

LOCKE'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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CHAPTER I

Signs and signification

Any discussion of Locke's views on language must begin by explicating his central linguistic notion: signification. This is by no means an easy task, as the sheer variety of available conceptions of signification will attest. Nevertheless, Locke's text clearly commits him to an understanding of signification applicable not only to words but to ideas themselves. Once we unearth this concept, we shall be in a position to come to terms with Locke's arguments for his seemingly counter-intuitive claim that words signify ideas.

WHAT IS LOCKEAN SIGNIFICATION?

Near the start of Book III of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke puts forth what I shall call the "linguistic thesis": "*Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them*" (III.ii.2: 405). It is helpful to have before us some other statements of the thesis:

The use then of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*; and the *Ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate Signification. (III.ii.1: 405)

Words, as they are used by Men, can properly and immediately signify nothing but *Ideas*, that are in the Mind of the Speaker . . . (III.ii.4: 406)

[Words'] signification [in a man's use of them] . . . is limited to his *Ideas*, and they can be Signs of nothing else. (III.ii.8: 408)¹

Obviously, we cannot make a start on interpreting these claims until we know what Locke intends by "signification." The meaning of this word has been fiercely debated, generating interpretations that range from sense and reference to medieval conceptions of signification as making something

¹ See also II.xxxi.6: 378: "Names standing for nothing but the *Ideas*, that are in Men's Minds." Also relevant is the "Epistle to the Reader" (1975, p. 13).

known to the intellect. My goal in this chapter is to argue for an admittedly controversial reading of both Locke's thesis and the central argument he offers in support of it.²

Many commentators have read Locke's pronouncements above as saying that words *refer* to ideas; that J.S. Mill did so is evident from this famous criticism: "[w]hen I say, 'the sun is the cause of the day,' I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of the day . . ."³ The semantic idealism produced by reading "signification" in this way is implausible; it could be attractive only to someone antecedently committed to ontological idealism. Much of the scholarship of the past thirty years has been motivated by a desire to defend Locke from this obvious objection. This is clearly one aim of Norman Kretzmann's influential article, "The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantic Theory";⁴ it is fair to say that most recent commentators have, with some notable exceptions,⁵ followed Kretzmann's reading, at least in its broad outlines. In addition, they have availed themselves (as Kretzmann did not, at least explicitly) of the Fregean distinction between sense and reference. By contrast, E.J. Ashworth has taken issue with such commentators on the grounds that they ignore the context in which Locke was writing. She argues that Locke inherits his conception of signification from the late Scholastics, correctly observing that Locke "does not bother to give a detailed explanation and justification of his claim that words signify ideas primarily and immediately, and this would be a very curious oversight on the part of one who had in mind a doctrine radically different from that normally conveyed by these words."⁶ Ashworth is right to say that Locke's arguments in favor of his claim about signification are brief and at best enthymematic. But I shall argue that what the words of the thesis "normally conveyed" can be discovered by looking, not to the

² E.J. Lowe briefly offers a similar interpretation of Locke's position in chapter 7 of his (1995).

³ Mill (1867, p. 15). I am going to call this "Mill's criticism" even though it was anticipated by John Sergeant, a contemporary of Locke's (see below, chapter six). See Sergeant (1984, pp. 33–5). Mill's criticism itself is somewhat unfortunately put, since it depends on reading "is the cause of" in the phrase in question as not itself ideational. To be consistent, Mill's attempted *reductio* should have it that "is the cause of," or each syntactic element in this phrase, refers to an idea.

⁴ Kretzmann (1975).

⁵ For example, Charles Landesman claims that Locke sometimes uses "idea" to mean "intentional object" (which at least in some cases is a thing in the world rather than a mental content), and that we can therefore say that words signify ideas, which are (or might be) things in a public environment. "Ideas as immediate significations are things in so far as they are conceived of. Things signified and things immediately signified are the same things" (1976, p. 33). Landesman's account depends on reading Locke as a direct realist, a view I find implausible. Locke's hostility to direct realism is especially evident in a letter to Stillingfleet where Locke argues that the view would entail that the thing thought of actually exists materially in the mind. See Locke (1812, vol. 4, pp. 390–1), discussed below (chapter six). For further argument against reading Locke as a direct realist, see H.E. Matthews (1971).

⁶ Ashworth (1981, p. 325).

late Scholastics, but to a tradition whose members include Thomas Hobbes and the authors of the Port-Royal Logic. Before offering my own interpretation, however, I shall explore and argue against those of Kretzmann and Ashworth.

Kretzmann attempts to defend Locke from Mill's criticism by emphasizing the distinction Locke seems to draw between primary and secondary or mediate signification (III.ii.2: 405). Kretzmann writes: "Once it becomes clear that it is only *immediately* that words signify *nothing but* the user's ideas, it is clear also that where the ideas immediately signified are *themselves* signs – that is, are representative ideas – their originals may be *mediately* signified by those words."⁷ The force of "immediate" here is this: words immediately signify ideas because it is only in virtue of this connection that they are able to signify things in the world.⁸ Because some of these ideas represent real objects or qualities, my ability to refer passes beyond my own mental contents and reaches out to a public realm. As this way of putting matters brings out, Kretzmann seems to be applying the sense/reference distinction to Locke's text; this is how most commentators read Kretzmann.⁹ As Kretzmann recognizes, his reading entails that Locke is simply confused when he claims that words and ideas are both signs. (I return to this issue below.)

The major dissenting voice in recent scholarship is that of Ashworth. She suggests that Locke is using the word "signification" in the way late Scholastics such as Burgersdijck used "*significatio*."¹⁰ "*Significatio*" is a technical term that does not mean the same thing as our word "meaning" for a

⁷ Kretzmann (1975, p. 133). ⁸ See Kretzmann (1975, p. 141).

⁹ For example, Ashworth (1981, p. 302), says that Kretzmann attempts "to identify the distinction between immediate and mediate signification with the distinction between meaning and reference." The details of how this identification is to be carried out are still very controversial. Consider Stephen Land's treatment of Kretzmann in his (1986, 36ff.). Land writes: "[Kretzmann's] suggested distinction between primary and secondary signification appears to negate the identity of meaning and reference. As a result of this distinction in Lockean theory words may be said to *refer* to ideas in the mind of the speaker but to have *sense* in the public domain beyond their reference." Land suggests that Kretzmann's reading "at least partly" exonerates Locke "from the absurdities of semantic idealism," but I cannot see how this could be, at least on Land's version of Kretzmann. For if ideas are the referents of our words, it is natural to say that we are talking *about* them, about mental contents, and thus Mill's criticism still applies. Further, I find it almost impossible to make sense of this view, as long as sense and reference are given their usual interpretations: sense is supposed to be a "mode of presentation" of an object, while the referent is supposed to be the object itself. See Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Meaning," in his (1980). Ashworth's reading of Kretzmann, which maps primary signification onto sense and secondary signification onto reference, is both more standard and more plausible. Another recent commentator, Robert Hanna, has taken a different approach in his (1991). On Hanna's view, "intension and extension are equally ideational, for Locke." Thus the only entities fit to serve as primary and secondary significates are ideas. Again, this does not adequately address Mill's criticism.

¹⁰ This is explicit in Ashworth (1984, p. 46): "[P]art of my defense will rest on the claim that Locke was using 'signify' in the same way that his scholastic predecessors used the Latin term '*significare*.'"

variety of reasons;¹¹ chief among these is that a word's "*significatio* included its reference . . . and seems also to have included elements which belong to meaning rather than reference."¹²

By the early sixteenth century the standard definition of "*significare*" was "to represent some thing or some things or in some way to the cognitive power," where "in some way" was introduced in order to cover the case of such syncategorematic terms as "all" and "none."¹³

Thus the question "what does this word signify?" could be answered correctly "by a statement about the term's total denotation."¹⁴ Locke, according to Ashworth, adopted the view held by for example Burgersdijck, whereby one can say that "concepts are signified, since it is by means of concepts that things are signified, and the means of signifying must itself be signified."¹⁵ Thus "signification" encompasses, for Locke as well as the Scholastics, such things as making known, expressing, and revealing, and it involves aspects of both sense and reference.¹⁶

Ashworth and Kretzmann represent the two main schools of thought on this issue. In my view, both are off the mark. We can begin to see that something has gone wrong in each of their views by examining the arguments they attribute to Locke.

Near the start of Book III, Locke argues that since one cannot immediately disclose to another the contents of his mind, one must "be *able to use these* [articulate] *Sounds, as Signs of internal Conceptions*; and to make them stand as marks for the *Ideas* within his own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others . . ." (III.i.2: 402).¹⁷ Very similar arguments appear in the Port-Royal *Logic*¹⁸ and Hobbes's *De Corpore*.¹⁹ Kretzmann²⁰ and

¹¹ For a detailed list and evaluation of these reasons, see Michael Losonsky (1994, p. 128ff.).

¹² Ashworth (1981, p. 310). ¹³ Ashworth (1984, p. 60); see also (1981, p. 310).

¹⁴ Ashworth (1984, p. 61). ¹⁵ Ashworth (1981, p. 324).

¹⁶ Ashworth (1981, pp. 309–11). For another discussion and critique of Ashworth's view, see Michael Losonsky's (1994).

¹⁷ This same point recurs in the next chapter: "The Comfort, and Advantage of Society, not being to be had without Communication of Thoughts, it was necessary, that Man should find out some external sensible Signs, whereby those invisible *Ideas*, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others" (III.ii.1: 405, also quoted in Ashworth (1981, p. 313)). See also II.xi.9: 159: "The use of Words then being to stand as outward Marks of our internal *Ideas*," as well as Locke's "Epistle to the Reader" (1975, p. 13).

¹⁸ Arnauld and Nicole (1970, p. 78). The authors there speak of "our need to use external signs to make ourselves understood . . ." My translations usually follow those of Jill Vance Buroker (Arnauld and Nicole 1996).

¹⁹ See *De Corpore* I.ii.3 (Hobbes 1839–45, vol. 1, p. 15); compare Hobbes (1994, p. 39): "And men desiring to shew others the knowledge, opinions, conceptions, and passions which are within themselves, and to that end having invented language . . ."

²⁰ See Kretzmann (1975, p. 127ff.).

Ashworth²¹ agree that this “argument from the uses of words” establishes (at most) that words used in communication are signs of ideas. It leaves open that words might be signs of something else as well and so does not adequately support the thesis insofar as the thesis involves the claim that words (immediately) signify *nothing but* ideas.

How, then, is the thesis to be supported? On this question there is, surprisingly enough, something like a consensus.²² According to Kretzmann, Locke attempts to establish the thesis with “the argument from the doctrine of representative ideas.”²³ This argument is worth examining in some detail.

Kretzmann purports to find the argument in this passage:

Nor can anyone apply them [words], as Marks, immediately to anything else, but the *Ideas*, that he himself hath: For this would be to make them Signs of his own Conceptions, and yet apply them to other *Ideas*; which would be to make them Signs, and not Signs of his *Ideas* at the same time; and so in effect, to have no Signification at all. (III.ii.2: 405)

On Kretzmann’s view, the argument attempts to show that the only things one can immediately signify with words are one’s ideas and is thus designed to bolster precisely the aspect of the thesis left unsupported by the argument from the uses of words. Locke’s argument is supposed to be this: since any successful use of *x* to immediately signify *y* (where *y* is not an idea of mine) presupposes that I have an idea of *y*, to say that *x* could immediately signify *y* would be to say that I could use *x* to signify *y* without having an idea of *y*, which is impossible.²⁴ Kretzmann sees a strong connection between Locke’s epistemological and semantic views: it is because representationalism – the view that we know the world only through the mediation of ideas – is true that we cannot succeed in referring to an object unless we have an idea of it that is itself a sign in the sense that it represents that object.²⁵

²¹ This corresponds to the second of the four arguments she finds in Smiglecius, three of which she attributes to Locke in her (1981, p. 312 ff.). See below, n. 26.

²² For Ashworth, see her (1981, p. 317) (quoted below). I find her agreement with Kretzmann here puzzling, since, if Locke meant by “signify” something as different from what Kretzmann takes him to mean by that term as Ashworth supposes, one would expect the arguments in favor of the thesis that crucially involve that term to be correspondingly different from the arguments Kretzmann gives.

²³ Kretzmann (1975, p. 130).

²⁴ See Kretzmann (1975, pp. 132–3): “[M]y applying (or attempting to apply) a word to signify something other than an idea of mine presupposes that I have an idea of that thing associated with that word. If I had no idea of that thing I could not make it the object of my attention or any action of mine. Thus, whenever I genuinely use . . . a word . . . that utterance of mine signifies *immediately* some idea of mine, whatever other meaning I may give or think I give to the word. Therefore, if X is something other than an idea of mine, to suppose that I can apply a word to signify X *immediately* is to suppose that I can apply a word to signify X while I have no idea of X, which is impossible.”

²⁵ Ashworth (1981, p. 325) writes, “I think that Kretzmann was right when he mentioned Locke’s representative theory of perception in the context of his theory of language. If ideas are the immediate

Ashworth attributes to Locke three arguments that she also finds in late scholastic writings.²⁶ One of these is “very closely related, if not identical to . . . the argument from representative ideas”²⁷ we have just been discussing. Here Locke takes over an argument from Smiglecius: since “things could not be signified by words unless by virtue of the concept (*ratio*) by which they were conceived,” “concepts are immediately signified.”²⁸ The inference pattern is the same: that ideas/concepts are immediately signified by words is to be supported by the claim that they are indispensable to signification.

But something is amiss in this dominant account of Locke’s reasoning. In fact, the argument is fallacious. Even if it establishes that ideas are a necessary condition of the meaningful use of language, how does it follow from this that ideas are themselves what is signified?²⁹ The fact that *x* is a necessary condition for signification in no way tends to show that *x* is what is signified, whether primarily or in some other way.

Consider Kretzmann’s statement of the argument. The position that has to be ruled out here is that words signify or immediately signify ideas *and* something else, viz., extra-mental things. But in order to show that there’s a difficulty with this position, Kretzmann has to build into the opposing view the claim that the speaker lacks an idea of the thing she (immediately) signifies, and this is to beg the question. Kretzmann might also be assuming that a word can only signify or immediately signify one thing at a time. But again, this begs the question. Surely Locke’s opponent need not claim that in (immediately) signifying *x* she lacks an idea of *x*. More important, she might grant that having an idea of *x* is a necessary condition for signifying *x* and still deny that the idea is the thing signified, whether immediately or otherwise.

Ashworth’s statement of the argument is in the same position. In fact, Smiglecius himself, in the very text she supposes Locke to be drawing from,

objects of perception, then it makes good sense that they should also be the immediate objects of signification.”

²⁶ Ashworth lays out four arguments she finds in scholastic sources, especially Smiglecius: the first is an appeal to the authority of Aristotle; the second, the argument from the uses of words; the third, an argument from the premise that one who conceives nothing signifies nothing (which I address below); and fourth, an inference from the premise that words can only signify things by means of concepts. She says that “each one of them, apart from the appeal to Aristotle, is found in Locke’s chapter on the signification of words” (Ashworth, 1984, p. 62). See also (1981, p. 312ff.).

²⁷ Ashworth (1981, p. 317). ²⁸ Ashworth (1981, p. 316).

²⁹ Ashworth in effect makes this point when she criticizes the argument from representative ideas by saying, “the move from the premise that ideas are necessary for the significant use of language to the conclusion that ideas are what is signified has been left unjustified” (1981, p. 302). She gives the impression there that the later portion of her article will improve upon Kretzmann’s reading of Locke’s argument; but this promise is never fulfilled.

goes on to point out the fallacy. Ashworth is aware of this, but seems not to find it implausible that Locke would lift a straightforwardly fallacious argument from one of the very figures he wishes to attack.

The same problem infects another argument Ashworth attributes to Locke,³⁰ which is based on the premise that those who lack the relevant concepts do not succeed in signifying anything by their words; that is, their utterances are mere parrot-talk (see III.ii.7: 408). But again, there is no legitimate inference from the fact that x is a necessary condition for signification to the conclusion that x is what is signified.

We have now exhausted the two most important attempts to interpret Locke's thesis and his arguments for it. We have also found good reason to be dissatisfied with them. Yet the fact that an argument is obviously fallacious is no reason, by itself, to hold off from attributing that argument to a great dead philosopher. I shall argue, however, that the interpretation I present below not only secures for Locke a valid argument for his thesis without committing him to semantic idealism, but is better grounded in the text.

TWO SEMIOTIC TRADITIONS

Ashworth is right in thinking that we must look at the larger context in which Locke was writing. But which one? Writings of the modern period and earlier offer a wide variety of notions of sign. We can make some progress by exploring other such notions that were available to Locke in texts we know he read.

I want to argue that a plausible source of inspiration for Locke's views has been staring us in the face. We must look, not to the Aristotelians, but to writers with whom Locke had much more sympathy, such as Hobbes and the Port-Royalians.

Consider Hobbes's discussion of signification in his *De Corpore* (1655), published some thirty-four years before the *Essay*. There, Hobbes writes,

Now, those things we call SIGNS are the *antecedents of their consequents, and the consequents of their antecedents, as often as we observe them to go before or follow after in the same manner*. For example, a thick cloud is a sign of rain to follow, and rain a sign that a cloud has gone before, for this reason only, that we seldom see clouds without the consequence of rain, nor rain at any time but when a cloud has gone before. And of signs, some are *natural*, whereof I have already given an example, others are *arbitrary*, namely, those we make choice of at our own pleasure, as a bush

³⁰ This is the third argument listed above in n. 26.

hung up, signifies that wine is to be sold there; a stone set in the ground signifies the bound of a field; and words so and so connected, signify the cogitations and motions of our mind. (*De Corpore* I.ii.2)³¹

We might say that signification in Hobbes's sense amounts to indication: rain indicates the recent presence of a cloud; a bush, the presence of wine-selling. As Hobbes's examples make clear, the notion is not an essentially causal one: a bush does not cause wine-selling.³² It is also neutral with regard to temporal sequence: ashes can signify a fire, and a dark cloud can signify rain. (Indeed, there may be no temporal sequence at all, as in the bush example.) Etymologically, the notion survives in our word "signaling."³³ This notion of signification is distinct from those suggested by Kretzmann and Ashworth. Clearly, it does not map onto sense, reference, or any mixture of both: a rain cloud or a bush outside a wine shop is not the right sort of thing to have a *Sinn* or a *Bedeutung*.³⁴ Neither is it Ashworth's "making known": every act of indicating *x* might also be an act of making *x* known (or revealing or expressing *x*), but the converse is clearly false.

It is not obvious what Hobbes means by calling sign and thing signified (or, as I shall call it, significate) antecedent and consequent. His discussion makes sense only when located in a tradition whose chief members include Aristotle, the Stoics, Sextus Empiricus, and, in the modern period, Pierre Gassendi. This tradition, as we shall see, is deeply at odds with that of the late Scholastics.

In the *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle says that a sign is *protasis apodeiktike e anankia e endoxos* (70a6–7), "a proposition, either necessary or reputable, used to show something."³⁵ Signs, then, have a role in inference; sign-inferences are enthymematic arguments on Aristotle's view (see *Prior Analytics* 70a10 and *Rhetoric* 1355a6). Signs play the role of antecedents in

³¹ Hobbes (1839–45, vol. 1, pp. 14–15).

³² This is not to say, of course, that apprehending a sign cannot cause knowledge of the thing signified. The point is that there is not necessarily any causal connection *between* *x* and *y*, where *x* is a sign of *y*, or vice versa.

³³ This kind of signification has a parallel in H.P. Grice's notion of "natural meaning"; see Grice (1957). He uses the following examples to explicate this notion: "Those spots mean (meant) measles"; "the recent budget means that we shall have a hard year" (1957, p. 377). Grice, of course, does not identify linguistic meaning with natural meaning.

³⁴ Ian Hacking makes a similar point in his (1975b, p. 22).

³⁵ The translation is Burnyeat's; see his (1982, p. 198). Aristotle also says, "[A]nything such that when it is another thing is, or when it has come into being the other has come into being before or after, is a sign of the other's being or having come into being" (*Prior Analytics* 70a8–10, in Aristotle 1984, vol. 1, p. 112). This omits the epistemic considerations common to most other definitions of "sign." But I take it that the characterization of signs given in the text above remedies this by bringing out the role signs have in inference.

conditional claims: to use one of Aristotle's examples, if this woman is lactating (sign), then she has recently given birth (significate). It is at first sight odd to see signs defined as propositions. In Aristotle's examples, they are states of affairs or facts. But as M.F. Burnyeat³⁶ points out, both ordinary Greek and ordinary English allow us to say "X is a sign of . . ." and "that p is a sign of . . ." interchangeably.³⁷

A necessary sign is an evidence (*tekmerion*), while a reputable sign "has no specific name" (*Rhetoric* 1357b3–5). A reputable sign figures in a refutable deduction; so if we infer that the wise are just from the fact that Socrates is wise and just, "we certainly have a sign, but even though the proposition is true, the argument is refutable, since it does not form a deduction" (*Rhetoric* 1357b13–14). The fact that Socrates is wise and just does not make it necessary that all other wise men should be just; this inference is an invalid third-figure syllogism. Similarly, the sign-inference from the fact that this woman is pale to the conclusion that she is pregnant is an invalid second-figure syllogism.³⁸ These arguments are always refutable, even if true (*Rhetoric* 1357b17–21). By contrast, if one infers from the fact that a woman is lactating that she has recently given birth, one has got hold of a necessary truth, and so the basis for inference is an evidence or *tekmerion*.³⁹

One difficulty in Aristotle's account is that reputable sign-inferences are invalid.⁴⁰ Aristotle says that "[t]ruth may be found in signs of whatever kind" (*Prior Analytics* 70a37–8),⁴¹ but this seems cold comfort, since of course any fallacious argument may have true premises and a true conclusion. The source of the difficulty, perhaps, is that syllogistic logic is rather a Procrustean bed for sign-inferences.⁴² But it seems clear that Aristotle is not suggesting that merely reputable signs and the arguments in which

³⁶ Burnyeat (1982, p. 198).

³⁷ The same issue recurs with the Stoics, who, as we shall see, say that sign is a proposition that forms the antecedent of a sound conditional. On their account, a proposition is a *lekton* that is incorporeal and so cannot, strictly speaking, be said to exist (see Long and Sedley 1987, vol. 1, pp. 195–201). The same line of thought Burnyeat offers in the case of Aristotle can also be offered here.

³⁸ Alternatively, one might say that it is an instance of affirming the consequent: if *x* is pregnant, *x* is pale; *a* is a pale woman; therefore *a* is pregnant. Philodemus would treat a woman's pallor as a "common" sign, which can exist whether or not its significate does, as opposed to the "particular" sign, which exists only when its significate does (see *de Signis* XIV, in Philodemus 1941, p. 55).

³⁹ Of course, as Burnyeat points out, this is not in fact an instance of a necessary truth.

⁴⁰ See *Prior Analytics* 70a28–37.

⁴¹ Aristotle seems to be using "*semeia*" here to refer to arguments based on signs. For the different uses of this term in Aristotle, see H. Weidemann (1989).

⁴² Alternatively, one might suggest that the problem is simply that Aristotle lacks the proper operators, such as "probably," "generally," and so on.

they figure be dismissed as worthless. Instead, he seems to be insisting that there are logically invalid inferences that are nevertheless of value.

The Stoics take a harder line, arguing that only *tekmeria* are signs. On their account, a sign is the antecedent proposition “in a sound conditional, revelatory of the consequent.”⁴³ We can cast the sign-inference from, say, motion to the existence of the void thus: if there is motion, then there is void. Thus *there is motion* is revelatory of its consequent just because it could not be true unless there were also void. It is crucial that not just any conditional, but only a sound one, will do; the question is, what is the criterion for soundness? On this point there does not seem to have been agreement. Sextus attributes to an early Stoic, Philo, the view that a sound conditional is any conditional except one with a true antecedent and a false consequent. But later Stoics such as Chrysippus introduced the criterion of *sunartesis* or cohesion, according to which a conditional is sound just in case the denial of the consequent conflicts with its antecedent.⁴⁴ The test of the soundness of a conditional is *anaskeue*, the “elimination method”: in thinking away the consequent, does one *thereby* think away the antecedent? It is tempting to render *anaskeue* as contraposition, but this would be inadequate, as even a Philonian material conditional, if true, would live up to it. Here is an example that passes the one test but not the other: “If I am typing, it is night.” Both propositions happen now to be true. But in denying the consequent, I do not thereby deny or think away the antecedent. They simply lack the proper connection.⁴⁵

Sextus Empiricus draws a distinction between kinds of sign that will be of crucial importance not only for our understanding of Locke, but of Berkeley as well (see chapter six). Sextus adds to the Stoic definition of sign an epistemic component: for his purposes, he defines an “indicative sign” as a sign whose significate is not itself observable. This he wishes to distinguish from a reminiscent or commemorative sign, which is not a basis for inference. In an influential passage, Sextus claims that “the dogmatists” hold that

⁴³ Long and Sedley (1987, vol. 1, p. 209).

⁴⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.110–13, in Long and Sedley (1987, vol. 1, p. 209).

⁴⁵ Here it is instructive to compare the way in which the material conditional fails to capture counterfactuals. For an extended argument against rendering *anaskeue* as “contraposition,” see David Sedley’s (1982, p. 245). Sedley traces *anaskeue* to *anarein* as it figures in Aristotle’s *Categories*. There Aristotle discusses pairs of terms such as half/double, slave/master, which are such that eliminating the one thereby eliminates the other. Such terms are relatives, in Aristotle’s terminology. It is then the meanings of the terms involved that allow some conditionals to pass the elimination test.

[t]hose [matters] which are occasionally non-evident and those that are by nature non-evident are grasped by means of signs, but the former by means of reminiscent signs (*hypomnēstika*) and the latter by means of indicative signs (*endeiktika*) . . . They call a reminiscent sign that which, having been observed together with [the occasionally non-evident thing] that it is a sign of, is, because of its being evident to someone at the time it occurs, a reminder to us of that which it was observed together with, though the latter is non-evident; for example, as in the case of smoke and fire. An indicative sign, they say, is that which is not evidently observable together with that which it is a sign of, but, as a result of its own peculiar nature and constitution, signifies that of which it is a sign, as, for example, the motions of the body are signs of the soul. Hence they define this [kind of] sign thus: “an indicative sign is the antecedent proposition in a sound conditional revelatory of the consequent.”⁴⁶

A “reminiscent” or “empirical” sign signifies something we have previously experienced; it brings to mind its significate in virtue of past association. An “indicative” sign, on the other hand, signifies something hidden. “The hidden” here means that which is imperceptible but knowable by inference. Commenting on this passage from Sextus, Gassendi says that an indicative sign signifies that which is naturally hidden “because it is of such a nature that it could not exist unless the thing exists, and therefore whenever it exists, the thing also exists.”⁴⁷ Gassendi’s favorite example (drawn from Aristotle) is invisible pores in the skin: sweating is an indicative sign of these pores just because one could not sweat unless such pores were present. Using this distinction, Sextus is able to distinguish his position from that of the dogmatists: he is arguing only against indicative signs, not reminiscent ones. For the latter are not grounds for inference; they carry no justificatory weight.⁴⁸

The distinction between signs-as-reminders and signs-as-indicators is also to be found in Augustine and in Hobbes. Augustine argues that “we don’t learn anything by these signs called words”; at best, “they remind us to look for things.”⁴⁹ This is contrary to the naïve view that there is in

⁴⁶ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.97–2.101, in Inwood and Gerson (1988, p. 214).

⁴⁷ Gassendi (1972, p. 332).

⁴⁸ “[W]e are not arguing against every sign, but only against the indicative sign, on the grounds that it seems to have been concocted by the dogmatists. For the reminiscent sign has been found to be trustworthy by everyday life, since when someone sees smoke, he takes it as a sign of fire, and seeing a scar he says that there has been a wound. Hence, not only are we not in conflict with everyday life, but we are even allied with it, by assenting undogmatically to that which has been made trustworthy by it, while opposing only those which have been especially invented by the dogmatists.” *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.102, in Inwood and Gerson (1988, p. 215).

⁴⁹ *De magistro* in Augustine (1995, p. 137).

fact some content being transmitted with or through the words.⁵⁰ A sign merely “brings something else to the mind.”⁵¹ But Adeodatus, Augustine’s interlocutor in *de magistro*, eventually compels Augustine to admit, however grudgingly, that “when words are heard by someone who knows them, he can know that the speaker had been thinking about the things they signify.”⁵² In this sense they not only bring something else to mind, they serve as a means of knowing what another speaker is thinking about.

Hobbes deploys the same distinction with regard to words, this time drawing it between *marks* and *signs*. Hobbes writes,

[T]he first use of names, is to serve for *marks*, or *notes* of remembrance. Another is, when many use the same words, to signify, by their connexion and order, one to another, what they conceive, or think of each matter; and also what they desire, fear, or have any other passion for. And for this use they are called *signs*.⁵³

A speaker or writer can use words to remind himself of thoughts he had previously. Their use in this capacity is purely private; that is, they are marks only for the person who writes or speaks them. In their second use, as signs, they allow others to infer what is present in the mind of the speaker.

It is worth pointing out that in antiquity, the debate over signs was primarily epistemological, with linguistic considerations usually coming in as an after-thought. (Augustine is the obvious exception here.) This might help to explain why some philosophers, such as the Stoics, claim that the connection between sign and significate must be necessary. Had they considered words as signs, they might have been brought to admit that some indicators can stand in a contingent relation to what they indicate and still serve their purpose.

However that may be, I now wish to draw attention to what all of these figures have in common: the belief that a sign must be available as an object of sensation. Augustine’s statement of this point is clearest: a sign is “something which is itself sensed and which indicates to the mind something beyond the sign itself.”⁵⁴ There is a competing tradition that has its source in the late Scholastic period. Ashworth is correct in saying that by the early sixteenth century the standard meaning of “*significare*” was “to represent some thing or some things or in some way to the cognitive power.” But this

⁵⁰ For his description of the opposed position, see his *Homilies on John the Evangelist* 37.4.14–24, quoted in Augustine (1995, p. xvi).

⁵¹ *De doctrina Christiana* II.i.1, in Augustine (1958, p. 27).

⁵² *De magistro* 13.45, in Augustine (1995, p. 145).

⁵³ *Leviathan* I.4, in Hobbes (1839–45, vol. 3, pp. 19–20).

⁵⁴ *De Dialectica* v, in Augustine (1975, p. 87). See also *De Doctrina Christiana* I.ii.2 and *de Trinitate* XV.xi.20. A helpful discussion is to be found in R.A. Markus (1957).

is a revision of the notion of sign common to the Augustinian tradition. The latter was thought by the late Scholastics to be too narrow to accommodate concepts or acts of knowing, which the late scholastics wanted to call “formal signs.” John Poinset (a.k.a. John of St. Thomas, 1589–1644) writes that a formal sign is “the formal awareness which represents of itself”;⁵⁵ a formal sign is not, in the first instance, an object of thought, but that *by which* thought is accomplished. A reflexive act is required to bring the formal sign to consciousness. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, the Conimbricenses, a group of commentators on Aristotle centered in Coimbra, Spain, explicitly rejected Augustine’s definition on the grounds that it ruled out formal signs.⁵⁶ This rejection of the Augustinian definition was, in the words of Ashworth, a “mere commonplace by the beginning of the sixteenth century.”⁵⁷ Augustine, it was claimed, had only defined “instrumental” signs. The notion of formal signs, signs that do not themselves have to be perceived, survives in the modern period in the works of Descartes, Glanvill, and the Cambridge Platonists.⁵⁸

To avoid confusion, I wish to impose a technical vocabulary on this spectrum of views. I shall call an *indicative* sign any sign whose significate is of necessity unavailable to perception, and which serves as an indication of that significate. I depart from the Hellenistic tradition in leaving open the question of necessary connection. A *reminiscent* sign is one whose presence conveys the mind by a causal process to something else which has been experienced in conjunction with that sign. There is room for confusion here, since we often say, even in the case of indicative signs, that we have been caused or made to think of something or that something is the case. It is as natural to say that sweat brings about the thought of pores in the skin as that smoke brings about the thought of fire. The relevant distinction is that reminiscent signs depend on prior experience of constant conjunctions, experience which is by definition unavailable in the case of indicative signs. Reminiscent signification is perhaps best understood as

⁵⁵ *Tractatus de Signis*, in Poinset (1995, p. 27). See John P. Doyle’s (1984) and Ashworth (1990, p. 39). There, Ashworth writes, “[f]or something to signify formally was [according to Soto] simply for it to be a concept or an act of knowing.”

⁵⁶ *Commentarii Conimbricenses in dialecticam Aristotelis* (1607, 6, q.1, a.1), quoted in Doyle (1984, p. 569). A formal sign is contrasted with an instrumental sign, which, in the words of John Poinset, “represents something other than itself from a pre-existing cognition of itself as an object, as the footprint of an ox represents an ox” (Doyle, 1984, p. 27). His definition of sign in general is “[t]hat which represents something other than itself to a cognitive power” (Doyle, 1984, p. 25); in this, he follows Domingo de Soto. According to Soto, Augustine had merely defined an instrumental sign. See Ashworth (1988, esp. pp. 138–9).

⁵⁷ Ashworth, (1988, p. 138). ⁵⁸ See Yolton (1984) and (2000).

expectation; whether this expectation is justified is another question I wish to leave open.

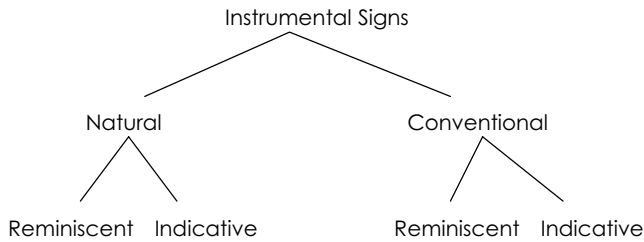


Figure 1: Taxonomy of Instrumental Signs

A further set of useful distinctions is to be found in the Port-Royal *Logic*.⁵⁹ Arnauld and Nicole discuss both conventional and natural indicative signs; as examples of the latter, they offer the expression of a face as a sign of a mental attitude and warm ashes as the sign of a fire; as examples of the former, they cite words as conventional signs of thoughts.⁶⁰

Their classifications cut across the categories of reminiscent and indicative signs, even if some of the sub-categories so constructed are empty. The most obvious distinction, already discussed, is (a) that between natural and conventional signs. Natural signs do not depend on human activity; conventional signs are arbitrary.⁶¹ The next (b) is drawn between signs whose significates are copresent with them, and those whose significates are not.⁶² One difference between the way in which warm ashes are a sign of fire and rain is a sign of a cloud is that the fire temporally precedes the ashes, while rainfall and a cloud are copresent. Arnauld and Nicole also distinguish between (c) signs whose presence ensures the existence of the thing signified – “as respiration is a sign of the life of animals”⁶³ – and signs from whose presence we can only conclude the *probable* existence of the thing signified – as “pallor is only a probable sign of pregnancy in women.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ We can be fairly certain that Locke was familiar with the Port-Royal *Logic*, as Harrison and Laslett list both French and Latin editions of *La Logique* as present in Locke's library. See their (1971, p. 75). Harrison and Laslett do not list a copy of Hobbes's *De Corpore* as among his possessions; however, he did have a copy of *Leviathan*, among other of Hobbes's works.

⁶⁰ “[L]es mots sont signes d’institution des pensées,” Arnauld and Nicole (1970, p. 82). And later: “On peut dire en général sur ce sujet, que les mots sont des sons distincts & articulés, dont les hommes ont fait des signes pour marquer ce qui se passe dans leur esprit” (1970, p. 143).

⁶¹ (1970, p. 82). ⁶² (1970, p. 81).

⁶³ “[C]omme la respiration l’est de la vie des animaux” (1970, p. 80).

⁶⁴ “[L]a pâleur n’est qu’un signe probable de grossesse dans les femmes” (1970, p. 80).

As we have seen, this distinction was captured by the tradition as holding between those signs which are “necessary” and those which are merely “probable.”⁶⁵

If a given sign is conventional, we can safely infer several of its other features. First, in order for a conventional signification relation to be set up, the parties concerned must have perceptual access to the signifier. No conventional sign, it seems, could be a formal sign. Consider Hobbes’s example (itself borrowed from the traditional logicians) of the bush in front of the wine shop: my wine business will hardly be improved by signifying that I sell wine by some sign of which no one could be aware. A bush outside the shop is useful precisely because perceptual access to it is (at least pre-theoretically) unproblematic. It is an open question, as yet, what kind of access (if any) we must have to the thing signified. Thus, it seems fair to say that any conventional sign will have to be instrumental rather than formal. Adherence to the Augustinian tradition on this point seems mandatory. With regard to (b), conventional signification is indifferent. With regard to (c), however, it seems clear that the relation is merely probable. We can easily imagine conventions such that in one context, x signifies y , while in another, x signifies z .

We are now in a position to return to Locke.

IDEAS AS SIGNS

How, then, does Locke understand signification? Which of these competing traditions best captures the sense of the term in his mouth?

A natural place to begin is Locke’s discussion of ideas, which he also calls signs.⁶⁶ As we have seen, Kretzmann is driven to claim that Locke equivocates when he calls both ideas and words “signs.”⁶⁷ A reading that is able to account for his use of this term in both ideational and linguistic contexts naturally has the advantage.

Locke argues that our simple ideas “agree to the reality of things” whether or not they resemble anything in the external world. For they are “designed to be the Marks, whereby we are to know, and distinguish Things, which we have to do with” (II.xxx.2: 372–3). Whether they are “only constant Effects,

⁶⁵ See Gassendi’s *Syntagma* Part I in Gassendi (1972, p. 330). Gassendi refers to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 1357b and the *Prior Analytics* II.xxvii, as well as to Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* V, ix. Aristotle says that signs that are merely probable indicators of their significates lack a name; Quintilian provides one, saying that “the Greeks” called those signs which are “necessary” *tekmèria*, and those which are not *sêmata*.

⁶⁶ “. . . [T]here are two sorts of Signs commonly made use of, *viz.* Ideas and Words” (IV.v.2: 574).

⁶⁷ Kretzmann (1975, p. 135).

or else exact Resemblances of something in the things themselves," such ideas are dependable marks or signs⁶⁸ of the objects or qualities of objects that can cause us to have those ideas. Ideas of sensation serve as grounds for inference to their causes: when I have a piece of paper before me in certain conditions, the idea *white* is produced in my mind, "by which I know, that that Quality or Accident (*i.e.* whose appearance before my Eyes, always causes that *Idea*) doth really exist" (IV.xi.2: 631). In this case, my having the idea *white* gives me a basis for inference to the presence of a secondary quality in a physical object.⁶⁹ It is in this sense that the idea is a sign or mark of its cause.

Consider Locke's response to the inverted spectrum problem. We have seen that an idea of sensation is a sign of its cause. Locke uses this premise to argue that it would not "carry any Imputation of *Falshood* to our simple *Ideas*, if by the different Structure of our Organs, it were so ordered, That *the same Object should produce in several Men's Minds* [qualitatively] *different Ideas at the same time*" (II.xxxii.15: 389).⁷⁰ What matters about the idea we connect with "blue" is not its qualitative content, but rather its epistemic role. That the same object should produce in us qualitatively different ideas in no way undermines our claim to have the same ideas, because the criteria of sameness here are not qualitative.⁷¹ Instead, Locke appeals to what we might call *significative* sameness, sameness of idea *qua* sign. Two ideas of a secondary quality are the same, on this view, if they are evidence for the presence of the same extra-mental object or quality that causes them.⁷²

Ideas of sensation are thus indicative instrumental signs that allow us to infer to the objects and qualities that cause them, which are necessarily hidden from us. But how do ideas come to represent their objects in the first place? Unsurprisingly, the causal connection that funds indicative sign inferences in the case of simple ideas also accounts for their role as representations. The epistemic function of ideas presupposes a distinct means of

⁶⁸ Note that unlike Hobbes Locke uses the terms "mark" and "sign" interchangeably. For example, immediately after stating that words signify ideas in III.ii, Locke writes, "That then which Words are the Marks of, are the *Ideas* of the Speaker: Nor can any one apply them, as Marks, immediately to anything else, but the *Ideas*, he himself hath" (III.ii.2: 405).

⁶⁹ On this issue, see Michael Ayers (1998b, pp. 24–47) and (1991, vol. 1, *passim*).

⁷⁰ We must be careful to distinguish different criteria for the sameness of ideas. For if numerical identity is at issue, it is obvious that the same object must produce different ideas in distinct minds. The sentence immediately following the one quoted in the text makes clear that qualitative difference is what is meant here.

⁷¹ Nevertheless, given our common physical makeup, Locke is "very apt to think, that the sensible *Ideas*, produced by any Object in different Men's Minds, are most commonly very near and undiscernibly alike" (II.xxxii.15: 389). But by Locke's lights, this is a side issue to be settled by physiology rather than philosophy.

⁷² For a related treatment of the inverted spectrum issue, see Michael Losonsky (1994).

representing what is indicated; causal co-variance provides this means, even if, as we shall see, Locke supplements this with teleological considerations.

Locke argues that simple ideas “represent to us Things under those appearances which they are fitted to produce in us: whereby we are enabled to distinguish the sorts of particular Substances, to discern the states they are in, and so to take them for our Necessities, and apply them to our Uses” (IV.iv.4: 564). This and many other passages suggest that Locke is offering a causal account of representation familiar from the work of Jerry Fodor.⁷³ We must note, however, that Locke applies his causal account only to *simple* ideas; his distinct treatment of the representation of complex ideas will be treated below (chapter three). What is more important, Locke’s causal account contains a teleological element.

A causal account on its own runs into two serious problems. First, it is unclear how a simple idea could ever *mis*represent anything. If idea x represents quality or thing y just in case y causes x , then, by the very nature of the case, there is no sense to be made of an x that misrepresents its y . A closely related problem is that of disjunction: if an idea of green, for example, is caused sometimes by green things and sometimes by red things, what it represents is no longer the quality green but the disjunction of green and red. It is typical for causal theorists to appeal to standard conditions to solve these problems: a properly functioning cognitive system in standard conditions will token *green* only in response to things genuinely having that quality. However tempting this move might seem, Robert Cummins has argued that it is impossible to specify these standard conditions in a non-circular way.⁷⁴

Locke never explicitly addresses these problems. His account has the resources to do so, however.⁷⁵ For Locke is not simply a causal theorist: his account includes a teleological element, built on God’s role in setting up the relation of causation between simple ideas and things. He need not appeal to standard conditions on their own because the disjunction and misrepresentation problems can be solved by appeal to design: “God in his Wisdom, having set [simple ideas] as Marks of Distinction in Things, whereby we may be able to discern one Thing from another; and so chose any of them for our uses, as we have Occasion” (II.xxxii.14: 388). A tokening of an idea is veridical just in case it is caused by the quality or object that God intended. Alternatively, we can say that veridical tokenings are those that take place under normal conditions. “Normal conditions” must,

⁷³ See Fodor (1987). ⁷⁴ See Cummins (1989, p. 46).

⁷⁵ My thoughts here are very much in line with those of Sally Ferguson’s (2001).

of course, be cashed out in non-intentional terms. The appeal to teleology allows precisely this: normal conditions are just those under which ideas function as they are supposed to, that is, as indications of the relevant extra-mental object or quality.

Contemporary naturalists have replaced divine teleology with that of natural selection. The result is the same: misrepresentation can be accounted for in terms of the purposes of God (or the *ersatz* purposes of natural selection) in setting up the connection between objects and mental representations. The disjunction problem also disappears once we see that the reference of a mental representation is fixed by the purposes of the creator. As Sally Ferguson puts it, "the intentionality of the designer trickles down to the thing designed."⁷⁶

These issues will become important again when we consider Locke's doctrine of abstraction (chapter 3), and in applying his linguistic views to his official definition of knowledge and his replies to skepticism (chapter seven). For now, it is enough to note that the role of ideas as indicative signs is distinct from their role as representations, even though the same relation, causation, underlies both.

WORDS AS SIGNS

I have been arguing that in his epistemology Locke exploits a notion of sign as an indication or an evidence, a grounds for inference. Given this, the most natural interpretation of Locke's claim that *words* are signs of ideas in the mind of the speaker is that words serve as indicators or signals of those ideas. Consider once again Locke's argument from the uses of words. A person's thoughts "are all within his own Breast, invisible, and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear" (III.ii.1: 405). The use of words lies in their capacity "to stand as outward Marks of our internal *Ideas*" (II.xi.9: 159). The case is exactly parallel with that of ideas of sensation: they, too, must serve as signs of what is hidden, since only our ideas (and perhaps our own minds)⁷⁷ are immediately present to us. Note that the signification relation in the case of ideas of sensation is dependent on causation; it is the fact that an idea of blue, for instance, is caused by an object with the proper secondary quality that allows the idea to serve as a sign of that quality. To say that words are conventional signs is just to say that the signification relation in their case is dependent upon

⁷⁶ Ferguson (2001, p. 118).

⁷⁷ For the suggestion that our own minds might be immediately present to us, see IV.xxi.4: 720–1.

their role in an artificial, shared convention rather than in a natural relation such as causation.

Although Locke's focus is usually on words as instruments of communication, and so as indicative signs, he nevertheless follows the spirit (but not the letter) of Hobbes's distinction between signs and marks. Immediately before stating the linguistic thesis in III.ii.2, Locke writes,

The use Men have of these Marks [i.e., words], being either to record their own Thoughts for the Assistance of their own Memory; or as it were, to bring out their *Ideas*, and lay them before the view of others: *Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them . . .* (III.ii.2: 405)

Note that this statement of the thesis declares not just that words are signs of ideas in the mind of the speaker, as is usually the case, but more broadly, in the mind of the person making use of the words. This allows for words to serve as Hobbesian marks, a use I take to involve, at least paradigmatically, writing rather than speech. One might jot down words for her own use and come back to them later, so as to remind herself of what she had been thinking, or one might use them as signs to others of her ideas. In either case, they are signs only of the user's ideas.

It is important to see that Locke's philosophy of language is partly normative. His claim is that the purpose of speech is to allow us to offer each other sensible signs of our ideas (III.i–ii; cp. III.xi.11: 514). But this is not to say that experience cannot set up a connection between a word and the idea it is used to indicatively signify such that one passes from the sound of the word to that idea without making an inference. Indeed, this is precisely the kind of laziness that Locke thinks responsible for so much confusion. Consider the case of a person who has already mastered one language attempting to learn another. On Locke's view there is a two-step process. First, one tries to infer the ideas a speaker has in his mind. We can check our progress, Locke thinks, by means of ostensive definition. After a time, a different kind of connection is set up, this time, not between a word and the idea in the speaker's mind, but between the word and an idea in one's own mind, with which one customarily associates that idea. Locke writes,

there comes by constant use, to be such a Connexion between certain Sounds, and the Ideas they stand for, that the Names heard, almost as readily excite certain Ideas, as if the Objects themselves, which are apt to produce them, did actually affect the Senses . . . [B]y familiar use from our Cradles, we come to learn certain articulate Sounds very perfectly, and have them readily on our Tongues, and always at hand in our Memories . . . (III.ii.6,7: 407; see II.viii.7: 134)

So after constantly conjoining a word with an idea, our thoughts move without hesitation from the one to the other. Locke never says that this activity is signification. Indeed, the causal connection presupposes, and so cannot explain, the conventional link established through signification.

Words, by their immediate Operation on us, cause no other *Ideas*, but of their natural Sounds: and 'tis by the Custom of using them for Signs, that they excite, and revive in our Minds latent *Ideas*; but yet only such *Ideas*, as were there before. For Words seen or heard, re-call to our Thoughts those *Ideas* only, which to us they have been wont to be Signs of: But cannot introduce any perfectly new, and formerly unknown simple *Ideas*. (IV.xviii.3: 689)

Even if a man were inspired by God, he could not communicate to others any simple ideas they have not already had. This, as we have seen, was precisely Augustine's point: words do not magically transmit any content; they serve only to indicate ideas in the mind of the speaker, or to revive ideas in us. What is crucial for our purposes is the clear relation of dependence Locke draws between words as causes of ideas in the hearer's mind and words as indicators. It is only in virtue of their role as signs of ideas in the speaker's minds that they are able to revive ideas in us. As we shall see below, the latter practice is a kind of laziness that, in some contexts, is pernicious.

Before we can move on to see how Locke argues for the thesis that words signify nothing but ideas, we must clear up two other issues. I have noted above that Locke is very free in his terminology: he sometimes says that words "denominate" or "name" things, and his talk of words primarily signifying ideas has led Kretzmann and Ashworth to supply him with a notion of secondary signification. Does Locke think that the indicative signification of ideas is the only, or even the central, role played by words?

Let us begin with primary and secondary signification. Both Kretzmann and Ashworth claim, reasonably enough, that the passages early on in Book III (esp. III.ii.1: 405; III.ii.2: 405; III.ii.4: 406; III.ii.8: 408) commit Locke to a distinction between these two kinds of signification. But in the course of Book III, Locke lets the restriction to primary or immediate signification drop, claiming simply that words are "the Signs of our *Ideas* only" (III.x.15: 499). Moreover, he never so much as uses the phrases "mediate" or "secondary" signification; still less does he explain these notions.

Traditionally, the distinction between primary and secondary signification was drawn in order to set apart ideas and things as distinct classes of significates of words. This distinction is easily accommodated on my account, for Hobbes specifies a sense (albeit a degenerate one) in which one may say that words signify things. Hobbes writes, "for that the sound

of this word *stone* should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this, that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone.”⁷⁸ We must note, as Kretzmann and Ashworth do not, that Locke claims that words “*properly* and immediately signify” (III.ii.4: 406, my emphasis; see III.ii.7: 407) nothing but ideas, implying that they can only *improperly* be said to signify things. If my suggestion is correct, we can easily see why Locke would say this, for only in an attenuated sense can we say that words signify things.⁷⁹

Even if we accept this, however, we must acknowledge that Locke often speaks, in other contexts, of words “denominating” things; we are said to “rank things under names” (see, e.g., III.iii.13: 415; III.vi.1: 438). Does Locke, then, have room for a semantic relation between words and extra-mental things, in addition to the semiotic relation between words and ideas? This question is difficult to answer precisely because Locke is so loose in his terminology. For he often says that words “name” ideas (II.xi.8–9: 158–9; III.vi.6: 442; III.vii.1: 471). Moreover, he tells us nothing about what this other semantic category is supposed to be. Certainly “naming” cannot be reference; otherwise, Locke would be guilty of holding semantic idealism. I think it is most reasonable, in light of Locke’s linguistic thesis and the emphasis he puts on it, to read the “denomination” of things by words as reducible to the signification of ideas. There are three key considerations here. First, since Locke says nothing by way of arguing for or even explicating the claim that words denominate or name things, it is difficult to see how we could be justified in interpreting him as undertaking a commitment to an altogether new semantic category. Second, Locke can reduce the denomination of things to the signification of ideas in the way suggested above: to say that “*x*” denominates *x* is just to say that someone uttering “*x*” is indicating that she has *x* in mind. And if my reading is correct, it is hardly surprising that Locke should require a shorthand for this cumbersome analysis. Finally, as we shall see, Locke spends a great deal of time in III.x and elsewhere deploying the linguistic thesis against the Aristotelian. If he did think that words refer to extra-mental things, it is very hard to understand why he would do so, for he would no longer be disagreeing with the Aristotelian: both could happily claim that words refer to things. By contrast, Locke believes that striving for Aristotelian

⁷⁸ *De Corpore* I.ii.5 (1839–45, vol. 1, p. 17).

⁷⁹ It is also worth noting that Sergeant attributes to Locke the view that words signify ideas in the mind of the speaker; nowhere does Sergeant mention primary/immediate, or secondary/mediate signification. In his marginal notes, Locke very often corrects what he perceives as misconstruals of his position. But he is silent on this point.

real definitions is a result of misunderstanding the role of words as signs of ideas. (I do not suppose that this last consideration can be persuasive until chapter four, where we explore Locke's anti-Aristotelian argument in detail.)

At a minimum, then, it seems we can ascribe to Locke the position that for speech to have sense requires (a) a suitable convention and (b) an intention to communicate by participating in that convention (III.i.2: 402; III.ii.2: 405). What is necessary on the hearer's side? First let us ask what it is to understand other kinds of conventional sign. What is it to understand, for example, what a stone at the boundary of a field means? It is at least this: (c) to take it as a sign of the boundary of a field, and (d) to be *correct* in so taking it, (c) will be possible only if one has knowledge of the convention invoked in (a), whereas (d) depends on (b) the intentions of the person, if such there be, who put the stone there. Similarly, we might say that to understand speech is for the hearer (c) to take the words as indicative signs of ideas in the mind of the speaker (or mental acts), and (d) to be correct in so taking them. Although Locke doesn't use this terminology, it seems that when we simply allow words to revive ideas in us, we cannot really be said to be engaged in communication, even if doing so is sufficient for daily life.

This notion of signification as indication is radically different from that of sense or reference, or making known, or expressing. But this does not entail that the notion of signification found in these authors is not properly called "meaning." There is a perfectly good pre-theoretical sense of "meaning" that fits the bill: a motorist can ask a mechanic, "what does this green puddle mean?", without using "mean" in a novel sense. The view will seem alien to us only so long as we fail to keep in mind the logical and explanatory priority these writers thought the mental had over the linguistic. On Locke's view, the work of intentionality is carried out at the level of ideas. If we must speak in terms of sense and reference (and I do not see why), we must say that if anything, *ideas* have sense; that is, they are or have a "mode of presenting" an object, and reference, a thing or class of things falling under them. On this account, words do not magically latch on to things through some unspecified causal connection. They are of use only in unfolding our minds to one another.

LOCKE'S MAIN ARGUMENT

Hobbes's understanding of what it is for a word to be a sign provides him with a very straightforward argument for the conclusion that words cannot be signs of things:

But seeing names ordered in speech . . . are signs of our conceptions, it is manifest they are not signs of the things themselves; for that the sound of this word *stone* should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this, that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone. And, therefore, that disputation, whether words signify matter or form, or something compounded of both, and other like subtleties of the *metaphysics*, is kept up by erring men, and such as understand not the words they dispute about.⁸⁰

If we read “signify” as “express” or “refer” or any of the other candidates Ashworth brings forward as common currency among the late Scholastics, the dispute Hobbes refers to makes some sense. Its connection with the detested hylomorphist framework is clear enough: is the substance itself, a form/matter compound, referred to or expressed by our words, or do words pick out some one of these elements? Hobbes dismisses the controversy with one stroke: once we understand what signification really is, and so understand the words we dispute about, we can see that it would be absurd to claim that anything besides our own cogitations were the significates of words. The argument is simple: if “sign” is understood as Hobbes defines it, “stone” cannot signify a stone. For to do so it would have to be a harbinger, as it were, or an indication, of a stone. Unless I am a magician, stones do not appear when I utter the word “stone.” If I wanted my utterance “stone” to be a sign of stones, I would have to be very sparing in my use of the word.

Armed with this grasp of one important contemporary understanding of “signification,” as well as with Hobbes’s argument to the effect that words do not signify extra-mental objects, we are now in a position to come to grips with Locke’s argument in favor of his linguistic thesis.

Kretzmann quotes an argument he takes to be another version of the argument from representative ideas, but which his account is powerless to explain. Locke writes, “by this tacit reference to the real Essence of that Species of Bodies, the Word *Gold* . . . comes to have no signification at all, being put for somewhat, whereof we have no *Idea* at all, and so can signify nothing at all, when the Body itself is away” (III.x.19: 501). I shall explore the context of this passage at greater length below (chapter four). For now, let us see whether either of the two dominant interpretations can make sense of its argument.

If we take the primary signification of a word as its sense, and its mediate or secondary signification as its reference, as Kretzmann’s account seems to suggest, there is, perhaps, a good reason why one cannot give a word the latter without also giving it the former. How could anyone refer to

⁸⁰ *De Corpore* I.ii.5 (1839–45, vol. 1, p. 17).

something if there were no mode in which that thing was presented to him, or, to use Gareth Evans's terminology, how could one think about something without there being a *way* in which one thinks about that thing?⁸¹ If we were to cash out Locke's view in this way, we might read him as saying that our words cannot succeed in referring to things when they lack sense.

But this sort of argument is not to be found in the passage at hand. Why should it be that, if one uses a word to signify something without the mediation of an idea, that word would signify nothing "when the Body itself" was away? What difference could *that* possibly make? If sense and reference have any place here, the conclusion should be that it is in principle *impossible* to primarily signify a thing (as opposed to an idea) with a word, not that, if one did so, the signification would only work when the thing signified was present. Alternatively, the Kretzmannian might say that "when the Body itself is away" is to be read as "when the thing one is attempting to refer to does not exist." Thus Locke would be warning us that successful reference can take place only when the referent exists; this view, if counter-intuitive and perhaps false, is at least intelligible. But this is not Locke's point at all: for a body to be away seems to be nothing more than for the body to be out of the presence of the speaker.⁸²

Nor does Ashworth's view fare any better here. To say that "signify" in this passage is used by Locke to include aspects of both sense and reference does not enable us to explain why it should be that this combination does not obtain when the thing signified is out of the presence of the speaker. We might read Ashworth as suggesting instead that "signify" is to be understood in the more general sense of "making something known." But why should the physical absence of a thing impede one's ability to make it known to others through words? The proposal under fire from Locke seems to be that words can (immediately) signify real essences of things. Why should someone putting forth that proposal be vulnerable to the objection that the word could only do its work of making known the real essence when the body whose real essence is at issue is present?⁸³ Moreover, on Ashworth's account, Locke is saying that one cannot signify a thing unless one has an

⁸¹ See Gareth Evans (1982, p. 32ff). ⁸² See III.vi.19: 449.

⁸³ It has been suggested to me that Ashworth and/or Kretzmann might respond by saying that the presence of the body allows one to have an idea that determines the thing the name signifies ostensively. While this might explain why the body must *at some time or other* be "present" so that one can have an idea of it, it cannot, on pain of denying our ability to remember ideas, explain why the word cannot signify anything when the body is away. Another ingenious response worth considering is this: in the absence of an idea of a real essence of, say, gold, one purporting to signify that essence by his words can only have in mind ideas such as "yellow," "malleable," etc. Thus when the piece of gold is removed, the claim that one is speaking about its real essence seems plausible only because these ideas can be recalled – "gold" calls up this collection of ideas. But on this story,

idea of it. But in this passage, Locke implies that if the thing were present, one *could* signify it, even in the absence of an idea.

In fact, the only way to understand this passage is to read “signify” as I have suggested. The proposal under consideration is that my word is a sign, not of any mental content or event in me, but rather of the hidden internal constitution of a thing. According to Locke, one does not have perceptual access to real essences; nevertheless, one might be able to infer that there are such things. This means that we might know that each individual instance of gold has *some* real essence, though we do not know what it is. This seems to allow that we could make a word a reliable indicator of the presence of the real essence of a thing simply because we know that a thing (which is perceptually accessible) and its real essence (which is not) come as a package. But Locke argues that this maneuver fails. For as long as the thing and its real essence cannot live up to the requirement that a word be able to reliably indicate them, the point about perceptual access is moot. The crucial criterion here is that they be the right sorts of things to be reliably indicated by words. This is explicit in the conclusion of Locke’s argument: the word assumed to signify a real essence “can signify nothing at all, when the Body itself is away.” Whether the word is supposed to be a sign of the thing or of the perceptually inaccessible real essence of the thing, the word will do its work only when its utterer is in the presence of that entity. This is absurd without being contradictory just because of the contingent fact that one, regrettably, cannot reliably indicate the presence of gold (or its real essence) simply by saying, “gold.” This is the sense in which “gold” understood as signifying the real essence of gold, has “no signification at all.”⁸⁴

Let us consider another argument Locke offers against the idea that our words signify the real essences of things:

[T]hey not having any *Idea* of that real Essence in Substances, and their Words signifying nothing but the *Ideas* they have, that which is done by this Attempt, is only to put the name or sound, in the place and stead of the thing having that real Essence, without knowing what that real Essence is; and this is that which Men do, when they speak of Species of Things, as supposing them made by Nature, and distinguished by real Essences. (III.vi.49: 470)

According to the previous argument, the attempt to use “gold” to signify the real essence of a thing fails due to a set of contingent facts about the sorts

the word *does* have signification: it signifies a collection of ideas, even in the absence of the physical stuff. By contrast, Locke’s conclusion is that the word *signifies nothing at all* when the body is away.

⁸⁴ See III.ii.7: 408, discussed above.

of things our words can reliably indicate. There is an alternative, however, to saying that "gold," given this signification, has no signification at all, and that is to say that the word signifies the auditory impression occasioned by the utterance of the word itself. This puts the "name or sound" of the word in place of the thing signified, which I take to mean, in the *role* of the thing signified.⁸⁵ If my uttering "gold" cannot be a reliable indicator of the presence of gold, it can, trivially, be a reliable indicator of the sound "gold." The word used in this way is not strictly speaking meaningless, since it signifies an idea; the idea in question is simply that of the sound of the word itself. Obviously, this is no improvement in the position of Locke's imaginary antagonist.

I think that the first of these arguments constitutes, albeit in a rather sketchy form, the basic line of thought Locke had in mind as support for his claim that words can signify nothing but ideas. On my reading, the thesis is this: all categorematic words conventionally signify (here, serve as grounds of inference for) nothing but ideas in the mind of the speaker. This follows from two premises: first, from the nature of signification, and second, from a set of contingent facts about what sorts of things words can be used to indicate. Locke thinks that he can rule out proposals that things other than ideas (and mental acts) are signified simply by consulting the definition of signification, and then seeing if these candidates can be linked with words in such a way as to meet that definition. Note that the argument I am attributing to Locke does not have the form of a reduction to contradiction: there is no logical impossibility about a world in which whenever anyone utters the word "stone," a stone appears. It is just that that world is not *our* world.

If I am right about Locke's argument in support of the thesis, the argument from the uses of words must be enlisted to support the first of the two premises I listed above. One naturally wants to say to Locke that, of course, *if* words are signs in Hobbes's sense, then there will be a difficulty in making them signs of anything but ideas or acts of the mind; but why believe that words are signs in this sense? Locke's response will be to advert to the uses to which words are put: insofar as communication is what is wanted, he will argue that words must be signs of ideas.

We can now round out this discussion by re-examining the passage in which Kretzmann purports to find the "argument from representative ideas" (III.ii.2: 405). Immediately before the portion quoted above, Locke

⁸⁵ In this connection, compare Arnauld and Nicole (1970, p. 67): "Car il y auroit de la contradiction entre dire que je sais ce que je dis en prononçant un mot, & que néanmoins je ne conçois rien en le prononçant que le son même du mot."

states both the linguistic thesis and the argument from the uses of words. With this in place, he can then argue that it is impossible for someone to use words to (immediately) signify anything but ideas. Locke argues that “this would be to make them Signs of his own Conceptions, and yet apply them to other *Ideas*, which would be to make them Signs, and not Signs, of his *Ideas* at the same time.” Before we can understand this argument we must be clear about what else such a speaker is trying to signify. The rest of the passage suggests that the “other *Ideas*” Locke intends are ideas in the minds of others. The violation of the thesis, then, lies in the attempt to make one’s words signs of one’s ideas and those of others at once. There is nothing contradictory in this; however, the nature of signification together with obvious facts about distinct human minds entails that such an attempt must fail. As Locke says at the end of the passage, even if the speaker “consents to give [his ideas] the same Names, that other Men do, ’tis still to his own *Ideas*; to *Ideas* that he has, and not to *Ideas* that he has not” (III.ii.2: 406). Moreover, the purpose of speech is to reveal one’s mind to others, not to reveal *other* minds to others. This is what gives the violation of the thesis Locke considers its air of self-contradiction. If my interpretation is correct, there is no need to attribute the fallacious argument from representative ideas to Locke; instead, this passage draws out one consequence of the nature and purpose of linguistic signification, viz., that the sole proper objects of such signification are one’s own ideas.

I believe that my interpretation is to be preferred simply because it better accords with the texts. Historians of philosophy who want to attribute to Locke views that, if not ultimately correct, are at least plausible by our lights, will initially look askance at my view: although I have argued against attributing to him the fallacious argument examined above, the interpretation I defend must sound harsh to the ears of philosophers steeped in the Fregean tradition. For at bottom there is no room for an irreducible conception of *Bedeutung* in Locke’s view. He can recast sentences involving ascriptions of reference easily enough, but he cannot, and does not wish to, accommodate the intuition that words directly refer to things. This is the heart of his disagreement with the Aristotelians. Insofar as one’s sympathies lie with a Kripke/Putnam view of reference, one is apt to find Locke’s position absurd. But it is worth noting that Locke is no less out of step with causal theories of reference when it comes to the intimately related issue of natural kinds, an issue I shall turn to below in chapter three.