

John Locke's Philosophy of Language

**A Guide to
Chapters One through Six
of Book Three
of
*An Essay
Concerning
Human Understanding***

Simon P. Oswitch

John Locke (1632-1704) was the founder of British Empiricism. He is best known for two monumental philosophical works: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*.

Simon P. Oswitch is instructor of philosophy at Mesa Community College in Mesa, Arizona. His main interest is the history of philosophy.

© Simon P. Oswitch, 2010

Published by Zip Publishing/The Educational Publisher
Columbus, Ohio
www.edupublisher.com

ISBN: 1-934849-21-9
ISBN13: 978-1-934849-21-7

Contents

Introduction	ii
Chapter 1: Exposition.....	1
1.1. “Of words or language in general”	1
1.2. “Of the signification of words”	2
1.3. “Of general terms”	3
1.4. “Of the names of simple ideas”	7
1.5. “Of the names of mixed modes and relations”	9
1.6. “Of the names of substances”	10
Chapter 2: Critique.....	14
Conclusion.....	18
Bibliography.....	19

Introduction

I find that there is so close a connection between ideas and words, and our abstract ideas and general words have so constant a relation to one another, that it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our knowledge, which all consists in propositions, without considering first the nature, use and signification of language....¹

Locke's insistence that language deserves "long" philosophical scrutiny should be known to readers of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. However, as at least one recent commentator states, this facet of his thought still receives only modest critical attention.²

Within the *Essay's* third book, Locke offers a detailed, in-depth account of the relationship between language and knowledge. Fundamentally, he seeks to explain (1) the correlation between words and ideas and (2) the way in which the latter comes to be represented by the former. One of the key sections within this discussion is concerned with the application of *general terms*—i.e., how we as speakers of a language, come to assign a single "general" name for many particular objects. This chapter of the third book contains Locke's most important views in regard to the phenomenon of language; without the ability to "annex" general terms to particular objects, speakers of a language would not be able to effectively communicate and, as we will learn, communication for Locke is the central function of a language. Also within the third book, Locke offers (1) an overview of the "general" function of words; (2) an account of words as "sensible signs"; and (3) a discussion of the terms which represent "simple ideas," "mixed modes," "relations," and "substances". Though the third book also contains chapters concerned with specific problems associated with language,³ this study will restrict itself to sections one through six which are concerned with the core of Locke's views on the way in which a language functions. Thus, in the first chapter, I will account for Locke's discussion of (1) how words function, (2) what they signify, (3) the annexing of general terms to particular objects, and (4) the naming of simple ideas, mixed modes, and substances. In the second chapter, I will offer two criticisms of Locke's view with respect to the

¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.D. Woozley (New American Library, N.Y., 1964), (II, XXXIII, 19), p. 255. For this study I have used the Woozley edition because it modernizes much of the punctuation and spelling of Locke's archaic writing style, facilitating easier reading. However, the standard Nidditch edition, which preserves Locke's original style, was also consulted.

² See Walter R. Ott, *Locke's Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-6. Ott states that the "neglect" of Locke's view on language stems from "the arguments of Frege, Wittgenstein, and Putnam" as well as his being made the "victim of uncharitable interpretation." According to Ott, the sole function of language for Locke is the "indicating (of) ideas" in the minds of speakers. Given this, he believes that Locke's account has "much to teach us."

³ Some of Locke's liveliest writing can be found in these sections which not only warn against the "imperfections" and "abuse" of words but even offer provisos against their misleading, seductive trappings (specifically, metaphor). Regarding this complex, often ironic issue, see Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor" in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 11-20. de Man offers a deconstructive reading of Locke's professed intent to restrict metaphor ("figurative (speech)") to its "proper place," but charges him with unwittingly though inescapably assembling a "theory of tropes"; he thus argues that Locke should be read pursuant to the "rhetorical motion of his own text."

question of why certain terms—those representing simple ideas—must remain without definition. The aim of such criticism is to promote the incorporation of certain “sub-definitions” which would aid in the communication of such ideas.

My reasoning for emphasizing the *Essay*’s third book lies within Locke’s contention of a definite and intimate connection between language and the expression of our knowledge.⁴ As “sociable creatures” linked together via language (“the great instrument and common tie of society”⁵), it seems reasonable that the reader should afford the attention evidenced by Locke in regard to this phenomenon.

It is my hope that the present study clarifies not only Locke’s general view of language but aids in understanding his basic empiricist position. As we learn from his comprehensive analysis in the third book, we simply cannot have one without the other.

⁴ In the *Essay*’s “Epistle to the Reader,” Locke makes clear that this task is critical to “removing... the rubbish” that hinders “knowledge”; he describes himself as an “under-laborer” therein; see Woosley, pp. 58-59.

⁵ Woosley, op. cit., (III, I, 2), p. 256.

Chapter 1: Exposition

1.1. “Of words or language in general”⁶

Locke’s first observation is that human beings are “(fitted)” by “God” to “form articulate sounds”; we, as social beings, were furnished with the ability to speak a language and, as mentioned, the “common tie of society” was established. However, the ability to form articulate sounds does not necessitate genuine communication; an animal such as a “parrot” has the ability to utter such sounds and yet this creature is an imitator and cannot engage in the sort of communication (“language”) characteristic of human beings.⁷

Thus, articulate sounds function, for humans, as “signs of internal conceptions... (which) mark... the ideas within... (the)... mind”⁸ of individual speakers. Because of this particular function, speakers are able to communicate and transmit thoughts to and from one another.

However, words take on even greater importance and usefulness when they are able to “comprehend” many particular objects; that is, language was greatly “improved” by the employment of “general terms.” When we can employ a single general term to comprehend a myriad of “particular existences,” we have made a substantial improvement in regard to the communication of various ideas and, thus, general terms come to stand for “general ideas.” Without the affixing of general terms to general ideas, the “multiplication of words would have perplexed their use, (if) every particular thing need of a distinct name to be signified by.”⁹ The resulting “inconvenience” would seriously hamper effective communication in that it would be unlikely that two (or more) speakers would have the same experience with respect to the named object in question. By way of contrast, “particular” ideas such as “Socrates” or “Paris” are signified by “particular” names—“Socrates” and “Paris.”

Locke feels that all words “ultimately derive” from “sensible ideas”; that is, though words such as “spirit” and “angel” signify objects which are “removed from sense,” they are derived from such “sensible things” as, respectively, “breath” or “messenger.” Other non-sensible words such as “comprehend,” “imagine,” “conceive,” etc., all derive from the sensible and are applied to certain types of thinking. Thus, for Locke, observable objects, in a temporal sense, precede language and form the basis which will allow for linguistic representation.

⁶ The subheadings in this chapter are the titles that Locke gave to the first six chapters of the *Essay*’s third book.

⁷ Irene Pepperberg’s work with “Alex,” the African Grey parrot, revealed far greater ability than was previously thought in regard to parrot communication and intelligence. Under Pepperberg’s tutelage, Alex developed a 100-word vocabulary. See Irene Pepperberg, *The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots* (Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁸ Woolzley, op. cit., (III, I, 2), p. 256.

⁹ Ibid., (III, I, 3), pp. 256.

1.2. “Of the signification of words”

Though we can regard language as a series of “sensible signs” essential for the “communication of (the) thoughts” of persons within a society, Locke argues against a “natural connection” between words and ideas; a word “arbitrarily” represents an idea for if this were not the case “then there would be but one language amongst all men.”¹⁰ Since there are a plethora of languages, the differences among them—i.e., different words, syntax, and, in some cases, alphabets—underscore Locke’s idea that because different names can signify the same object there is no direct or necessary connection between words and ideas.

For anyone to employ signs, they must have, within their mind, the “ideas” that the signs “represent”; ideas precede signs for if the opposite were true, signs would be unable to signify anything in that there would be no cognitive content for the word to represent. Thus, a speaker can only communicate that which they have had an idea; without an idea, there is, simply “nothing” to signify.

However, though we can only speak of ideas within our minds, speakers, “in their thoughts (do) give... a secret reference to two other things.”¹¹ The first implied referent is that the words will “(mark)... the ideas in the minds also of other men with whom they communicate.”¹² Any attempt at communication presupposes this notion. Secondly, speakers assume their “words stand for the reality of things.”¹³ When one speaks, one would not be thought of as conveying that which is solely a product of the “imagination”—but rather, when speaking one is referring to that which “really” constitutes the sensible/observable world—i.e., empirically verifiable objects such as persons, animals, trees, etc.

Though there is not a “natural” connection between words and ideas, Locke does believe that there is a “constant... connection” between words and ideas; thus, certain words “readily excite” certain ideas in a way analogous to that of physically sensing objects. This leads Locke to admit that speakers do, at times, engage in mimicry: “... it often happens that men, even when they would apply themselves to an attentive consideration, do set their thoughts more on words than things.”¹⁴ Without the realization and recognition of the relation of words with ideas, we, when speaking, convey “nothing but insignificant noise.”

Once again, Locke reiterates the arbitrary relationship between words and ideas; though certain words, due to continuous association elicit certain ideas, the relation is not natural because there are, in fact, speakers of a language for whom an idea is not produced upon the hearing or, it would seem, the reading of a particular word.

¹⁰ Ibid., (III, II, 1), p. 259.

¹¹ Ibid., (III, II, 4), p. 260.

¹² Ibid., (III, II, 4), p. 261.

¹³ Ibid., (III, II, 5), p. 261.

¹⁴ Ibid., (III, II, 7), p. 261.

Furthermore, there is nothing that would prohibit a speaker from making a word “stand for whatever idea he pleases,”¹⁵ and thus, no one has the ability or power to fix within the mind of another the idea intended when one speaks. Though “common use, by a tacit consent, appropriates certain sounds to ideas in all languages, which so far limits the signification of that sound”¹⁶ (i.e., there is an accepted range or boundary between words and ideas), this phenomenon does not make for a natural or necessary connection between words and ideas.

1.3. “Of general terms”

In this key chapter, the initial observation is that the “greatest” numbers of words comprise “general” or abstract terms; furthermore, Locke claims this is not a result of “chance,” but of “reason and necessity.” Since it is “beyond the power” of the human mind to remember each and every distinct idea that has been present within it, the mind must “make recourse” to a single term that would come to stand for, or represent, all of the particular instances to which it applies. It would be impossible for speakers to “retain distinct ideas” of, for example, “every bird” that they have perceived. Thus, the general term “bird” comes to represent each particular bird that has been—or could be—observed. Without general terms, we would be unable to communicate because an endless list of the names of particular objects would fail to “excite in another’s... mind” the idea intended; the reason, as alluded to previously, is that it would be extremely rare—if not impossible—for two speakers to have exactly the same experiences.

As before, Locke contrasts general and particular terms and feels that because “convenience demands” the employment of the former, we must make use of them. We give particular names to “persons, countries,... cities, rivers, mountains,”¹⁷ etc., and these types of terms serve a crucial function in communication among speakers.

At this juncture, Locke discusses the ways in which general terms are “made.” The central question is how we affix general terms to that which is particular—namely, “all things which exist.” Basically, there are two answers: (1) words are generalized after they become the signs of general ideas. An idea becomes generalized when it is separated from “... the circumstances of time and place, and any other ideas that may determine them to this or that particular existence.”¹⁸ This type of “abstraction” allows for the representation of “more individuals than one,” so long as each particular “conforms” to the abstract term; (2) similarly, ideas become general when speakers, after much experience, find “some common agreements” in regard to physical shape, size, etc., of particular objects and subsequently develop an idea in which the particular objects “participate.” Thus, after observing numerous particular men, speakers form the idea of “man” in which the distinct particulars participate.

¹⁵ Ibid., (III, II, 8), p. 262.

¹⁶ Ibid., (III, II, 8), p. 262.

¹⁷ Ibid., (III, III, 5), p. 264.

¹⁸ Ibid., (III, III, 6), p. 264.

Furthermore, experience teaches speakers that there are other objects with “qualities” that “agree” with those of “man,” though these objects also contain qualities which “differ”; since the distinct qualities disallow the object to be understood by the general term “man,” a new general term is instituted “uniting” the similar qualities of both man and the other object while, simultaneously, leaving out what is distinct. Thus, we understand beings which are (1) composed of a living “body,” (2) have the ability to “sense,” and (3) have the capacity for “motion,” as “animals.” This new general term can be regarded as a “comprehensive extension” of the previous term “man.”

At this point, Locke reminds the Scholastics that their idea of a “general nature” or “general notion” is nothing but this aforementioned type of abstract idea with a general term or name “annexed” to it. The ideas of individual men such as “Peter” or “Paul” differ from the abstract idea “man” only in that the latter term has retained what would “agree” in the two former instances while simultaneously excluding nonessential “particular” differences. If we eliminate the different qualities between, say, “horse” and “man,” we arrive at the general term “animal”; if we exclude “motion” and “sense” from “animal,” the complex ideas which remain—i.e., “body, life, and nourishment”—can be comprehended under the general term “vivens”; from “vivens” we can proceed to the general name of “substance” and then, “being” or “thing.” Thus, the Scholastic conception of *genera* and *specie* are nothing but abstract ideas which are “more or less comprehensive” and, as stated, have particular names “annexed” to them. The reasoning which Locke feels underlies the Scholastic use of *genus* is one of “dispatch” or expedience; that is, to define an object in terms of its *genus* allows us to comprehend the essence of a thing without being forced to enumerate the many simple ideas that the “next genus stands for.” It is more expedient to define the essence of “man” as “rational animal” than to enumerate the many simple ideas of which the terms “rationality” and “animal” are composed; we always define “man” as a being which is extended, has life, is able to sense and move and, most importantly—in terms of distinguishing “man” from “animal”—has the capacity to engage in “rational” thought¹⁹—but necessity—that, is, the aforementioned notion of expedience necessary for communication—disallows this action. Strictly speaking, when defining an object it is “best” to enumerate the many simple ideas that combine to make up its complex idea, as mentioned, expedience prohibits this lengthy and laborious project. Thus, the Scholastic “rule” that objects must be defined via *genus* and *differentia* (i.e., always defining a given genus that would

¹⁹ Today, our understanding of animal intelligence is comprehensive and expanding; for example, see Roger Fouts, *Next of Kin: What Chimpanzees Have Taught Me about Who We Are* (William Morrow & Company, 1997). “Part One: A Family Affair” is especially noteworthy. Also, see footnote 9. However, only a few decades after Locke, Scottish philosopher David Hume argued that it was “evident” that animals were also “endow’d” with “reason and thought” and not only “infer” from “experience” but often reveal “extraordinary instances of sagacity.” See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford University Press, 1976), (I, III, XVI), pp. 176-179. Though Locke does admit that “some” animals “in certain instances reason”—and thus should not be deemed “bare machines,” ala Descartes—he is emphatic that they cannot form “abstract” ideas nor use “general signs.” Epistemologically, they always remain within the “particular.” The “power of abstracting”, for Locke, is the main “distinction” between humans and animals; see II, XI, 10, 11 of the *Essay*.

constitute a thing, along with its distinguishing characteristic) does not—and in many instances—cannot require complete adherence.

From this point, Locke returns to his discussion of “general words.” He argues that the concept of the “general” and/or the “universal” does not belong to the “real existence of things”; rather, these ideas are “inventions... of the understanding.” Persons are confronted with a world composed only of particulars and though nature has created many entities that do appear similar, their particularity remains constant.

In regard to specifically “species of things,” they are nothing but abstract ideas that the “understanding” creates after observing many similar particulars; following such observation, particulars are “ranked” under the name signifying the specific abstract idea, and thus, we arrive at the notion of “species”:

*... the sorting of (particular) names is the workmanship of the understanding, taking occasion from the similitude it observes amongst them to make abstract general ideas, and set them up in the mind, with names annexed to them, as patterns of forms... to which, as particular things existing are found to agree so they come to be of that species, have that denomination, or are put into that classis.*²⁰

Thus, Locke believes that abstract ideas are the “medium” responsible for uniting (1) general names and (2) particular beings. He thus concludes that the Scholastic conception of “real essences of substances”—i.e., essences thought to be within observable objects—is mistaken. Because in principle, it is possible for (1) “two” different species to be, in fact, “one” and (2) “two different essences (to be) the essence of one species,”²¹ we cannot have “precise” knowledge of things if we regard essences as being present within objects. However, if species are “determined... by *our* abstract ideas,” we can, in fact, resolve the problem by realizing (1) that we are only dealing with a world of particulars, and (2) that it is we who have created essences by abstracting what is similar from particulars. That is, if essences are within things, and for some reason the thing undergoes “alterations,” we would be confronted with an epistemological-metaphysical problem in that the thing would now have to be classified under a new specie because it is now different from the specie that it once belonged. By way of contrast, if we admit that the essence of a specie is “our” mind-contributed abstract idea of its similar constituent members—i.e., similar particulars—we can allow for such change because the essence of the thing exists independently of the thing.

Furthermore, Locke states that a “distinct abstract idea” is the same as a “distinct essence”; complex ideas—ideas composed from simple ones—can be “different” for different people and thus the name “sheep,” for example, would probably elicit “different” abstract ideas in different persons.

²⁰ Woozley, op. cit., (III, III, 13), p. 268.

²¹ Ibid., (III, III, 13), p. 269.