



R. I. AARON

RICHARD ITHAMAR AARON

1901-1987

RICHARD AARON was born at Seven Sisters on 6 November 1901, but brought up in Ynystawe on the banks of the river which gave the village and the valley, Cwmtawe, as well as Abertawe (Swansea) their names—names ever dear to Aaron. Names mattered to the Aarons. The late Sir Ben Bowen Thomas, in an appreciation for an issue of *Efrydiau Athronyddol* published 1969 in Aaron's honour, relates how visitors to the home would be met with the question 'What is the meaning of *Llwyfenni*?' (the name of the Aarons' home), and how Richard's father took pride in showing the tall trees beside the house and explaining that *llwyfenni* is Welsh for *elms*.

William Aaron, the father, we are told, was a man with high standards of propriety, order, industry, and conscientiousness. From him the son learnt, first to seek a clear vision of what tasks he could accomplish, and then to work through them methodically with thoroughness and determination. William's wife, Margaret, was a gentle, wise, and prudent mother who provided the peace and stability which gave her children a secure home most favourable to a cultured upbringing. The most prominent elements in the culture influencing the growing boy were the Welsh Baptist church and the Welsh language and literature. If some of the sermons were sometimes a bit above the heads of the ordinary congregation, as they could be in those days, that was probably because they were genuine intellectual efforts that the young Aaron would appreciate. And he certainly did appreciate with enthusiasm the early poetry of the young bard, Islwyn. These are the influences which explain why his earliest forays into the philosophical literary arena were efforts in Welsh to extract a Plotinian philosophical theme from Islwyn's poem, *Y Storm*. Preoccupation with the influence of Plotinus on Welsh religious thought is probably what led to the appearance of the section on 'Transcendent' Knowledge in Aaron's first book, *The Nature of Knowing*.

Aaron took his secondary education at Ystalyfera Grammar

School, and went on from there to University College, Cardiff, where he studied history and philosophy, the head of the Philosophy Department at the time being H. J. W. Hetherington, who was followed shortly after by J. W. Scott. The interest in history kept pace with his enthusiasm for philosophy as is evidenced by the title of his MA thesis, 'A Dissertation on the Relations of History and Science'. That, of course, is an interest that features strongly in his later scholarly work on Locke and the British Empiricists. In 1923 he was elected to a Fellowship of the University of Wales, and that enabled him to go to Oxford where he took the degree of D.Phil. for a thesis on 'The History and Value of the Distinction between Intellect and Intuition', the examiners being J. A. Smith and A. D. Lindsay. As a student at Oriel College he learnt much from the then Provost, W. D. Ross, from H. A. Prichard, H. H. Joachim, and from some who were to remain life-long friends, Alfred Ewing, Gilbert Ryle, and Michael Foster.

Aaron's first appointment was as lecturer in A. E. Heath's department in Swansea, his colleagues being Ewing, and H. B. Acton, with whom he also formed a close friendship. This was a time of lively interchange of ideas for the young lecturer. There was, no doubt, much philosophical discussion in the common room, and there is evidence in Aaron's library that many friends of these early years were in lively correspondence with each other, exchanging copies of their work and offering comments of appreciation or criticism. At the same time, his energy, enthusiasm and genuine concern for education outside the walls of the university led him to take extra-mural philosophy classes high up in the valleys and in the suburbs of Llanelly. The university was not for him that intellectual ivory tower which can, and sometimes does, breed contempt for folk whose opportunities and skills do not belong in the sphere of higher education.

Some of the fruits of Aaron's work over these early years appeared in the aforementioned book, *The Nature of Knowing*, which came out in 1930. The terminology and mould of thought is very much that of the Oxford philosophers of his student days: the discussion is in terms of the act of knowing, which is contrasted with opining, and there are frequent references to intuitions, apprehensions, and cognitive experience. He defines knowledge as 'an intuitive apprehension of the real', and the tentative conclusion he comes to is that we do possess some such knowledge—at least in the realms of mathematics and logic. The approach is typically methodical, making it easy to pick out the

successive stages in the author's thinking and to keep the general picture in view at the same time. Today the book provides an interesting reflection of the way problems of knowledge were being handled just before the influence of Moore, Russell, and the positivists became predominant.

In the following year his article on 'Locke and Berkeley's *Commonplace Book*' appeared in *Mind*—evidence of the growing interest in historical and textual matters. There was an encouraging response from several philosophers including W. R. Sorley, A. A. Luce, and G. Dawes Hicks, with whom Aaron was subsequently in communication.

When the Chair of Philosophy at Aberystwyth became vacant after the retirement of W. Jenkyn Jones, Aaron was appointed as a young man of great promise. Those were the golden days of optimism about the future of philosophy in Wales, and that future was a matter of deep concern to Aaron, as his inaugural lecture shows. It was entitled 'The Place of Philosophy in Contemporary Welsh Life' and in it he returns to the theme of Neo-Platonism in Welsh thought, with quotations in Welsh from that classic of Welsh literature, *Llyfr y Tri Aderyn* by Morgan Llwyd. One senses that Aaron was slightly pained by the fact that Wales had not produced a philosopher of the standing of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. There is a telling little paragraph in his next book, *Hanes Athroniaeth: o Descartes i Hegel*—a book based on the lectures he gave to his extra-mural classes. It comes at the end of his chapter on Berkeley where he explains that he has given more attention to that philosopher because he was, if I may translate, 'a Celt, full of the charm of the Celt, with his lively imagination, and his religious spirit', and Aaron adds, 'this is the only Celt among the greatest philosophers of Europe'.

In the light of this it is no surprise to learn that Aaron had already, just before coming to Aberystwyth, inaugurated a move to set up a forum for discussing philosophy in Wales. This was eventually incorporated as a Philosophy Section of the Guild of Graduates of the University of Wales in 1932. Aaron was its first secretary, and was later the very successful editor for thirty years of *Efrydiau Athronyddol*, in which the proceedings of the Section's annual conference are published. It is a tribute to Aaron that the Section still thrives and that *Efrydiau Athronyddol* has appeared annually without a break since its inception in 1938.

Aaron's publications during the early thirties were almost all, including reviews, in the field of history of ideas, focusing especially on Locke. His Aristotelian Society paper on 'Locke's

Theory of Universals' in 1932 and his editing, with J. Gibb, of *An Early Draft of Locke's Essay* in 1936 were harbingers of the much awaited full-scale work on the life and thought of John Locke which eventually came out in 1937. In an appendix to the third edition, Aaron gives a vivid account of his discovery of the unresearched wealth of material preserved in the Lovelace Collection including letters, note-books, catalogues and, most exciting for Aaron, an early draft of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* hitherto presumed missing—the draft A as it came to be called (what came to be known as draft B had already been published by Benjamin Rand in 1931). So, to Aaron belongs the credit for having the initiative and perseverance to pursue a mere passing reference in the Preface of the second edition of Lord King's *Life and Letters of John Locke* through the stages which eventually led to a very rewarding discovery.

That discovery obviously gave a tremendous boost to Aaron's consuming interest in Locke. With typical energy and determination he pressed on with the work that was to make his name as an authority on Locke; and within two years, in 1937, Aaron's volume was selling in the bookshops. His reputation was made; students and teachers of British Empiricist philosophy, and of Locke in particular, are deeply indebted to him for a painstaking, comprehensive study which is at the same time manageable for the purposes of classroom use.

The book, published by Oxford University Press, had been invited as a contribution to the 'Leaders of Philosophy' series by J. L. Stocks, and it is sad to recall that Stocks, for whom Aaron had a high regard as both philosopher and friend, died in the same month as the preface to *John Locke* was being written. The early biographical chapters present Locke as a philosopher who was utterly devoted to the pursuit of truth, cautiously averse to speculation, learned, but unpretentious both as a philosopher and in his general personal bearing, and who saw his task in the *Essay* as the modest one of 'under-labourer', simply preparing the way for the pursuit of true knowledge by 'master-builders' such as Boyle and Newton. Preparing the way involved removing obstructive misconceptions, one of which was the view that knowledge rests on innate principles. So Aaron naturally follows his chapter on aim and purpose with a discussion of Locke's polemic against innate knowledge. It emerges that the polemic was directed in part at least against the unattractive view that we are born with some articulated principles already implanted in the mind, which raises the question whether anyone could have

been tempted to hold such a theory and whether it was even serious enough to merit the critic's attention.

Aaron argues that the main target was Cartesian innatism, though not the crude variety which Locke clearly has in mind part of the time. What might fairly be attributed to Descartes is the view that we have an inborn inclination to believe certain necessary and universal truths. Locke does reject that view too, but Aaron thinks that his polemic over-elaborates criticism of the first crude variety of innatism at the expense of neglecting more important issues. For Locke does not deny either that there are innate dispositions, or that there are necessary and universal truths. What he denies is that those truths are innate, holding rather that they are known by means of an intuition which is neither an innate disposition nor a mere sense experience. So what the polemic lacks is a positive analysis of knowledge explaining the role of intuition in relation to necessary and universal truths on the one hand, and in relation to sense experience on the other.

Aaron's judgement is that 'Book I is badly written' and that 'it emphasizes the relatively unimportant and neglects the important'. However, the 'neglect' turns out to be a matter of postponement, for the hints about knowledge are taken up for fuller treatment by Locke in Book IV, and Aaron does not think there is anything in the earlier discussion 'which contradicts the theory of knowledge put forward in Book IV'; it is simply that the latter theory is 'not at all explicit' at the earlier stage.

Aaron is also heavily critical of Locke's account of ideas and the attendant representative theory of perception. It is not enough to be told that ideas are the immediate objects of perception and of thought and that they are in the mind. Aaron comments, 'Of all the ambiguous phrases used by philosophers this phrase "in the mind" is surely the most ambiguous'—a remark that philosophers generally would do well to heed. Furthermore, as Aaron sees it, difficulties are compounded in Locke's case because of his attachment to a representative theory of perception—a theory of which he is not the author and for which he really has no great enthusiasm.

What Locke commits himself to, according to Aaron, is: (i) the existence of ideas conceived as objects of some sort, albeit 'in the mind'; (ii) a causal source for those ideas in the material objects of the external world; (iii) their conveyance to the mind by sense organs; and (iv) an implicit mind/brain interactionism. It has recently become a matter of great debate whether Locke did hold

a representative theory of perception, and Aaron himself was fully aware that Locke was critical of some of the features usually associated with it. Aaron's considered opinion at the time however was that Locke was somewhat vague about the nature of the end product of perceptual transactions and certainly disinclined to think of them as crude copies of external objects, but that he was firm as to their origin in the physical world and their mode of acquisition via the sense organs.

On the question of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities Aaron comments that it 'gives rise to many vexatious problems', and indeed the subsequent proliferation of disputes in the literature show how very apt the comment was. As Aaron points out, Locke's loose handling of the distinction between qualities themselves and the ideas of qualities, and his failure to realize the need to distinguish between determinables and determinates compound the difficulties of fixing on a clear interpretation. The one Aaron favours seems defensible: we have ideas of primary qualities that resemble those qualities, giving us indirect knowledge of them, and have other ideas 'which it is customary to call ideas of qualities, and which we may . . . call ideas of secondary qualities', the latter being representative of, though not resembling, certain powers of objects—powers which depend on 'the primary qualities of their minute and insensible parts, or . . . upon something yet more remote from our comprehension' (the former quote is in Aaron's words, the latter in Locke's).

Aaron's stress on Locke's indebtedness to Robert Boyle in this context has been amply confirmed by the subsequent detailed investigations by Peter Alexander. Though, again, complexities in the task of getting the details of the interpretation right come out very clearly in Paul Hoffman's review of Alexander's work. It is surely a tribute to Aaron that he was able to chart a sane, suitably cautious path through such a minefield, and to keep within the confines of his limited space, happily avoiding disturbance of the general balance of his book.

The exposition of Locke's views about psychological matters and about the topics of modes, substance, and relations keeps the theme of Locke's empiricism very much to the fore. Similarly in the chapter on Locke's examination of the nature of words and language. Having mounted a merited sharp attack on Berkeley's interpretation and criticism of Locke, Aaron discerns three strands in Locke's discussion. First, general ideas are particular ideas considered in their representative capacity. This is the

weakest strand, not at all clearly developed in Locke's text and leaving much to be explained. Secondly, universals are, as Aaron puts it, 'framed by abstraction from the *given* of experience', eliminating all properties not possessed in common by all the particulars encountered in experience. Thirdly, a general term stands for 'a meaning', or 'a group of characters shared by particulars of the same sort' which constitutes the 'essence' of the sort. However, Aaron stresses that the ideas are always, as Locke puts it, 'creatures of our own making', and that they are, in Aaron's words, 'framed by abstraction from the *given* of experience'. Locke's theory of universals is, for that reason, clearly empirically based.

One of Locke's deepest concerns is the vindication of his empiricist thesis—that ideas have their source in sense experience. There are indeed plenty of problems on the way, but the one that Aaron regards as the most pressing of all is the problem of knowledge. How can Locke allow for a lift from the level of empirically acquired ideas to the level of certain knowledge? The problem is tackled in Book IV of the *Essay*. The most interesting, and possibly the most debatable, point in Aaron's account of Locke's views on knowledge is that he has two theories which he failed to reconcile. According to the earlier theory, knowledge is of 'relations between abstract ideas, a universal, hypothetical, and highly abstract knowledge, best typified in mathematics'. But a later theory has it that knowledge of the self at least is, as Aaron puts it, 'direct intuition', and that, further, 'there seems to be some element of direct intuition also in our knowledge of physical objects'. Aaron finds difficulties in each of these theories, and concludes that 'Locke's theory of knowledge is defective in being both incomplete and incoherent'. Locke's theory of knowledge is still a matter of live debate as witness, for instance, the paper by H. A. S. Schankula in the Wolfenbuttel Symposium of 1979, where some aspects of Aaron's interpretation are forcefully challenged.

The book on Locke is undoubtedly Aaron's major contribution to the study of philosophy. It has been regularly mentioned in book lists for courses and in bibliographies on Locke ever since its first appearance and it still sells in its third edition. Interestingly, it has recently been translated and published in Chinese. It is a comprehensive account covering not only Locke's metaphysics and epistemology but also his views on morals, politics, education, and religion. Problems are not shirked, but neither does the level of involvement ever take the book out of the reach of the

student. Obviously one looks for interpretation but it never obtrudes. That Aaron greatly admires his subject is obvious enough especially in the biographical section, but there is no sign of protective tenderness or bias; the warts are there for all to see.

Looking back from a vantage point, enjoying the benefits of subsequent industry in the rich mine of Locke's philosophy, we can see how much more room for investigation there was. But where Aaron noted ambiguities, vagueness, incoherence, and inadequacies there was also a signalling of further possibilities of interpretation and a stimulus to further investigation. It would of course be absurd to expect him to have exhausted all interpretative investigation and to have anticipated all subsequent developments in Lockean studies.

Aaron never allowed his scholarly and philosophical interests to diminish his concern for the welfare of his department at Aberystwyth. His departmental Philosophy Society was always one of the most lively in the college; its list of visiting speakers over the years include Ryle, Quine, Strawson, Kneale, and many other outstanding philosophers. Naturally, he took pride in his lectures on the history of philosophy, but he would also lecture on political philosophy, aesthetics, logic, and epistemology, and his course on Plato's *Republic* was staple diet for first-year students. A former student recalls that as a teacher he was self-effacing, certainly never flamboyant, introducing the philosopher's task rather in the style of Locke himself as a matter of clearing the ground, removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way.

At the more purely social level, the annual walk and picnic in the Cardiganshire hinterland which he organized will long remain a favourite topic of happy reminiscence whenever old students of his department meet together. He kept in contact with many of them after they left Aberystwyth, writing them a Christmas letter with news of the department and his family.

In the preface to the first edition of *John Locke* there is a record of thanks to Miss Rhiannon Morgan for reading and correcting the manuscript and proofs. Happily, the year of the book's publication was also the year of Aaron's marriage to Rhiannon. They were ideally suited. Rhiannon created that stable and cultured family home to which Aaron had been accustomed, and many visitors to Garth Celyn will remember her as a most charming hostess. There were five children, William, Margaret, Gwen, and the twins John and Jane, all now grown up, having done their parents proud in their respective fields.

Aaron published further papers on Locke: one entitled 'Great

Thinkers: John Locke' which appeared in *Philosophy*, and another, on 'The Limits of Locke's Rationalism' published in *Seventeenth Century Studies*, a volume presented to Sir Herbert Grierson. He also wrote on phenomenalism, discussing the views of R. B. Braithwaite, G. F. Stout, and H. H. Price, and criticizing what he called a 'phenomenal-noumenal' metaphysic. In 1939 he published 'Two Senses of the Word Universal' in *Mind*, an article in which he emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the word as meaning a common quality of things and as meaning a concept—an emphasis which is commended forty years later by D. M. Armstrong in his book, *Nominalism and Realism*. The problems relating to universals was pursued further: first, in the paper on 'Hume's Theory of Universals' which he read to the Aristotelian Society in 1941 and, secondly, in the British Academy Lecture which he gave in 1945 under the title 'Our Knowledge of Universals'.

Aaron was, throughout this period, also writing articles in Welsh, on philosophical, historical, and literary topics. Further, in 1941, a scholarly interest led him to write about the autobiography of Edward, first Lord Herbert of Cherbury. There is more about Lord Herbert and his manuscripts in the note on 'A Possible Early Draft of Hobbes's *De Corpore*' (*Mind*, 1945), a note which gives a vivid impression of the delight Aaron took in textual investigation and which provides an excellent example of the thoroughness with which he pursued such interests.

Needless to say, Aaron loved his study, and his heart was first and foremost in writing and seeing to the affairs of his department, but in 1946, he undertook additional responsibilities when he became chairman of the Welsh Advisory Council for Education. It was in that capacity that he published the Jubilee Pamphlet on the work of the Central Welsh Board. Interestingly, his conclusion begins thus, 'We may hope that the next fifty years of the Central Welsh Board's life will prove to be as fruitful and useful to Welsh education as the last fifty have been'. No doubt he would have wished the same prospect for his department. But the Central Welsh Board has long since been replaced by a different body, and sadly we are now witnessing the demise of the department.

Aaron's work on universals culminated in the publication, in 1952, of his book *The Theory of Universals*. The book, like the aforementioned papers dealing with universals, displays Aaron's dual interests: examining past theories and developing a view of his own. Though the medieval period is mentioned as one in

which the problem of universals was a dominating theme, Aaron concentrates attention very largely on the contributions of the British Empiricists, with one chapter given to the continental philosophers Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant. The book confirms the impression that Aaron was at his best as an historian of ideas. In particular he is very much at home with Locke, Berkeley and Hume, deftly dissecting their arguments and separating the wheat from the chaff.

At the beginning of Part II, Aaron sets out to develop his own views from a position where no questions are begged about the status of universals or their relationships with particulars. His declared ultimate interest is in the nature of thinking, but questions about how we use general words are very much in the foreground. And this question is perceived as bringing us right up against the problem of universals, at which point the original question gives way to a multiplicity of questions: questions about Platonic forms, real essences, concepts, common characters, and dispositions.

In the course of attacking the notion of a universal as a so-called Platonic form Aaron takes issue with Platonism in mathematics. This, perhaps, was not a wise thing to do. It is true that defenders of Platonism as a general theory of universals are indeed thin on the ground, so Aaron would have many friends on that score, but Platonism in the philosophy of mathematics is a very different matter. One could not hope to do justice in a few pages to the highly sophisticated arguments that have, and still are, advanced for a Platonist view of mathematics.

Aaron is equally critical of Aristotelian realism about essences, also of nominalism and of conceptualism. But he defends the notion of common qualities, holding that it is by becoming acquainted with them that we are able to use certain general terms to talk about such qualities. These qualities are identities: 'the colour of this postage stamp does not resemble the colour of the second stamp but is identical with it', and 'one and the same shade of red is here *and* there, in two places at one and the same time'. Getting the concept of such a colour is a matter of abstracting, singling out, the colour; and that in turn involves getting an image of it. This account is offered as a *partial* explanation of the significant use of some general words on some, though not all, occasions. So this cannot amount to a general theory of word meaning; Aaron points out that it does not help with connectives or words like 'yes' and 'no', nor with a host of adjectives and nouns. He proposes to correct the defect by

introducing dispositions into the picture. Fixing his attention on nouns he argues that learning the meaning of words like 'house' is a matter of acquiring a disposition to use the word in a certain way as a result of familiarity with recurring *Gestalten* whose details are not differentiated. Then, turning back to common qualities, he applies the same principle, saying that to have a concept of, say, *ultramarine* is to be able to recognize ultramarine objects and classify them as such.

By now we have two elements that are to go into the making of a complete theory of common quality universals. There is the abstracting of the common quality and there is the acquiring of a capacity to recognize instances. The abstracting, it seems, lands one with an image which, in turn, is what makes possible the acquisition of the capacity. The account is then extended to cover the case of object-universals: 'So too around the fuzzier image of the grass-snake have gathered those propensities of the mind which enable us to recognise grass-snakes when we see them' (cf. the point about *Gestalten* above).

This brief account smoothes over some complexities but, I hope, is not an unfair representation of the theory which Aaron sums up by saying 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.*' No doubt there is much in the account that Aaron would have wished to develop and clarify if he had had the opportunity. The notion of abstraction has long been suspect, but the pregnant notion of disposition is highly relevant and would deserve further attention.

In the second edition Aaron included an additional section dealing with some of Frege's ideas. Perhaps it would have been better to leave Frege out of the picture, since it is highly questionable whether his discussion of objects, concepts, and functions should be considered as a straight contribution to the understanding of universals. Dummett, one of the most authoritative interpreters of Frege, thinks that the latter's contribution was to clear away and supersede the old debate. In his laudable attempt to relate his account to contemporary discussion Aaron would probably have done better to turn to Strawson's book, *Individuals*, where the problems are discussed within the more traditional mould congenial to Aaron.

Aaron's steady stream of articles continued well into the fifties, with an essay on 'Contemporary British Philosophy' in a collection presented to A. R. Wadia (Madras, 1954), and a contribu-

tion on 'The Rational and the Empirical' to *Contemporary British Philosophy* edited by Hywel D. Lewis in 1956. He also delivered the eighth Dr Williams Lecture in 1955 on 'The True and the Valid'. In 1956, Aberystwyth was host to the Joint Session of Mind and the Aristotelian Society so it fell to Aaron to give the Inaugural Lecture, which was on 'Feeling Sure'. He was in the following year made president of the Aristotelian Society, the title of his presidential address being 'The Common Sense View of Sense-Perception', in which he launched yet another attack on what he called dualist theories—theories like phenomenism and representationalism which he saw as wrongly construing sense data (or impressions or whatever) as intermediaries in perception.

A very happy year was spent by the whole family in America in 1952–3 while Aaron was Visiting Professor at Yale University. It was an occasion for friendly association and discussion between people who had hitherto been known to each other only by name and reputation. Among those close to the Aaron family during the stay in America were Charles W. Hendle, W. A. Christian, and Brand Blanshard.

Aaron returned to Aberystwyth. He had not been without attractive opportunities to take up chairs elsewhere but his attachment to Aberystwyth, where he was happy to remain, was strong. His industriousness, his standing, and reputation as a philosopher, and his breadth of interest especially in matters educational brought him further recognition in due course. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1955, an honour he prized as much as any. He was also elected President of the Mind Association in the same year. That, too, was the year when he brought out a second edition of his masterpiece on Locke involving many changes and including a substantial addition giving an account of Draft C of the *Essay* which he had studied at the Pierpoint Morgan Library at New York. Aaron was not a man to rest on his laurels.

Almost inevitably perhaps as time went on there was greater call for his services in public life. Mention has already been made of his chairmanship of the Welsh Advisory Council for Education which produced reports in 1948, 1951, and 1953 on various aspects of education in Wales. And, with his concern for education outside the university, he was happy to be Vice-Chairman of Coleg Harlech for many years—a connection he cherished. Aaron was also chairman of the Council for Wales for a period during which three important reports were produced. And he

served in the same capacity for the Library Advisory Council (Wales) and even for the Pembroke and Ceredigion Agricultural Wages Committee. In addition to all this he was at various times serving as a member of the General Advisory Council to the BBC, the Council of the National Library of Wales, and the TV Research Council.

Aaron's philosophical output in the form of articles slowed down in the sixties, but he was still working as hard as ever. More public commitments were undertaken, and the administrative demands of college and department were increasing with the explosive growth and development of the universities in the sixties. Still, in 1966, he was writing the preface to a second edition of *The Theory of Universals*, published the following year, an edition which includes several additions and changes, and involved the rewriting of whole chapters. And within four years, in 1971, the third edition of *John Locke* was ready. Again there were several changes, some minor corrections, new footnotes, and several appendices including one by Dr Charlotte Johnston, once his student and later his colleague, also an appendix written jointly with Dr Phillip Walters, another colleague.

Furthermore, during those years he must have been hard at work on what turned out to be his last full-scale book, *Knowing and the Function of Reason*. This work is the culmination of Aaron's thinking about epistemological and closely related problems over a period of more than forty years. Here the central issue is still the nature of knowing, but the scope of the discussion has widened considerably. There is a lot about the variety of forms of thinking—analogue, deductive, inductive thought—and about the way spontaneity of thought relates to the restrictive role of reason. Some of the material is psychological, and he also touches on points of linguistics. He discusses the logical principles of non-contradiction, excluded middle and identity, and there is much too about the use of language in speech and thought, as well as about substance and the problem of causality. The discussion is wide-ranging.

The problem with knowledge is seen to arise in this way: on the one hand, what we are normally sure of is something we could be wrong about, whereas a knowledge claim, on the other hand, entails infallible certainty, which Aaron sees as an unattainable ideal. The unwelcome upshot seems to be that we do not know any of the things we normally suppose ourselves to know. What are we to say? Aaron argues that it is not enough to add the requirements that we have adequate evidence, and that such

evidence be objective and universally acceptable and true. The trouble with this is that the final appeal on the adequacy of evidence will inevitably involve a state of being sure of the sort that was originally in question. It seems to be a matter of trying to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps.

It now looks as if we have a simple choice between trying to make good the claim to infallible knowledge, which Aaron thinks impossible, and conceding that all we have is, at best, fallible opinion or belief. Aaron's way out is to suggest that there is a third possibility. On the one hand there is indeed fallible opinion, which is not satisfactory and is less than we actually have in many cases where we ordinarily claim to know something; on the other hand one can conceive of infallible knowledge which, however, we do not actually attain; but, Aaron claims, there is also something which is better than fallible opinion though falling short of infallible knowledge. This is being sure though fallible. It is what Aaron sometimes calls 'probable knowledge', and is even prepared to call 'knowing with a certainty that is complete'. Such is my knowledge that I am here at this moment, that my friend is sitting opposite me conversing with me, or that there exists a table near by—in short, the sorts of things we normally claim, without qualification, to know.

Aaron was obviously right to insist that, even if absolutely infallible knowledge is conceivable but unattainable, that does not mean that we are left with nothing better than what in ordinary parlance is called 'feeling sure'—an expression used precisely when we do not wish to commit ourselves to a knowledge claim. There is an ordinary everyday use of the word 'know' such that we normally distinguish, with good reason, between knowing in that sense and merely feeling sure. And knowledge in that sense is attainable. So, even though Aaron does attach importance to a special 'high standard' philosopher's use of the word 'know', he sees no reason why we should despair of having knowledge in a respectable everyday sense. That seems to be his message.

Aaron retired in 1969 after thirty-seven years in the chair at Aberystwyth. But it is unthinkable that idleness should have crept into his bones. The following year found him teaching again for a semester at Carlton College in Minnesota, and no sooner had he returned than he was back in his study writing again, working this time on articles for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: one was on 'John Locke' and the other on 'Epistemology', and both appeared in the 1974 edition. He still took great

pleasure in attending the department's Philosophy Society meetings although he was now in his late seventies. And he was studying the sociological works of Comte, Mill, Weber, and Durkheim, pen in hand as ever, when ill-health finally caught up with him. While incapacitated he enjoyed the unstinting support of his family and particularly of his wife, Rhiannon. He died peacefully on 29 March 1987.

Aaron was rather charmingly conservative in some of his ways. Christmas parties for students would feature parlour games and carols; not for him rock-and-roll or the deafening pop that was inevitably to take over. He did not take to television until a set was presented on his retirement. As for having a car, it was enough for him that Garth Celyn was within walking distance of the college and the railway station. There is a touch of the same conservatism in his philosophical writings; something of the style of philosophizing in Oxford in his student days still shows over fifty years later in his last book.

At a deeper level Aaron saw it as a duty to preserve certain values he inherited as a child whose home gave pride of place to religion and national heritage. To understand Aaron one would need to be capable of sympathy with his feelings and convictions when he said to students soon after coming to Aberystwyth, 'I think the Welsh language a thing of beauty. I think the literature in the Welsh language a treasure. And it seems to me unChristian not to seek to preserve this beauty and not to hand it on to future generations'. It is also worth remembering that Aaron told those same students that the way to do this was not through agitation, but rather 'by plodding away quietly, but with determination, never letting your endeavours slack, until you so master your subject, whatever it is, that you can claim a place for yourself of responsibility in Wales'. In the pursuit of that ideal, Aaron himself was a shining example.

O. R. JONES

There is a list, not quite complete, of Aaron's publications up to 1967 compiled by the late Sir Ben Bowen Thomas in *Efrydiau Athronyddol*, xxxii (1969). There is also a list of Aaron's publications, manuscripts and type-scripts, together with short biography, tribute, and a catalogue of Aaron's library in *The Aaron Philosophy Collection*, with an introduction by I. C. Tipton and D. O. Thomas, published by C. C. Kohler (Dorking, 1987).

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