WORDS AND THE WORLD

A Study in Seventeenth-Century Theories of Meaning

by

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PART ONE

THE DESTRUCTIVE EMPIRICISTS - The Under-labourers
From at least the time of Ockham until the present day the theory of meaning has constantly re-appeared as a topic for philosophical discussion in England. In opposition to Ryle I should want to say that not only is it false that Mill was original in producing a theory of meaning at all, and true that earlier empiricists were concerned with the same sort of problems that vexed Mill, but also that from the very nature of the empiricist movement as it occurred in England we should expect at least to find some serious attempts being made by empiricist philosophers to tackle these same problems. That we do find such attempts in the history of British empiricism is easily shown by even a cursory examination of the writings of such men as Ockham and Locke.

Any philosopher who sets out to give an empirical account of the origin and extent of human knowledge is ipso facto concerned to deny any unexperienceable Platonic realm of meanings which for him can be nothing other than
fictions; he is concerned, that is, with the denial of a well-known theory about the nature of universals. So far as he is doing this he must also be aware that if general words are to have any reference they must refer in some other, non-Platonic, way. More important than this, however, is the fact that a thorough-going empiricist obviously denies the possibility of any form of mystical knowledge, knowledge which is inexpressible; for him, to have knowledge is to be able to express this knowledge in words, to be able to communicate this knowledge to the appropriate people. Because of this belief he has a natural interest in the relation between language and the world as experienced. Further, a philosopher who takes it upon himself to account for our knowledge solely by referring to those facts of which we become cognizant through the medium of our senses is forced, if he is to attempt an inclusive account, to take notice of the fact of language as itself an element in our experience. We are aware that we and others talk and write, ask questions and make statements, promise and blame, hope and pray, that we learn and understand; these are as much elements of our experience as are tables and chairs, and they themselves therefore call out for explanation by the empiricist. We might say, of course, that any philosopher, whether he be empiricist or
rationalist, is going to take account of the fact of language and that all philosophers have done so, though not always explicitly. However, if a satisfactory theory of meaning is to be developed more than an implicit recognition of the fact of language is required; explicit attention must be paid to word and sentence meanings or uses. Now, while all philosophers give at least an implicit explanation of the notion of meaning, here I want to be able to say more than this; I want to uphold the stronger view that empirical philosophers at least are compelled from the very nature of their approach to reality to deal explicitly with meaning-questions. That they are so compelled may be shown by a consideration of the motive behind their philosophizing.

Empiricism has usually been motivated by a belief in the need for a re-assessment and re-valuation of current philosophical and ordinary beliefs. The empiricist has been by profession the critic, the expounder of common-sense as against obscurantism, the man whose task is conceived as that of an 'under-labourer' employed 'in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge'.¹ Not only is

¹. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 'Epistle to the Reader'. 
this true of Locke but it is also true of empiricism as such. William of Ockham, in whose work problems connected with the theory of meaning stirred much more than 'vaguely', was mainly concerned as a philosopher 'to purge Christian theology of all traces of Greek necessitarianism, particularly of the theory of essences, which in his opinion endangered the Christian doctrines of the divine liberty and omnipotence': 1 Bacon, as an expounder of the 'new' philosophy, was convinced of the need for removing impediments in the way to knowledge, maintained by existing philosophies; while Hobbes took his empirical departure from his dissatisfaction with the 'school divinity' which, as he puts it, walked well on the foot of Scripture 'but halted on the other rotten foot, which the Apostle Paul called vain, and might have called pernicious philosophy'. 2 As Dewey remarked:

The modern philosopher has usually had a critical purpose in mind. Like Bacon, Locke, Condillac and Helvetius, he stood face to face with a body of beliefs and a set of institutions in which he


profoundly disbelieved. His problem was the problem of attack upon so much dead weight carried uselessly by humanity, crushing and distorting it. His readiest way of undermining and disintegrating was by appealing to experience as a final test and criterion. In every case, active reformers were 'empiricists' in the philosophical sense. They made it their business to show that some current belief or institution that claimed the sanction of innate ideas or necessary conceptions, or an origin in an authoritative revelation of reason, had in fact proceeded from a lowly origin in experience, and had been confirmed by accident, by class interest or by biased authority. (1)

Not only is this true of the 'modern' philosophers - i.e., for Dewey, a philosopher of the seventeenth century or later - but it is equally true of the Franciscan empiricist of fourteenth-century England, William of Ockham. As Moody has pointed out, Ockham is normally interpreted as holding a philosophy whose only 'interest is to be found in an empiricist and subjectivist orientation akin to that of Francis Bacon, Locke, Hume, and to the philosophical background of modern experimental science'. 2 While Moody gives reasons for doubting this interpretation of Ockham he nevertheless makes it clear that Ockham's work was, like that of the later empiricists, directed against 'dead-weight carried uselessly by

humanity' even though this dead-weight was not, in Moody's opinion, the philosophy which came to his time from Aristotle through the interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas. Rather, Ockham revolted against 'scholasticism' in the worst possible sense of that word; that is to say, he was critical of a

scholastic peripateticism so subtly and inextricably coloured by augustinian or arab meanings and interpretations, that he found it necessary to attack these scholastic statements as generally presented and understood... (1)

It was precisely the complexities of scholasticism understood in the sense of a dogmatic and uncritical appeal to tradition and authority that became in turn the whipping-post of the seventeenth-century empiricists. The philosophies with which we are here concerned all, in part, began from a desire to clear away the subtleties, misleading distinctions, and needless verbiage of scholastic philosophy.

It is of course well-known that the main criticisms offered by seventeenth-century British empiricism were directed against the scholastic philosophy. The sixteenth and seventeenth century break with scholasticism took its

1. Ibid., p.10.
rise in part from the work of Francis Bacon whose 'new' method in science was not in any way as influential in its effect upon seventeenth-century philosophical thought as was his anti-scholastic, and thus empiricist or non-rationalist, bias. His dislike of the verbal intricacies and subtle distinctions of the school philosophy was balanced by the complete confidence, also typical of his immediate successors, which he displayed in the power of the human intellect, once it was freed from the inhibiting effect of authority, to discover and control nature. He demanded a division between the realms of theology and science on non-religious grounds as had Ockham on religious grounds. As human knowledge cannot hope to reach as far as the knowledge of God and his angels we should by observation and careful experiment extend our knowledge as far as we can, leaving the vain search for final causes to one side. We must be content with the knowledge of which we are capable, a knowledge more limited than that suggested to us by the Church Fathers but of infinitely more use in the practical affairs of life. This knowledge we have to seek, not in the armchair and study, but in the field and laboratory.

The seventeenth-century puzzlement about questions of meaning arose from the inability of the current
scholastic philosophy to adapt itself to the current growth of knowledge about the world. Scholasticism produced a multiplication of technical terms which appeared either to have a very vague and tenuous connexion with the world experienced by the ordinary man or no such connexion at all. This proliferation of obscure and vague technicalities was considered incapable of satisfying the demands of the century for a clear and distinct account of physical phenomena. Seventeenth-century thinkers began to regard language as essentially instrumental in character: it was an instrument whereby man might accumulate knowledge about the universe, knowledge which was to assist him in subduing and gaining the utmost benefit from his environment. If in our discussions we are dealing with a world which we all experience then the confusions inherent in scholastic philosophy should not arise. The ceaseless controversy, the endless disputations about matters of fact, were considered to be indicative of a widespread misunderstanding of the nature and proper function of human discourse. The critical aspect of seventeenth-century empiricism was directed against existing uses of language on the ground that these practices inhibited the growth of knowledge and postponed indefinitely the scientific millenium which some at least of the seventeenth-century
thinkers confidently expected to be near at hand.

This view of the inhibitory character of scholastic 'jargon' led, as we shall see, to a profound distrust of current philosophical linguistic habits, a distrust which is evidenced in the work of writers throughout the century and which led ultimately to the seventeenth-century emphasis upon explanations of the phenomena of meaning. This distrust of scholastic jargon was the reverse of a coin, whose obverse was the growth of an interest in scientific knowledge.

In determining the temper of the subsequent age, in this as in so much else, Francis Bacon - though concerned more with the obverse of the coin - castigates the schoolmen for their abandonment of experience and their adherence to an outmoded logic in their search after truth.¹ The modern corruption of philosophy, whose aim after all is to gain knowledge, springs from these errors together with the mixture of 'superstition' and 'theology' which characterizes the philosophizing of the schoolmen; this shows itself most clearly when the schoolmen come to speak of abstract forms, final

causes, first causes and the like as if they were, by so doing, providing us with scientific knowledge. This tendency to generalization and abstraction without a constant reference back to experience, the use, for example, of such terms as 'generation, corruption, augmentation, diminution, alteration, and local motion' to distinguish between different types of motion ends only in discourse, whereas natural philosophy should end in utility.¹ The 'old' science, moving as it does from a few particulars to a general conclusion, either avoids noticing the occurrence of future contrary instances or else multiplies *ad hoc* hypotheses to accommodate these instances within the original generalization: if we, as the schoolmen have done, add subtlety to subtlety we will 'think our knowledge perfect, and yet not know anything we need to know'.² Instead of the argument and discourse which have been looked upon as an end by the schoolmen, philosophy should turn towards its true end, a knowledge of things.³

Thomas Hobbes, with a power of disparagement

1. Ibid., pp. 65-7.
2. Ibid., pp. 111-2.
unequalled in his century, hastened to join the attack upon the existing scholastic philosophy: the scholastic theory of universals with its tendency to 'occultism', the belief in the existence of mysterious entities named by our words, received probably its most telling blow at the hands of Hobbes. The schoolmen, he holds, dispute endlessly and needlessly about matters concerning which there can be no dispute simply because no meaning can be given to the terms they employ.¹ The language they use, which is nothing but 'insignificant trains of strange and barbarous words', unintelligible in a modern language, has only one quality, namely, that of concealing the truth and at the same time convincing men that they have in fact attained it and that their search is now ended.² The sort of 'jargon' against which Hobbes directs his attack is typified by the scholastic use of such words as 'abstract essences' and 'substantial forms', words which they use to suggest that there are essences which somehow exist in the world quite separate from the objects whose examination first gives rise to these abstractions. The world for Hobbes is corporeal, and that which is not corporeal is not of the world: because of

² Ibid., p. 686.
this it makes no sense to speak of abstract essences or substantial forms as if, considered by themselves, they formed part of the world.

Joseph Glanvill, in his first published work,¹ and indeed throughout his life, is in essential agreement with his predecessors Bacon and Hobbes. The scholastic philosophers, because of the method they employ, 'lose both themselves, and the truth, in a Verbal Labyrinth'; further, in their search for knowledge, the entangled disputants, as Master Hobs ingeniously observeth, like Birds that come down the Chimney; betake them to the false light, seldom suspecting the way they enter'd; But attempting by vain, impertinent, and coincident distinctions, to escape the absurdity that pursues them... (2)

Peripateticism, the school development of the Aristotelian philosophy, is a 'huddle of words and terms insignificant', imposed in a random way quite divorced from their commonly accepted usages.³ From the wrong application of words and their needless multiplication arise the interminable scholastic disputes about nonentities which add nothing to our knowledge but merely perplex us further.

1. The Vanity of Dogmatizing (1661).
2. Ibid., p. 161.
3. Ibid., p. 150.
Words to be of value in language must have a definite reference, there must be something 'answering' to them, and this quality is lacking in most of the philosophy taught at the universities.

Bacon, Hobbes, and Glanvill were not alone in their contempt for scholastic verbalism and in their belief in the ineptitude of the scholastic claim to supply man with knowledge. The first official historian of the Royal Society, Thomas Sprat, speaks for the modern educated men of his time when he says that the philosophy of the schoolmen

was never able to do any great good towards the enlargement of knowledge; Because it relied on general terms, which had not much foundation in nature; and also because they took no other course, but that of disputing,

a manner of procedure that 'is not at all proper for the spreading of knowledge'.

It is in Locke's work near the end of the century that we find a culmination of this strand of criticism of scholasticism. Although it was still considered

fashionable to criticize scholasticism for many years after this, we find no clearer statements of this position than those which appear in the Essay. The 'mischief' of scholasticism has not 'stopped in logical niceties, or curious empty speculations; it hath invaded the great concerns of human life and society; obscured and perplexed the material truths of law and divinity; brought confusion, disorder, and uncertainty into the affairs of mankind..."¹ many later positivists have felt this same concern about the metaphysicians they were attacking - especially, for example, Hegel. So far as we may say that 'scholasticism' is that way of thinking which believes in final causes, and in the possibility of providing a rational account of the nature of man and the world, so far is it true to say that 'anti-scholasticism' has been one of the major dominating influences in most subsequent English philosophy. And it was, in particular, the 'mischief' of scholasticism that early British empiricists attempted to undo.

Section 2  Meaning Theory and Scholasticism

I have held that, historically, empiricists have

¹ Locke, Essay, III.10.12.
been motivated largely by their belief in the need for a criticism of existing philosophical systems and existing ways of thinking; more especially I have contended that the British empiricists of the seventeenth century, and even earlier, have seen as their 'bogey' the philosophies which they associated with the name of 'scholasticism'. So far as they saw themselves as critics it was the philosophy of Aristotle as adopted and adapted by the schoolmen towards which they directed their criticism. Earlier also, I set out to show that necessarily any empiricist, in pursuing his critical function, would need to make explicit questions connected with the problem of meaning; the cash-value of this contention will best be seen if we first become aware of the importance of questions of meaning for the seventeenth-century critique of scholasticism.

The philosophical criticism of scholasticism, as distinguished from the theological criticism, was engendered in part at least by the interminable controversies of the schoolmen, by the fact that they appeared to be as well qualified to deny a particular view as to support it, to argue for or against a thesis with equal willingness and ability, with an apparent disregard of the common human desire to discover the truth concerning any
particular issue. The philosopher, as such, found in these controversies which appeared to admit of no solution, a denial in practice of certain logical principles, a denial with which he found it impossible to agree. A major part of empiricist criticism took the form of an attack upon the mass of technical terms spawned by this pathological interest in disputation; the empiricists asked for the cash-value of these terms in the real world. Also, it was felt, the scholastic philosophers were in conflict with the ways of looking at the world which were characteristic of the new science. It is all very well, it was said, to use such words as 'entity', 'quiddity', 'form', 'immaterial substance', but we may call for definitions of these terms and ultimately you are going to be forced to show us what elements of experience are to be denoted by the use of these terms or, at least, to show us the elements of experience from which they are derived. If this could not be done the empiricist held that the scholastic had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his proposition, and was consequently speaking nonsense.\(^1\) That is to say,

\(^1\) Cf. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.4733; '...if [a proposition] has no sense this can only be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts'.

the empiricist attack upon the logic of scholasticism consisted in a demand that the latter make clear the meaning of the terms he employed; this could only be done, on the empiricist view, by a reference to the facts of experience. This criticism amounted to a questioning of the meaningfulness of terms and propositions and the easiest way to undermine scholasticism was by appealing to experience as a final test and criterion. This is not to suggest that the acceptance of empiricism followed the realization that it presented a powerful weapon against scholasticism, but rather that the widespread acceptance of empiricism as a fruitful method in philosophy, brought about particularly by the growth of modern science, involved the belief that the scholastic philosophy no longer satisfied the new criteria of the scientist for counting some word or sentence as referring either to some real thing or known fact. Essential to meaning in empiricist eyes was the fact of reference; whatever else 'meaning' might mean, it was taken for granted that if A meant B then A referred to, denoted, signified, or represented, that which it meant, namely, B. The elements of our knowledge were the data of experience; our words ultimately could only refer to these data; and if substantive words such as 'form' and 'substance' could not be shown to refer to an element of experience they
were to be accounted meaningless. This amounted to a vigorous and wholesale wielding of Ockham's Razor, which at one stroke was to cut away the needless and meaningless verbal intricacies of the disputing scholastics.

Thus, seventeenth-century empiricism was concerned, in part of its attack upon previous philosophy, to remove unnecessary intricacies and abstractions by putting forward a suggestion that only certain types of words could be meaningful. As a result the empiricists were compelled to adopt some criterion for determining the meaning of expressions which would permit them to speak meaningfully about the world, at the same time as denying correctness of speech to the commonly accepted statements of earlier philosophy. This criterion they found in the notion that the words we use ultimately refer to the elements of experience - to be meaningful was to refer in this way, and any word which could be shown not to have an extra-linguistic correlate in experience was ipso facto to be regarded as meaningless. The scholastic philosophy called for criticism upon logical and verbal lines; the growth of modern science, the methodological work of Bacon, the criticism of the new Renaissance humanism with its emphasis on scholarship, all pointed to the adoption of an empiricist re-assessment of the nature of reality and the scope
of human knowledge; these facts involved a criticism of
scholasticism which necessarily involved an attack in
terms of the meanings of words and sentences; this, in
turn, implied the necessity for the development of an
empiricist theory of meaning. If scholasticism were to
be refuted, the explicit development of a theory of meaning
became necessary, a theory which would have to be much
more than a 'vague stirring' in a mass of psychological
detail.

The tendency was always strong to believe that
whatever receives a name must be an entity or being,
having an independent existence of its own; and
if no real entity answering to the name could be
found, men did not for that reason suppose that
none existed, but imagined that it was something
peculiarly abstruse and mysterious, too high to
be an object of sense. The meaning of all general,
and especially of all abstract terms, became in
this way enveloped in a mystical haze... (1)

It was this haze that the empiricists attempted to dispel.

Section 3 Meaning Theory and Empiricism

Thus, if seventeenth-century empiricism was to
achieve one of its main aims in its criticism of
scholasticism then it was forced to develop a theory of

1. J.S. Mill, in a footnote to his edition of James Mill's
Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind (1869),
meaning: however, I also wish to point out that empiricism in general is naturally and inevitably concerned, and has always been, with the development of meaning-theory. We saw in discussing seventeenth-century empiricism, as a special case of empiricism, that the empirical motivation towards criticism of existing theories led to a discussion and repudiation of the linguistic habits of earlier philosophers, and this, in turn, led to the explicit development of those theories of meaning which we encounter in seventeenth-century empirical philosophers. Now, it was not by chance that this criticism should turn upon linguistic questions: the empiricist is insistent upon the necessity of giving an account of the derivation of our knowledge from experience alone which is to say that, to be meaningful, the discourse in which we express our knowledge must refer to the events or facts or elements of experience. Because our knowledge, and hence the discourse in which we record and impart this knowledge, is always and only derived from experience we should always be able to decide, given any particular discourse, from which elements of experience this knowledge was derived. Where we cannot do this the empiricist draws the inevitable
conclusion that the discourse is meaningless. Given these initial assumptions and this way of arguing the empiricist of the seventeenth century had little difficulty in disposing of much of scholastic philosophy on the grounds of its meaningless by pointing out that on empiricist assumptions - which the scholastic for the most part accepted - no 'meaning' was given by these philosophers to certain terms in their propositions, i.e. no element in experience could be suggested as a possible reference for the expression. Empiricism has always adopted this way out from Ockham until the logical positivists of the twentieth century: the theory of verification in many positivist writings is simply a more carefully thought out and more stringent criterion which is basically the same move as that made by their fore-runners in the same tradition. Like positivism also, the earlier empiricists were prepared to allow meaningfulness to some statements other than those derived from experience, just as positivism will allow the meaningfulness of analytic statements. As we would expect, however, and as we shall see, though different answers were given to the question of the nature and status of propositions of this sort their existence as meaningful propositions was

1. Unless an explicit suggestion is made to the contrary, the 'discourse' with which we, and the empiricists, are concerned is declarative and indicative discourse, as distinguished from other uses of language such as the emotive or evocative.
irrelevant for a defence of scholasticism.

To call John Locke an empiricist would not give rise to dispute. I shall, however, refer to the writings of some men whose claim to this title is more dubious and about whose inclusion there would be occasion for argument. The term 'empiricism' has had, and does have, many different connotations in English philosophy, and for this reason I should like to make clear here what is the minimal meaning to be given to this term throughout this thesis. A necessary condition of the application of the word 'empiricist' to any thinker is that he should be prepared to say that all our knowledge about the world is derived from data received through our various senses, even if one of these senses is an 'inner' sense; this allows the possibility of there being other forms of knowledge, e.g., a knowledge of analytic truths, but all our knowledge regarding matters of fact must be derived from experience. It is customary also to take as essential to empiricism the notion that our knowledge cannot extend beyond the bounds set by possible experience; that our knowledge is both derived from experience and cannot exceed the possibilities of experience. Locke, however, would obviously not satisfy a condition such as this because of his adherence to the view that the
existence of God can be demonstrated, that we can have knowledge of God's existence, from a consideration of certain experienced facts; that is, we are able to infer the existence of something not experienceable from that which is experienced. For this reason his views about God may be regarded as being inconsistent with his empiricism, as Hume tried to show.

In considering men of such widely differing interests as Hobbes, Glanvill, Burthogge, and Locke difficulties arise on every side when we try to include them within the boundaries of one class; to label them all as empiricists upon the basis of the derivability of all our knowledge from sense-experience would, in the first place, blur important distinctions and, secondly, would provide a classification so devoid of real content as to be almost worthless. On the basis of this condition alone we should include within this class both Aristotle and the traditional scholastic philosophers; that is, those very philosophers who were being attacked by the seventeenth-century English thinkers. Of course, a philosopher may be an empiricist in his general outlook and yet still make concessions to some other sort of view as, for example, did Locke in the account he offered of mathematics and morals. Even if we may divide views and
opinions into empiricist and non-empiricist without blurring distinctions, we cannot really divide people in this way.

The discussions of language and knowledge with which this thesis is concerned were all in part prompted by anti-scholastic motives, they were directed against the 'occultism' and dogmatism, the reliance upon tradition and authority, which still pervaded philosophy at the universities in the seventeenth century. The philosophers whose discussions concern us were all empiricists so far as, imbued as they were with the ideals of the 'new' science, they reacted against traditional learning by appealing to the necessity for at least grounding our knowledge of matters of fact upon experience to the exclusion of reliance upon received tradition. Their empiricism, in their philosophies of language, rested upon the belief that the meanings of our words should be traced back to their origins in experience. Thus, for the purpose of this thesis the word 'empiricist' is to be taken as referring to any philosopher of this period who gave prominence to the notion that our talk about the things in the world must be grounded upon sense-experience as a weapon with which to belabour the verbal habits of the scholastics,
with their corresponding ontological commitments. That is, an empiricist in this context is one who uses the demand that our language must be derived from our experience of the world as a method of refutation: the claim he wishes to refute is the claim that traditional learning provides us with knowledge when its adherents use words which cannot be given such an experiential reference.

Even men of such widely differing views as Hobbes and Locke were, so far as their philosophy of language is concerned, thinking on the same lines. They both believed, as indeed it was commonplace to believe in this century, that our knowledge depended upon our sense-experience through the medium of which we received our 'ideas', 'phantasms', or 'notions', the stuff of our thoughts. This indeed was not a seventeenth-century phenomenon but was the attitude of most traditional philosophers. The phrase *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu* was, after all, subscribed to by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas as well as by Locke. The scholastics, however, did not turn this view against the metaphysical conceptions they were using; against their 'intentional species', their 'quiddities', and so on. The actual content of the scholastic explanations
was not empirically based. The seventeenth-century philosophers went further, however, in not only saying that our knowledge is derived from sense-experience but also in making a feature of the supposed fact that our words were signs of or named our 'ideas'. With this went the belief that the meaning of a word was to be ascertained by analyzing the experienced constituent which that word named; by resolving the idea for which the word stood into the 'simple ideas' which together formed the complex ideas; by finding out which 'phantasms' were referred to by the word. Broadly speaking, any word which could not be resolved in this way, any word whose correlative 'idea' could not be shown to be derived from the simple data of experience, was consequently to be counted meaningless. In this respect Hobbes and Locke - and others who differed from them in certain other ways - are to be seen as concerned with identical problems. Both of them were typical of their century so far as they were impressed by the new science with its emphasis upon the study of the individual things in the world and so far also as they reacted against the traditional learning. Their first concern in language was to give an account of the meaning of individual words, just as it was the intention of the new science first to give an account of individual things. This, in their eyes, presented
no serious problem - words were mostly names and what it was that they named was to them sufficiently obvious; their emphasis both in epistemology and in the philosophy of language was placed upon the apprehension of the particular.

A more serious problem arose for thinkers of this century however in giving an account of the meanings of general words, words which were not the 'name' of particulars. As was noted earlier, meaning-theory had always been inextricably bound up with certain theories of universals of either a Platonic or Aristotelian sort; the meanings of general words had been taken to be entities of one sort or another which were named by the words we used but which at the same time were not directly experienceable in the way that the entities named by particular words were experienced. Thus the anti-scholasticism of the period in one of its forms denied the propriety of the use of certain terms on the grounds that no element of experience could be regarded as providing a 'meaning' for these terms. More especially, the terms whose propriety was being denied were the terms of metaphysics and of 'physical science' as the scholastics understood it.
The two main reactions to the view which postulated a realm of 'meanings' were conceptualism and nominalism, which were held in one form or another by all the philosophers we are to consider. Conceptualism and nominalism were two views taken regarding the meaning of general words or - which amounts to the same thing - they were two explanations of universals. Broadly - and we shall see later that this needs qualification - a conceptualist was one who believed that the general word was the name of a general idea in the mind of the user of the word, the 'universal' element in experience being a universal, abstract, or general idea. The nominalist, on the other hand, was prepared to say that a general word was the name of all those things which it could be used to refer to. That is, for him, there are no universals other than the words we use; these are called 'universal' solely because they are used to refer to many things. The word 'cat' for the conceptualist refers to a general idea of a cat, which is somehow similar to but not yet the same as the idea of any particular cat; for the nominalist this word refers to all the cats there are.

Conceptualism reacted against the Aristotelian doctrine of *universalia in rebus* by saying that when we
attribute, say, 'roundness' to all of a certain range of experienced objects we are not saying that we apprehend an essential characteristic of these objects, a characteristic which recurs in each of them and to which we apply this name. Objects which we experience **resemble** each other in certain ways and one of these ways of possible resemblance is in respect of the shape exhibited by the object. To speak of an attribute 'roundness' which is instantiated in many objects tempts us to say that a word names a peculiar entity of some sort of which we are supposed to be cognitively aware; as against this, conceptualism urges that this temptation is removed if we recognize that words denoting characteristic are applied not because of the presence of some peculiar entity but simply on the basis of observed resemblances between experienced data. The **universal** element in experience is the human concept which we apply to the world - to classify something as 'round' is to say that it bears a sufficient resemblance in respect of its shape to other things to which we have previously applied this word; it is not to recognize that this object exhibits a characteristic, 'roundness', which is inherent in many objects. The nominalist, on the other hand, deals more drastically with Aristotelian 'meanings'; he is prepared as a rule to say that a class word is the
name, not of a universal in the Aristotelian sense, but of all the things to which this word may be applied. The word 'universal' is itself a name of any word which may be so applied, i.e., to say that 'x' is universal is to say no more than that 'x' may be used in a certain way.

Thus, on the one hand, conceptualism avoids the postulation of peculiar entities which are named by class words by pointing to the way we make classifications upon the basis of observed resemblances between things, resemblances which do not - because of the difference of degree between them - compel us to say that we are here taking note of the recurrence of one characteristic which appears in many instances. The universal elements in experience are the concepts or 'ideas' that we have of things. On the other hand, the nominalist avoids the Aristotelian position by denying the existence of anything universal other than a name. Often within the work of the same writer we find a tendency to fluctuate between these two views (Hobbes is a notorious example of this): we shall have occasion later to examine this tendency with a view to assessing its effect upon seventeenth-century explanations in the theory of meaning.
CHAPTER TWO

EARLY NAMING THEORIES OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Section 1 Naming Theories and the Discourse of Science

It is fashionable to-day to say that, even in indicative or declarative discourse, words do not always refer to an entity and even where they do the entity to which they refer is never the meaning of the word. However, this is an expression of a comparatively recent development in meaning-theory: as late as the early 1920's and even later it could be accepted by a large number of Western philosophers that 'the name means the object. The object is its meaning'.\(^1\) The view of meaning suggested by Wittgenstein's remark has been perennial in philosophy: it is the view that words, and more especially substantive words, are names of objects of one sort or another, names which we attach to objects for the purpose of communicating by means of language; and, further, the objects we thus name are the meanings of the words used. This naming-model of meaning is also the basic model upon which were grounded seventeenth-

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century explanations of the theory of meaning. It was this view which later came, through Wittgenstein's influence, to be regarded as only a partial and misleading view of the way language functions;¹ it is this same view which Ryle deprecatingly dubs the 'Fido'-Fido theory of meaning.²

Modern theory of meaning attempts to give a general explanation of the notion of meaning in all types of discourse by more or less equating the meaning of a word, an expression, or a sentence, with the ways in which it is used; by suggesting that instead of asking for the meaning of an expression, with its inbuilt assumption that we are searching for one single something which is the meaning, we should rather ask for the rules which govern the use of this expression within a particular living language. On the other hand, as we have already noted, seventeenth-century discussions of meaning were basically concerned with statements of which 'true' and 'false' might be predicated - they were


concerned, that is, with only one type of discourse, and devoted their attentions mainly to giving an account of meaning at this level. Because of this restricted interest they were predisposed to equate the meaning of a word or name with the bearer of that name, for in a language of this sort we are constantly using words in a referring way. Ideally, it was held, substantives should always be used in this way. Because of their belief that most words are names the unit of meaning for early theorists in this field was the word; it is this atomistic approach that has been criticized in our time as being bound to end in confusions resulting from viewing language when it is on 'holiday' rather than when it is doing its work.¹

This belief, however, in the primacy of word-meaning was strengthened in the seventeenth century by the growth of modern observational science with its emphasis upon the necessity for experiment and an acquaintance with particulars for the obtaining of real knowledge. With this went the view that there are simple elements of experience which must ultimately be the meanings of our words if our language is to be tied to reality at all.

¹ See, Philosophical Investigations, para. 38.
For the seventeenth century, at the level of 'scientific' prose the question 'What is the meaning of "x"?' was equivalent to the questions 'To what entity does "x" refer?' or 'What thing does "x" signify, denote, mark, or name?'. For modern meaning-theory, on the other hand, 'What is the meaning of "x"?' is never interchangeable with these questions. If it is equivalent to anything then it is equivalent to some such question as 'How do we use "x" in this language?', where the statement of the way that 'x' is used is the meaning of the word in this application of language. One use to which the word may be put is to refer, but that to which it refers is not the meaning of the word. This fundamental difference between modern and pre-twentieth century theories of meaning is part, and a very important part, of the modern revolution in philosophy; to write about previous meaning-theory in the light of present-day views is to run the risk of failing to see the value of the earlier discussions simply because we have, in our more sophisticated moments, shaken ourselves free from certain cramping assumptions which were unquestioned by earlier philosophers. It is also to run the risk of failing to see that the philosophers with whom we are concerned were grappling with very real problems arising out of the intellectual climate of their time.
It needs, then, to be borne in mind that, while modern philosophers have been impressed by, and have taken as their starting-point, the multiplicity of uses which words have in our actual language, philosophers of the seventeenth century did not see this question of multiplicity as a problem which should concern them. They did not equate the meaning of an expression with how it is used because - within the limits they set themselves - they knew how words were used. They did not doubt for a moment that within indicative prose, 'scientific' language, words were used mainly to refer, denote, or signify. What they did see as a problem was the exact nature of the entity or entities to which words referred. Words, we now say, function in many ways and to ask for the meaning of a word is not to ask for a description of some entity to which it refers but it is to delineate the range of possible functions this word has in our language; for the seventeenth-century empiricist words had only one function, namely, to refer. To ask for the reference of a word was equivalent in seventeenth-century eyes to asking what is the function of the word.

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1. I.e., they did not see it as a problem that worried them as philosophers; but on the question of the multiple uses of language, see below Chs. 5 and 6.
for there was only one such function. Prior to Wittgenstein and Ryle no one ever doubted that, in 'scientific' prose at least, part of the answer to the question 'What does "x" mean?' included some such statement as 'We use "x" to refer to ...'; from this it was but a small step to saying that that which is referred to is the meaning of the word in question.

There is abundant evidence that seventeenth-century thinkers were aware of forms of language other than the indicative, or that which I have called 'scientific'. Their function as philosophers, however, was conceived to be one of assistance to man in his ceaseless search for knowledge, knowledge which could only be gained and propagated by the use of language; part of their self-imposed task, therefore, consisted in a clarification of didactic discourse and an explanation of its functioning. Although Hobbes, for example, makes it clear that he is aware of the existence of 'divers kinds of speech' nevertheless, 'in philosophy, there is but one kind of speech useful, ... the speech of those that affirm or deny'.

As philosophers, the seventeenth-century empiricists

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concerned themselves primarily with giving an account or explanation of those statements to which we attribute truth or falsity, and they did this by relating words to other entities which were named by the words.

The belief that the use of words in descriptive, didactic, or scientific prose was to refer to some entity or other has always led those who held this belief to put forward one version or another of the naming theory of meaning. Essentially, these differences of theory amounted only to a difference in the sort of entity or entities which the theorists concerned considered to be the referents of the words so used. Generally speaking, however, the accepted view of meaning, even among philosophers - until they came to develop their theory in detail - was that words were names given to the objects known by experience. It is still not unusual to find in the early explanations offered of language in modern student text-books, statements to the effect that words stand for things, that linguistic beginnings were full of inventors of words who named things by merely selecting one of an infinite multitude of possible noises and arbitrarily
making it stand for that thing'. Qualifications are soon introduced to show firstly that some words do not stand for things in any ordinary sense of this word, and secondly, to account for the fact that most of our words refer to more than one thing, or to classes of things. However, it is a fact that such an approach to questions of meaning is in harmony with ordinary views on this question so long as we take 'thing' in a wide sense where it may itself refer to objects, actions, states, qualities, and the like: Nelson's grandmother would certainly have held that the best, and possibly the only, way to settle the boy's ignorance concerning the meaning of 'fear' would be either to induce this psychological state in him, or to show him behaviour which we (perhaps misleadingly) regard as evidence of such a psychological state in another.

If a child asks the meaning of a word like 'cat' we may satisfy it by a description of objects to which we are prepared to apply this words where description fails we show it a cat, and this counts as an explanation of the meaning of the word for the child. From the Platonic Dialogues to Wittgenstein's Tractatus this

view, or something closely akin to it, was accepted almost without question, especially in discourse of the type with which we are at present concerned. The ordinary man, so far as he thinks about it at all, still leans heavily upon this earlier model; neither should we regard this as a sign of human obtuseness for there is indeed a very large measure of initial plausibility in views of this sort. We are brought up, as Wittgenstein has pointed out, to ask 'What is that called?' and part of the learning of a language involves this question followed by the mention of a name - this is a possible 'language-game' and one that we all play, although naming things or being given their names, and using these names in discourse, are two quite disparate activities.¹ Our upbringing conditions us to ask for names and this predisposes us to accept unquestioningly naming theories of meaning. While it is true that this view of meaning 'surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible',² it is also the case that the common adherence to naming theories is based upon such deeply-

1. Philosophical Investigations, para. 27.
2. Ibid., para. 5.
rooted assumptions in the history of the individual and the race that it is surprising, not that we should have held such a theory, but that we should have partly shaken ourselves free from these assumptions in this century. And we have only partially freed ourselves: like Hume's scepticism, our philosophical beliefs about meaning tend to be discarded when we leave the study or seminar room. That this partial freedom has come about is mainly the result of Wittgenstein's work in this century; but we shall see that some, at least, of the pre-conditions necessary for this revolution were established with the rise of empiricism in England in the seventeenth century.

Although it is an apparently illegitimate step to move from '"x" means x' to 'therefore, x is the meaning of "x"', this is not illegitimate if 'meaning' and 'reference' are equated. If to 'mean' is to 'refer', 'denote', or 'signify' something; and, if 'x' signifies, denotes, or refers to x then x is the signification, denotation, or reference of 'x'. If 'x' means in this way it will be true to say that x is the meaning of the word that refers to it, just as we would say if A loves B, then B is the beloved of A. This, of course, is simply an abbreviated way of saying that B is the 'object-loved' by A just as,
on the naming-theory, x is the 'object-meant' or referred to by 'x'. To say that 'x' is a name is to say that x is an object, in some sense or other of this word, the 'meant-object' of 'x'.

The question, 'What is the meaning of ...?' is notoriously ambiguous: for example, it may be a request for an explanation of the occurrence of some event, or, allied to this, it may be indicative of a search for a cause. It may be equivalent to the question, 'What is ... a sign of?' or 'What normally follows ...?'; or it may be equivalent to a question about purposes, or ends. None of these possible interpretations is of primary importance in a discussion of language, for in language we are concerned with the meanings of words, not of things and events. To ask 'What is the meaning of "x"?' where 'x' is a word, however, is also ambiguous, and it was Wittgenstein who pointed this out with great forcefulness in this century; however, if words are names no ambiguity exists, as it did not indeed for the seventeenth-century empiricists. 'What is the meaning of "x"?' was equivalent for them to 'What (object) is meant (referred to) by "x"?'. Twentieth-century criticism of naming theories of meaning has done nothing to destroy the legitimacy of this step from '"x" means x' to 'x is the meaning of "x"'; what it has done is to
show that the meaning of 'meaning' is not always to be equated with 'reference'. In our discussions of the seventeenth-century accounts of scientific prose we must always bear in mind that basically, in this context, words are names and that which they name or refer to is their meaning.

The notion of words functioning primarily as names was bound up in the seventeenth century with the terminology of 'ideas'. Nothing was clearer, it was thought, than that the external world became known to us by the impression it made upon our senses: in seeing, for example, we receive images from experience which were held to be the stuff of our thought, that which we thought about directly. The things in the real world were only, and could only be, thought about through the medium of the images, phantasms, notions, conceptions, or ideas that each of us received from experience. Because of this psychological view of the nature of thought and experience Locke and his contemporaries were inevitably led to start their epistemological discussions from a point of view of privacy, each of us ultimately being able only to think about his own ideas, or to think about things as reflected by his own mental experience. This notion of the way in which reality is experienced by us, together with the belief in the privacy of experience, was consistent with, and
helped to reinforce, the common view that the unit of meaning, the point from which discussions of meaning-phenomena should advance, was the word.

Section 2  Bacon and Hobbes

Perhaps the most outstanding philosopher of the century, prior to Locke, to write at length upon questions of meaning was Thomas Hobbes. Earlier than this of course Bacon had already been concerned to point out the essentially referring nature of the words we use in scientific discourse together with the necessity that these words should refer to entities, but he did not devote as much time to these discussions as did Hobbes. I shall take Hobbes as central to a discussion of meaning-theory at this level, firstly because he dealt so fully with the questions involved; secondly, because what he had to say was of extreme importance for his century; and thirdly, because subsequent empiricist thinkers, while for the most part disagreeing with Hobbes over certain metaphysical principles did not question his basic remarks concerning the nature of meaning. Hobbes began from the starting-point of Bacon but, in attempting to give an account of descriptive language as it is, he pursued
the issues which arose much further than did the latter, and indeed much further than did any other theorist until the time of John Locke. Although during the first half of the century it is Hobbes who said more than did others about the functioning of language in science, he did not start with any assumptions not common to his time. Hobbes's starting-point might best be shown by outlining in brief certain features of the work of Bacon upon the question of how language functions at this level - that is, by outlining certain features of Bacon's attack upon traditional philosophy through the medium of an analysis of descriptive language.

Bacon's more important work was not published until after 1600; he may, then, be regarded as the first of the seventeenth-century theorists to adopt a naming theory of meaning for the purposes of science, and to combine this with an exposure of the absurdities involved in earlier naming theories. Concerned as he was with the 'new' approach to scientific knowledge, he attacked the prevalent attitude of his time towards authority both as it occurred within the universities and within religion. Part of this attack, as was also to be the case with Hobbes, took the form of a demand for clarity in speech and writing as a cure from the
spell laid upon philosophy and science by the endless multiplication of terms and distinctions with which the scholastic philosophy had become associated.

Bacon's attack upon traditional logic and philosophy is perhaps nowhere expressed more nicely than in the first book of The Advancement of Learning:¹

This kind of degenerate learning did chiefly reign among the schoolmen; who having sharp and strong wits, and abundance of leisure, and small variety of reading, ... and knowing little history, either of nature or time; did, out of no great quantity of matter, spin out unto us those laborious webs of learning which are extant in their books. For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit.

As has been noted earlier, wherever we find an abuse of scholastic practices in this century we find alongside it a belief in the importance, practical value, and possibility of a growth of scientific knowledge, a knowledge which must develop from the observation of the particulars given to us in sense-experience.

We must not, however, immediately fly from a few observed particulars to highly general statements about the world; we need rather to ascend step by step 'from particulars to lesser axioms; and then to middle axioms ... and last of all to the most general'.¹ The programme suggested by Bacon as that most likely to achieve fruitful results in scientific investigation was that which members of the Royal Society were later to attempt to follow in their investigations of nature.²

Implied by this general attitude towards scientific discovery, of course, was Bacon's belief that all the knowledge of which human beings are capable is derivable from our sense-experience; despite the fact that our senses may, and often do, deceive us they 'nevertheless, with diligent assistance, suffice for knowledge'.³ From sense-experience we obtain our ideas or notions and the words we use are

'but the current tokens or marks of popular notions of things'; they are the 'images' of our thoughts. Our senses 'suffice for knowledge'; all the objects about which we think come to us through the medium of sense-perception and it is the thoughts, conceptions, 'ideas', thus gained which we name when we use words.

It is not, however, enough for a scientific use of language - for the language of 'natural philosophy' - that our words should represent our notions or ideas; as well as this our notions must represent reality. Our notions must represent things in the world. Thus it is that in natural philosophy Bacon wants to say that our words reflect or mark the divisions which we discern to exist among things, and it is the things that are named by our words. Using a name, however, has in the past misled people into believing that they thereby know a thing that is named: Bacon deprecates this tendency and finds in it one of the main reasons why so much previous philosophy has ended in discussions about words without any advance being made in our knowledge of things.

Bacon considers language, as we know it, to

1. Ibid., p. 441.
be a system of arbitrarily agreed symbols, the letters of the alphabet, which we use as 'a vehicle to convey the thoughts of one man to another'. Other sets of symbols may be used for communicative purposes: for example, gestures and hieroglyphics, both of which can mean something without the intervention of words. Both of these he considers to represent in the sense of 'picture' for both these 'have always some similitude to the thing signified'. In Bacon's opinion that we are inclined to believe we know a thing if we know the name we apply to it, and in his tendency to under-emphasize the special role of existing language as opposed to hieroglyphic or gesture languages we may see evidence of his distrust of words as an instrument for the gaining of knowledge. It was from this in part that sprang the seventeenth-century emphasis upon the necessity for dealing directly with things; it was this approach to the world of science that prompted the adoption of the Royal Society's motto.

Although Bacon does not develop a theory of meaning after the manner of Hobbes, his beliefs and

1. Ibid., p. 439.
2. Ibid., p. 440.
intentions are made abundantly clear. Without analysing the questions at issue to any great extent he clearly supported a theory in the realm of scientific, descriptive, discourse which took words to be names of things in the world, though he too, like those who were to follow him, assumed the presence of ideas in the mind as intermediaries between words and things. His emphasis upon the necessity for the observation of facts in the pursuit of knowledge, with his correlative deprecation of the previous philosophical tendency to speak in abstractions quite divorced from reality, helped to destroy much that had previously passed for knowledge and philosophy. Bacon's task at the beginning of the century, was not to concern himself with 'speculative and withal unprofitable matters'; it was rather to 'lay more firmly the foundations, and extend more widely the limits, of the power and greatness of man'.

His task was 'to open and stir the earth a little' at the roots of the sciences; just as Locke was to see himself as an 'under-labourer' engaged upon much the same task.  

Hobbes, considers that the transitory nature of our thoughts compels the imposition of words as marks of the ideas we receive from experience - the acquisition of knowledge by any man is only to be brought about by the use of some 'sensible monuments' or 'marks' of our thoughts, marks which when once imposed upon a certain idea will at a future time be the occasion of our again entertaining that idea; i.e., this mark, by association, will assist us in again thinking the same thought.\(^1\) That is, if there were one man in the universe, he would be unable to remember past sights, sounds, and smells, he would be unable to recall them to mind at will, unless he invented for this purpose certain marks to assist his recall; if the individual man is to think at all, or to remember what he has thought, he must develop language of at least a simple sort. This amounts to saying not only that private languages are possible, but that they are in fact necessary, at least for the solitary man. They are also possible in society, where a man may develop a private language and thus advance his learning: the development of such a language,

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however, Hobbes takes to be a useless occupation which could be turned into an occupation of benefit to the whole of mankind by the use of public signs by means of which 'what one man finds out may be manifested and made known to others'.¹ This is the ground which Hobbes advances for the development of language in the full sense, for public language, namely, that the public benefit is best served by such a language - a utilitarian or pragmatic ground.

As well as needing marks of our own thoughts as an aid in recall, we also need signs whereby these thoughts may be, as it were, laid before the view of another; we need to reach agreement upon the significatory function of certain marks for the development of the sciences. 'The difference ... betwixt marks and signs is this, that we make those for our own use, but these for the use of others'.² In actual languages the words of the language function both as marks, by assisting us in recalling our own thoughts, and as signs, by making these thoughts clear to others. The words of our public language only become signs, according to Hobbes, by being

1. Ibid., p. 14.
2. Ibid., p. 15.
'disposed and ordered in speech', for while a word by itself may serve as a 'mark' for our own use it cannot be a public sign unless it occurs in a context of some sort. While the hearing of a word may produce an idea of something in the mind of he that hears it, this person cannot know whether or not his idea corresponds to that in the mind of the speaker unless something is, as it were, said with it. A word becomes a name as distinguished from a mark only by forming part of a statement.

'Words so connected as that they become signs of our thoughts, are called SPEECH, of which every part is a name'; every word in a significant cognitive statement is a name. Hobbes appears here to be extending the superficially plausible naming-model of meaning beyond the limits within which it may be seen to operate with any degree of success. He seems to want to say that words like 'of', 'is', 'but', 'quickly', are names just as much as are the sorts of words to which we more readily attach this label, such as 'John', 'man', 'animal', and the like. However, before approaching the problem of what, if anything, is named

1. Ibid., p.15.
by a word like 'of' we must first be clear as to the precise reference of words like 'man' and 'animal'. Hobbes has no doubt that the words most readily acceptable as referring or naming words are the words which are signs of certain mental entities, namely, of such of our ideas as are derived from an observation of the physical world. They are signs of these ideas and not signs of the things themselves:

But seeing names ordered in speech ... are signs of our conceptions, it is manifest they are not signs of the things themselves; for that the sound of this word stone should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone. (1)

The notion that substantive words are the signs of our ideas does away, Hobbes contends, with much scholastic verbiage about whether our words refer to or signify the matter or the form, the actually present object or the essential nature, of things in the world.

In the next section, however, Hobbes appears at first sight to contradict his earlier statement by saying that the word 'stone' is the name of the thing itself; by this, however, he only means that any use

1. Ibid., p. 17.
of the word 'stone' is indicative of the fact that the user is thinking about (having an idea of) a stone, and that stones in fact exist. In this sense the word 'stone' is the name of a thing, but primarily it signifies our idea, although our idea is derived from an existent object or set of objects. Not every substantive need name, even in this indirect sense, an object in the world: Hobbes is committed to saying that every substantive occurring in speech is a name, but this only compels him to hold that we have a conception which answers to the use of certain words; this conception itself does not necessarily mirror an existent object in the way in which our idea or image of a stone may be said to mirror actual stones. Thus 'future' is a name yet nothing future can 'have any being'; we have a conception of 'future' formed from our experience of the past in relation to the present but 'no future thing has yet any being'.

Hobbes goes further than this, however, in saying that certain groups of words whose referent logically could not be exemplified in experience such as 'that which neither is nor has been, nor ever shall, or ever can be' are none the less names. This is to say no more than that we are able to have an idea, conception, or notion, corresponding in some way to
these words; we are able to use these words intelligibly and therefore they must on Hobbes's definition constitute a name. That 'nothing' is a name, or that 'nobody' is a name should not on Hobbes's view have led the King to make the mistake he did in talking to his Messenger, for that 'nobody' can be used and understood is not even *prima facie* evidence that there is an entity in the world referred to by the name.

But seeing every name has some relation to that which is named, though that which we name be not always a thing that has a being in nature, yet it is lawful for doctrine's sake to apply the word *thing* to whatsoever we name; as if it were all one whether that thing be truly existent or be only feigned. (1)

Ultimately, that is to say, Hobbes does not really care a jot whether we say that our names refer to things or to ideas provided we bear in mind that a centaur, a stone, the future, are all very different kinds of 'things' - so different in fact that no information is conveyed by saying that all are the names of things. Names signify, and that which they signify are the thoughts, ideas, or conceptions in the mind of the speaker; some of these conceptions are derived in a very direct manner from - to borrow Locke's terminology - archetypes in reality; others are not.

1. Ibid., p. 18.
It should be remembered at this point that Hobbes's primary concern is to give an account of cognitive or scientific discourse; so far as his theory of naming is an explanation of how language operates at this level, it is not of great moment that his account of the functioning of words referring to fictitious entities or to logical impossibilities fails to be convincing. He is concerned essentially with giving an account of the meaning of simple statements such as 'There are six men in this room', 'There is a black pen on the desk', 'Swans are white', and so on; with statements, in short, that convey information about the world. In statements of this sort, he contends, our substantives directly name our ideas, and indirectly name the objects from which these ideas are derived.

Hobbes and his contemporaries were able to see that many words did not appear to fit their naming-model. It did not occur to them that the construction of a radically different model might afford them more explanatory power; instead, they habitually used certain artificial devices by means of which it was hoped that all, or most, words could be shown to function in this way. The first device they adopted we have already touched on, namely, that of postulating certain
mental entities to which our words referred. This in itself created difficulties for them for it soon became apparent that we could not have determinate images, say, of 'corporeity' or 'extension' - and for Hobbes, in particular, all imagery is determinate.¹ Hobbes did not adopt Locke's way out by suggesting that we could have general ideas to which our general words referred; instead he held that those names which are universal are such simply by virtue of the use to which they are put. Universal names may be used to refer to any one of a number of things; to say of a name that it is universal does not indicate that it denotes or refers to either an abstract essence or to a general idea - it merely points out a use to which the name may be put. Thus the universal word 'man' refers, not to an existent universal, nor to a general idea, but to each of a class of objects despite the fact that in using the word the user will have one (determinate) conception in mind.

Abstract names such as 'rationality', 'corporeity' and the like arise through our search for the causes of our making statements such as 'this creature is rational'. On Hobbes's view of the proposition we are

¹. Ibid., p. 60.
here applying two different names to the same object—namely, 'this creature' and 'rational'—and when we ask why is it that we do this the answer might be given that we apply the name 'rational' to this object because we see that this particular creature is rational or 'possesses rationality'. Here rationality does not denote anything existent in reality, it is simply the name given to 'that which in any subject denotes the cause of the concrete name':¹ that is to say, there is a quality of things such that it prompts us to apply the concrete name 'reason' to it and our use of the word 'rationality' is simply an extension of this which denotes the cause of the concrete name 'reason'. In his attitude to abstract names, such as 'rationality' and 'corporeity', to universal names such as 'man' and 'animal', in his emphasis upon the initial privacy of the reference of our ordinary words, Hobbes is clearly motivated by his desire to attack the prevalent scholastic emphasis upon essences and abstract natures, which he feels is to be blamed for the lack of advance in the sciences.

The main device employed by Hobbes to prevent his naming-model 'bursting at the seams' was to draw

¹. Ibid., p. 32.
distinctions between words, distinctions which enabled him to show, to his own satisfaction, that to uphold the theory that words were names did not necessarily compel him to say that words must all denote something really existing. If for Hobbes ideas were always determinate images it was more than ever necessary for him to adopt some such device as that of a division between different sorts of names in order to retain the plausibility of that naming theory which he takes as basic. We shall see, however, that doubt may be cast upon the contention that an idea or conception for Hobbes is always an image of this sort; that it may be held that here his statement of his belief differs greatly from his actual practice. We shall see also later that this hesitancy concerning the nature and status of 'ideas', which amounts to a lack of careful analysis of the notion, is common to seventeenth-century British epistemology and accounts in part for popular interpretations of their views on meaning, interpretations which I hope to show are - to say the least - misleading.

The main distinctions which Hobbes draws among names need not detain us long: I only wish to point out here that part of his purpose in drawing these distinctions was to attempt the assimilation of
all words to names. He first distinguishes between positive and negative names: names such as 'man' or 'Socrates' are positive names because they denote any one of a variety of men and one and the same man respectively. Opposed to these sorts of names are negative names which are positive names that have the prefix 'not' added to them, e.g. 'not-man'; by the use of these names, Hobbes remarks, 'we take notice ourselves, and signify to others what we have not thought of'.¹ By this he seems to mean that, in the case mentioned, our name denotes a conception we have which is essentially representative of everything not denoted by the word 'man': the world, that is, is divided into men and not-men. If Hobbes, of course, is holding that all names denote our conceptions and conceptions are always concrete, he would meet with apparently insurmountable difficulties in saying that we are able to entertain a determinate image of 'not-men'. What he would of course say is that this word denotes all the things in the world that are not men; the use of the name 'not-men' would be accompanied in any particular use by a particular determinate image

¹. Ibid., p. 19.
of any one of the things that are not men. This, however, would be hard to credit as an account of any process which actually occurs, just as it is hard to credit the general statement that any use of words is necessarily accompanied by imagery. The device of introducing negative names, however, enables Hobbes on the one hand to give an account of words like 'nonsense' and 'infinite' in terms of his naming theory and, on the other hand, to give a plausible account of the function of the operator 'not' such that it also squares with his theory by being made part of a name instead of a name in its own right. Any positive name and its correlative between them exhaust everything that is, for everything is either x or non-x, whatever x may be.

The next distinction between names is that between common or universal names and proper names: a universal name, as we have already seen, is the name of many different though similar things, as for example 'a stone' is a name applicable to any member of the class of stones; on the other hand, a proper name is one which is applicable to only one thing.

Examples of this latter class of names are 'he that writ the Iliad', 'Homer', 'this man', and 'that man'.

The reason why 'a stone' is a universal name is not that it refers to an essential nature belonging to all things of a certain class, as the scholastic philosophers would have us believe, but that it can be used to refer to many different individual things; whereas a proper name is one which is 'proper to one thing', which can, that is, be applied to one thing only. For obvious reasons Hobbes prefers to refer to common names rather than universal names; they are names 'common to many things' as opposed to those 'proper to one thing'. Again here, as in the case of the distinction between positive and negative names, Hobbes is ensuring the success of his naming-model by reducing so-called universal names to the level of proper names, for it is the explanation of the meaning of this latter type of name which he took to be fundamental for any general explanation of meaning-theory. By means of this approach to universals, at the same time as dealing a powerful blow against scholasticism he is able to support his simple explanation.

of meaning as a naming process by showing that in any particular use of a universal term, as a predicate-expression at least, it is the name of only one thing though it has the capacity or power to act as a name for things other than this. Where, on the other hand, a universal term appears as a subject expression its reference is all the members of the class to which the name is applied; even in this use its function is analogous to that of proper names occurring as subject-expressions for these, too, refer to all the members of a class, even though that class by definition has but one member.

Other distinctions between different sorts of names drawn by Hobbes are comparatively unimportant for our purposes. We have already noted the distinction between abstract and concrete names and have seen how here again, he explains the reason for the use of abstract names in terms of the names of existent qualities of which we are aware in sense-experience. As in the case of the universal-proper name distinction, while attacking current philosophical beliefs he reinforces his contention that all words are names and their meaning or reference is that entity which they name.

Thus Hobbes's account of language seems to amount to the following: we experience the world through
our various senses, i.e., we entertain phantasms, notions, conceptions, ideas of what there is in the world around us. In thinking we arrange, as it were, these images in certain patterns or trains in our mind and, for the purposes of recall, we can and do assign certain marks to these conceptions. We can in this way build a 'private' language which would suffice for the gaining of knowledge: however, as this would be of little use in society, we agree to use the same marks as others for registering and communicating our thoughts, on the assumption that others have much the same experiences that we have. Marks used in this way are names; names usually of our conceptions, which may be said also to be names of things. Universal names are not the names of mysterious entities which we do not directly experience, but are simply names which may be applied to many objects in the world. We can give names to 'things' which can never be experienced as existing - e.g., 'the future' - but this does not mean that we are naming a realm of Meinongian objects. It means merely that we have an idea or conception corresponding to these names. It is this attitude upon Hobbes's part that throws doubt upon his account of the 'idea' as being always some determinate image; when speaking of names of this sort he seems to mean
by 'conception', not an entity of some sort, but simply a capacity to understand what is being said, a realization that these 'names' are useful to us in speech. He begins, that is, from the notion that the words we use in cognitive discourse name elements of our experience and he goes to great lengths to ensure that this model will still do as a satisfactory explanation of the meanings of universal, negative, and abstract names. He is unable to do this however in respect of the 'names' of that which it is empirically impossible to experience and here he introduces for the first time a different criterion of meaningfulness; e.g., in the case of 'the future' the name serves to signify a 'knitting together' of other elements of experience by the mind. Relative names such as 'cause', 'unlike', 'equal', and 'master' also serve to signify a comparison we make between ideas that we entertain. In these cases that which the name 'signifies' is certainly not a determinate image in the mind.

So far, then, all words are names: they are either the names of our conceptions (and indirectly of things in the world) or they are names of mental processes, or they are names of names. In speaking of
'nothing' he gives us a clue to the very wide sense in which he is prepared (or, perhaps, forced) to use 'idea' by saying that 'nothing' is a name, i.e., is meaningful, because it is 'not unuseful' in discourse.¹ We shall have occasion later to return to this aspect of seventeenth-century talk about questions of meaning.

The question which next arises is, 'How does Hobbes explain words other than substantives on the naming-model he wishes to employ?'. We have already seen that the operator 'not' is given a place in the language, not by allowing it to be a name, but by holding that it is part of a name. This same device is used by Hobbes in other instances. Words 'which denote universality and particularity' such as 'all', 'every', and 'some' are not names but only parts of names: their use in discourse is to enable us to communicate with others - that is, we find them helpful in discourse in making clear to others what it is that we are thinking about.² The same may be said of articles such as 'the' and 'a', with demonstratives like 'this' and 'that', which Hobbes does not specify

¹. Ibid., p. 18.
². Ibid., p. 22.
as parts of names, but always uses as such.

The various parts of the verb 'to be' are also given an anti-scholastic signification by Hobbes. The simplest kind of proposition is one in which 'two names' are 'copulated' by means of some part of the verb 'to be'; in discourse of this sort we signify merely that the final name in the proposition is the name of the same thing as is named by the subject of the proposition. The verb 'to be', the copula, merely signifies a belief entertained by the speaker, namely, that he considers the two names of the proposition to be so related. Hobbes uses this analysis of the function of the verb 'to be' to attack the scholastic tendency to think that because we can speak of properties as if they are separated from bodies we can therefore speak of them as if they could exist independent of all bodies. This arises, he contends, from their habit of asking what it is 'to be' anything, which gives rise to the mistaken view that they can speak intelligibly of such things as 'abstract substance' and 'separated essence'. Further, if it were not the case that we normally used the copula in propositions, but instead used adjectival verbs following the subject, the interminable controversies concerning 'essence', 'entity', 'quiddity',
and the like would never have begun. Hobbes once again accuses the scholastic philosophy of drawing inferences concerning the nature of the world from certain purely contingent facts about language.

Hobbes did not hold the naming theory of meaning in as unsophisticated a form as it was held by the scholastics. In the way he differed from the traditional account his anti-scholasticism becomes clear: by means of an altered model of meaning-explanation he was able to show that there were no abstract essences referred to by our general words, and to insist that the world we experience is composed entirely of individuals. As has been pointed out, proper names 'denote a singular body with a unique combination of properties'; the traditional practice had been to treat universals as not differing in their function from proper names, so that to talk of 'man' or 'animal' was to talk of some one thing - although a peculiar thing - an essence, or nature, which either existed in some super-mundane realm or else existed within things. Aquinas, for example, would have been

content to agree that only individual objects exist in the world but he would have been far from content to deny the existence of the 'abstract essences' to which Hobbes objects. From the things in the world that we experience, Aquinas holds - or rather, from the images we receive from them - man's intellect is able to abstract the *species intelligibilis* or intelligible forms of these material things. It is these intelligible forms or 'quiddities' that are the real universals to which our general words refer; it is they which are the 'meanings' of our spoken and written words.¹

In either case the essence was an 'object' so far as it was an object of thought; this was the reference of universal words just as it is a certain heavenly body that is the reference of 'Saturn'. Just as proper names were taken to be labels attached to individuals, so universal names were traditionally thought to be labels attached to certain essences lying behind or beyond the sensible world. It is to Hobbes's credit that he realized that universals never function in the same way as proper names; proper names,

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¹ See e.g., Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Bk. I, Chs. 46 and 53; Copleston, Aquinas (1955), pp. 175-7; D'Arcy, St. Thomas Aquinas (1953), pp. 165-8.
used to label elements of experience, do have a single bearer, but universal names or, as he prefers to call them, 'common' names are common to many such elements—they have many bearers. For Hobbes universal names function quite differently from the way in which proper names function: they still refer, but they may refer to each of the members of a class indifferently. In this or that particular use they may refer to this or that particular individual but their range of possible uses covers all the members of the class of individuals. Proper names, on the other hand, are uniquely referring.

Thus Hobbes saw that to say of a certain word that it was a universal was simply to say that it could be used to refer to more than one object; it was still (perhaps misleadingly) called a 'name' by Hobbes but it was a name common to a group of particulars. It is true, of course, that alongside this altered naming-model Hobbes retained the earlier model so far as he held our names to refer to mental contents. However, that there is a random occurrence of a particular image concomitantly with the use of the word 'man' was not, in Hobbes's view, a proof that this image was the reference of the word; we remember, when using certain words, that they sometimes bring one image to mind
and sometimes another - we are aware, that is, that they are names common to many things and do not refer solely to the images that accompany them. In speaking in this way Hobbes goes against his definition of a name as a 'sign of what thought the speaker had' in his mind if we consider this alongside his belief in the existence of only determinate imagery. 'Thought' and 'conception' for Hobbes, however, are more than equivalent to 'idea' in the sense of 'determinate image'. He would be prepared to say that I could have a thought or conception of 'man' yet he would not hold that I entertained an image of 'man' but only of 'this man'. To say that a name is a sign of thought is not, for Hobbes, to say that it is the sign of a determinate image in my mind. Ultimately words are names of the things in the world that they are used to denote, or refer to.

So far then, we have seen that Hobbes continues the Baconian tradition of explaining meaning at the level of 'scientific' discourse in terms of names referring to things through the medium of ideas. Hobbes's theory is more detailed than that of Bacon but, so far as we have gone, Hobbes has said little with which

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Bacon would not agree. To give us knowledge about the world, our language must be such that the words we use in a referring way refer to elements of experience which are, for all practical purposes, the meanings of these words. This is the sort of view which is commonly attributed to thinkers of the seventeenth century in England and there is no doubt that it recurs time and again within the works of those with whom we are concerned.

Section 3 Some Minor Figures

Thus Joseph Glanvill used a similar metaphor to that employed by Bacon in order to point out that it was the task of his fellow members of the Royal Society to 'remove the Rubbish, lay in Materials, and put things in order for the Building'; this was an age of modesty in philosophy, of piece-meal additions to the storehouse of knowledge, and - with the exception of Hobbes - the system-building was left to later generations. The 'Rubbish' to be removed was the obscurantism of scholasticism which lay in the way of scientific advancement, the 'Materials' to be

collected were the results of careful observation and experiment of natural things, and the ordering of things for the 'Building' was in part the suggested reform of language which is to be our concern in a later chapter.

By the time Glanvill published his spirited attack upon scholasticism in 1661 the Baconian emphasis upon the derivation of all our 'notions' from experience, coupled with the belief in the necessity for scientific language to refer to these experienced elements, had become commonplace. It was no longer novel to say that 'the Aristotelian philosophy is an huddle of words and terms insignificant' or to ask 'what a number of words here have nothing answering them?' Glanvill re-emphasizes the current plea, which was part of the programme of the Royal Society, that we should avoid becoming lost in verbal abstractions and 'intentional nothings': we must, if we are to gain knowledge, deal with things, not words. Things in the world are only known to us by the impressions they make upon our senses; 'we cannot perceive the manner of any of Nature's operations, but by proportion to our senses, and a return

to material phantasms'.

To avoid the 'litigious' nature of scholastic philosophy Glanvill suggests that we follow the example of the mathematicians who have developed a science which is certain because they have built upon 'clear and settled significations of names', a commendable practice hitherto avoided in the work of philosophers; philosophers - as 'Master Hobs ingeniously observeth' - have preferred to become lost in a 'verbal labyrinth'. The terms of mathematics, Glanvill finds, are 'clear and settled' in their signification and 'admit of no ambiguity or insignificant obscurity'. Every name introduced into this study is carefully defined and given a 'stated real meaning' which is lacking in the use of words in the 'Aristotelian philosophy'. In the 'Aristotelian philosophy' words are permitted to be used without the participants in the discussions being agreed about their meaning; because of these permitted mistakes in 'simple terms' the propositions and deductions containing them reflect in a greater degree these first confusions.

1. Ibid., p. 67.
2. Ibid., p. 160.
3. Ibid., p. 160.
seeker after truth must first seek clear 'simple notions' and must follow these by circumspect deductions: 'One mistake of either simple apprehension, or connexion, makes an erroneous conclusion'.¹ Like Hobbes, Glanvill accuses the scholastic philosophy of resolving everything into 'occult' qualities. For Glanvill, as for both Bacon and Hobbes, all our knowledge is derived from our senses; we entertain in our minds 'representations' or 'conceptions' of things outside us and our names are signs of these conceptions.

However, words are not names of our ideas. Glanvill suggests that for all we know ideas may differ from person to person and it may well be that all we agree in is the name: 'And though we agree in a common name, yet it may be, I have the same representation from yellow, that another hath from green'.² Because we agree so readily in the use of our words it may seem paradoxical to talk in this manner, but that this is not so may readily be seen if we try to determine whether, for example, our idea of white is the same as another's idea which he calls by the same name for 'how the same things appear to

¹. Ibid., p. 164.
². Ibid., pp. 218-9.
others they only know, that are conscious of them'.

Here Glanvill merely emphasizes the point made earlier by Hobbes that our experiences are essentially private and thus, in a sense, so is our language. In any normal sense of 'language', however, we are faced with a public phenomenon: this is because, although our words signify our ideas and these may differ from person to person, in any actual use of words we are referring to the things which are causally connected with the ideas that arise in us. Our words are names of things even though the idea intervenes between word and thing and, so far as it does, obscures the 'real' character of the latter. Words in scientific prose do not refer to our ideas, but to that which causes the idea to arise in us. Thus in Glanvill we again see a reflection of what he would have called 'the climate of opinion' of his time. Words, our units of meaning, are names; they signify the ideas, conceits, representations, conceptions, caused in us by the things in the external world from which ultimately all our knowledge is derived. He does not

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1. Ibid., p. 222.

2. See The Vanity of Dogmatizing, p. 222, where Glanvill speaks of the 'conceit of what he calls white' - i.e., the idea of that which is called 'white'.
elaborate his theory of naming further but he must hold the view that in communication my use of a word arouses an idea in the mind of my hearer to which he normally applies the name. Locke also recognized that different ideas might be signified by the same name as used by different people; the difference between Locke and Glanvill, however, rests in the fact that while Glanvill gives us no clue to - in fact, denies the possibility of - checking the similarity between 'ideas' in two people Locke does show us what is required for us to say that two people 'have the same idea'. Meaning for Glanvill consists in a naming-relation between words and the world through the medium of ideas. *Prima facie*, meaning for him is essentially a private matter where the only public, in the sense of 'knowable', element is the word. He gives no explicit direction as to how public meaning is to be developed from this; though it will be seen later that, given Glanvill's basic views, only one possible theory of public meaning is open to him.

Glanvill's writing is admittedly polemical, and he makes no attempt to develop an all-embracing theory of meaning even at the descriptive or scientific level. He does not, for example, deal specifically with the crucial class of general words although his
view of ideas would point to him holding beliefs not unlike those of Hobbes. He does allow himself to say that certain words, such as 'heat' and 'cold', are names, not of things in the world, but of our feelings or 'passions' but he goes no further in analyzing the sorts of 'things' referred to by our words. He is content to combat the occultism of traditional philosophy and rests satisfied with the injunction that the words of knowledge-expressing statements should all be casable in terms of some definite experience. He accepted as true the common view of the seventeenth century concerning the reference of 'names'.

Other men of this century held similar views, although we do find in some a greater stress upon the existence of a naming-relation between 'words' and 'ideas' rather than between 'words' and 'things'. This is not a serious difference but a difference of emphasis indicative of the fluctuation throughout the century - and in individual thinkers - between conceptualism and nominalism, a tendency to vacillate between saying that ideas could be general in some sense and saying, as Hobbes wished to say, that all ideas are determinate images.
We find also a tendency in those who believed that we all receive the same ideas from experience to say that our words name the 'ideas' in the mind of him that uses them - and also, of course, by hypothesis they name the ideas in the mind of a hearer. On the other hand, where a possible difference between the ideas so received is admitted the inclination is to hold that words are the names of 'things'. However, as no one in seventeenth-century England seriously doubted the existence of things which exist independently of us, there is no practical difference between these two views. In holding that a word names an idea which is the same in each of us and yet is derived from things, I am in effect naming the thing which arouses precisely the same idea in your mind as in mine. This will become clearer when we discuss the movements for a reform of language in the seventeenth century: the temper of the age was directed towards giving a proper account of the things in the world.

Bishop Wilkins was one of those who spoke more in terms of words as the names of ideas, and who at the same time held that ideas received from the world of real things do not differ as between persons. I shall have occasion later to refer in more detail to Wilkins in another connexion; for the moment, however, I simply want
to show that Wilkins, in his best known work, adopts the sort of naming theory of meaning which I have held to be typical of the seventeenth century. This might best be done by quoting in extenso from this work:

As men do generally agree in the same Principle of Reason, so do they likewise agree in the same internal notion or apprehension of things. The external expression of these mental notions whereby men communicate their thoughts to one another, is either to the ear, or to the eye. To the ear by sounds, and more particularly by articulate voice and words. To the eye by anything that is visible, Motion, Light, Colour, Figure, and more particularly by Writing. That conceit which men have in their minds concerning a horse or a tree, is the notion or mental image of that beast, or natural thing, of such a nature, shape, and use. The names given to these in several languages are such arbitrary sounds and words, as nations of men have agreed upon, either casually or designedly, to express their mental notions of them. The written word is the figure or picture of that sound. (1)

Wilkins is concerned here in particular with the fact that where a Frenchman uses 'cheval' and an Englishman uses the word 'horse' they both refer to the same thing, or - as Wilkins would say - they both have before their minds the same 'mental image' or 'notion'. Wilkins has none of the misgivings of Glanvill regarding the possibility of these images varying as between persons, for we each apparently obtain the same mental image

1. John Wilkins, An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language (1668), I.5.2., p. 20.
from the same stimulus. The people of each nation arbitrarily choose a word as a name of this image, and thus language is born.

The tradition of naming theories of meaning pervaded philosophies as different from that of Hobbes as the thought of men like Richard Burthogge, who, a century before Kant, anticipated in many ways the latter's 'Copernican revolution'. While holding that we never know the thing-in-itself because our minds contribute something to the object apprehended, Burthogge nevertheless adopts a view similar to Locke's sensationalistic account of the origin of knowledge when he comes to discuss how it is that the mind becomes furnished with its objects: '... the impressions of things without upon the Sensories, produce or occasion in them the Cogitations which we call Sentiments, as Colours, Sound, Sapours, etc.' The 'sentiments' act upon the 'Understanding' to produce there 'higher Cogitations which we call Notions, Apprehensions of Reason or Ideas'. Knowledge may


3. Ibid., Sect. 24.
be seen firstly as an 'apprehension' of an object, and secondly as a 'conception' of the idea by means of which we perceive that object. We take note of things by means of words or propositions;\(^1\) our words and propositions, however, do not name our conceptions, but name instead the things of which we have a conception.

Those Words or Propositions any one hath a sense of, those things to which the Words or Propositions relate, he hath a Notion of ... and to have the sense of a Word or Proposition, is to frame a Notion of it, or of the things signified by it. (2)

That is to say, forBurthogge words in statements concerned with the real world relate to or signify not our ideas or notions but the things from whence these notions are derived.

John Norris, who was to become one of Locke's earliest critics,\(^3\) writes in what I have taken to be the typical psychological and linguistic framework of the seventeenth century in A Collection of Miscellanies, first published in 1687. In the essay 'The Art of Thinking' in this volume he finds one of the impediments

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1. Ibid., p. 11.
2. Ibid., pp. 14-5 (underlining added).
3. See his Cursory Reflections upon a Book call'd An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, included at the end of his Christian Blessedness (1690).
of knowledge to be an undue deference to authority, an instance of which is to be found in the scholastic philosophers.¹ He speaks further of our 'simple ideas' and the necessity for avoiding 'confused' and 'obscure' notions if we are to obtain knowledge. He does not in this work explicitly set forth a naming theory of the type which we have seen to be commonplace in his time, but by implication he does when he argues for less ambiguity in the use of our words. For, he says, words and phrases are able to have many meanings, many interpretations, and in discourse we need to be sure that we are aware of the 'determinate sense' in which our adversary is using a word.² If we do not do this we end in discussions which are merely verbal, which bring us no nearer to clarity or to understanding of the problems that perplex us. Norris never doubted that our words name 'ideas' or 'thoughts' which are made clear to our hearers when we speak, and which are derived from the external world. Thus, as well as adopting the customary anti-scholastic view, Norris opts for an account of meaning which insists upon the


² Ibid., p. 149.
necessity of maintaining a close link between the words which we use and the things in the world; only in this way may we overcome the problems with which reality presents us.

Richard Cumberland, whose general philosophical position has close affinities with that of Locke, published, in 1672, an account of the laws of nature in which he deals incidentally with many of the issues later canvassed by Locke. Notable among these are his account of the origin of our knowledge in experience, and an exposition of the nature of mathematical and ethical knowledge. Professor Gibson has noted that there are striking similarities between the accounts both Cumberland and Locke give of mathematical and ethical knowledge, and considers that there is internal evidence in Locke's Essay pointing to the fact that Locke wrote in full awareness of Cumberland's work. Although Cumberland does not approach Locke's systematic


development of the points they have in common - for these questions are only incidental to his main plan - he, like Locke, denies the suggestion that we have innate ideas and puts forward a theory that all our ideas originate in experience. Our primary cognitions - our 'notions', 'thoughts', or 'simple apprehensions' - are obtained either by the operation of the object itself upon the mind 'from whence the Mind perceives and becomes conscious of its operations' or 'by the Ministrations of our external senses' whereby 'The rest of Mankind, and the other parts of the visible World, are conveyed into our Minds'. These two ways of gaining our primary data are called by Cumberland 'internal perception' and 'external sensation' respectively.\[1\] Cumberland recognized that abstraction and generalization, as Locke later agreed, are both necessary for science: accordingly, he holds that the mind has a faculty of abstracting from the data of sense by 'cutting off such Accidents as distinguish each single Particular from the rest'.\[2\] Thus Cumberland holds closely similar views to those of Locke on the questions of the origin of our knowledge in sense-

2. Ibid., I.2.11.
experience and upon the nature of ideas.

As we would expect, his account of words accepts the current views of his time: we invent spoken words and written marks to use as an aid in recalling remembered ideas to mind and to communicate our thoughts to others. Like Hobbes, and unlike Glanvill, Cumberland is in no doubt that we all receive the same ideas from objects without us. Because our notions come to us from natural things 'it comes to pass, that the same notions prevail everywhere altho' the Language or Words be different'.

Language is a human invention, an invention of words designed to stand for or represent our ideas; these words we join together 'at pleasure' to make propositions which, if true, are in 'agreement with things'. A man uses words in language as a vehicle for 'conveying his own sentiments and observations to the understanding of others'. Again in Cumberland, therefore, we find the same sort of attitude to names and that which is named as we have already noted in Bishop Wilkins: there is the same tendency to emphasize the naming-relation between our words and ideas; however, at the same time

1. Ibid., I.2.2.
2. Ibid., I.2.5 and I.2.9.
3. Ibid., I.2.11.
there is the firmly held belief that real things produce in all observers the same ideas and that descriptive discourse purports to describe, not our mental state, but the world of physical things, the world of the scientist.

The sorts of views I have outlined as being views on questions of meaning commonly held in the seventeenth century are well known: when questions of meaning-theory are raised these are the sorts of things that are commonly said about Bacon and Hobbes and the others. And with these accounts I would wish to agree - they are indeed correct accounts of the views on meaning put forward by empiricist philosophers in the seventeenth century.

As accounts of what these thinkers believed, however, they have one important failing, namely, they are partial - they do not take account of many other issues raised at this time, just as they fail to take account of the general intellectual background which stimulated the philosophizing of the period. The nature of this intellectual background and its implications for the philosophy of the time will be discussed below.¹ Before turning to this question, however, we shall first

1. See Chs. 5 and 6 below.
discuss the common interpretations offered of John Locke's attitude towards questions of meaning, for in Locke - here, as in so much else - we find a distillation, a summary, of the prevailing notions of the century.
I wish to outline here the current interpretations of Locke on these questions with a view to showing that the common interpretations, like those offered of his predecessors, are far from satisfactory - or, perhaps we should say, they are satisfactory as far as they go but that they do not look closely enough at Locke's actual practice, or at the intellectual milieu from which he took his start. They are satisfied for the most part to rest in the theory of meaning explicitly stated in the early sections of Book III; a theory which was a variant of the 'naming' theories of meaning that we have seen to be commonplace at the time.

Locke opens Book III with the statement that men have been given language to weld them into society. Accordingly, men were given the ability and the physical organs necessary to make 'articulate sounds'. This, however, was not enough. An articulate sound, as such, Locke points out, has no right to be called a word. We may train a parrot to utter articulate sounds but because the bird does not use them consistently in a referring
way we say that it has not the power of 'speech'. To constitute part of a language words must have a distinctive significatory quality, they must be used as signs of something other than themselves. Locke's fundamental belief is that words are signs of the ideas which form the content of our thoughts; it is obviously true that we cannot express our thoughts without using some public sign of these thoughts. Primarily, for Locke, words are the signs of those ideas which occur in the speaker's mind, they are signs of his 'internal conceptions'. ¹ We make words signs of ideas in our minds and by this means our ideas or thoughts are conveyed from one man's mind to that of another. 'The use of words is to be sensible marks of our ideas' and in 'their primary and immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them'. ² It would seem from Locke's account so far that as my words would refer to my ideas alone, and not to some publicly identifiable thing, the communication which exists between men could in point of fact never be achieved; all languages would be essentially private. We would talk solely about our mental states together.

2. Ibid., III.2.1, and III.2.2.
with, in Locke's language, the objects signified by these states, without there being any possibility of making others aware which ideas and objects we intend to refer to by the use of particular expressions.

Locke sees the difficulty attendant upon the word-idea-thing relationship he is putting forward and evolves a language common to a group of people out of this material, a language in the full sense of that word, by two ad hoc assumptions. Firstly, we 'secretly refer our words to, or take them to be signs of, the ideas in other people's minds'; that is to say, when we use a word publicly as a sign of an idea or thought of our own we assume that this word will cause the same idea to arise in the mind of our hearer. That we are justified in assuming our words to refer to similar ideas in the minds of others Locke takes to be proved by the fact that we are able to understand others when they speak.¹ The implication here is that if my speech did not arouse precisely the same thoughts in the mind of my hearer as occurred in my mind we would never be able to communicate. We should notice here, that the only

¹. Ibid., III.2.4.
possible proof Locke can have that he has been understood is that his hearer behaves appropriately, i.e. in a manner that the speaker would expect. That is to say, the sole justification for believing our words to arouse the same ideas in the mind of our hearer as occur in our mind is the fact that he understands us; and if this understanding can only exist in his behaving appropriately - i.e. making the expected remark, performing the expected action - then to say that my words arouse the same ideas in the hearer as occur in me is to say no more than that my words stimulate him to any one of a possible range of behaviour responses. Locke might well reply that these responses are only intelligible if regarded as responses to the hearer's ideas. This, however, would simply be a roundabout way of saying that my words, signifying my ideas, arouse the sort of response in my hearer that the same words delivered by another speaker would arouse in me; that when I behave in this way I have certain ideas 'in my mind'; therefore my hearer has the same ideas in his mind as I have in mine. While on Locke's theory this may well be so, it still remains a fact that the only evidence I can have that I am understood is by observing what I take to be an appropriate behaviour response; and only by knowing I am understood am I
able to suppose my 'words to be marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men'.

A further reply might be given that in at least a fairly primitive use of language such words as we use might be accompanied by appropriate gestures which would draw our hearer's attention to that with which we were concerned; thus we could be sure that our words excited precisely the same ideas in our hearer's mind as occurred in our mind. This, however, will not do: the same gesture with which I intend to refer to an object which has excited the idea of a book in my mind might excite in the mind of another the idea of a colour, or a shape. As has been pointed out recently even ostensive definitions or 'teaching of words' may be 'variously interpreted in every case'.

The second assumption which Locke sees as necessary if our language is to be a language engaged in the communication of thoughts between people is that the words of each of us refer not only to ideas in the minds of our hearers but also to the 'reality

1. Ibid., III.2.4.
of things'. As an explanation of why we should thus take our words as being signs of a world of common objects, Locke is only able to say at this stage that we find it difficult to believe that each of us lives in his own private world: '... men would not,' he says, 'be thought to talk barely of their own imagination....'

After stating these assumptions he continues:

But whatsoever be the consequence of any man's using of words differently, either from their general meaning, or the particular sense of the person to whom he addresses them; this is certain, their signification, in his use of them, is limited to his ideas, and they can be signs of nothing else. (2)

This insistence that the 'proper' signification of a word is an idea in our mind can be interpreted as an insistence upon the possibility of a private language which only we can understand. Many of Locke's difficulties in the philosophy of language arise from the fact that he begins his analysis from the starting point of the individual man in 'the state of nature', which involves him in the correlative belief not only in the possibility but also the priority of private languages out of which grow the language of the social

1. Locke, Essay, III.2.4 and III.2.5.
2. Ibid., III.2.8.
unit. Thus, even in considering those parts of Book III which have been most influential with the traditional interpreters of Locke we may see two suggestions which become important for him later in his work. On the one hand, there is the suggestion that a private language is possible and is in fact the basis upon which all language grows; on the other hand, we find when we turn to public language that he implicitly offers a pragmatic test of meaning which, owing to his belief in the primacy of the private nature of word meanings, he overlooks in favour of an extension of this latter theory.

The theory of meaning which emerges most clearly from the Essay - more particularly, from Book III read in conjunction with Book II - is that most commonly attributed to Locke by his commentators. It is to the effect that our words refer directly to the ideas we have, but that we also refer our words both to the ideas in the minds of others and to the real world. If Locke were to say nothing more on the question of language it would not be unjust to accuse him of having made no advance upon his predecessors in the same tradition. Whether he did in fact make a worthwhile step forward remains to be seen; there is no doubt, however, that he at least
brought into sharper focus many points in meaning-theory adumbrated by his predecessors. Before moving on to a discussion of these issues, however, we will discuss the things which some of his more prominent commentators have had to say about the value of Book III in general and, more especially, what they have had to say about Locke's philosophy of language. That a re-examination of Locke's theory of meaning is necessary may be shown clearly by such a discussion, considered in conjunction with other attitudes towards language commonly held in his century.

Campbell Fraser, in the critical introduction to his edition of Locke's Essay, does not devote the special attention to Book III that he does to the remaining books. One cannot help but feel that for him the question of meaning, and linguistic questions in general, did not have the importance they have assumed for later generations. Fleeting references are made to the linguistic doctrines of Book III but no full discussion of either their general tendency or their value occurs. That Fraser accepts the traditional interpretation of Locke's account of language and meaning is supported by his

statement that 'The Second and Third books deal especially with ideas and their verbal signs';\footnote{1} from statements of this sort, together with the over-all avoidance of a discussion of Locke's philosophy of language we may reasonably conclude that Fraser read no more into this section of Locke's work than had his predecessors.

James Gibson,\footnote{2} refers at times to the relation between words and ideas. Like Fraser, he makes it quite clear that he accepts the view that words for Locke are 'sensible marks of ideas and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification';\footnote{3} he accepts this as Locke's final view upon the meanings of words. Words, according to Gibson, are 'those signs of our ideas, without which we cannot communicate our knowledge to others'.\footnote{4} Again, Gibson notes that for Locke both the idea and the word are 'essentially representative';\footnote{5} while ideas have a reference to the objective world, words refer

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., Vol. I, Introd. p. lviii.
\item In Locke's Theory of Knowledge.
\item Locke, Essay, III.2.1.
\item Gibson, Locke's Theory of Knowledge, p. 12.
\item Ibid., p. 20.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
to ideas in the mind which are their meaning. That each name stands for a certain idea is a common enough interpretation of Locke and it is this interpretation that I wish to attack in what follows. Although Gibson does not see the problem of meaning as being of sufficient importance to warrant a full discussion, where he does talk about meaning he accepts quite uncritically the misguided interpretation which results from an over-emphasis upon Book II of the Essay at the expense of the things Locke has to say about knowledge in Book IV. This amounts to an over-emphasis upon the psychological aspects of Locke's work. Gibson was himself aware of the prevailing tendency in criticisms of Locke to over-emphasize the importance of the psychological aspects of the Essay but he did not see that to deny Locke's absorption in psychological questions had certain implications for the theory of meaning.¹

Pringle-Pattison, in his edition of Locke's Essay,² is also unimpressed by Book III: 'This Book, although it contains some of Locke's characteristic

¹. Ibid., pp. 21-2.
doctrines, is in the main a practical treatise on the improvement of the understanding ...'. Pringle-Pattison considers that the connexion between words and 'ideas' suggested to Locke the possibility of inserting a third book into the whole Essay simply as an afterthought.¹ One aim of Pringle-Pattison's abridged edition was to retain the original framework of the Essay while leaving out 'nothing that was in any way characteristic of Locke's thinking'.² In view of this statement we may find further indication of the comparative unimportance of Book III for Pringle-Pattison - if any further indication were needed - in the fact that he prunes and omits in the abridged edition of the third book far more than he does in either Book II or Book IV. Above all he omits from the end of Book III the whole of chapters 9, 10, and 11 'as containing nothing of philosophical importance that does not occur elsewhere in the Essay'.³ It will be one of my contentions in this thesis that Chapter 9 of Book III in particular contains work of first-rate philosophical importance which is not included, except in a very incidental way,

1. Ibid., Introd. p. xvi. Cf. below Ch. 7 Sect. 1.
2. Ibid., Preface p.v.
3. Ibid., p. 254.
in other parts of the Essay. I will contend, this chapter forms an essential part of the study of the Essay both in its own right and as being necessary for a proper and complete understanding of Locke's conclusions in Book IV.

Following his explanation of the immediate signification of words Locke turns to a more special problem, namely a discussion of the signification of general terms. General words for Locke must also be the names of ideas which have been derived from sensation and reflection. They do not, however, signify one thing alone, neither do they signify many particulars; for if they signified a particular they would be indistinguishable from proper names, and if they signified a 'plurality' then man and men would signify the same'. It is from this point that Locke develops his theory of universals, a theory which is of some relevance to the points I wish to make in this thesis. Current thought upon the nature of this theory has been developed most extensively by Professor Aaron\footnote{R.I. Aaron, John Locke (1937); also a 2nd edition, with alterations and an additional section on Draft C of the Essay, published 1955. See also, Aaron The Theory of Universals (1952), Ch. 2.} whose views upon this question reveal yet another
traditional view concerning the nature of the meaning-relation in Locke's work.

Although Aaron's work reflects the growing Anglo-Saxon interest in questions of language, I shall again want to hold that he either fails to see or disregards as unimportant some views put forward by Locke which are essential to an understanding of both Locke's theory of meaning and the account of the nature and extent of our knowledge. Aaron praises Book III on two counts: firstly, he says, it is 'one of the earliest efforts in the English language at a close analysis of words and their meanings'; secondly, it is a serious effort 'to remedy the imperfections and abuses of language' which constantly lead us into error. Aaron is also aware that as our knowledge is expressed in propositions, which in turn consist of words, Locke needed the preparatory work of Book III in order to make clear what he had to say about knowledge.

Aaron, in dealing with Locke's theory of universals, points out firstly, and quite correctly, that the Berkeleian criticism of Locke's theory of

the general idea is an attack upon a 'straw-man'.

Surely, Aaron says, the point that Locke was wanting
to make is that our general idea of a triangle,
whatever it is, stands for all types of triangles
without itself being one of them. If Locke were to
speak always of an idea in the sense of an 'image'
or a 'picture' Berkeley's criticism of the general
idea of a triangle outlined in Book IV of the Essay
would be sound. However, even Locke's first definition
of 'idea' includes within it far more than this:

It being that term which, I think, serves
best to stand for whatsoever is the object
of the understanding when a man thinks, I
have used it to express whatever is meant
by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever
it is that the mind can be employed about
in thinking. (2)

He expressly includes here not only the 'picture'
type of idea but also the more abstract ideas or
concepts. It is well-known that he was not
consistent in his use of this term and any attempt
at an all-embracing interpretation, a simple
definition, of his use of this word is bound to fail.
O'Connor notes Locke's 'many different uses' of 'idea'.

1. G. Berkeley, Introduction to The Principles of Human
Knowledge, sect. 13; Aaron, John Locke (1937), pp. 192ff.
2. Locke, Essay, I.1.8.
while Aaron goes so far as to say that 'it is not possible to give a single definition of it'.

This is certainly true; however, it is legitimate, and profitable, to determine the most basic sense which Locke gives to this word in his actual practice in the Essay. He certainly does not have one consistent use for the term 'idea': sometimes it is used to mean the object of the mind's attention in the sense of a passing image or sense-datum; more often, however, and more basically - the idea is not a temporal unit but a logical one, a concept identical in its many historical occurrences as the object of a particular mind's consideration. These ideas represent and are caused in us by qualities in things.

Ideas in Locke's most basic sense do not represent a temporal cross-section of a thing, as they would if they were images or sense-data; they rather represent a quality the thing possesses and are therefore primarily concepts, not sense-data. However, although I suggest here that the 'idea' for Locke is basically a concept there is no doubt that the suggestion of ideas as images and sense-data also appears throughout

2. Locke, Essay, II.8.8.
the Essay — although this is more especially the case in Book II. The criticism has been levelled against Locke that as these phenomena — images, sense-data, concepts — are of quite different types, to attempt to include them all under the same general heading is to run a grave risk of ending in ambiguity. While this is so the fact remains that Locke needed a word which would be able to stand for all the mind’s objects. Although in doing so he left himself widely open to misinterpretation, our task, in an attempt to make his thought as consistent as possible, is to see what actual use he prefers to give this word in the body of the Essay. His basic use of ‘idea’ is to refer to concepts: the units or atoms from which he starts are not temporal units but logical ones.

In support of this suggestion we might note that in an early section of the first chapter of Book I Locke speaks of our coming to have ‘any sensation by our organs’ on the one hand and ‘any ideas in our understandings’ on the other. Here he seems specifically to link the notion of a ‘sensation’ to the body as contrasted with the notion of ‘idea’ being connected

2. Locke, Essay, I.1.2.
with the understanding. He speaks also, at this same place, of the 'formation' of ideas - a view hardly consistent with the belief that ideas are primarily crude data. On the other hand, when speaking of animals he holds that they have simple ideas which, *prima facie*, appears to be a denial of any attempt to interpret Locke's ideas as being basically concepts.¹ This, however, is not necessarily the case, for we are able to say that perhaps animals have reached the stage of being able to classify data of sense - and hence to have simple ideas - but have not gone beyond that. Even here ideas would still not be simply crude data, for they are distinctive signs of something. The concept of the significatory function of ideas is of paramount importance in interpreting Locke: throughout Book III great stress is laid upon this primary function of ideas, namely, to serve as signs.

The contention that basically an idea for Locke is a concept may perhaps be further strengthened in the following way. If we interpret Locke in a completely atomic way we will be led to say that looking at an expanse of colour and blinking four times will present

¹. Ibid., II.11.7 and II.11.8.
us with four ideas; here there would exist a many-one relationship between 'idea' and 'object' where 'many' is to be understood in the sense of 'plurality' not 'variety'. On the other hand, and this I suggest is Locke's basic view, we are able to say that in these circumstances we have four *instances* of an idea, four exemplifications of a universal, of a concept under which we subsume the instances. Here the relation between idea and object is one-many in the sense that the one idea, say 'blue', signifies many blue things, firstly in respect of number, and secondly in respect of the different sorts of blue things. Also we should note that on this interpretation one sighting of an object could present us with several different ideas - say, blue, square, bright, etc. Typical simple ideas for Locke are 'yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those which we call sensible qualities'.

Now these are not the names of isolated data but are already general notions under which we subsume the various instances given to us in sense-perception, whereas if our simple ideas were sense-data simply, they would and could only bear proper names; generality, thus, would always elude us.

1. Ibid., II.1.3.
On first looking at the *Essay* we should like to think of 'abstracting' as something which should be performed on the simple ideas which are our primary data, but Locke does not always speak as if this is so. At times he makes statements which tend to support the suggestion that abstraction is necessary before we even reach our simple ideas. For example, he says:

The same colour being observed to-day in chalk or snow, which the mind yesterday received from milk it considers that appearance alone makes it representative of all that kind; and having given it the name whiteness, it by that sound signifies the same quality, wheresoever to be imagined or met with, and thus universals, whether ideas or terms, are made. (1)

That is to say, abstraction is necessary before we even reach our simple ideas; also, this is abstracting on 'things', not 'ideas'; abstracting 'white' from white things. If we consider what he says here together with his remarks about the generality of words in Book III we cannot help but conclude that even Locke's simple ideas are the result of abstraction and are not,

1. Ibid., II.11.9.
2. Ibid., III.3.1, III.3.2, and III.3.3.
therefore, crude data. In this case, the so-called simple ideas, being the result of abstraction, are general.

The fundamental point of all this for our purposes is that if Locke thinks that ideas like 'white' are general then he must be maintaining that the very bases of our thought, our simple ideas, are the product of our understanding. If he is not saying this, then to remain consistent he must maintain that the simple ideas cannot be universals but must bear proper names. However, he normally does regard the simple ideas as universals. That is to say, then, even the simple ideas are not mere data but are the products of our mind working upon the data of sense. Ideas for Locke are not particular data received through sensation or reflection; ideas (even simple ideas) are general notions, universals, or concepts. This is made especially clear in the second reply to Stillingfleet: 'If your Lordship tell me what you mean by these names, I shall presently

1. His very contentions, for example, that all words - except proper names and particles - are general, may be seen as an argument in favour of the view that even simple ideas are the result of abstraction. See Essay, III.1.6.

reply that there then are the ideas that you have of them in your mind'. Here an idea is the meaning of a word and, as all words (except proper names and particles) are general, it would seem that ideas for Locke are something quite general.

In developing his own theory of the general idea or universal in Locke's *Essay*, Aaron distinguishes three main aspects of Locke's theory. The first strand of Locke's thought about universals, according to Aaron, was one with which he was never satisfied; traces of it appear whenever Locke talks of general ideas but explicit isolated statements of it never occur. This strand of Locke's theory is similar to that explicitly stated by Berkeley in the Introduction to the *Principles* where he says, 'An idea, which considered in itself is particular, becomes general by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort'.¹ Aaron criticizes this Berkeleian suggestion upon the ground that it quite misses the point of a theory of universals by not giving us any indication of how we are to decide which other particular ideas are supposed to be

represented by the particular idea which we call the universal or general idea.\(^1\) This view of the general idea sees it as a particular image; however, we have seen that 'idea' for Locke is much more extensive than 'image'.

Aaron considers that the second strand of Locke’s theory of universals is to be seen most clearly when Locke begins in Book III to discuss general terms. This theme of Locke’s theory of universals 'consists in the view that the universal is the resultant of a certain process of elimination carried out according to the guidance of experience'.\(^2\) We observe similar things in the world, and eliminate all the qualities they exhibit except those which we find to be common to them all. This makes of the universal an idea formed by the process of 'abstraction'. Aaron criticizes this aspect of Locke's theory upon three separate grounds and suggests that dissatisfaction with this view led Locke to attack the problem again, an approach which resulted in yet another view of universals.

The final suggestion Aaron finds in the Essay towards the development of a satisfactory theory of

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2. Ibid., p. 197.
the general idea avoids, he thinks, the particularity which we encounter within the universal in the first two strands discernible in Locke's thought.

For this view ... the universal is not at all what is left over after the empirical process of eliminating the peculiar. It is the essence meant when the general term is used, an essence whose nature is wholly clear to us. (1)

The universal in this sense is a quality or set of qualities shared by various particulars; these characteristics constitute the essence of the sort, either 'nominal' or 'real'. On this view, Aaron holds, the universal is a concept, the meaning of a word when it is used, which is another way of saying that the universal is the definition which we would give to the word we use.²

Aaron goes on to say that because for Locke essences 'are supposed to remain steadily the same',³ and as the universal is this essence, the universal

1. Ibid., p. 199.

2. Cf. D. Hartley, Observations on Man (6th ed., 1834), p. 226, where he diverges from Locke on the question of the use of 'idea'. He is, however, prepared to say that if we would substitute the word 'definition' for 'idea' at the appropriate places in the Essay we would find Locke's reasoning still valid.

is a fixed, unchangeable meaning. In dealing with universals we need not attend to the particulars indirectly referred to by the word but may attend only to what Ockham would have called its connotation; we are at liberty even to fix this connotation quite arbitrarily. It is, Aaron suggests, the fixing of meanings in this way, with a complete disregard for subsequent experience, which enables Locke to provide that objectivity which, so far, his theory of universals lacks. As we are necessarily limited to dealing with nominal essences, at least in the case of substances, the only objectivity he can hope for is that of precise definition, and this becomes possible only if the essence to be defined is fixed and immutable. Thus, conceiving the universal as a fixed, immutable meaning gives objectivity to Locke's thought. (1)

Aaron, however, is surely wrong in saying that the universal for Locke is a static meaning. Locke does say, in speaking of real essences, that they are 'supposed' to remain the same but we should remember that while he believed sincerely in the existence of real essences they were for him unknown and - at the present stage of human knowledge - unknowable. Aaron

in this context completely overlooks Locke's equally firm belief in the variability between ideas as between people and as they occur in the same people at different times. Ideas are seldom if ever the same in any two occurrences. From this it follows that Locke's 'universal', his 'nominal essence', is not and cannot be a 'fixed, unchangeable meaning'; it is certainly a meaning, the concept, the definition of the word that we use, but this is a variable thing, not only between people, but also in the same person at different times. To seek for objectivity in Locke's theory of universals by relying upon the immutable nature of the essences to which we refer our words is a mistaken notion.

In explaining the sort of existence and objectivity that universals possess for Locke, Aaron deals firstly with the universals of natural science, and secondly with those of mathematics. The complex ideas which we have of natural things, which partially represent them, are observed to have certain common characteristics: we make a selection of these characteristics according as we assess them to be

1. See below Ch. 7, sect. 3.
important for our purposes, and thus make an essence which is the universal or general idea. Here, Aaron notes, we do not 'discover' essences but 'make' them: we decide which common qualities are to be included within our general idea. It is because of this that Locke insists upon the distinction between 'real' and 'nominal' essences in the universals of 'natural philosophy'. Because we are unaware of the real constitution of things we must rest content with the similarities of co-existence of qualities given to us in sense-perception, which are not the qualities belonging to the inner constitution of things. The universals of natural science do not, and cannot, possess an Aristotelian objectivity because they are made by us, not discovered. 'For Locke the universal is simply what we decide the term M to mean, using experience as a guide'.¹ Universals in this sense may be objective so far as they are the fixed meanings which we give to the general terms we use, they may be said to exist if all we mean by this is that people entertain general ideas and talk about them; but they are not objective in the sense that they exist either

¹. Aaron, John Locke (1937), p. 203.
in nature or in a world of 'substantial forms'.
Neither do they exist in any way independent of mind.

The universals of mathematics are again universals which we frame: the universal is 'no actual thing in nature'.¹ In the case of mathematical universals, however, we are not as subject to the guidance of experience, as we are in the case of the universals of natural science: our mathematical ideas are their own archetypes. These ideas are not completely independent of experience - for Locke no idea can be - but they are abstract ideas developed from the fundamental sense-given notions of number and space. Mathematics consists in the inspection of abstract general ideas, and the discovery of relations between them. It is, that is to say, for all that it has empirical foundations in number and space, a purely deductive study which is exempted from appearing for trial at the bar of experience. Mathematical universals are no more discovered than are those of natural science; they are creations of a mind, objective, Aaron thinks, not as being independent of mind, 'but as being a meaning fixed by definition'.²

We are now in a position to see what Aaron takes

¹. Ibid., p. 205.
². Ibid., p. 205.
Locke's theory of meaning to be. Quite unequivocally, at least so far as universals are concerned, Aaron holds that the meaning of a word for Locke is the collection of characteristics, the idea, concept, essence, universal, meaning - he uses them all indiscriminately - which we name when we use the word. If I take the nominal essence of gold to be yellowness and heaviness then the meaning of the word 'gold' for me is that complex idea of which yellowness, heaviness, and co-existence in one subject are constituents. For Locke, according to Aaron, words mean ideas.

Aaron also considers Locke's theory of language proper: an examination of this section again reveals that Aaron's interpretation of Locke upon the question of meaning is the traditional interpretation wherein words mean ideas. Aaron notes, for example, Locke's view that we may use words without any corresponding ideas, but he notes further, following Locke, that when we do so we are speaking after the manner of parrots and are not using language significantly; that is, we are using words without meaning.¹

Aaron praises Locke for his account of definition

¹. Ibid., pp. 207-8.
which breaks away from the traditional notion that in defining we are placing the real essence of that which is defined before our hearers; he praises him, that is, for denying that definitions delineate natural species. Locke considers himself to be defining words, not things; '... a definition is nothing else but the showing the meaning of one word by several other not synonymous terms'. The only criterion which we are able to employ in order to test whether or not a definition is 'good', correct, or adequate, is to see whether or not the idea of which the word is a sign in the speaker's mind is as it were represented or set before the view of another; and thus its signification ascertained'.

This makes it clear that on Locke's view we do not define things; we only give the meanings of words or, perhaps, state the characteristics of the idea that the word is taken to signify. Locke also points out that only the names of complex ideas are definable; the words which signify our simple ideas are not verbally definable because simple ideas, being simple, are not divisible into constituents. Locke does, however, recognize that the meaning of the names of simple ideas can be

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made clear to others by 'showing' - as we would perhaps say, the names of simple elements are definable ostensively. In the account he offers of Locke's remarks upon definition Aaron holds that Locke is putting forward the view that the meanings of words are the ideas which they are made to represent: in definition we use other words to make clear the meaning of the word to be defined, we point out or indicate the idea for which the word stands.

Aaron turns next to a consideration of Locke's comments upon the imperfections and abuses of language. Exact communication demands that the word signifies the same idea in both speaker and hearer. This ideal use of words is, Aaron says, 'hardly ever attained'. As well as the more or less inevitable imperfections of language there are certain abuses of words which may be avoided if we are not stupid or careless. These abuses, essentially, amount to our forgetting certain characteristics which language should possess. When introducing the topic of the imperfections and abuses

1. Ibid., III.11.14.
2. We shall see later that there is good reason to believe that this is never attained. See below, Ch. 7, Sect. 3.
of language Aaron notes that according to Locke the communication of our thoughts by language may take one of two possible forms. The communication of thoughts which takes place in ordinary conversation is called 'civil' communication; as well as this there is the communication involved in 'the statement of scientific fact, "philosophical" communication'. It is this last sort of communication which requires as its conditions that the words employed in it should always signify the same idea wherever used, and also that they should signify the same idea in both speaker and hearer. It is in respect of this type of communication that Locke lists the several reasons which almost inevitably make language imperfect for our purposes. 'In civil communication, Aaron notes,

such exactness is not necessary, and language, as it is, is well fitted for the purposes of everyday conversation. But in the communication of scientific information where precision and exactitude are indispensible, these defects in the use of language become very serious. (2)

This is all that Aaron has to say about this distinction in Locke between civil and philosophical communication; a distinction which is of considerable importance in

2. Ibid., p. 215.
discussions of language in the seventeenth century, and which I intend to show to be of prime importance for a correct and full interpretation of Locke's theory of meaning. In this chapter of Aaron's are contained the germs of a much more fruitful interpretation of Locke's attitude to the whole question of meaning; either Aaron does not see this or else does not realize its importance for Locke, particularly in relation to the final book of the *Essay*. ¹ Aaron gives us very little in his analysis of Book III other than the traditional view of Locke's theory of meaning as being a view which relates each word to an idea. We shall see later that this is only a very partial account of Locke's thought on this question.

A third commentator upon Locke whose views on the meaning-relation in the *Essay* would re-pay examination is D.J. O'Connor.² While O'Connor feels that Book III has not been the most influential section of the *Essay* he considers that it is probably the most original. He sees this book as 'a serious attempt

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¹. He does, however, note at p. 291: 'The study of language and of words was also directly helpful to Locke in his preparations for Book IV'. See also below, Ch. 7, Sect. 1.

to demonstrate the relations, as he [Locke] conceived them, between thinking, the signs we use in thinking, and the referents of these signs.' That is to say, it would appear from the outset that O'Connor is going to interpret Locke as saying that the meaning of the signs which we use in thinking — namely, our words — are the 'referents' of these words, the ideas. Our examination of O'Connor's views will be concerned not with all he has to say about language and thinking in Locke but with a selection of the points he makes concerning the meaning-relation. The point of this, as with the discussion of Aaron's work, is to see how far, if at all, O'Connor has moved away from the traditional interpretation of Locke upon this question.

For language to be possible Locke thought it necessary that men should be able to use words as marks of ideas: this O'Connor takes to be a major error and attacks in the following way. Words, he says, are considered by Locke to be directly significative of ideas: ideas are whatever we think about whether they be sense-data, images, or concepts. Ideas are the material upon which the mental activity of thought is

1. Ibid., p. 123.
engaged; they are the *significata* for which our individual words stand. While words are signs of ideas, ideas are signs of things or properties: O'Connor points out, however, that although Locke does not consider the difference, there are obvious differences between the sense of the word 'sign' in these two uses.¹ When Locke speaks of words as being the signs of ideas he is using it in the more normal sense in which the sign not only represents but literally 'takes the place of' or is substituted for that of which it is the sign; to speak of ideas as being signs of things is to use this word 'in an extended or metaphorical sense'.

This, however, is not fatal to Locke's view: any examination of Locke's use of the word 'idea' results in the admission that he uses 'sign' and 'signify' in two different senses. The relation between 'word', 'idea', and 'thing' is one of the more serious confusions in the *Essay*. However, the fact that 'sign' is used in these two senses does not in itself affect Locke's contention that words are signs of ideas; it simply shows that he was not sufficiently careful in his choice of words to describe these two cases, or in

¹. Ibid., p. 130.
his analysis of the reasoning and thinking processes.

Ideas for Locke are signs of things in the sense that they are caused to arise in us by things just as smoke is a 'sign' of fire, although they differ from this example in some cases, more especially when Locke is thinking of ideas as being equivalent to 'images' or 'pictures'. Here, obviously enough, the idea is a 'sign' of the thing as a photograph of a building is a 'sign' that there exists a building similar to the one depicted. On the other hand, words are not signs of ideas in the sense that they are caused by the idea. Rather, words are arbitrarily used and conventionally agreed upon to refer to the fact that the user of the word has a particular idea 'in his mind'; and, as we saw, Locke further supposes that the use of this word to 'signify' the speaker's idea calls up the same idea in the mind of the hearer. Thus, if I use the word 'cat' I am using a word conventionally agreed upon to show that I have an image of a cat in my mind, or that I am thinking (talking) in some way about cats; the word signifies the idea of a cat, or better perhaps, that I have an idea of a cat.¹ On the other hand, my having an idea of a cat signifies ultimately that there are cats which cause this idea to

¹ Cf. Hobbes; see above p. 57.
arise in me; or, if there are no cats, my having the idea signifies that there are at least observable constituents of the universe which, if combined in a certain way, produce in me the idea of a cat. Thus, Locke's contention that words are 'signs' of ideas is not destroyed by saying that he uses 'sign' in two different senses; words 'signify' to others that I am entertaining certain ideas, as three balls in certain circumstances 'signify' the presence of a man who will lend me money. But ideas 'signify' things in the sense that smoke 'signifies' fire. Although the difficulties attendant upon Locke's different use of 'sign' and 'signify' permeate the whole Essay they do not affect directly the thesis which I wish to advance. In dealing with Locke's philosophy of language we are concerned with the sign-relation only as it exists between words and ideas.

O'Connor interprets Locke as saying that words signify our ideas, that these latter can only be known to the mind when they are actually present to it, and that therefore words are only significant when used in connexion with an idea actually present in the mind.¹ So far as he has gone O'Connor has attributed the same

¹ O'Connor, John Locke, p. 131.
sort of view to Locke as did Aaron. Words stand for, signify, mean, our own ideas: although they may be taken to refer indirectly to things and properties, this is a 'perversion' of their use.\textsuperscript{1} The chief difference between O'Connor and Aaron on this question is that while the latter does not deny that words may mean ideas, O'Connor does deny this.\textsuperscript{2}

Thus we have seen, very briefly, that Locke's main commentators in this century have been content either not to mention the problem of meaning at all, or else to interpret him by and large as saying that words mean ideas. Only one of them so much as mentions the distinction Locke draws in Book III between the 'civil' and 'philosophical' use of words. It seems to me that this distinction is central to all that Locke has to say in Books III and IV: without it Book IV appears more inconsistent than it in fact is; include this distinction and we see signs of a more plausible and helpful theory of meaning emerging from Locke's work than that which is usually attributed to him. This distinction between the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 125.
\item \textsuperscript{2} See, e.g., O'Connor, \textit{John Locke}, p. 124, where he says that in thinking that men must be able to use words to mark ideas Locke was making one of his 'major errors'.
\end{itemize}
civil and philosophical use of words is one which we should have expected Locke to develop in later sections of the Essay; the fact that he does not do this explicitly is, I suggest, no indication of the importance he attributed to it. I will contend that this distinction, which is largely a reflection of seventeenth-century trends in the philosophy of language, is implicit in a large number of Locke's further statements and involves a re-interpretation of his philosophy of language in general and his theory of meaning in particular. Before moving on to a consideration of the other issues connected with meaning-theory in the seventeenth century - issues habitually overlooked by present-day interpreters - we shall first, in the next chapter, attempt to dispel the popular notion that the 'naming' theories offered by these men were naive and simple-minded.