John Locke
1632–1704

Though not a rhetorical theorist, John Locke powerfully affected the direction of rhetoric, and every other intellectual endeavor as well, in the eighteenth century. He assimilated and extended the epistemological ideas of Bacon and Descartes, presented these ideas in accessible language, and explained them in terms of common experience and common sense. Locke’s persuasive account of the mental processes of perception, thinking, and using language, combined with his popular treatises on civil government and the rationality of religion, made him a celebrated public figure and a dominant force in the development of modern philosophy.

At Westminster School, Locke studied the classics as well as Hebrew and Arabic. He went on to Oxford and took his degrees in philosophy, which at that time was still the study and practice of Scholastic disputation. Dissatisfied with this curriculum and increasingly interested in experimental science, Locke studied medicine (influenced in this decision by Robert Boyle) and set up an amateur practice in 1666. That same year, he became personal physician and adviser to Lord Ashley, first Earl of Shaftesbury, who vigorously opposed the succession of the Catholic James II and, in 1682, was forced to flee to Holland. Locke, also under suspicion of conspiracy against the Crown, followed in 1683. For the next six years, he studied and wrote under the protection of William of Orange. When he returned to England after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Locke published in quick succession his Two Treatises of Government (1690), arguing for personal liberty; An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690; excerpted here), his great work of philosophy; Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693); and The Reasonableness of Christianity (1695).

Locke’s philosophy, which follows Bacon and the experimental scientists, searches for truth in the physical world and attempts to understand knowledge as a psychological phenomenon. This perspective stands opposed to the traditional doctrines of received truth, innate ideas, and the presumption that direct knowledge is available through revelation or perception. Like Bacon, Locke believes that there is a real external world and that knowledge of it is possible, but only if we understand the processes by which we come to such knowledge. We have direct knowledge only of our own ideas, says Locke. We have direct sensations, of course, but we know only the ideas of these sensations; all other ideas are formed by reflecting upon the primary ideas caused by sensory perception. Reflection is the act of relating our ideas to one another, forming mental associations, and examining the mental processes of which we are aware: thinking, doubting, believing, and so on. These operations of the faculty of understanding are the source of all our knowledge. In this connection, Locke notes the uselessness of the syllogism for discovering truth, for the syllogism neither describes nor conforms to this process of achieving knowledge. Locke’s epistemological approach raises the question of whether it is possible to know the real essences of things. What we know is, after all, only our ideas and
their relationships to one another. Ideas, says Locke, are the signs of real things. From this semiotic position, Locke finds himself led—against his original intention, he admits—to reflections upon language, for our words are but the signs of our ideas.

Words are also the source of many of our ideas. In Book III of the Essay, Locke reviews his theory: Sensation, a universal human phenomenon, generates simple ideas, which are also universally the same. To these ideas we give arbitrary signs: words. But clearly we may learn, through words, of something we ourselves have not perceived. Thus it is possible to have an incomplete or inaccurate idea associated with those words. It is even possible to have an incomplete idea of something within our experience, for a word may designate, for some people, certain features of the thing signified and, for others, different features. Moreover, complex ideas are formed by the connections among simple ideas; words are attached to these complex ideas to keep the connections from being merely personal and ephemeral and to allow us to communicate them to others. Complex ideas are not universal, as we can see by the difficulties of translating from one language to another. Many words name relationships, institutions, and cultural phenomena that do not exist elsewhere and therefore have no exact equivalent in another language. Words, too, may carry cultural connotations—or even personal ones—that complicate the relationship between communicated word and signified idea. These reflections lead Locke to insist on the need for clarity, especially in discussing knowledge. He attacks Scholastic philosophy for creating obscurities through disputation, and he attacks rhetoric for increasing ambiguities through excessive ornamentation. In the excerpts printed here, Locke looks at the inherent properties of language and at the typical problems of communication that contribute to those obscurities and ambiguities. Language is imperfect, he concludes (and philosophers will echo him through our own time); therefore, one task of philosophy is to improve language.

In Book IV, Locke attempts to set forth a method for examining the internal coherence of propositions, on the assumption that verbal propositions stand for mental ones and that mental ones stand for real external phenomena. Locke adheres to a nonrelativistic view of knowledge. Consequently, he bemoans the fact that language is intractibly ambiguous and frequently misused, making it, at best, an imprecise means of conveying knowledge. Knowledge itself is independent of language. "We should cast off all the artifice and fallacy of words, which makes so great a part of the business and skill of the disputers of this world," Locke says, in a memorandum on the abuses of Scholasticism; "pretending to the knowledge of things, [we] hinder as much as we can the discovery of truth, by perplexing one another all we can by a perverse use of those signs which we make use of to convey truth to one another."

Rhetoricians responded strongly to Locke's critique, first in emphasizing perspicuity (that is, clarity) as the most important quality of a good style, and second in developing a psychological theory of persuasion and taste. Virtually all the major

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works on rhetoric in the eighteenth century imitated Locke in combining grammatical analysis and speculation about the origins of language as part of the program of promoting perspicuity. Vico, Sheridan, and Campbell, as well as a number of philosophers, pursued Locke’s suggestive but incomplete account of the relationship of language and knowledge, though never far enough to link rhetoric explicitly with the process of creating “true” knowledge. These ideas, as we shall see, become significant much later, in the twentieth century.

Selected Bibliography


E. P. J. Corbett reviews the scholarly recognition of Locke’s influence on rhetoric in “John Locke’s Contributions to Rhetoric” (in The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing, ed. J. J. Murphy, 1982). Corbett notes that although Locke’s importance is well recognized, little work has been done on Locke beyond W. S. Howell’s article, “John Locke and the New Rhetoric” (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 [1967]: 319–33), and its expansion in *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (1971). Corbett’s call has had some recent answers. Jules David Law, in *The Rhetoric of Empiricism: Language and Perception from Locke to I. A. Richards* (1993), examines the visual metaphor of “perception” and the way it shapes empiricism’s view of language. Law traces this connection from Locke and shows its implications for rhetoric. Peter Walmsley probes Locke’s aversion to disputation and consequent preference for a conversational style of rhetoric in “Dispute and Conversation: Probability and the Rhetoric of Natural Philosophy in Locke’s Essay,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54 (July 1993), 381–94. Leigh H. Holmes argues in “John Locke’s Rhetoric: Response to the Nominal Quandaries of Legitimate Communities” (*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 29 [1996], 33–50) that, in contradistinction to readings of Locke that emphasize the mental (such as this headnote), rhetoricians should attend more to Locke’s views of community and consensus, with their links to understanding and language use.
From An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

From Book III

CHAPTER IX

Of the Imperfection of Words

Words are used for recording and communicating our thoughts.

1. From what has been said in the foregoing chapters, it is easy to perceive what imperfection there is in language, and how the very nature of words makes it almost unavoidable for many of them to be doubtful and uncertain in their significations. To examine the perfection or imperfection of words, it is necessary first to consider their use and end; for as they are more or less fitted to attain that, so they are more or less perfect. We have, in the former part of this discourse often, upon occasion, mentioned a double use of words.

First, One for the recording of our own thoughts.

Secondly, The other for the communicating of our thoughts to others.

Any words will serve for recording.

2. As to the first of these, for the recording our own thoughts for the help of our own memories, whereby, as it were, we talk to ourselves, any words will serve the turn. For since sounds are voluntary and indifferent signs of any ideas, a man may use what words he pleases to signify his own ideas to himself: and there will be no imperfection in them, if he constantly use the same sign for the same idea: for then he cannot fail of having his meaning understood, wherein consists the right use and perfection of language.

Communication by words either for civil or philosophical purposes.

3. Secondly, As to communication by words, that too has a double use.

I. Civil.

II. Philosophical.

First, By their civil use, I mean such a communication of thoughts and ideas by words, as may serve for the upholding common conversation and commerce, about the ordinary affairs and conveniences of civil life, in the societies of men, one amongst another.

Secondly, By the philosophical use of words, I mean such a use of them as may serve to convey the precise notions of things, and to express in general propositions certain and undoubted truths, which the mind may rest upon and be satisfied with in its search after true knowledge. These two uses are very distinct; and a great deal less exactness will serve in the one than in the other, as we shall see in what follows.

The imperfection of words is the doubtfulness or ambiguity of their signification, which is caused by the sort of ideas they stand for.

4. The chief end of language in communication being to be understood, words serve not well for that end, neither in civil nor philosophical discourse, when any word does not excite in the hearer the same idea which it stands for in the mind of the speaker. Now, since sounds have no natural connection with our ideas, but have all their signification from the arbitrary imposition of men, the doubtfulness and uncertainty of their signification, which is the imperfection we here are speaking of, has its cause more in the ideas they stand for than in any incapacity there is in one sound more than in another to signify any idea: for in that regard they are all equally perfect.

That then which makes doubtfulness and uncertainty in the signification of some more than other words, is the difference of ideas they stand for.
Natural causes of their imperfection, especially in those that stand for mixed modes, and for our ideas of substances.

5. Words having naturally no signification, the idea which each stands for must be learned and retained, by those who would exchange thoughts, and hold intelligible discourse with others, in any language. But this is the hardest to be done where,

First, The ideas they stand for are very complex, and made up of a great number of ideas put together.

Secondly, Where the ideas they stand for have no certain connection in nature; and so no settled standard anywhere in nature existing, to rectify and adjust them by.

Thirdly, When the signification of the word is referred to a standard, which standard is not easy to be known.

Fourthly, Where the signification of the word and the real essence of the thing are not exactly the same.

These are difficulties that attend the signification of several words that are intelligible. Those which are not intelligible at all, such as names standing for any simple ideas which another has not organs of faculties to attain; as the names of colours to a blind man, or sounds to a deaf man, need not here be mentioned.

In all these cases we shall find an imperfection in words; which I shall more at large explain, in their particular application to our several sorts of ideas: for if we examine them, we shall find that the names of mixed modes are most liable to doubfulness and imperfection, for the two first of these reasons; and the names of substances chiefly for the two latter.

The names of mixed modes doubtfull. First, because the ideas they stand for are so complex.

6. First, The names of mixed modes are, many of them, liable to great uncertainty and obscurity in their signification.

1. Because of that great composition these complex ideas are often made up of. To make words serviceable to the end of communication, it is necessary, as has been said, that they excite in the hearer exactly the same idea they stand for in the mind of the speaker. Without this, men fill one another's heads with noise and sounds; but convey not thereby their thoughts, and lay not before one another their ideas, which is the end of discourse and language. But when a word stands for a very complex idea that is compounded and decompounded, it is not easy for men to form and retain that idea so exactly, as to make the name in common use stand for the same precise idea, without any the least variation. Hence it comes to pass that men's names of very compound ideas, such as for the most part are moral words, have seldom in two different men the same precise signification; since one man's complex idea seldom agrees with another's, and often differs from his own—from that which he had yesterday, or will have tomorrow. Connections to Corner (?) Secondly, because they have no standards in nature.

7. Because the names of mixed modes for the most part want standards in nature, whereby men may rectify and adjust their significations; therefore they are very various and doubtful. They are assemblages of ideas put together at the pleasure of the mind, pursuing its own ends of discourse, and suited to its own notions; whereby it designs not to copy anything really existing, but to denominate and rank things as they come to agree with those archetypes or forms it has made. He that first brought the word sham, or wheedle, or banter, in use, put together as he thought fit those ideas he made it stand for; and as it is with any new names of modes that are now brought into any language, so it was with the old ones when they were first made use of. Names, therefore, that stand for collections of ideas which the mind makes at pleasure must needs be of doubtful signification, when such collections are nowhere to be found constantly united in nature, nor any patterns to be shown whereby men may adjust them. What the word murder, or sacrilege, &c., signifies can never be known from things themselves: there be many of the parts of those complex ideas which are not visible in the action itself; the intention of the mind, or the relation of holy things, which make
there are several connections to
Codr., but how or in what ways
do the two theories depart/diverge?

a part of murder or sacrilege, have no necessary connection with the outward and visible action of him that commits either: and the pulling the trigger of the gun with which the murder is committed, and is all the action that perhaps is visible, has no natural connection with those other ideas that make up the complex one named murder. They have their union and combination only from the understanding which unites them under one name: but, uniting them without any rule or pattern, it cannot be but for such voluntary collections should be often various in the minds of different men, who have scarce any standing rule to regulate themselves and their notions by, in such arbitrary ideas.

Common use, or propriety not a sufficient remedy.

8. It is true, common use, that is, the rule of propriety may be supposed here to afford some aid, to settle the signification of language; and it cannot be denied but that in some measure it does. Common use regulates the meaning of words pretty well for common conversation; but nobody having an authority to establish the precise signification of words, nor determine to what ideas any one shall annex them, common use is not sufficient to adjust them to Philosophical Discourses; there being scarce any name of any very complex idea (to say nothing of others) which, in common use, has not a great latitude, and which, keeping within the bounds of propriety, may not be made the sign of far different ideas. Besides, the rule and measure of propriety itself being nowhere established, it is often matter of dispute, whether this or that way of using a word be propriety of speech or no. From all which it is evident, that the names of such kind of very complex ideas are naturally liable to this imperfection, to be of doubtful and uncertain signification; and even in men that have a mind to understand one another, do not always stand for the same idea in speaker and hearer. Though the names glory and gratitude be the same in every man's mouth through a whole country, yet the complex collective idea which every one thinks on or intends by that name, is apparently very different in men using the same language.

The way of learning these names contributes also to their doubtfulness.

9. The way also wherein the names of mixed modes are ordinarily learned, does not a little contribute to the doubtfulness of their signification. For if we will observe how children learn languages, we shall find that, to make them understand what the names of simple ideas or substances stand for, people ordinarily show them the thing whereof they would have them have the idea; and then repeat to them the name that stands for it; as white, sweet, milk, sugar, cat, dog. But as for mixed modes, especially the most material of them, moral words, the sounds are usually learned first; and then, to know what complex ideas they stand for, they are either beholden to the explication of others, or (which happens for the most part) are left to their own observation and industry; which being little laid out in the search of the true and precise meaning of names, these moral words are in most men's mouths little more than bare sounds; or when they have any, it is for the most part but a very loose and undetermined, and, consequently, obscure and confused signification. And even those themselves who have with more attention settled their notions, do yet hardly avoid the inconvenience to have them stand for complex ideas different from those which other, even intelligent and studious men, make them the signs of. Where shall one find any, either controversial debate, or familiar discourse, concerning honour, faith, grace, religion, church, &c., wherein it is not easy to observe the different notions men have of them? Which is nothing but this, that they are not agreed in the signification of those words, nor have in their minds the same complex ideas which they make them stand for, and so all the contests that follow thereupon are only about the meaning of a sound. And hence we see that, in the interpretation of laws, whether divine or human, there is no end; comments beget comments, and explications make new matter for explications; and of limiting, distinguishing, varying the signification of these moral words there is no end. These ideas of men's making are, by men still having the same power, multiplied in infinitum. Many a man who was pretty well satisfied
of the meaning of a text of Scripture, or clause in
the code, at first reading, has, by consulting com-
mentators, quite lost the sense of it, and by these
elucidations given rise or increase to his doubts,
and drawn obscurity upon the place. I say not this
that I think commentaries needless; but to show
how uncertain the names of mixed modes natu-
really are, even in the mouths of those who had
both the intention and the faculty of speaking as
clearly as language was capable to express their
thoughts.

Hence unavoidable obscurity in ancient authors.

10. What obscurity this has unavoidably brought
upon the writings of men who have lived in re-
 mote ages, and different countries, it will be
needless to take notice. Since the numerous vol-
umes of learned men, employing their thoughts
that way, are proofs more than enough, to show
what attention, study, sagacity, and reasoning are
required to find out the true meaning of ancient
authors. But, there being no writings we have any
great concernment to be very solicitous about the
meaning of, but those that contain either truths
we are required to believe, or laws we are to
obey, and draw inconveniences on us when we
mistake or transgress, we may be less anxious
about the sense of other authors; who, writing but
their own opinions, we are under no greater ne-
cessity to know them, than they to know ours.
Our good or evil depending not on their decrees,
we may safely be ignorant of their notions: and
therefore in the reading of them, if they do not
use their words with a due clearness and per-
spicuity, we may lay them aside, and without any
injury done them, resolve thus with ourselves.

Si non vis intelligi, debes negligi.¹

Names of substances of doubtful signification, because
the ideas they stand for relate to the reality of things.

11. If the signification of the names of mixed
modes be uncertain, because there be no real
standards existing in nature to which those ideas
are referred, and by which they may be adjusted,
the names of substances are of a doubtful signifi-

¹"If it doesn’t make sense, it may be disregarded." [Ed.]
which their significations may be best rectified. But neither will these archetypes so well serve to this purpose as to leave these names without very various and uncertain significations. Because these simple ideas that coexist, and are united in the same subject, being very numerous, and having all an equal right to go into the complex specific idea which the specific name is to stand for, men, though they propose to themselves the very same subject to consider, yet frame very different ideas about it; and so the name they use for it unavoidably comes to have, in several men, very different significations. The simple qualities which make up the complex ideas, being most of them powers, in relation to changes which they are apt to make in, or receive from other bodies, are almost infinite. He that shall but observe what a great variety of alterations any one of the baser metals is apt to receive, from the different application only of fire; and how much a greater number of changes any of them will receive in the hands of a chymist, by the application of other bodies, will not think it strange that I count the properties of any sort of bodies not easy to be collected, and completely known, by the ways of inquiry which our faculties are capable of. They being therefore at least so many, that no man can know the precise and definite number, they are differently discovered by different men, according to their various skill, attention, and ways of handling; who therefore cannot choose but have different ideas of the same substance, and therefore make the signification of its common name very various and uncertain. For the complex ideas of substances, being made up of such simple ones as are supposed to coexist in nature, every one has a right to put into his complex idea those qualities he has found to be united together. For, though in the substance of gold one satisfies himself with colour and weight, yet another thinks solubility in *aqua regia* as necessary to be joined with that colour in his idea of gold, as any one does its fusibility; solubility in *aqua regia* being a quality as constantly joined with its colour and weight as fusibility or any other; others put into it ductility or fixedness, &c., as they have been taught by tradition or experience. Who of all these has established the right signification of the word, gold? Or who shall be the judge to determine? Each has his standard in nature, which he appeals to, and with reason thinks he has the same right to put into his complex idea signified by the word gold, those qualities, which, upon trial, he has found united; as another who has not so well examined has to leave them out; or a third, who has made other trials, has to put in others. For the union in nature of these qualities being the true ground of their union in one complex idea, who can say one of them has more reason to be put in or left out than another? From hence it will unavoidably follow, that the complex ideas of substances in men using the same names for them, will be very various, and so the significations of those names very uncertain.

**Thirdly, to coexisting qualities which are known but imperfectly.**

14. Besides, there is scarce any particular thing existing, which, in some of its simple ideas, does not communicate with a greater, and in others a less number of particular beings: who shall determine in this case which are those that are to make up the precise collection that is to be signified by the specific name? or can with any just authority prescribe, which obvious or common qualities are to be left out; or which more secret, or more particular, are to be put into the signification of the name of any substance? All which together, seldom or never fail to produce that various and doubtful signification in the names of substances, which causes such uncertainty, disputes, or mistakes, when we come to a philosophical use of them.

With this imperfection, they may serve for civil, but not well for philosophical use.

15. It is true, as to civil and common conversation, the general names of substances, regulated in their ordinary signification by some obvious qualities, (as by the shape and figure in things of known seminal propagation, and in other substances, for the most part by colour, joined with some other sensible qualities,) do well enough to design the things men would be understood to speak of: and so they usually conceive well
enough the substances meant by the word gold or apple, to distinguish the one from the other. But in philosophical inquiries and debates, where general truths are to be established, and consequences drawn from positions laid down, there the precise signification of the names of substances will be found not only not to be well established, but also very hard to be so. For example: he that shall make malleability, or a certain degree of fixeness, a part of his complex idea of gold, may make propositions concerning gold, and draw consequences from them, that will truly and clearly follow from gold, taken in such signification: but yet such as another man can never be forced to admit, nor be convinced of their truth, who makes not malleableness, or the same degree of fixeness, part of that complex idea that the name gold, in his use of it, stands for.

Instance, gold.

16. This is a natural and almost unavoidable imperfection in almost all the names of substances, in all languages whatsoever, which men will easily find when, once passing from confused or loose notions, they come to more strict and close inquiries. For then they will be convinced how doubtful and obscure those words are in their signification, which in ordinary use appeared very clear and determined. I was once in a meeting of very learned and ingenious physicians, where by chance there arose a question, whether any liquor passed through the filaments of the nerves. The debate having been managed a good while, by variety of arguments on both sides, I (who had been used to suspect, that the greatest part of disputes were more about the signification of words than a real difference in the conception of things) desired, that, before they went any further on in this dispute, they would first examine and establish amongst them, what the word liquor signified. They at first were a little surprised at the proposal; and had they been persons less ingenuous, they might perhaps have taken it for a very frivolous or extravagant one: since there was no one there that thought not himself to understand very perfectly what the word liquor stood for; which I think, too, none of the most perplexed names of substances. However, they were pleased to comply with my motion; and upon examination found that the signification of that word was not so settled or certain as they had all imagined; but that each of them made it a sign of a different complex idea. This made them perceive that the main of their dispute was about the signification of that term; and that they differed very little in their opinions concerning some fluid and subtle matter, passing through the conduits of the nerves; though it was not so easy to agree whether it was to be called liquor or no, a thing, which, when considered, they thought it not worth the contending about.

Instance, liquor.

17. How much this is the case in the greatest part of disputes that men are engaged so hotly in, I shall perhaps have an occasion in another place to take notice. Let us only here consider a little more exactly the fore-mentioned instance of the word gold, and we shall see how hard it is precisely to determine its signification. I think all agree to make it stand for a body of a certain yellow shining colour, which being the idea to which children have annexed that name, the shining yellow part of a peacock’s tail is properly to them gold. Others finding fusibility joined with that yellow colour in certain parcels of matter, make of that combination a complex idea to which they give the name gold, to denote a sort of substances; and so exclude from being gold all such yellow shining bodies as by fire will be reduced to ashes. Another, by the same reason, adds the weight, which, being a quality as straightly joined with that colour as its fusibility, he thinks has the same reason to be joined in its idea, and to be signified by its name: and therefore the other made up of body, of such a colour and fusibility, to be imperfect; and so on of all the rest: wherein no one can show a reason why some of the inseparable qualities, that are always united in nature, should be put into the nominal essence, and others left out: or why the word gold, signifying that sort of body the ring on his
finget is made of, should determine that sort rather by its colour, weight, and fusibility, than by its colour, weight, and solubility in aqua regia: since the dissolving it by that liquor is as inseparable from it as the fusion by fire; and they are both of them nothing but the relation which that substance has to two other bodies, which have a power to operate differently upon it. For by what right is it that fusibility comes to be a part of the essence signified by the word gold, and solubility but a property of it? Or why is its colour part of the essence, and its malleableness but a property? That which I mean is this, That these being all but properties, depending on its real constitution, and nothing but powers, either active or passive, in reference to other bodies, no one has authority to determine the signification of the word gold (as referred to such a body existing in nature) more to one collection of ideas to be found in that body than to another: whereby the signification of that name must unavoidably be very uncertain. Since, as has been said, several people observe several properties in the same substance; and I think I may say nobody at all. And therefore we have but very imperfect descriptions of things, and words have very uncertain significations. (I'm thinking of Snarkslur.)

The names of simple ideas the least doubtful.

18. From what has been said, it is easy to observe what has been before remarked, viz. that the names of simple ideas are, of all others, the least liable to mistakes, and that for these reasons. First, Because the ideas they stand for, being each but one single perception, are much easier got, and more clearly retained, than the more complex ones, and therefore are not liable to the uncertainty which usually attends those compounded ones of substances and mixed modes, in which the precise number of simple ideas that make them up are not easily agreed, so readily kept in mind. And, Secondly, Because they are never referred to any other essence, but barely that perception they immediately signify: which reference is that which renders the signification of the names of substances naturally so perplexed, and gives occasion to so many disputes. Men that do not perversely use their words, or on purpose set themselves to cavil, seldom mistake, in any language which they are acquainted with, the use and signification of the name of simple ideas. White and sweet, yellow and bitter, carry a very obvious meaning with them, which every one precisely comprehends, or easily perceives he is ignorant of, and seeks to be informed. But what precise collection of simple ideas modesty or frugality stand for, in another's use, is not so certainly known. And however we are apt to think we well enough know what is meant by gold or iron; yet the precise complex idea others make them the signs of is not so certain: and I believe it is very seldom that, in speaker and hearer, they stand for exactly the same collection. Which must needs produce mistakes and disputes, when they are made use of in discourses, wherein men have to do with universal propositions, and would settle in their minds universal truths, and consider the consequences that follow from them.

And next to them, simple modes.

19. By the same rule, the names of simple modes are, next to those of simple ideas, least liable to doubt and uncertainty; especially those of figure and number, of which men have so clear and distinct ideas. Who ever that had a mind to understand them mistook the ordinary meaning of seven, or a triangle? And in general the least compounded ideas in every kind have the least dubious names.

The most doubtful are the names of very compounded mixed modes and substances.

20. Mixed modes, therefore, that are made up but of a few and obvious simple ideas, have usually names of no very uncertain signification. But the names of mixed modes which comprehend a great number of simple ideas, are commonly of a very doubtful and undetermined meaning, as has been shown. The names of substances, being annexed to ideas that are neither the real essences, nor exact representations of the patterns they are referred to, are liable to yet greater imperfection and uncertainty, especially when we come to a philosophical use of them.
Why this imperfection charged upon words.

21. The great disorder that happens in our names of substances, proceeding, for the most part, from our want of knowledge, and inability to penetrate into their real constitutions, it may probably be wondered why I charge this as an imperfection rather upon our words than understandings. This exception has so much appearance of justice, that I think myself obliged to give a reason why I have followed this method. 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 connection 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: which being conversant about truth, had constantly to do with propositions. And though it terminated in things, yet it was for the most part so much by the intervention of words, that they seemed scarce separable from our general knowledge. At least they interpose themselves so much between our understandings, and the truth which it would contemplate and apprehend, that, like the medium through which visible objects pass, the obscurity and disorder do not seldom cast a mist before our eyes, and impose upon our understandings. If we consider, in the fallacies men put upon themselves, as well as others, and the mistakes in men’s disputes and notions, how great a part is owing to words, and their uncertain or mistaken significations, we shall have reason to think this no small obstacle in the way to knowledge; which I conclude we are the more carefully to be warned of, because it has been so far from being taken notice of as an inconvenience, that the arts of improving it have been made the business of men’s study, and obtained the reputation of learning and subtilty, as we shall see in the following chapter. But I am apt to imagine, that, were the imperfections of language, as the instrument of knowledge, more thoroughly weighed, a great many of the controversies that make such a noise in the world, would of themselves cease; and the way to knowledge, and perhaps peace too, lie a great deal opener than it does.

This should teach us moderation in imposing our own sense of old authors.

22. Sure I am that the signification of words in all languages, depending very much on the thoughts, notions, and ideas of him that uses them, must unavoidably be of great uncertainty to men of the same language and country. This is so evident in the Greek authors, that he that shall peruse their writings will find in almost every one of them, a distinct language, though the same words. But when to this natural difficulty in every country, there shall be added different countries and remote ages, wherein the speakers and writers had very different notions, tempers, customs, ornaments, and figures of speech, &c., every one of which influenced the signification of their words then, though to us now they are lost and unknown; it would become us to be charitable one to another in our interpretations or misunderstandings of those ancient writings; which, though of great concernment to be understood, are liable to the unavoidable difficulties of speech, which (if we except the names of simple ideas, and some very obvious things) is not capable, without a constant defining the terms, of conveying the sense and intention of the speaker, without any manner of doubt and uncertainty to the hearer. And in discourses of religion, law, and morality, as they are matters of the highest concernment, so there will be the greatest difficulty.


23. The volumes of interpreters and commentators on the Old and New Testament are but too manifest proofs of this. Though everything said in the text be infallibly true, yet the reader may be, nay, cannot choose but be, very fallible in the understanding of it. Nor is it to be wondered, that the will of God, when clothed in words, should be liable to that doubt and uncertainty which unavoidably attends that sort of conveyance, when even his Son, whilst clothed in flesh, was subject
to all the frailties and inconveniences of human nature, sin excepted. And we ought to magnify his goodness, that he hath spread before all the world such legible characters of his works and providence, and given all mankind so sufficient a light of reason, that they to whom this written word never came, could not (whenever they set themselves to search) either doubt of the being of a God, or of the obedience due to him. Since then the precepts of Natural Religion are plain, and very intelligible to all mankind, and seldom come to be controverted; and other revealed truths, which are conveyed to us by books and languages, are liable to the common and natural obscurities and difficulties incident to words; methinks it would become us to be more careful and diligent in observing the former, and less magisterial, positive, and imperious, in imposing our own sense and interpretations of the latter. . . .

CHAPTER X
Of the Abuse of Words

The ends of language: First, to convey our ideas.

23. To conclude this consideration of the imperfection and abuse of language. The ends of language in our discourse with others being chiefly these three: First, to make known one man's thoughts or ideas to another; Secondly, to do it with as much ease and quickness as possible; and, Thirdly, thereby to convey the knowledge of things: language is either abused or deficient, when it fails of any of these three.

First, Words fail in the first of these ends, and lay not open one man's ideas to another's view: 1. When men have names in their mouths without any determinate ideas in their minds, whereof they are the signs: or, 2. When they apply the common received names of any language to ideas, to which the common use of that language does not apply them: or, 3. When they apply them very unsteadily, making them stand, now for one, and by and by for another idea.

Secondly, to do it with quickness.

24. Secondly, Men fail of conveying their thoughts with all the quickness and ease that may be, when they have complex ideas without having any distinct names for them. This is sometimes the fault of the language itself, which has not in it a sound yet applied to such a signification; and sometimes the fault of the man, who has not yet learned the name for that idea he would show another.

Thirdly, therewith to convey the knowledge of things.

25. Thirdly, There is no knowledge of things conveyed by men's words, when their ideas agree not to the reality of things. Though it be a defect that has its original in our ideas, which are not conformable to the nature of things as attention, study, and application might make them, yet it fails not to extend itself to our words too, when we use them as signs of real beings, which yet never had any reality or existence.

How men's words fail in all these: First, when used without any ideas.

26. First, He that hath words of any language, without distinct ideas in his mind to which he applies them, does, so far as he uses them in discourse, only make a noise without any sense or signification; and how learned soever he may seem, by the use of hard words or learned terms, is not much more advanced thereby in knowledge, than he would be in learning, who had nothing in his study but the bare titles of books, without possessing the contents of them. For all such words, however put into discourse, according to the construction of grammatical rules, or the harmony of well-turned periods, do yet amount to nothing but bare sounds, and nothing else.

Secondly, when complex ideas are without names annexed to them.

27. Secondly, He that has complex ideas, without particular names for them, would be in no better case than a bookseller, who had in his warehouse volumes that lay there unbound, and without titles, which he could therefore make known to others only by showing the loose sheets, and communicate them only by tale. This man is hindered in his discourse, for want of words to
communicate his complex ideas, which he is therefore forced to make known by an enumeration of the simple ones that compose them; and so is fain often to use twenty words, to express what another man signifies in one.

Thirdly, when the same sign is not put for the same idea.

28. Thirdly, He that puts not constantly the same sign for the same idea, but uses the same words sometimes in one and sometimes in another signification, ought to pass in the schools and conversation for as fair a man, as he does in the market and exchange, who sells several things under the same name.

Fourthly, when words are diverted from their common use.

29. Fourthly, He that applies the words of any language to ideas different from those to which the common use of that country applies them, however his own understanding may be filled with truth and light, will not by such words be able to convey much of it to others, without defining his terms. For however the sounds are such as are familiarly known, and easily enter the ears of those who are accustomed to them; yet standing for other ideas than those they usually are annexed to, and are wont to excite in the mind of the hearers, they cannot make known the thoughts of him who thus uses them.

Fifthly, when they are names of fantastical imaginations.

30. Fifthly, He that imagined to himself substances such as never have been, and filled his head with ideas which have not any correspondence with the real nature of things, to which yet he gives settled and defined names, may fill his discourse, and perhaps another man’s head, with the fantastical imaginations of his own brain, but will be very far from advancing thereby one jot in real and true knowledge.

Summary.

31. He that hath names without ideas, wants meaning in his words, and speaks only empty sounds. He that hath complex ideas without names for them, wants liberty and dispatch in his expressions, and is necessitated to use paraphrases. He that uses his words loosely and unsteadily will either be not minded or not understood. He that applies his names to ideas different from their common use, wants propriety in his language, and speaks gibberish. And he that hath the ideas of substances disagreeing with the real existence of things, so far wants the materials of true knowledge in his understanding, and hath instead thereof chimeras.

How men’s words fail when they stand for substances.

32. In our notions concerning Substances, we are liable to all the former inconveniences; v.g. he that uses the word tarantula, without having any imagination or idea of what it stands for, pronounces a good word; but so long means nothing at all by it. 2. He that, in a newly-discovered country, shall see several sorts of animals and vegetables, unknown to him before, may have as true ideas of them, as of a horse or a stag; but can speak of them only by a description, till he shall either take the names the natives call them by, or give them names himself. 3. He that uses the word body sometimes for pure extension, and sometimes for extension and solidity together, will talk very fallaciously. 4. He that gives the name horse to that idea which common usage calls mule, talks improperly, and will not be understood. 5. He that thinks the name centaur stands for some real being, imposes on himself, and mistakes words for things.

33. In Modes and Relations generally, we are liable only to the four first of these inconveniences; viz. 1. I may have in my memory the names of modes, as gratitude or charity, and yet not have any precise ideas annexed in my thoughts to those names. 2. I may have ideas, and not know the names that belong to them; v.g. I may have the idea of a man’s drinking till his colour and humour be altered, till his tongue trips, and his eyes look red, and his feet fail him; and yet not know that it is to be called drunken-
ness. 3. I may have the ideas of virtues or vices, and names also, but apply them amiss: v.g. when I apply the name frugality to that idea which others call and signify by this sound, covetousness.

4. I may use any of those names with inconsistency. 5. But, in modes and relations, I cannot have ideas disagreeing to the existence of things: for modes being complex ideas, made by the mind of pleasure, and relation being but by way of considering or comparing two things together, and so also an idea of my own making, these ideas can scarce be found to disagree with anything existing; since they are not in the mind as the copies of things regularly made by nature, nor as properties inseparably flowing from the internal constitution or essence of any substance; but, as it were, patterns lodged in my memory, with names annexed to them, to denominate actions and relations by, as they come to exist. But the mistake is commonly in my giving a wrong name to my conceptions; and so using words in a different sense from other people: I am not understood, but am thought to have wrong ideas of them, when I give wrong names to them. Only if I put in my ideas of mixed modes or relations any inconsistent ideas together, I fill my head also with chimeras; since such ideas, if well examined, cannot so much as exist in the mind, much less any real being ever be denominated from them.

Seventhly, language is often abused by figurative speech.

34. Since wit and fancy find easier entertainment in the world than dry truth and real knowledge, figurative speeches and allusion in language will hardly be admitted as an imperfection or abuse of it. I confess, in discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from them can scarce pass for faults. But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats: and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. What and how various they are, will be superfluous here to take notice; the books of rhetoric which abound in the world, will instruct those who want to be informed: only I cannot but observe how little the preservation and improvement of truth and knowledge is the care and concern of mankind; since the arts of fallacy are endowed with the copies of things regularly made by nature, nor as properties inseparably flowing from the internal constitution or essence of any substance; but, as it were, patterns lodged in my memory, with names annexed to them, to denominate actions and relations by, as they come to exist. But the mistake is commonly in my giving a wrong name to my conceptions; and so using words in a different sense from other people: I am not understood, but am thought to have wrong ideas of them, when I give wrong names to them. Only if I put in my ideas of mixed modes or relations any inconsistent ideas together, I fill my head also with chimeras; since such ideas, if well examined, cannot so much as exist in the mind, much less any real being ever be denominated from them.

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