

CONVERSATION ONE

‘The greatest part of the Questions and Controversies that perplex Mankind depend on the doubtful and uncertain use of Words.’

Locke: ‘The Epistle to the Reader’
An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

Secret Reference: Locke’s Key to Meaning

In their first conversation, the beamed-up John Locke addresses Terence Moore’s unease over the fragility of our understanding of each other’s language. As Moore puts it, our experience of using language is invariably mixed. Sometimes language works: we appear to be understood. Sometimes it doesn’t: we appear to be misunderstood. Why the constant oscillation between understanding and misunderstanding? Why in particular is misunderstanding so rife?

An original and radical answer emerges as Moore and Locke discuss Locke’s analysis of the underpinnings of language use, the nature of meaning and the limits to our understanding of each other’s words. Locke’s answer first establishes the ultimate privacy of our meanings – a privacy that entails our need to engage in a tacit, communal conspiracy to be able to communicate at all. The key to that conspiracy he calls ‘Secret Reference’. As the conversation progresses we begin to see more clearly why ‘Secret Reference’ matters to us today.

Moore: Let’s plunge straight in. What exactly did you mean by ‘Secret Reference’? How does it explain the necessarily provisional and uncertain nature of our understanding of each other and of the world?

Locke: I'm not sure plunging in is wise. Wouldn't it be better if I spelt out the fundamental problem I saw 'Secret Reference' as a solution to? Then we can follow through its implications for our understanding of each other's language.

Moore: Of course, you're right. I'm always jumping ahead of myself. The fundamental problem 'Secret Reference' addresses has to be your weird and radical view of meaning, doesn't it? You argue that words have no meanings. That can't be right, can it? Everybody knows words have meanings. It's common sense.

Locke: Common sense can be wrong. Common sense says the sun rises and the sun sets. But we know it does no such geocentric thing. Anyway, surely I didn't exactly say words have no meaning.

Moore: True, it was me who said it. What you said in Chapter III, Book III was words 'would be Signs of nothing, Sounds without Signification.'

Locke: I added though that words have no meaning until each of us individually creates a meaning for ourselves by filtering public words through complex private processes in our heads.

Moore: You certainly never said that in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*!

Locke: Maybe not those words exactly. But it's what I had in mind.

Moore: You're saying that's what you had in mind when you said repeatedly in Book III that 'Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the mind of him that uses them'.

Locke: It's not very 21st century language, is it? Let me try to recast it in your idiom. Perhaps I should say something like: the meanings of the words we use depend upon each of us creating for ourselves links between public words and private ideas in our own heads.

Moore: So I'm to understand words are meaningless unless each of us makes those links for ourselves?

Locke: I do have to repeat myself, don't I? Yes, I'm saying words have no meaning until we each personally link them to ideas in our own heads, in our own way.

Moore: Alright, but convince me. Treat me as a naïve realist – someone who believes that the meanings of words are objects out there in the world, not here inside our heads – things to be pursued, hunted down platonically till we find the real, the true meaning.

Locke: The real, the true meaning! Poppycock! There's no such animal. Have I got that right? I like the sound of it – poppycock!

Moore: Poppycock? As a term for nonsense, yes. But why? Why is the naïve realist's view poppycock?

Locke: Because it rests on reifying meaning – treating meaning as a thing, an entity. Reifiers assume words contain meanings. They don't. Words can excite meanings in minds the way catalysts can excite chemical reactions. But the words themselves remain meaningless, empty husks. What words do have is potential – the power to excite ideas and feelings in the individual minds of people.

Moore: So 'Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.'

Locke: You're quite the poet!

Moore: Not me, alas, Wittgenstein. Have the poets got it wrong then? Eliot, for instance:

Words strain

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

Locke: Yes, literally Eliot is wrong, or better, confusing, as poets often are. It's not words that do any of those things. Words are actually pretty stable. Take 'wicked' for instance. Hasn't its meaning gone from 'bad' to 'good'?

Moore: Not for me yet!

Locke: Yet the word itself hasn't changed. It's the meanings of words that can crack, break, slip, slide ... will not stay in place, will not stay still. Though actually, the more

fundamental problem with this bit of Eliot is his unspoken assumption.

Moore: That somehow the meanings of words were once precise and need not slide, slip, decay with imprecision?

Locke: Exactly. Eliot must have had mathematics or logic in mind, not language. Language begins and ends in imprecision – though, fortunately, the degrees can vary.

Moore: I'm wavering, but I'm still not totally convinced. Why is Eliot, why are the reifiers, so very wrong to believe words contain meanings?

Locke: Consider some evidence. Let's do an experiment. Let's take a word that's meaningless to you and see what goes on when you try to create a meaning for it.

Moore: Alright. What word do you have in mind?

Locke: Let me try 'struthious'. What ideas does the word 'struthious' excite in your mind?

Moore: Absolutely none – never heard it before.

Locke: Good. So to you it's a meaningless word.

Moore: Meaningless yes, but syntactically quite rich. I'd guess it's an adjective like 'curious, or 'furious'. That its abstract noun might be 'struthiosity' or possibly 'struthy'. That the comparative form is likely to be 'more struthious', that ...

Locke: Yes, yes. I know you were once a syntactician of the generative school, but I'm talking semantics. We can agree you recognise 'struthious' as a possible English word, technically an adjective, but it remains a word empty of meaning. To make it meaningful for you we have to take one giant stride for mankind.

Moore: Which is?

Locke: Invoke the mind. The mind is the great creator of meanings for each individual. Each mind takes the words it hears and annexes them to its own ideas of the world. Meanings emerge from the processes by which each individual mind fuses public words with their private ideas.

Moore: So you're saying meanings are basically mind-dependent.

Locke: It's not the whole story, but mind-dependent will do for starters. Let's see what bundle of ideas the word 'struthious' might knot together for you.

Moore: Is this your strand theory of meaning?

Locke: Strand theory of meaning! I never used that expression in the *Essay*. But I like it. It strikes a note on the keyboard of my imagination!

Moore: 'Strands' is a gloss I put upon your knot-and-bundle image of word and meaning – an image you return to several times in the *Essay*. You describe the word as a knot tying bundles of ideas together. One example I remember was the word 'courage'. That bundle had five or six strands:

‘perceiving danger’, ‘presence of fear’, ‘not being affected by the fear’, ‘careful consideration of what needs to be done’, ‘carrying out the appropriate action’.

Locke: It’s true, I do see words acting like knots tying together strands of meaning, even if I didn’t express it exactly like that. The nub of the problem with communicating is that while we may share the word, the knot, we may not share the bundle of meaning, the strands of ideas, it ties together. Some strands we may share, some we may not. Going back to ‘struthious’, I have a number of strands and you at the moment have none.

Moore: None as yet. I’m hoping to pick some up.

Locke: Suppose I put the word to work in a sentence. Taking language out of its context of use, as Saussure – your acclaimed Father of Modern Linguistics – did, has only a limited value. Let me tell you about a friend of mine, Max. Suppose I tell you that ‘Max is struthious’.

Moore: That tells me absolutely nothing about him!

Locke: So far that’s true. Suppose I tell you the ideas ‘struthious’ excite for me revolve around ostriches.

Moore: Ostriches!

Locke: Ostriches.

Moore: So you’re telling me Max is ostrich-like?

Locke: Does that tell you anything about Max?

Moore: It tells me something about your view of Max. You think he's reluctant to face unpleasant things – he's an in-the-sand head-burier.

Locke: Yes, that's an aspect of Max's behaviour I've observed several times. Forget Max. Instead note how my ostrich clue started you pulling together some strands of meaning for 'struthious'. Not that I was sure you knew the fabled behaviour of ostriches.

Moore: Everybody knows the story about the way ostriches behave in face of danger.

Locke: Maybe, maybe not. Suppose you hadn't known the story. Knowing that the ideas 'struthious' excites for me concern ostriches wouldn't have been any sort of clue to what I had in mind when I commented on Max.

Moore: So?

Locke: Don't you see? In using language, I can never know for sure what experience, what beliefs, what initial conditions you bring to processing the words I use. I can assume, or guess, or imagine you know the sorts of things I know, but I can't be sure. In the end you have to filter my words through your mind and therefore the meanings you arrive at are your own meanings, not mine. The personal filtering is all. The fact you can't begin to understand the words I use until you have passed them through the filters of your own mind is what makes meanings ultimately mind-dependent, ultimately person-dependent.

Moore: So you're saying that I understand your words because I imagine they are mine. Or rather I imagine your meanings are the same as mine. You're reeling me in. I'm about ready to jettison the common sense view of meaning. When you wrote in Book III, 'Words in every Man's Mouth stand for the Ideas he has, and which he would express by them', was that a declaration of the private, subjective nature of meaning – that our strands were our own property?

Locke: A declaration! No. More my attempt to say something about where meaning is localised – in the head. Looking back I realise I should have talked more about the process, the filtering process. The absolute necessity to filter words through our own minds spells out why it is each of us can apply a word only to his own bundle of ideas, not to somebody else's.

Moore: Actually you did say that in the same paragraph: 'it is evident that each can apply the word only to his own Ideas, nor can he make it stand as a Sign of such a complex Idea, as he has not.'

Locke: Bit long-winded, but it does hammer home the basic idea. The origins of meanings for words depend in the end on intricate processes in individual minds – processes I could only speculate on.

Moore: Setting aside the processes in the brain – which we in the 21st century are still largely ignorant about too – let me acknowledge I'm convinced. Meanings, I'll agree, are in the last resort mind-dependent. However, I have another problem. I think you're inconsistent.

Locke: Inconsistent! Where?

Moore: On the one hand you claim our meanings for words are ultimately private, yet you also claim language is, let me get the quote right, ‘the great Instrument and common Tye of Society’. How can it be either of those things if we are all semantic individualists with our own meanings locked in our own heads?

Locke: Because we fool ourselves. We hold something to be true, which is not true but which it is sublimely useful to believe is true. In short we ‘secretly refer’.

Moore: Now we get to it! ‘Secret Reference’. Your solution to the problem created by the essentially personal and subjective nature of the meanings of our words. Your highly individual key to understanding how we understand one another!

Locke: Indeed. Let me try to explain. As you have kindly pointed out, I repeatedly insist words as we use them can properly and immediately signify only our own ideas ...

Moore: The ultimate privateness of our strands of meanings.

Locke: ... Nevertheless, if you recall, I add an escape clause. Each of us, I believe, secretly refers – or better perhaps in an idiom that will seem less archaic, tacitly imagines – two fundamental things. I call these tacit acts of the imagination ‘Secret Reference’.

Moore: So there are two kinds of ‘Secret Reference’?

Locke: Yes but let's stick with the first 'Secret Reference' for the moment. What I believe we universally do is secretly imagine, or as you modern thinkers would probably prefer to say, tacitly imagine, that the words we're using excite the same ideas in the minds of others as they do in ours. That's what I had in mind when I said in Chapter II, Book III, we 'suppose our Words to be Marks of Ideas in the Minds of others, with whom we communicate'.

Moore: You're saying when we talk or write we're supposing – tacitly – that the meanings of our words are the same for others as they are for us?

Locke: That's right. Take now. I'm tacitly imagining my words are marking the same meanings in your mind as they are in mine. A bit rash, but that's what I'm doing!

Moore: So the first 'Secret Reference', or tacit act of the imagination, establishes the belief that our meanings are uniform across speakers. But it's not true.

Locke: Of course it's not true. How could it be? We've already agreed first, that to arrive at meanings for words we have to process them through our own heads. And second, that the strands knotted by words will differ to some degree at least for each of us. Nevertheless if we didn't tacitly imagine our strands of meaning were the same we would, as I remarked in the *Essay*, 'talk in vain, and could not be understood if the Sounds we applied to one Idea were such as by the Hearer were applied to another'. The need to make contact is the fundamental reason driving our innumerable, daily acts of 'Secret Reference'. We have little choice, beyond becoming Trappist monks.

Moore: So language, ‘the great Instrument and common Tye of Society’, is built upon something we imagine to be true, but it isn’t – in short it’s a lie!

Locke: Don’t be so moralistic! ‘The great Instrument and common Tye’ is built upon a tacit, working hypothesis – a mostly unacknowledged hypothesis, I admit. But I’ll acknowledge it. I’m now supposing you’re understanding my words in the same way as I understand them. And to some degree I’m sure you are. Though our strands may differ, the meanings of our words do often overlap. The real trouble – the cancer at the heart of language – lies with the tacitness of the understanding. Ordinarily we just don’t acknowledge, even to ourselves, what is going on as we talk. And it’s the failure to acknowledge that can have fatal consequences for our understanding of each other and of the world.

Moore: For instance?

Locke: Let me give you two ‘for instances’. First, once I imagine – however tacitly – that my meanings are your meanings, I don’t need to check, to find out whether what you’ve understood by what I said is what I had in mind. Rather than checking we have similar strands, I, as speaker, simply assume you’re understanding my words and their meanings. Could be a disastrous assumption – a recipe for misunderstanding!

Moore: Made worse since I, as hearer, rarely challenge you to tell me about your strands of meanings!

Locke: Absolutely! Checking and challenging are THE essential tools for establishing a degree of understanding.

Moore: What's the second instance?

Locke: Failing to acknowledge the role of 'Secret Reference' allows us to believe what your naïve realist believes: that the meanings of the words we're using are not ideas in our heads but somehow contained in the words themselves.

Moore: Rather than your way of putting it – what words do is excite meanings in our heads, in the way a lit fuse excites an explosion.

Locke: Yes. The container view paints a picture of communicating where words are, to use a simile from your time, like wagons in a goods train loaded with meanings shunting between me and you. Staying with the train metaphor, words should be seen as empty wagons, meaningless sounds, until, arriving at their destination, they ignite processes in the minds of those they were sent to.

Moore: I'm convinced we resolutely avoid acknowledging what's actually going on when we converse. I'm still not quite sure why nevertheless you still maintain language is 'the great Instrument and common Tye of Society'?

Locke: Sometimes I wonder why. Recall I never said language was an effective or necessarily efficacious instrument. Still, language does give us opportunities to try to understand each other. But I think you're right. I should have added that using language can also be dangerous – definitely

a two-edged sword. One edge can hurt us; the other can enlighten us, particularly if we take on board the implications of ‘Secret Reference’.

Moore: So you think even in our advanced day and age, when we’ve moved on hugely in so many fields since your 17th century, we should take on board your ancient idea of ‘Secret Reference’?

Locke: The consequence of taking ‘Secret Reference’ on board is that we should erase from our use of language the question, ‘What does that word mean?’

Moore: Because it’s not the word that has meanings but the individual. I’m beginning to understand. Words don’t mean. People mean things by way of words. Do you think we should have courses in our schools that explore the ways ‘Secret Reference’ underpins our use of language? Say, a course on the use of language and the pursuit of truth?

Locke: Have you forgotten, I did write a book entitled ‘*Some Thoughts on Education*’, but I admit I didn’t make language its focus? I think you’re right though. It’s in school that the ways language actually operates should be explored. Learning to check and challenge are basic skills best acquired early. I’d prefer a course title like, Language and the Pursuit of Understanding.

Moore: Better, I agree – covers both understanding the world and each other. To conclude, what’s the appeal you derive from ‘Secret Reference’?

Locke: My reforming instinct is telling me to go for a homily. I'm tempted.

Moore: No homilies!

Locke: Just a brief one. We should remember – whenever the context demands it – the provisional and uncertain nature of the meanings for the words we use.

Moore: In a word their inherent indeterminacy.