

TLD 1

John Locke on Language

(Michael Morris)

Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such, from which others, as well as himself, might receive profit and delight; yet they are all within his own breast, invisible, and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made appear. 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. For this purpose, nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds, which with so much ease and variety he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how words, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, come to be made use of by men, as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. The use then of words, is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for, are their proper and immediate signification.

- This general conception of language is not original to Locke: much of it can be found in Hobbes, and elements of it can be traced back to Aristotle.

- What exactly does Locke commit himself to in this short passage.
- These are eight significant assumptions involved in that short paragraph of Locke's.

- (L1) The nature of language is defined by its function.
- (L2) The function of language is to communicate.
- (L3) What language is meant to communicate is thought.
- (L4) Words signify or mean the components of what language is meant to communicate.
- (L5) The components of thought are Ideas.
- (L6) One person's Ideas cannot be perceived by another.
- (L7) The relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary.
- (L8) Words are not intrinsically meaningful.

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(L3) What language is meant to communicate is thought.

- Without communication of thought there can be no society, and without society human beings miss out on significant 'comfort and advantage'; according to another writer, their life without society is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.⁴ The ultimate good furnished by language is the security and prosperity provided by society; and language promotes that by making communication possible.
- This functional conception of language seems to be used by Locke to give a general account of what words mean. The basic idea seems to be that if language communicates thought, then words, being the components of language, must communicate the components of thought. We might put the fundamental assumption here like this:

(L4) Words signify or mean the components of what language is meant to communicate.

- (L4), however, is a bit of a fudge. Locke certainly thinks that words are *signs* of, and therefore *signify*, the components of thought; and he occasionally uses the notion of *meaning* instead; but it is not quite obvious that his notion of *signification* is the same as we might ordinarily think was involved in the notion of *meaning*. Having raised that question, I'll leave it aside for now and return to it in the next section.

(L5) The components of thought are Ideas.

- The word 'Idea', as it is used here, is a technical term, and Locke registers the fact that it's a technical term by scrupulously italicizing it whenever he uses it. I'll register the same fact by capitalizing the word. Because it's a technical term, it is hard to be sure what it means without going deep into Locke's philosophy, and this is not the place to do that. What do we think thoughts are composed of? This may not strike us as an obvious or natural question: ideas, perhaps we might say (using the word in an everyday sense), or concepts – though we are unlikely to be clear what ideas or concepts are. Casually speaking, we can think of Locke's Ideas as like ideas, in the modern sense, or concepts – whatever, precisely, those are – but we probably get closer to Locke if we think of a Lockean Idea as a kind of mental image.

(L6) One person's Ideas cannot be perceived by another.

- Whatever their nature (ideas), Locke was clear about one thing: Ideas are 'invisible and hidden from others';

(L7) The relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary

- Locke endorses what seems no more than common sense when he insists that there is no natural connection between sounds and Ideas: the relation between words and Ideas is arbitrary, he says. We can separate two distinct assumptions here. The first one is L7

(L8) Words are not intrinsically meaningful.

- (This is) involved in the fact that Locke seems clearly to think of words as just sounds. In particular, they are sounds which people find themselves able to make. What this suggests is that words are not intrinsically meaningful: they only come to be meaningful by being set up as 'sensible marks of ideas'.

Meaning and signification

- On a quick reading of Locke, it's natural to think that his view is simply that words mean Ideas. Defenders of Locke, however, have claimed that this is unfair. In the first place, **it's not clear that 'signify' means the same as 'mean'. And in any case, what Locke says is just that the Ideas they stand for are the 'proper and immediate' signification of words**

- According to Locke's general theory, Ideas are representations of other things. So my Idea of gold represents the metal, gold; perhaps it is an image of the metal. If the word 'gold', as I use it, is in the first instance a sign of my Idea of gold, then it seems that it must be possible in principle for the word to be a sign in some way – indirectly or 'mediately' – of the metal. If we ignore for the moment the worry about whether 'signify' is equivalent to 'mean', it seems that there has to be some sense in which the word 'gold' means the metal, gold, on Locke's view.

- If we think that a word is in the first instance a sign of a concept, this means that we can always say that it is also some kind of sign of whatever it is that the concept is a concept of.

- Is it fair to attribute to Locke the view that words mean Ideas? We might think that this is so unnatural a view that we should hesitate in ascribing it to Locke: surely the word 'gold' means gold, the metal, and not any Idea or concept of it? Speaking for ourselves, we may say that the word 'gold' means the metal, but, as we use it, expresses our concept of the metal

- Morris' own view is that it's hard to deny that Locke thought that words mean Ideas.
- If the nature of language is to be understood by its function, and a word is meant to signify something, it's hard to see how that thing could not be what the word means. But even if you disagree about this, it seems clear enough that Locke is committed to the view that it is part of the meaning of words that they signify Ideas, and that is enough to raise some of the most obvious objections to his theory.

Problems about communication

- The most obvious difficulty with Locke's conception of language is that it makes it impossible for language to do what it thinks that language is supposed to do: it makes communication impossible.
- Genuine communication involves one person understanding another, and this requires that she should know what the other person means. This is just what is impossible, on Locke's picture.

- Words themselves are not intrinsically meaningful, according to (L8):
- The only way we can know which Ideas they signify is by knowing something about the relation between these sounds and a person's Ideas.
- But the Ideas themselves cannot be perceived by another person, according to (L6).
- So we could only know which Ideas were signified by a person's words if there were some dependable, reliable relation between particular words and particular Ideas
- But the relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary, according to (L7).

- That means that we have no right to make any assumptions about the Ideas signified by particular words.
- That means that we can never know what someone means when she speaks, on Locke's account of the meaning of words. And that means that genuine communication is impossible.

