

Introduction

I must confess then, that when I first began this Discourse of the Understanding, and a good while after, I had not the least Thought, that any Consideration of Words was at all necessary to it. But when having passed over the Original and Composition of our *Ideas*, I began to examine the Extent and Certainty of our Knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with Words, that unless their force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning Knowledge . . .

(III.ix.21: 488)

Despite the importance Locke attaches to issues of language, this aspect of his philosophy has drawn comparatively little attention in the secondary literature. One reason for this neglect might be the disfavor into which what is commonly understood as his view has fallen. Locke is regarded as a “mentalist” who has been refuted by the arguments of Frege, Wittgenstein, Putnam, and their followers. Haven’t we learned that meanings aren’t in the head? Why bother with Locke at all?

One justification historians of philosophy are apt to give in such contexts is that the view in question has simply been the victim of uncharitable interpretation. This has certainly been the case with Locke’s philosophy of language, from his day down to our own. Locke is not vulnerable to the standard arguments deployed against him, and his main rival, the causal theory of reference, is simply false (or so I shall argue). Examining Locke’s philosophy of language is more than a mere antiquarian enterprise, and I shall argue that he has much to teach us. At the same time, I shall not hesitate to convict Locke of error when I find it. I do not hold the currently fashionable position that one can only justifiably attribute a view to a great dead philosopher when that view is, by our lights, true, or at least plausible.¹

¹ For an instance of the tendency to insist that fidelity of interpretation requires the ascription of what are currently considered plausible views, see David Behan (2000). For a corrective, see John Yolton (2000), a reply to Behan.

As the epigraph indicates, Locke was not engaged in a disinterested inquiry into the nature of language. His reflections on epistemology and metaphysics drove him to explore language to a much greater degree than he had initially intended (see I.i.3: 44). I shall show that many of the key issues in Locke's philosophy turn in part on his theory of meaning. By this I do not mean to suggest that philosophy of language is foundational for Locke in the way it is for, say, Quine or Wittgenstein. My point is only that, as Locke himself came to see in the course of writing the *Essay*, the project of investigating the nature and limits of knowledge cannot be divorced from an inquiry into the workings of language. What is more, such an inquiry has consequences for metaphysics, since some metaphysical positions (such as those of the Aristotelians) are generated by a failure to appreciate the purposes and capacities of language.

On Locke's view, language allows us to reveal our minds to one another. Since we cannot immediately perceive anyone else's ideas or mental acts, we require some medium through which communication can take place. But precisely because this is such a common occurrence in everyday life, language can bewitch us. In particular, we can be tempted to regard words as somehow directly latching onto things rather than merely indicating ideas in the speaker's mind. Locke gives a careful analysis of the forces that might drive us to suppose that words signify things or real essences rather than ideas, a position he regards as absurd.

In addition to allowing him to clarify his position on such vexed topics as substance and real essence, Locke thinks a careful discussion of language will yield anti-Aristotelian results. Locke sets out to expose fundamental confusions in the positions of his chief antagonists and takes his place in a tradition that runs through Bacon and Hobbes. Unlike these figures, however, Locke presents a developed position on the nature of language and uses it to undermine, in novel ways, the "learned Gibberish" of the Schoolmen. His philosophy of language has normative force: he wishes to explore not only *how* language is used but also how it *should* be used.

We should not assume that Locke is concerned to account for all uses of language. His focus is squarely on language as it figures in philosophy and science. Locke is often abused for neglecting the complexities of language use; he has nothing to say, for example, about performative utterances such as promising, or emotive or prescriptive language. Berkeley was perhaps the first to take him to task for this, and his critique is well taken. Nevertheless, Locke's view should be judged according to whether it is a satisfactory account of those admittedly narrow areas of language in which he was interested.

INTERPRETATIVE DIFFICULTIES

Locke's philosophy of language centers around what I shall call his "linguistic thesis": the claim that words signify ideas. This is meaningless, of course, unless we have some notion of what "idea" is to mean. The controversy over this question seems interminable; the Port-Royalians' claim that "the word 'idea' is one of those that are so clear that they cannot be explained by others, because none is more clear or simple" seems comical in retrospect.²

Locke introduces his use of the term thus: "*Idea* . . . serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks" (I.i.8: 47). In this use, at least, an idea is an intentional object. Other evidence in the *Essay* and elsewhere suggests that Lockean ideas are mental items or contents. Since "the Things, the Mind contemplates, are none of them, besides itself, present to the Understanding, 'tis necessary that something else, as a Sign or Representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it: And these are *Ideas*" (IV.xxi.4: 720–1). Ideas (mental objects) must be posited in order to explain the mind's ability to think about anything other than itself. Locke requires that the immediate objects of thought be "ontologically present" to the mind, to use Michael Ayers's phrase.³ It follows that only mental objects can be the immediate objects of thought. This line of thought is apparent in Locke's attack on his Aristotelian critic John Sergeant. In a letter to Stillingfleet, Locke argues that Sergeant's direct realism has the absurd consequence that physical objects are literally in the mind (see chapter six). The requirement of ontological presence makes representationalism (or idealism) inescapable.

This introduces a terminological difficulty it would be well to clear up. "Intentional object" is ambiguous between the idea and what it represents; both clearly fit the description "object of thought." I shall restrict my use of this phrase to ideas, using the admittedly cumbersome locution "extra-mental objects" for the ultimate rather than the immediate object of thought.

I have said that I follow Locke's text (I.i.8: 47) in treating ideas as objects. Nevertheless, Locke suggests later in the *Essay* that some ideas (such as ideas of relations) involve mental acts as well as ideas. Indeed, I shall argue below that Locke's semiotic empiricism requires him to extend his use of "idea" to include complexes of acts and objects.

² Arnould and Nicole (1996, p. 25). I do not mean to suggest that the Port-Royalians themselves are unclear on the meaning of '*idée*.'

³ See Ayers (1986).

The above is at best a start at characterizing the role ideas have to play in Locke's position; it says nothing about the *nature* of Lockean ideas. Although Michael Ayers's claim that Locke construes ideas as images is quite plausible, for the purposes of my arguments, I can remain neutral on this debate.⁴

Quite apart from the controversy over ideas, Locke's inconsistent use of terminology where language is concerned means that any interpretation will have to reconcile apparently contradictory statements. For instance, although Locke says that words signify nothing but ideas, he also says that words *primarily* signify nothing but ideas, suggesting that in some other sense words signify extra-mental objects. He sometimes claims that words "name" things, but he also says often enough that words name ideas only. In chapter one, I set out a number of interpretative options, listing the cost of each, and begin to make a case for my own view, according to which secondary signification and other linguistic notions are reducible to primary signification or signification *simpliciter*. Despite Locke's use of words like "denominate," "mark," "designate," and "design," I argue that signification is his fundamental linguistic notion. I suggest ways in which his use of these other words might be reconciled with this claim.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The project has two goals: first, to explicate and assess Locke's philosophy of language, and second, to use this new interpretation to explore other areas of his philosophy, including his arguments against the Aristotelians and his views on mental representation, abstraction, essence, knowledge, and skepticism.

Locke's doctrines about language have been widely misunderstood. Locke does not hold that words refer to ideas, that ideas serve as the sense of words (which in turn refer to things), or that words "express" ideas but refer to things. Instead, words indicate ideas in the mind of the speaker. In the first chapter, I argue for this interpretation by examining a tradition of understanding signification that runs through such figures as Aristotle, the Stoics, and Hobbes. Although this tradition typically focuses on *ideas* or sensations as indicators (in this case, of extra-mental objects), it also deploys signification in its account of the workings of language. In Locke's case, both words and ideas are signs in the sense that they are reliable indicators of ideas in others' minds or of extra-mental qualities and

⁴ See Ayers (1991); for criticism, see Soles (1999).

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objects. This epistemic role is clearly differentiated from what I construe as Locke's causal-cum-teleological theory of the representation of simple ideas of sensation.

The second chapter extends Locke's view of signification to so-called "syncategoremata," words such as "if," "and," and "is." I show that Locke's position has the resources to account for the unity of the proposition and propositional attitudes. This chapter provides indirect support for my interpretation, since Locke's view of particles as signs of mental *acts* rather than objects accords well with the claim that words are signals or indicators and poorly with competing conceptions of Locke's linguistic thesis.

Any empiricist account of language as having meaning in virtue of its association with mental objects and acts faces a difficulty in accounting for our ability to talk about kinds of things in addition to particulars. Thus in the third chapter I turn to Locke's account of abstraction, arguing that he conceives of abstraction as mental separation. Locke's somewhat obscure discussion of space, once clarified, in no way conflicts with this reading of abstraction. I defend Locke from some common objections before going on to show how his account of nominal essences functions as a replacement for the Aristotelian view. What is more important, I show how a brand of realism about the (fully particularized) properties of corpuscles and their structures is both implicit in and consistent with Locke's limited form of nominalism. Locke's intriguing strategy is to clearly differentiate the issue of natural kinds and our epistemic access to them from that of universals and properties. This strategy allows him to press his nominalism against the Aristotelians on natural kinds and real essences while retaining a realistic view of properties as particularized natures of the fundamental constituents of the physical world. The latter is necessary, I argue, for grounding Locke's ambitious conception of the laws of nature.

With the rudiments of Locke's view in place, I turn in the fourth chapter to the deployment of his linguistic claims against the Aristotelians. The real essences that the Aristotelians cast as foundational elements in their conception of natural philosophy can be shown, Locke thinks, to be illusory. His argument diagnoses the Aristotelian view as flowing from a misconception of the uses of words. If Locke's view of language is correct, words can at best allow us to unfold our minds to one another; they cannot directly "latch on" to things. A real definition thus becomes a kind of category mistake, since only words can be defined; a real definition, taken as the Aristotelian must intend it to be taken, is simply nonsense. This strand of argument must be seen as independent of the more familiar anti-essentialist arguments.

This argument, I suggest, is an instance of the familiar empiricist “argument from nonsense”: rather than showing that a given claim is false, the goal is to show that the words as used by the opposing view are in fact meaningless. In the fifth chapter, I ask whether Locke can lay claim to such arguments without sawing off the branch he sits on. In particular, how can Locke account for meaningful discourse about God, real essence, and substance, given his commitment to seeing all use of language without corresponding ideas in the mind of the speaker as literally nonsensical? In this chapter, I show that Locke's linguistic thesis must be relaxed so as to include ideas in the sense not only of mental objects but of complexes of such objects and mental acts.

In chapter six I briefly discuss the reception of Locke's philosophy of language. I begin by looking at the work of two of Locke's contemporaries (or near-contemporaries), John Sergeant and George Berkeley. Sergeant offers an interesting case of a late-seventeenth-century Aristotelian who wishes to retain his empiricism without falling prey to the “fancies of the ideists.” In the course of critiquing Locke's view, Sergeant anticipates many later criticisms.

No account, however brief, of the reception of Locke's writings would be complete without a discussion of Berkeley. Unraveling the tangled skein of Berkeley's arguments allows us to see how the ancient notions of signification both persisted in and were transformed by modern empiricism. I go on to examine criticisms centering around the privacy of the mental: in what sense can two people be said to have the same idea? How can we ever check that they are using the word to signify that idea?

Finally, I draw together the themes of the book by stepping back from the details of Locke's view and examining his overall position on the connection between word and world. This affords an opportunity to consider recent philosophers, such as Hilary Putnam, who see Locke's project of accounting for the intentionality of language in terms of the intentionality of the mental as fundamentally confused. I do not aim for a complete defense of Locke's view, though I do think that these objections are unsuccessful. Rather, my goal is to draw out the content and implications of Locke's view by seeing how it fares in light of some more recent developments.

I have been mindful throughout that some of the topics I discuss, especially abstraction, real essence, and substance, have been the subject of vast heaps of scholarly literature. I have tried to confine myself to those areas on which I felt I had something original to say; where this has not been possible, I have been as brief as clarity permits.

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.).