
Locke the Hermenaut and the Mechanics of Understanding

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“Nothing that is said has its truth simply in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is unsaid.”

—H. G. Gadamer

“The use of language is, by short sounds to signify with ease and dispatch general conceptions: wherein not only abundance of particulars may be contained, but also a great variety of independent ideas, collected into one complex one”

—J. Locke

Opening Statement

John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* contains an implicit hermeneutics. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer’s assertion that “the sense of a text in general reaches far beyond what its author originally intended” (Gadamer 1989, 372), I will reconstruct and reinterpret Locke’s treatment of language in the third book of his *Essay* to show that there is a nascent hermeneutical understanding at work. Whether or not this is a robust hermeneutics is yet to be seen, but it does open an avenue of thinking beyond the empiricist tradition. In this vein, I will begin with J. C. Weinsheimer’s objection that Locke’s philosophical outlook is thoroughly anti-hermeneutical. This assertion is drawn from his chapter devoted to Locke in *Eighteenth-Century Hermeneutics, Phi-*

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losophy of Interpretation in England from Locke to Burke. I will outline Weinsheimer's general positions, and then present an alternative interpretation. I will then provide a brief overview of Locke's descriptions of the relations among words, ideas and objects of experience; however, I will not attempt to delve into the issues of his philosophy of language,¹ for that would take this project too far afield. Instead, my approach will be informed by Gadamer's assertion that "Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and that all-embracing form of the constitution of the world" (Gadamer 1977, 3), which was in part anticipated by Locke's philosophy.

The Objection

Weinsheimer's book employs a Gadamerian approach to hermeneutics. Weinsheimer states that "an interpretation that is an interpretation and not a duplicate of the text must differ from it" (Weinsheimer 1993, 11). The interpretation is justifiable by its inventiveness and difference, advancing beyond the text (or source) of its interpretation. It thus brings a new richness to what is wrought and wrangled from the object of its inspiration. Essentially speaking, Weinsheimer explicitly holds that Locke represents the "anti-hermeneutic animus" of eighteenth-century British philosophy (Weinsheimer 1993, 8). Placing aside Locke's practices, but concentrating on his philosophy, Weinsheimer states, "virtually nothing in the latter renders dialogue or interpretation fundamental to knowledge" (Weinsheimer 1993, 26). This claim, taken as an objection, will be answered by demonstrating that there is nascent hermeneutic in Locke's *Essay*, which makes dialogue and interpretation fundamental to knowledge.

Weinsheimer sees an "anti-hermeneutic animus" in Locke.

Weinsheimer's methodology differs significantly from the latter sections of this essay. He draws on Locke's larger corpus, whereas this work intentionally draws from the *Essay* alone. According to Weinsheimer, Locke's later political writings and commentaries on religious texts promoted peace and tolerance, which is indicative of certain reversals and changes in his political philosophy over the course of his career (Weinsheimer 1993, 24-25). This point is important for Weinsheimer's thesis as it demonstrates Locke's anti-hermeneutical stance. As Locke developed his ideas,

¹ See, for example, L. Ott (2003) or N. Kretzmann (in Parret 1976).

his “general desire [was] to suppress interpretive difference by minimizing interpretation wherever possible” (Weinsheimer 1993, 32-33). The reason for this, as Weinsheimer indicates, is that there is a structural element to Locke’s philosophy that precludes interpretations. Supposedly this is the case for dialogue.

Dialogue between persons, or between a person and text(s), which would necessitate interpretation, is judged to be pointless. “The pointlessness of dialogue seems to be a direct corollary of Locke’s epistemological individualism” (Weinsheimer 1993, 26). Weinsheimer identifies this with a “natural atomism”² and “epistemological solipsism” wherein “whatever a person does and thinks, it [that is, he or she] does and thinks alone” (Weinsheimer 1993, 28 and 38). This is a justifiable claim; for, as Locke writes in the *Essay*, “Every man being conscious to himself, that he thinks, and that which his mind is employed about whilst thinking being the ideas, that are there, ‘tis past doubt, that men have in their minds several ideas . . .” (Locke 1996, II.I.1).³ The presence of this Cartesian *cogito* (self-consciousness) in Locke’s philosophy supports Weinsheimer on this point. Locke’s own epistemology then suffers from the same substance dualism as Cartesian thought. If understanding, and subsequently knowledge, is to be acquired, such will be exclusively held in the mind and be pertinent for that mind alone (or primarily). This knowledge, if at all true, must rely on what is plainly self-evident, which “is not susceptible of proof” and “is a force to which the mind submits” (Weinsheimer 1993, 36-37). In this sense, the understanding passively acquires true knowledge, whereas interpretation requires an active engagement of the understanding, which precludes access to anything that is self-evident.

Access to that which is self-evident is obscured by language. The discussion of language in Weinsheimer’s chapter on Locke actually appears quite late in his examination. He holds that Locke sees language as a medium that necessarily clutters, distorts or obscures our intuitions or immediate, non-inferential knowledge, which is then the leading cause of all kinds of disputes. “What we know are above all, our own ideas, since they and they alone, in Locke’s view, are known without the mediation of any interven-

² See Locke 1996, I.II.1.

³ See footnote #9 below.

ing ideas" (Weinsheimer 1993, 41). Any kind of intercessional phenomena will cause problems for gaining knowledge: "Whatever intervenes and mediates between the subject and its object not only fails to make knowledge possible but impedes it. Language is by far the most important among such mediations" (Weinsheimer 1993, 43). Thus, according to Weinsheimer's reading, Locke would rather dispense with language altogether, for, and he quotes Locke here, "Learning [that is, being learned or well-read] is distinct from knowledge, for knowledge consists only in perceiving the habitudes and relations of ideas one to another, which is done without words" (Weinsheimer 1993, 44). Even Locke seems to admit that language is more of a hindrance than an aid to the understanding and the acquisition of knowledge. This objection must be answered in order to provide a different reading that would fulfill Weinsheimer's wish: if there were an alternative conception of language in Locke, admitting "that language is 'scarcely separable' from thought and truth, this admission would have metamorphosed his monological epistemology into a dialectical hermeneutics, for understanding oneself would then be 'scarcely separable' from understanding others" (Weinsheimer 1993, 44). This is the explicit goal that the next sections seek to flesh out. In order to do this, we must first turn our attention to the nature and role of ideas in Locke's *Essay*. This will point to some correctives for Weinsheimer's critique, and provide a foundation for a Lockean dialogical hermeneutics.

Ideas and Language

As an empiricist, Locke holds that all knowledge is generated through experience. He rejects innate ideas, though he does recognize some universal characteristics of animate and inanimate constitutions. For example, humans are attracted to pleasurable experiences, and avoid negative or harmful ones. This is not to say that certain built-in principles guide such behaviour, but rather our complex embodiments favour certain kinds of conditions.⁴ We see this with the non-verbal cues *qua* perceptual experiences that

⁴ "But the claim that human beings are predisposed to sort the things they encounter in one way rather than another is in no way inconsistent with the denial of innate ideas. What would be innate is not an idea at all but rather a capacity" (Ott 2003, 71).

Perception
viewed as
passive
acceptance
of sense
impressions.

employ the signficatory capabilities of our embodiment, such as with the pointing of fingers to indicate specific objects/qualities. The bases for knowledge are the simple ideas impressed upon us by our senses whose sources are the objects, things or events in the external world; the term "*Idea* . . . serves best to stand for whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks. . ." (Locke 1996, I.I.8). External phenomena impact the sense organs that provide the raw sensations that the mind passively accepts as *transformed* into simple ideas. These simple ideas are the basic building blocks of complex ideas, produced through the activities and reflections of the mind. When Weinsheimer discusses the disclosers given via intuition, he neglects to distinguish simple from complex ideas, surreptitiously forgetting their differences for the mind. These ideas in the mind are mere representations that resemble the (properties of) objects out in the world. Norman Kretzmann claims the following passage from Locke is indicative of this doctrine (Parret 1976, 338): ". . . Since the things the mind contemplates are none of them, besides itself, present to the understanding, it is necessary that something else, as a sign or representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it: and these are *ideas*" (Locke 1996, IV.XXI.4). We must note that there is an ontological and epistemological gulf here, though this gulf is nominally bridged by words and language use.

Representations in mind
ontologically
distinct from
related
external
objects.

The ontological mode of ideas *qua* representations, though related to the objects of the external world, tends to be independent of the latter. Ideas only stand in relation to their objects, and are thereby different from them, for an idea's object may cease to exist without the idea ceasing, and vice versa. An idea's existence in the mind has an independent existence from its source in sense experience. The status of external objects is independent of the ideas in the mind that represent said objects. However, our knowledge of worldly objects is only constituted by the ideas that the mind has. This is Locke's *objective idealism*. The use of words then completes the triadic relation, whereby they signify, are marks for, or refer to the *ideas* in the mind, and then the ideas stand as representations for the objects of experience. The linguistic connections among external objects of our experience, the ideas they produce, and the words used to represent these ideas, tend to be arbitrary, though these connections take on a conventional necessity when we consider their purposes.

Much of Locke's *Essay* that deals with language employs it in such a way as to present a kind of *nominalism*. Locke is concerned with rejecting Platonic and Aristotelian notions of substance (Chappell 1994, 116), for he says that any existential claims regarding the substances of external objects is a misconstrual and reification of the names that we have given complex ideas used to represent various properties of given (individuated) objects: "our *ideas* of . . . substances . . . [are] nothing but certain collections of simple *ideas* united in one subject, and coexisting together" (Locke 1996, IV.III.9, modified). In other words, we apply a name, such as gold, to some particular object with a set of qualities, and believe the name directly represents a necessarily unified phenomenon. However, experience actually presents a complex phenomenon constituted by various properties given as sensations (yellow, malleable, heavy), and thus as simple ideas that the mind via its naming-behaviour arbitrarily clumps together and reflectively assigns an ontological status as an independent substance. The name helps cover over and make the mind forget the complexity of the experience. The mind (sometimes) confuses its knowledge (based on representational ideas) with actual reality *qua* substance; according to Weinsheimer, Locke cites this as one of the sources for the disputes endemic to interpretation (Weinsheimer 1993, 44). The reality of any such actual substance is beyond our knowledge, for it always remains beyond our perceptual capabilities. Locke distinguishes the nominal from real essence⁵ in the following manner:

. . . [The] *nominal essence* of *gold*, is that complex *idea* the word *gold* stands for, let it be, for instance, a body yellow, of a certain weight, malleable, fusible, and fixed. But the *real essence* is the constitution of the insensible parts of that body, on which those qualities and all the other properties of *gold* depend (Locke 1996, III.VI.2, underlining added).

Thus the real essence of any object always remains outside of our sensible experiences; we only perceive bits and pieces (simple ideas) that the understanding constitutes into complex ideas that are then named. We misconstrue the name for the actual object's essence and tend to forget that it is the use of the word that uni-

⁵ Locke says, ". . . *essence* may be taken for the very being of anything, whereby it is, what it is. And thus the real internal, but generally in substances, unknown constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their *essence*" (Locke 1996, III.II.15).

fies and encapsulates the set of simple ideas, which are the bases for any substantial essence. This, for Locke, is intended to serve as an epistemological corrective for our knowledge claims, for people “often suppose their words to stand for the reality of things” (Locke 1996, III.II.5).

Making a reflexive turn at this point leads us to consider the following dialectical issue: for Locke, “Every articulate word is a different modification of sound,” and by extension, every written word is a different modification of sight (and Braille could likewise be considered a modification of touch), thereby such uses of words are first and foremost simple ideas given through sensation. Thus, for the mind to understand that the words signify *other* ideas requires a complex perception that recognizes the relations among ideas, for “every word is an idea” (Parret 1976, 342-4). Yet the word *qua* idea is a culturally arbitrary vocalization or inscription that is associated and conditioned by past experience and education, all of which provide the word with its meaning(s). This should be kept in mind in order to avoid the semiological trap of ascribing real essences to *words* themselves and forget that they too are perceptually experienced. At least two consequences follow from this insight: first, the relativity of word use in different cultural traditions can be accounted for; and second, no word has a necessarily absolute meaning, for such meaning is relativized, though not radically, by culture and the individual linguistic agent. According to Locke, what do these issues entail for language and its purposes?

Communication and Interpretation

Words *qua* ideas “are always made for the convenience of communication, which is the chief end of language” (Locke 1996, III.V.7). Such communication aims at establishing understanding and transmitting knowledge/information among and between linguistic agents. But how does this take place? What are the mechanics of this understanding and transmission through language use?

Language use does not occur in a vacuum. Perceptual agents, following Merleau-Ponty’s insights, move within and take up perspectives within their phenomenal *Gestalt*, and thus always shape their situations, just as they are shaped by them. As Locke recog-

nizes, in such perceptual experiences the “Ideas of sensation [are] changed by judgment. We are farther to consider concerning perception, that *the ideas we receive by sensation, are often in grown people [i.e., adults] altered by the judgment, without our taking notice of it*” (Locke 1996, II.IX.8).⁶ Such altering by judgment includes the previously learned ideas of past experience, as well as the complex ideas generated by reflection, both of which condition (or is it, constitute) the understanding.⁷ Likewise, Gadamer proposes that “A person who believes that he is free of prejudices [i.e., prejudices], relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him *a vis a tergo*” (Gadamer 1989, 360). Again, Locke foresaw the consequences of such claims: “This is in many cases, by a settled habit, in things whereof we have frequent experience, is performed so constantly, and so quick, that we take that for the perception of our sensation, which is an *idea* formed by our judgment” (Locke 1996, II.IX.9, underlining added). Prejudices can become habitual, and can possibly over-determine the ideas we think we have regarding our perceptual sensations; for example, we say those paintings (hanging on the wall) are mounted in square/rectangular frames, but our actual perspectival perceptions show us oblong trapezoids of varying shapes, for it is due to our past conditioning (that is, experience) that we habitually refer to such frames as square or rectangular.

We can see that Locke has intertwined perception, sensation, judgment, mental operations (like naming and abstraction), habit and language in his explanations of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge, for Locke, succinctly put is the comparing and contrasting of ideas to see if they agree or disagree with each other. Weinsheimer, reading Locke in a traditional manner, assumes that such comparing and contrasting is performed within

That humans must communicate to have knowledge implicit in Locke.

⁶ This quote is lacking the first statement in Locke (1975), which is perhaps a significant difference between Peter Nidditch’s editing and Kenneth Winkler’s version (Locke 1996).

⁷ Here is an anti-realist element within the realism of Locke’s objective idealism. P. Guyer in Chappell (1994, 134) explores in great detail Locke’s claims that “the boundaries of species [i.e., abstract ideas] remains the ‘workmanship of the understanding’,” wherein the understanding is taken as a function of the mind. This project, however, treats understanding as a complex event or phenomenon between persons *qua* linguistic agents.

the solipsistic subject, that is, the Cartesian *cogito*. However, in order to properly or objectively perform such operations, humans must communicate with each other; Locke implicitly anticipated this, but his epistemological commitments derailed an investigation of this kind. Language thus serves as the foundation for this venture, for without language objective knowledge and understanding would not be possible. How then does Locke understand language and its role in conveying information and meaning between persons?

Locke assumes existence of communities whose members have similar linguistic abilities.

Locke's treatment of language seems to lack an analysis of grammar and syntax, for it at best remains implicit (Ott 2003, 121). He concentrates on semantics and the generation of nominal meanings; but language has much more to say than merely empirical claims (which are either true or false about the world), such as we see in illocutionary speech acts, exclamations, and addresses. Language is a dynamic process evidenced by its historical developments and diversity, of which Locke displays some awareness in acknowledging that meanings are only relatively stable and change over time.⁸ The dialogical element of language, which Gadamer (and others) investigates in depth, remains unappreciated in Locke. Yet, it is not explicitly rejected in the *Essay*, as perhaps Weinsheimer believes. This element points to the fact that language is an intersubjective phenomenon. Though this is a contemporary issue,⁹ Locke rightly assumes the existence of communities of humans with similar linguistic abilities—one of those “universal” or innate capabilities of our psycho-physiologies.

Locke's opening description of language in Book III of the *Essay* states, “God having designed man for a sociable creature,

⁸ Locke 1996, III.XI.12: “. . . [Persons] in the improvement of their knowledge, come to have *ideas* different from the vulgar and ordinary received ones, for which they must either make new words . . . or else *must* use old ones, in a new signification.”

⁹ Locke 1996, III.I.1 (underlining added): “. . . ‘tis past doubt, that men have in their minds several ideas, such as are those expressed by . . . words . . . [It is] to be inquired, how he comes by them? . . . [To answer,] I shall appeal to everyone's own observation and experience.” When cited thusly, this shows that Locke has the potential to modify the Cartesian proposition, “I think, therefore I am,” for such solipsism in merely being conscious of the ideas given to one's own mind, yet linguisticity necessarily involves others who are embodied (intersubjectivity), share an inherited linguistic community (history), and implies that one ought to recognize the nominalist tendencies that we habitually forget and reify (an epistemic corrective).

made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with language, which was to be the great instrument, and common tie of society" (Locke 1996, III.I.1). Our social natures provide that premise, or better yet, existential condition for linguisticity. Whether or not this is a consequence of divine intentions matters not here, for the fact is that being so "furnished" is demonstrated by our capabilities to create and learn to use language. This has its biological basis in our vocalizing and auditory organs, as well as our neurological aptitudes. Furthermore, the "instrumental" value of language binds people together in social and communal relations. Language may even heuristically serve as a cultural boundary, yet it is permeable, as evidenced by linguistic borrowings and pidginings. Additionally, words are human constructs, for Locke says that animals can mimic such sounds, but they cannot use such words with the meanings we employ. Though this is mostly true, some animals (like apes) can be taught aspects of this cultural skill.

Words are signs of ideas (and are ideas themselves).

Besides articulate sounds therefore, it was farther necessary, that he [or any human individual] should be *able to use these 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, and the thoughts of men's minds be conveyed from one to another (Locke 1996, III.I.2).¹⁰

Gadamer similarly writes, "In speaking with each other we constantly pass over into the thought world of the other person; we engage him, and he engages us. So we adapt ourselves to each other in a preliminary way until the game of giving and taking—the real dialogue—begins" (Gadamer 1977, 57). Humans then use words as signs of internal ideas and conceptions in the mind. They stand as marks for ideas, which can then be communicated to other persons' minds. So a subject can make known to another which and what ideas are being subjectively thought, and thus the

¹⁰ See Ott (2003): "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" (p. 2); and later Ott writes, "If Locke's view of language is correct, words can at best allow us to unfold our minds to one other. . ." (p. 5). C. S. Peirce says nearly the same thing; see Nöth (1999, 618). My argument parallels Nöth's in this vein, and is isomorphically iconic to his interpretation of Peirce.

ideas can be shared—assuming the words used to convey the thought are properly and appropriately spoken, written, or expressed. This would be the paradigmatic case for claiming that *understanding* has taken place between linguistic agents: “To understand, we may say, is itself a kind of happening” (Gadamer 1977, 29). Perhaps we could say that words and language in general can serve as the “clothing” of thought, and that ideas are the “bodily content” wrapped in these linguistic garments. Yet, Locke is acutely aware of the problems associated with separating purely mental from verbal propositions: “For a *mental proposition* being nothing but a bare consideration of the *ideas*, as they are in our minds stripped of names, they lose the nature of purely *mental propositions*, as soon as they are put into words” (Locke 1996, IV.V.3). Consequently, a bare mental proposition would be by this definition incommunicable. Thus language and thought are actually tightly woven elements that constitute our knowledge (Locke 1996, IV.VI.1).

The ultimate ground for words in language are sensible ideas. It seems reflection as a source of ideas would also have to count, but only the most basic or simple ideas given by reflection. Words depend on sensible ideas. Sensible ideas are the empiricist’s foundation for knowledge. Words and knowledge then share the same basis. As knowledge becomes more abstract, the words are likewise transferred from mere simple ideas to more complex ones. Thus these words have more abstruse/abstract significations, which is a move from “the operations of sensible things [*qua* ideas], and applied to certain modes of thinking” (Locke 1996, III.I.5) *qua* reflection and abstraction. This exemplifies Locke’s nominalism: words as abstractions stand as mere representations for ideas that are reflective transformations of simple ideas that represent sensations.

How can a linguistic sign of an ideational representation be understood, that is, the proper relation identified, when such relations among words and ideas are (culturally) arbitrary? After all, though words serve as signs of ideas, they are ideas themselves. Yet, words are arbitrarily connected to the propositional content of the ideas they are intended to mean. How can we *knowingly* distinguish them? Is communication really so transparent, or is it more opaque? “Although language is our only instrument for communication of ideas we can never think of it as a transparent

medium: it cannot give us direct access to the ideas of others" (Chappell 1994, 126). In other words, what do we really mean when we use words? Is our meaning something *other* than the words we use? Locke would have us believe so.¹¹ If conveying thought were the purpose of communication with language, it would seem then that Locke is merely positing a poor, idealistic substitute for "telepathy." Words have a life of their own beyond those who say or write them, as well as those who hear or read them. Their "life" as simple ideas (phonemes for instance) *and* as representational signs is not solely contained in the minds of linguistic agents. This is exemplified by the nature of a tradition, a corpus or canon of works that "outlive" their authors and initial audience. It is not simply the case that we have a tradition, for as Gadamer rightly asserts, "we belong to it" (Gadamer 1989, 358). Locke unknowingly describes this when he states,

Meaning of words not solely contained in minds of linguistic agents.

Though the proper and immediate signification of words, are *ideas* in the mind of the speaker; yet because by 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; but yet [we] are not always careful to examine, or settle their signification perfectly. . . (Locke 1996, III.II.7, underlining added).

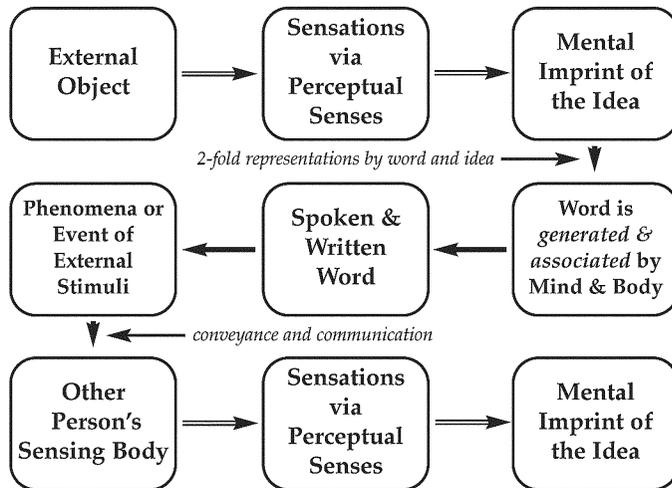
This understanding is important for Locke's epistemic thrust, the conveyance of knowledge via the representational characteristics of words. For it is by recognizing the traditional milieu in which we experience and communicate that such "thought transfer" becomes feasible. "To be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible" (Gadamer 1989, 361).

How then does this culturally conditioned conveyance occur? I have attempted to depict the salient points of the Lockean mechanics of understanding in the flowchart presented on page 194. External objects (or phenomena) provide sensations to the embodied perceiver. These sensations become ideas in the mind of this being-in-the-world. Note here that a two-fold representation occurs: first, the sensate idea images the external object, and then

¹¹ See Ott (2003, 142): "... Locke in no way claims that language is *about* our ideas...intentionality, for Locke, takes place at the mental, not linguistic level. In this sense of 'aboutness', words are not about *anything*. Instead, they are signals others can (although they often do not) use to infer what is going on in our minds."

there is a word (qua idea) that signifies this ideational representation. This word can be spoken/written, thereby becoming this person's sign for the idea (of that external object) that is in his or her mind; "Locke's view is that words signify ideas in the mind of the *speaker*, not the hearer" (Ott 2003, 123). This word serves as an external object for another person who senses (sees, hears, or feels) this phenomenal event; the next arrow represents the conveyance of the intended communication, which has not yet been successful. This event becomes a sensation for this other person, who has a sensation followed by an idea of the word itself; and then, *if a correct understanding occurs*, associates the word with the same or similar representation of the first person's idea of the original external object, though the particular represented idea *cannot be identical* to the original idea of the speaker/writer.¹² In the last box, the important work for understanding occurs: the perceiver of the word must decode the signifier to acquire the meaningful/propositional content of the idea (Ott 2003, 129-130).

The Mechanics of Understanding



¹² See Ott (2003, 33). When Weinsheimer writes, "if understanding means understanding other people's ideas as others' [that is, the identical ideas of others], then understanding in that sense never occurs" (Weinsheimer 2003, 31), he misunderstands Locke on this point. Locke recognizes that it is impossible for the identical idea to be thought by two distinct minds, however, the signified representation elicited by the language employed can share a similarity, more or less depending on the success of the communication attempt.

Locke basically employs pragmatic criteria (Locke 1996, III.IV.6) to determine whether the attempted conveyances of such meanings are successful. Yet we should ask how many *transformations* of meaning have occurred in this process? Is it any wonder that there are so many failures of communication? That words “signify only men’s peculiar *ideas*, and that by a perfect arbitrary imposition, is evident, in that they often fail to excite in others (even that use the same language) the same *ideas*, we take them to be signs of” (Locke 1996, III.II.8, underlining added). It is as if every dialogue (no matter the number of participants) is akin to playing the game of “telephone.” At each step in the process, unless the transformations are perfectly identical, any understanding that can be generated must have an *ambiguous atmosphere*¹³ open to further (mis-) understandings (by default).¹⁴

Locke holds that “the use and force of language” is “subservient to instruction and knowledge” (Locke 1996, III.I.6). Language is thus useful for teaching, but by force perhaps he means that language has the power to influence thought or shape ideas, and can thereby provide a means to guide, manipulate or control the ideas of others.¹⁵ We have seen that words are sensible ideas that are necessary for communication. Communication conveys (or *intends* to convey) the ideas of one person to another person(s): “. . . the words we find capture our intending, as it were, and dovetail into relations that point beyond the momentariness of our act of intending” (Gadamer 1977, 56), that is, the ideas in our minds. But these ideas of each individual are invisible to others, yet their signs are sensible phenomena. Communication thereby makes sensible what is *invisible*, not what is insensible. Words, though well adapted to the natural ends of representing ideas for communication, have no necessary natural connections to the ideas they represent.¹⁶ Words are associated with ideas in capricious manners:

¹³ This consideration is indebted to Merleau-Ponty (1966, 381).

¹⁴ See Nöth (1999) on this point.

¹⁵ This claim points to the responsibilities that teachers, politicians, sermonizers, and public speakers bear, as well as the choice of language used in various social (mass) media.

¹⁶ On the other hand, the Peircean informed approach to iconicity has given rise to counterclaims regarding the origins of language. See Nanny (1999, xix): “Many linguistic signs (or structures) may once have started off as icons, but in the course of time they have tended to become worn down to mere symbols. . . . In language, however there is a constant opposition between economy, which

*A word's
representation
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cultural
context.*

“Such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea” (Locke 1996, III.II.1). This statement needs to be qualified: Locke does not hold that, each time any word is used, such employment is absolutely arbitrary. Rather, a word’s use for a particular idea is merely contingent, depending on the cultural and social context of its use. Words “have no natural connection with what they signify, it is only in virtue of the agreement of human beings that they signify anything at all” (Ott 2003, 116). Otherwise, radical and universal arbitrariness would end in a failure of communication and representation; for example, if one were to constantly call a “pen” by different bird names, one’s intended communication would make no sense. For “when a man speaks to another, it is that he may be understood; and the end of speech is, that those sounds, as marks, may make known his *ideas* to the hearer” (Locke 1996, III.II.2).¹⁷ Others then have to decode and decipher the intended meanings/ideas in the speaker’s mind via the media of language, for “interpretation belongs to the essential unity of understanding” (Gadamer 1977, 57).

This process relies on certain factual givens: intersubjectivity, linguisticity, cultural context, and a shared language. Speakers must *suppose their words to be marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men, with whom they communicate*: for else they should talk in vain, and could not be understood . . . [and] that they use the word, as they imagine, in the common acceptance of that language; in

causes linguistic items and structures to be eroded, thus becoming conventional, that is more and more ‘symbolic’ (arbitrary), and the need for expressivity to counterbalance the erosion.” P. Guyer considers a similarly strong claim that does not quite match Locke’s understanding, and against which he proceeds to develop a valid critique using Locke’s philosophy: “Ideas are natural signs of things, and words that are conventional signs of ideas thus become conventional signs of natural signs of things: these ideas to which our words are connected by convention naturally suggest to us the objects that produce them” (Chappell 1994, 124-6). To say that words “naturally suggest” seems to imply that the words have something akin to iconic characteristics that mimic the representational ideas that the mind has with respect to external objects. This undercuts Locke’s claims about conventionality in terms of its arbitrariness; as Locke says, “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” (Cited in Chappell 1994, 126).

¹⁷ This same paragraph could also support Wittgenstein’s argument against private language. Locke is more explicit about this (III.XI.11), when he says, “Languages already framed, being no man’s private possession” is the case. Ott similarly asserts, “It would be impossible for different persons, each having distinct experiential histories, to use a word to signify the same idea” (Ott 2003, 53).

which case they suppose, that the *idea*, they make it a sign of, is precisely the same, to which the understanding men of that country apply that name (Locke 1996, III.II.4, underlining added).

Locke explicitly recognizes the relativity or contingency of language, yet words, though non-absolute, are not completely arbitrary, for each “country” (to use his term) will have a shared linguistic tradition in which its words are used and have their histories.¹⁸ He extends this understanding when considering the issues involved in translating from one language to another:

*Whereof the intranlatable words of divers languages are a proof. A moderate skill in different languages, will easily satisfy one of the truth of this, it being so obvious to observe great store of words in one language, which have not any that answer them in another. Which plainly shows, that those of one country, by their customs and manner of life, have found occasion to make several complex ideas, and given names to them, which others never collected into specific ideas. This could not have happened, if these species [of words] were the steady workmanship of nature; and not collections made and abstracted by the mind, in order to naming, and for the convenience of communication (Locke 1996, III.V.8, underlining added).*¹⁹

Thereupon, the interpretation of other persons’ words, in order to arrive at an understanding, is even further problematized when one examines words used by persons in other countries, or better yet, traditions. Gadamer, of course, asserts, “No translation can replace the original” (Gadamer 1977, 68), which also radicalizes this issue. Thus the dilemmas that haunt our understanding in dialogues within a shared tradition become more extreme across traditions. Yet Locke’s (and Gadamer’s) hermeneutical understanding is not fated to fall helplessly into scepticism.²⁰ Instead, the goal of his *Essay* is to provide “a cautionary view of language” (Chappell 1994, 143)²¹ to help us avoid the disputes, problems and imperfections words generate.

¹⁸ See Ott (2003, 28): “. . . [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. . .” (underlining added).

¹⁹ See footnote #6 above.

²⁰ See Ott (2003, 130): “Locke is aware of the skeptical consequences of his view and counsels epistemic humility when judging whether communication is actually taking place or not, i.e., whether we are actually annexing the same idea to a given word.”

²¹ See also the reference to “the practical lesson” in Chappell (1994, 121).

Suggestive Conclusions

Can Locke (and Gadamer) provide a hermeneutic that makes understanding possible between speakers (or readers)? Further, can Locke's version account for meaningful communications across traditions? Let us refer to Gadamer's analysis of translating texts to situate this problematic:

The translator has a linguistic text before him, that is, something said either verbally or in writing, that he has to translate into his own language. He is bound by what stands there, and yet he cannot simply convert what is said out of the foreign language into his own without himself becoming again the one saying it . . . (Gadamer 1977, 68).

In this sense, the translator acts as an interpreter, a hermenaut, exploring the movement of meanings within and across texts.

An interpreter who only reproduces the words and sentences spoken [or written] by one person in the language of another alienates the conversation into unintelligibility. What he has to reproduce is not what is said in exact terms, but rather what the other person wanted to say and said in that he left much unsaid . . . (Gadamer 1977, 69, underlining added).

To re-say or translate via "non-exact terms" means the translator "must also take care to *apply their words*, as near as may be, to such ideas as common use has annexed them to" in the "receiving" translated language. The unsaid here is prefigured by those foundational experiences provided by perceptual sensations and the *ideas* generated thereby (Locke). Gadamer emphasizes that the interpreter also belongs to a tradition, which further conditions this claim. For Locke, this would be equivalent to the judgments that literally inform perceptual experience. In uncovering the roles played by such *prejudices*, we can see how understanding can be generated.

Taking a clue from Locke's claims, we know that language is one of those factors that bind human beings into social communities. Gadamer refers to this as language's *universality*, for it is "all-encompassing. There is nothing that is fundamentally excluded from being said, to the extent that our act of meaning intends it" (Gadamer 1977, 67). To make sense of this in terms of Locke requires a shift in emphasis, from leaving nothing excluded, to highlighting the basic foundation of language in simple ideas, the most basic acts of meaning:

The names of simple *ideas*, substances, and mixed modes, have

also this difference; that those of *mixed modes* stand for *ideas* perfectly *arbitrary*: those of *substances* are not perfectly so; but *refer to a pattern, though with some latitude*: and those of *simple ideas* are perfectly taken from the existence of things, and are *not arbitrary* at all (Locke 1996, III.IV.17, underlining added).

On a cursory reading, this seems to say that the words for simple ideas are not arbitrary, but that is not what Locke means; rather, the words that refer to simple ideas must remain stable upon pain of insensibility. If the word “gold” constantly changed its referent of signification, then the word would have no meaning. In other words, certain meanings must consistently hold, which is *not* an absolute claim: “. . . in places, where men in society have already established a language amongst them, the signification of words are very warily and sparingly to be altered” (Locke 1996, III.VI.51). This accounts for the continuities we find within linguistic traditions, which Locke names as their “common use.” As such, simple ideas can serve as the background upon and against which abstract and complex meanings take shape; they are ultimately irreducible prejudices that shape understanding.

The universality of our linguisticity is evidenced by our shared sensorimotor capacities and proclivities as human beings. We experience the world in similar manners, even with our varying perspectives. This similarity is reflected in the consistently held meanings within traditions. Such meanings can be refined over the course of experience and are joined with verbal acquisitions via education. As languages develop into traditions, the traditions maintain certain consistencies, continuities and stabilities related to experiences. This view might seem to support a generally empiricist understanding of knowledge, of which Locke’s philosophy is only one example. However, one should not take up Locke’s epistemology uncritically because it is marked by Cartesian dualism, as well as the only seemingly innocuous claim that sensations produce ideas, which under this dualism remains highly suspect. The question of how such transformations occur returns us to some of the ideas regarding language explored in this essay. Perceptual experience is coupled with, articulated through, the universality of linguistic understanding. We can see that human being is situated in the hermeneutics of linguistic experience, but this understanding remained only nascent in Locke’s thought. In recognizing and developing this idea, we discover

A hermeneutical philosophy nascent in Locke.

some responses to Weinsheimer's objections. Thus, in conclusion, we can say that there are the beginnings of a hermeneutical philosophy woven into and beneath Locke's discussion of language in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

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