. 'Science and Linguistics.' *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee*. Ed. J. B. Carroll. Cambridge, MA: The M. I. T. Press (1956), p. 352.

36 Martin, Laura. 'Eskimo Words for Snow: A Case Study in the Genesis and Decay of an Anthropological Example.' *American Anthropologist*. 88 (2), (1986), pp. 418-19.

concepts and, in regard to Berkeley's visual language, there does not seem to be any way to eliminate that liberty. Of course, if that liberty is not eliminated, our conceptualization of the visual world will largely be our own rather than God's. By contrast, the concepts that are communicated to us by our language community do eliminate our innate liberty because, in our early acquisition of language, other members of the language community instruct us concerning which instances of our experience are extensions of specific words or phrases, and from that our concept forms in accordance with our culture. Such instruction is missing from Berkeley's visual language, and thus we have an enormous freedom in conceptualizing our experience. There are many people who can serve as instructors in order that our concepts be molded after those of our language community, but none to instruct us in order that our concepts be molded after the author of nature. Without such instruction, we have no way of knowing if our conceptualizations conform to the intentional meaning of the author of nature. Of course, as we have seen, some concepts do seem to form naturally through pure experience as in the case of distance, and some might be the product of mental or linguistic hardware, but in most cases we have a great liberty in forming the concepts that organize and make sense of our experience.

On the level of particular objects there is no problem in putting together the shapes and colors that make up a rabbit, because there is little or no alternative judgment that could be made. But when we attempt to put particular creatures of the same kind together in order to form a concept of a species, a vast variety of alternative possibilities confront us. The visual world offers no instruction concerning the correct criterion for making such unions. By contrast, conventional language has an army of instructors who eliminate all alternative judgments and bring our concepts into line with the acceptable concepts of the language community. So even though Berkeley admits the existence of relational universals which are able to unite particulars into kinds or species, they do not seem, for the most part, to be established by the author of nature but by agents of our language communities.

Of course, the visual language is capable of communicating signs that are able to aid us in our earthly existence. Clouds are a sign of rain and that is certainly to our benefit. But such simple communication seems the extent of the visual language. In fact, such communication does not go much beyond the form of communication that exists between man and the lower animals that he domesticates or trains.

Berkeley does seem to be right in claiming that with the visual language God could express His existence, for even a primitive language causes us to suppose a mind or spirit behind such communication. Our evidence for the existence of a man does not lie in the series of perceptions we identify as a man, but rather because of man's ability to communicate through something like language.

It is plain, we do not see a man, if by man is meant that which lives, moves, perceives, and thinks as we do...³⁷

37 *op. cit.*, Berkeley, *Principles*, sect. 148.

It is rather that we suppose an intelligence behind the communication. And Berkeley says, 'After the same manner we see God'³⁸. But if God wanted to communicate more than simply His existence, or simple commands such as we communicate to animals, could His intentional meaning be communicated to us since His concepts are not those of our language communities?

Personal Concepts

God's concepts are obviously very different from our own. For one thing, they are not common or the product of a community the way ours are, nor are they acquired in the same manner that our concepts are acquired, and, most importantly, there are no instructors to point out the correct extensions of God's concepts the way there are instructors to teach us the correct extensions of the common concepts of our language communities. God's concepts are thus fundamentally different from our concepts.

Wittgenstein understood that there were different kinds of concepts. Unlike Plato, and nearly the entire Western tradition that followed him, Wittgenstein realized that language, and its concepts, function differently in different situations, and for different purposes³⁹. This is largely due to the fact that human beings, and their language, function on several levels and thus so must their concepts. Wittgenstein says that we can create exact concepts for specific purposes and that these concepts stand as additions to the concepts we use for common language⁴⁰. In addition to the common concept of 'water' which I communicate in order to satisfy my thirst, there may also be an exact concept of 'H₂O' which allows me to communicate a more precise meaning of the same signifier or word. But although Wittgenstein acknowledges different kinds of concepts, what he denies is that there can be a private language with words which refer to concepts or inner experiences that are totally private and only known to an individual⁴¹. Language, for Wittgenstein, is always common and the product of a community. His arguments against the idea of a private language are convincing, but such arguments remain on a purely human level and do not bring God into the mix. Not that God has a language that is knowable only to Himself, but certainly God's concepts are not the product of any language community and their origins are purely personal rather than common. By contrast, if all of our concepts are common, as Wittgenstein argues, then how could we ever know such divine concepts that are so different in kind from our own? Are such concepts, which are so different from our own, even imaginable?

I believe they are imaginable and even knowable. My reason for believing that God's concepts are knowable is that we too have concepts that are very different

38 *ibid.*, sect. 147.

39 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers. (1965), p. 1.

40 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc. (1968), sects. 68–69.

41 *ibid.*, sects. 243–315.

from those of our language community. Indeed, in addition to the concepts given us by our language communities, we also have concepts which, like God's concepts, originate privately and are not the product of a language community. Not that they are part of a private language known only to ourselves, but they are concepts that are personal, and not common nor the product of a community. Our first concept of a dog began as a personal concept. Of course, it was molded into a common concept but it began as a personal or private one. Additionally, we retain many concepts that are not the product of our language community but are private and the result of our own personal experience and judgment. For example, in addition to my common concept of water and the more scientific concept of H₂O, there is also a concept of water that represents the stuff I played in as a child. This concept is not the concept I commonly communicate but is the kind of concept I wish to communicate in my more intimate communions where I wish to express a more private or personal meaning. This personal concept is very different from the concept that the language community commonly holds. It is my private concept of 'water' which has a unique meaning only to me, but it is nevertheless a concept that I sometimes wish to communicate to another human being (usually someone with whom I am intimate).

On the common level, or even the precise scientific level, a concept is little more than a commonly understood boundary that separates one kind from another, while on the more personal level, a concept is really not common at all. Plato's idea of a concept as an *eidos* or what is common to all members of a species only applies to the common or scientific notions of a concept and omits completely the idea of a personal concept⁴². Personal concepts are very different from common or scientific concepts in that they are not concepts which are known in abstraction, but concepts known from the perspective of a person. When they are communicated to me, what I grasp is not something common but something personal.

In common communication, we use concepts for the purpose of utility, and thus knowing the intentional meaning of a speaker is not important, but at other times when we wish to communicate for the purpose of intimacy, the intentional meaning or personal concept of the speaker is what we are after. Thus, with our common concepts, the concept is most often used as a means to identify the extensions of that concept, while with our personal concepts the instances or extensions of the concept are the means, and the purpose is to communicate the concept itself. Of course, an exact communication of such an intentional meaning is impossible, but the purpose of this kind of personal communication is not to establish the kind of exactness sought in the sciences but to intimately share with another person the way one uniquely conceptualizes the world.

With human beings, personal concepts may begin as common concepts acquired through language, but because they become concepts that are of particular interest and importance to us we attach additional meaning and significance

42 Plato. *The Meno*. Eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. *Plato: Collected Dialogues*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (1989), pp. 72–79.

to them. Such concepts often more genuinely define us than our occupations or social statuses, and they are what we want others to know about us. Such concepts represent the objects of our greatest interest and affection. The man who loves dogs has a very different concept of those animals than other members of the language community. He is familiar with the common concept, but his concept includes things that the one who is not a dog lover would have difficulty imagining. Similarly, the man whose interest is money has a concept of money that goes far beyond the concept others signify by the same word.

Ortega y Gasset says:

In truth, nothing characterizes us as much as our field of attention... This formula might well be accepted: tell me where your attention lies and I will tell you who you are.⁴³

This is certainly true, but our field of attention is always conceptually constructed. It is not what we perceive, that makes something important to us, but how we conceive it. More than our finger prints, the things that most truly identify and personalize us are those personal concepts which we have given much time and attention to develop. These are the things we share in our most intimate relationships, and these are the things we are often most attracted to in another person.

The way in which personal concepts are communicated is very similar to the way common concepts are communicated to us in our initial exposure to language. As we saw earlier, a child's concept may begin as something very different from that of their language community. It is shaped, however, as additional instances of a given signifier or word are provided. With the additional instances, eventually the child's concept becomes something close to the concept held by the language community at large. Likewise, the same is true regarding the communication of our private concepts, the only difference being that with the communication of private concepts there is a single instructor concerning the correct extension of the concept, and the purpose of communicating the concept is, not for the purpose of some future utility, but rather in order to be more intimately known by another person.

In a marriage one way a spouse intimately communicates to their mate is by expressing the unique intentional meaning they attribute to certain important concepts. The first step in such communication is for the spouse to convince their mate that what they mean by a certain signifier is not what is commonly meant, and that the concept to which a signifier commonly or even scientifically refers is of little use on this personal level. Without understanding our natural estrangement from the personal concepts of others, we will never even begin to enter into communication on this more personal level.

After my wife has convinced me that I do not understand a particular concept that is important and unique to her, she then gives instances of what she does

43 Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme*. Trans. Toby Talbot. New York: Penguin Books, Inc. (1957), p. 26.

mean. As she sets out additional instances of her particular concept, I come ever closer to an understanding of her intentional meaning, just as I had through a similar process come to understand the public concept referenced by that word. The main difference lies in the fact that the private or personal concept is much more complex and includes many more aspects unique to my wife's experiences, judgments, and values. These unique aspects would certainly be eliminated from the public concept of that same word or signifier.

Knowing God's Concepts

Since we ourselves have the capacity to form private concepts that are very different from those of our language community, and we are able to express these private concepts by using the common concepts of our language community, it should not be surprising that God can do the same. All that would be needed would be an understanding, on our part, that we do not have God's concepts to begin with; a willingness, on our part, to acquire God's concepts in order to more intimately know Him; and an instructor who could show us what the correct extensions of God's concepts are.

In order to intimately know my wife, I need to know how she uniquely conceptualizes those things that are most important to her. I begin by understanding that I am not naturally equipped with concepts that enable me to know her most important and unique concepts. I equally have to be willing to come to know such concepts, and she needs to instruct me concerning her concepts by giving me instances which serve as extensions of those concepts.

The same is true of my relationship with God. In order to intimately know Him, I need to know how He uniquely conceptualizes those things that are most important to Him. As with my wife, I need to begin by understanding that I am not naturally equipped with an understanding of God's intentional meaning. Equally, I have to desire to know His concepts, and finally He has to instruct me concerning the proper extensions of His concepts. As we have seen, there is no instructor within nature to point out the correct extensions of God's concepts, but God has provided the Scripture, and with Scripture we have just such a single instructor capable of pointing out the correct extensions of God's most important concepts. With the biblical instances, we have what was missing from Berkeley's visual language. The instances the Bible offers of things like love and faith provide extensions of God's concepts, and thus we come to understand God's intentional meaning, just as we come to understand our spouse's intentional meaning through the instances they provide as extensions of their important personal concepts.

In spite of the fact that our language communities impose their concepts upon us, we are nevertheless free to form personal concepts and communicate them to others, and we do so by using conventional language and its common concepts. Philosophers in particular create new concepts out of their unique experience and judgment, and they communicate those concepts to others using existing language and its common concepts. Sometimes philosophers invent a

new word, or someone else introduces a new word, to signify a new philosophical concept, but a new word is not necessary, and the new concepts can be expressed using existing words and their concepts. All that is necessary is that they give instances which serve as extensions of the new concept. The same is of course true of God. He can communicate His unique concept of something like 'love' through the biblical instances which serve as extensions of that concept. Today, the word *agape* signifies God's unique concept of love, but the word did not have that meaning when the Bible was being written. At the time when the Bible was being written, the word *agape* signified a very broad and common concept of love. Indeed, the biblical concept of *agape* love did not exist before the biblical instances that created it.

Thus, the fact that the words God uses to communicate to us do not signify His concepts, but rather those of our language community, does not prevent God from expressing His intentional meaning to us, since we too are able to express our intentional meaning to others in spite of the fact that the concepts we often wish to express are very different from the common concepts of our language community. All that is necessary for such communication to take place is that there be some means of expressing extensions of a particular signifier or word. Since Scripture provides such a means for God to express the extensions of His unique concepts, the only thing that would prevent God from communicating His concepts to us is a belief on our part that we either come naturally equipped with God's concepts, and thus have no need for God to communicate them to us, or that God's concepts are so radically different from our own that they are unknowable. It has been the purpose of this paper to refute both positions and suggest a middle ground which points us to Scripture.

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