Philosophia (2009) 37:373–378
DOI 10.1007/s11406-008-9148-2

Comments on Daniel E. Flage's "Berkeley's Contingent Necessities"

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Received: 26 June 2008 / Accepted: 1 July 2008 /
Published online: 19 August 2008
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Abstract According to Daniel Flage, Berkeley thinks that all necessary truths are founded on acts of will that assign meanings to words. After briefly commenting on the air of paradox contained in the title of Flage's paper, and on the historical accuracy of Berkeley's understanding of the abstractionist tradition, I make some remarks on two points made by Flage. Firstly, I discuss Flage's distinction between the ontological ground of a necessary truth and our knowledge of a necessary truth. Secondly, I discuss Flage's attempt to show that, according to Berkeley, the resemblance relation does not constitute a necessary connection.

Keywords George Berkeley · Daniel Flage · Abstraction · Meaning · Necessary truth

In his essay, Flage argues that, according to Berkeley, all necessary truths are founded on acts of will that assign meanings to words (or to other suitable signs). Berkeley considers necessary truths as stipulative definitions of terms. The laws of nature themselves constitute the language of God: they are based on volitional acts of God that make certain ideas stand for other ideas (or for minds). Since each one of us has to learn the linguistic conventions used by others, and most importantly, the linguistic conventions adopted by God himself, it follows that not all necessary truths can be known a priori.

1. Once we understand Flage's usage, the air of paradox contained in the title of the paper disappears. According to Berkeley, "[t]he meaning of a word is fundamentally arbitrary" (p. 4). Establishing the meaning of a general term consists of establishing a rule of use, whereby we make one word stand for a class of individuals picked out on the basis of some resemblance among them (see p. 4).

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Flage argues that since a necessary truth is a statement that cannot be false, this rule of use is a necessary truth. I come up with a rule for the use of the word 'dog', that is, I decide to make it stand for certain animals resembling each other in certain respects. This rule "specifies only what *I* mean by 'dog' at a certain time" (p. 4). This rule does not necessarily specify what other people mean by the word 'dog' at the same time, or what I meant (or what I will mean) by the word 'dog' at a different time. Since, at time *t*, I arbitrarily decide what I mean by this word, I cannot be wrong about what I mean by this word at time *t*. This claim of Flage seems unobjectionable to me, but since we normally think that necessary truths are statements that cannot be false at any time and for everybody, the title of his essay comes across as being paradoxical. Moreover, one could argue that the necessity ascribed to mathematics rests on the fact that we uniformly and constantly abide by the stipulative definitions of terms we agreed upon. Perhaps, one could find less than intelligible the notion itself of a "convention" or "stipulation" that is only valid for oneself and only at a particular time.

2. In the first section of his essay, Flage examines Berkeley's theory of the meaning of sortal terms. Before introducing Berkeley's theory, he briefly considers Berkeley's critique of the theory of abstract ideas: "This critique undercuts one putative source of the claims of necessary truths" (p. 1). Abstraction would be a source of necessary truths because it would yield "essential truths" (or, to use Descartes' terminology, "eternal truths and true and immutable natures").

Two concerns seem to overlap in this part of the paper. Firstly, one might be concerned that if there are indeed abstract ideas, and if sortal terms stand for abstract ideas rather than—as Berkeley contends—classes of individuals, then somehow sortal terms would not acquire their meaning by convention or stipulative definition. Secondly, one might be concerned that if there are abstract ideas, then these abstract ideas are, or anyway faithfully represent, the essential natures of things (natural kinds). Thus, these essential natures would constitute the source of the claims of necessary truths, in alternative to the arbitrary stipulations of meaning by word users.

I do not see how the first concern would be justified, since even if there are abstract ideas, the use of one term for an abstract idea might still be the result of a convention, unless there are words that signify certain things by nature (presumably, onomatopoeic words). The second concern would not be justified either, since there could be abstract ideas that do not make us know the essential natures of things, e.g. Locke's nominal essences. These nominal essences are the result of the selective attention we pay to an object insofar as it has a certain quality, while disregarding other qualities it has.[1] As a consequence of this selective attention, there would be a certain element of arbitrariness in the way we abstract an object's features one from another, and in the way we group things on the basis of resembling features.

[1] See, for example, John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book 3, Chapter 6, Section 7, p. 443: "Why do we say, This is a *Horse*, and that a *Mule*; this is an *Animal*, that an *Herb*? How come any particular Thing to be of this or that *Sort*, but because it has that nominal Essence, Or, which is all one, agrees to that abstract *Idea*, that name is annexed to?"

But I think this part of the paper has to be read keeping in mind Flage's discussion of Berkeley's conception of laws of nature as a divine language of ideas: regular successions of ideas reflect only God's decision to assign a certain meaning to certain terms of his language, and do not reflect any necessary connection arising from the nature of ideas themselves. In the same manner, our classification of individual things together under one general name is not evidence of a common nature they share. In short, what properly speaking is conventional is not simply the assignment of names to objects, but the way we group things together.

3. Reading Flage's account of Berkeley's arguments against the abstractionists, one would naturally suspect that the positions of Aristotle, the Scholastics, Descartes, and Locke are importantly different from each other. Thus, while Flage's assumption that Berkeley did not mean to attack only Locke in the Introduction to the *Principles* is justified, it is not so evident to many commentators that Berkeley was correct in his interpretation of his predecessors.

Flage identifies one central argument *ad hominem* against abstractionists: "abstractionists deemed it impossible for a mode, property, or form to exist apart from some object, while claiming that it is possible to form an idea of those modes, properties, or forms apart from determinate objects, that is, to form an abstract idea" (p. 2). Since they also held the principle that whatever is conceivable is possible, their principles form an inconsistent triad.[2]

Locke, as Flage recalls, said that kinds are a convenient fiction, and that they cannot possibly exist, since "all Things, that exist, [are] Particulars."[3] If Locke claimed that we conceive of kinds and yet that they cannot possibly exist, his position would not necessarily be inconsistent, unless he also held, like other abstractionists, that whatever is conceivable is also possible. (Berkeley's criticism of the triangle passage in Locke is successful only if we assume that what is impossible, in this case an object having inconsistent properties or no determinate property, is also inconceivable).[4] We can therefore see the point of some interpretations that take ideas in Locke to be intentional contents of thought rather than particular existents. It is not clear to me whether Locke actually subscribed to or rejected the principle that whatever is conceivable is possible (and, consequently, that what is impossible is inconceivable).[5] He certainly admitted that it is difficult to form general abstract ideas of objects having inconsistent properties or no

[2] See also Daniel E. Flage, *Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions: A Reconstruction based on his Theory of Meaning* (London & Sidney: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 30–36.

[3] Locke, *Essay*, 3.3.1, p. 409.

[4] See George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Part I, Introduction, Section 13.

[5] Thomas Reid rejected the principle that "our conception of things is a test of their possibility, so that, what we distinctly conceive, we may conclude to be possible; and of what is impossible, we can have no conception": see Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, edited by Derek R. Brookes (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), Essay IV, Chapter 3, p. 327. Thus, he had no difficulty talking about universals as non-existent intentional objects of our minds: see Reid, *Essays*, V.2, 359–64.

determinate properties, like the general idea of triangle. However, this fact does not seem to imply that it is impossible to conceive of such ideas.[6]

4. We may also distinguish two distinct ways the process of abstraction was conceived in the Aristotelian tradition preceding Berkeley.[7] As Roderick Long explains, in considering a horse in abstraction from its color, we may conceive it in two different ways:

> We may consider the horse *as not* having a determinate color, or else we may consider the horse *not as* having a determinate color. To consider the horse *as not* having a determinate color is to hold, or attempt to hold, a horse that simply has no determinate color-a creature never encountered in physical reality, and having its home either in Platonic heaven or nowhere.[8]

As Aquinas says, this mode of abstraction implies falsehood, that is, it falsifies the reality of the concrete object on which it is based, since there is no horse that has no determinate color.[9]

However, the second mode of abstraction does not falsify the reality of the particular object on which it is based. "[T]o consider the horse *not as* having a determinate color is simply to consider the horse as a horse, without attending to its color, that is, without considering its color one way or another."[10] Berkeley seems to be oblivious to this second way of understanding abstraction among his predecessors, or, perhaps, he thinks that the distinction between these two types of abstraction in some of his predecessors is spurious. That Berkeley himself seems to have appreciated the second way of understanding abstraction is evident from section 16 of the Introduction to the *Principles*, and, in particular, from the addition he made to the second edition:

> And here it must be acknowledged that a man may consider a figure merely as triangular, without attending to the particular qualities of the angles, or

[6] See Locke, *Essay*, 4.7.9, pp. 595–96.

[7] I rely for my account of two kinds of abstraction on Roderick T. Long, "Realism and Abstraction in Economics: Aristotle and Mises *versus* Friedman", *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* Vol. 9, No. 3 (Fall 2006): 3–23 (see especially pp. 5–9).

[8] Long, p. 7.

[9] See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* I.85. 1 ad 1, in Thomas Aquinas, *On Human Nature*, edited by Thomas S. Hibbs (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999). In support of his identification of two types of abstraction, Long also quotes Aristotle, *On Memory* 450a1–7, *Physics* 193b22–36, *Metaphysics* 1077b23–1078a29, and Abelard as summarized by John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 166–7. Armand Maurer also refers to these two types of abstraction as *precisive* and *non-precisive*: see Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 2nd edition, edited by Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968), p. 39, note. As Long says, in *precisive* abstraction, certain actual characteristics *are specified as absent*, while in *non-precisive* abstraction, certain actual characteristics *are absent from specification* (see Long, p. 7). The case of a triangle that has multiple inconsistent characteristics would be a type of abstraction where certain characteristics are *specified as all being present at the same time*. Thus, in addition to the type of abstraction that takes the triangle *as not having* angles or sides of a determinate size, we should also consider a form of abstraction that takes the triangle *as having* angles and sides of *all* sizes.

[10] Long, p. 7.

> relations of the sides. So far he may abstract: but this will never prove, that he can frame an abstract general inconsistent idea of a triangle. In like manner, we may consider Peter so far forth as man, or so far forth as animal, without framing the aforementioned abstract idea, either of man or of animal, in as much as all that is perceived is not considered (*Principles*, Introduction, Section 16).

5. According to the interpretation of Berkeley given by Flage, all connections among things are the result of volitional acts (God's acts and ours) that make certain ideas stand for others. These are contingent relations, since the intentions at play could have been different. However, as Flage notices in Section 3 of his paper, "there is an element of Berkeley's philosophy that seems inconsistent with the language model and, perhaps, his nominalism" (p. 9). This is Berkeley's contention that there are relations among things that involve necessary connections. In different terms, not all the relations between signs and what is signified are arbitrary or conventional, but some signs suggest what they signify by some necessary connection existing between the sign and the signified object. In particular, according to Berkeley, two relations seem to involve necessary connections: the relations of causality and resemblance ("similitude").

The first objective of Flage is to show that the fact that a relation between two things constitutes a necessary connection does not imply that we know it a priori. In his words, "one must distinguish between the ontological ground of a necessary truth and the postulation of a necessary truth" (p. 10). This observation leads to some counterintuitive consequences.

If there are necessary connections in Berkeley, then the relation of causality is certainly one of them. According to Berkeley, only an act of will qualifies as a proper cause, and the relation between an act of will and the object of the act of will is necessary. However, in the case of our acts of will, we can only discover this necessary connection a posteriori, by experience, if the effect obtains. If the effect does not obtain, then we must conclude there was no will to begin with, and we were just mistaken in thinking that we willed something. The example given by Flage of seeing whether I can lift a car illustrates this point. The distinction between the ground of a necessary truth and the postulation of a necessary truth also appears in the distinction to be made between the will that instituted the connection between words and meanings in a language I still have to learn, and my subsequent learning of that language. However, I have some difficulty seeing the distinction between the ground of a necessary truth and the postulation of a necessary truth, when I try to apply it to my own institution of the meanings of words by the use of my own will: I decide to use a word to stand for some objects, but should I wait until I see what I mean by that word, after I decide to use it in that way? This case seems to be different from my ascertaining by experience whether I really have the will to lift a car.

The second objective of Flage is to show that in Berkeley's philosophy the relation of resemblance does not constitute a necessary connection among ideas. In other words, resemblance is not the ontological ground in ideas that results in their classification into sorts. In the terminology of Winkler, Flage's interpretation would be tantamount to showing that all signs in Berkeley are arbitrary or conventional

(whether instituted by God or humans), and that there are no compulsory non-arbitrary signs.[11]

If resemblance, according to Berkeley, is a *relation*, then it is an act of mind, since all relations include an act of mind. Flage says: "If human minds are fairly uniform in faculties—if there is a fairly uniform relating of things in terms of resemblances—the connection would be grounded in terms of an act of the mind" (p. 14). Flage then quotes a passage from the early Notebooks, #649, where Berkeley admits there are innate ideas. Flage suggests that this might be taken as evidence that there are such uniformities in our faculties and in their relating of ideas. The usual objections come to up my mind: how would one recognize that our acts of "relating of ideas", and thereby our faculties, are "fairly uniform", without pointing to the resemblance itself in the objects so related, or without pointing to the resemblance in the acts of relating—a resemblance that in its turn would have to be explained?

Flage concludes this section, with the following remarks:

> While an act of will brings something into existence, and a perceptual relation is a necessary condition for the existence of an object, the relation of resemblance constitutes a resemblance between two ideas. The ideas so related remain distinct. The act of mind in deeming two ideas resembling brings that state affairs into existence, making resemblance similar to a causal relation (p. 14).

An act of mind that *recognizes* a resemblance relation *brings* that resemblance relation *into existence*. Thus, Flage seems to suggest that, according Berkeley, these acts of mind are ultimately acts of will. In the terminology of Thomas Reid, these acts of mind would therefore be *transitive*, they would have effects on the world. According to this account, there would not be room for *immanent* acts of mind that simply *discover* the resemblances among ideas but do not *constitute* them.[12]

[11] See Kenneth P. Winkler, "Berkeley and the doctrine of signs", in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 126–38.

[12] See Reid, *Essays*, II.14, p. 177.