WORDS AND THE WORLD

A Study in Seventeenth-Century Theories of Meaning

by

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We have seen that many thinkers in seventeenth-century England of widely differing interests and aims have, at one level of discussion, accepted as commonplace the view of language derived from the notion that all or most of our knowledge is derived from experience through the medium of sense-perception. As we should expect in people of such widely differing aims as, for example, Bacon and Cumberland there are divergences in the detail of their theories; despite these divergences, however, there remains a hard core of agreement so far as their philosophy of language is concerned. For all of them - in scientific discourse at least - words are primarily names, names of 'images', 'phantasms', 'conceptions', or 'ideas', which are caused to arise in us by the course of experience. It is the use of these names that makes clear to others what thoughts we are entertaining by arousing in our hearers the same ideas which we have - or, at least, arousing the idea which our hearer normally associates with that word. The meaning
of a particular word in this context is the idea in the speaker's mind which he names by it; the meaning of a sentence — so far as this was discussed at all — is the set of ideas or thoughts with their various connexions in our mind that are named by the words of the sentence.

From the sophisticated heights of the twentieth century it is easy to be patronizing regarding this type of theory: that it is an implausible view we readily believe. However, that its implausibility is readily apparent is not itself as apparent as we might like to believe. We should bear in mind firstly that the men of the seventeenth century accepted as being quite literally true the account of the beginnings of human life given in Genesis: Cumberland does not speak metaphorically when he says that mankind 'sprung originally from one common Root, Adam and Eve; and that Eve, without any Difficulty, used Words in the very Sense and Meaning Adam had appointed ...'.¹ For the seventeenth-century mind it was for the most part a literal truth to say that Adam was set in the world by God, who gave names to the objects with which Adam was confronted. A 'labelling' process went on similar

¹ Cumberland, De Legibus Naturae, I.2.11.
to the experience of a new assistant in, say, a chemist's shop where bottles could perhaps be labelled to show the 'name' of the contents. Of course, to label objects is not to be qualified linguistically; to know the 'name' of the contents of the bottle is not to know how to use the word in discourse. However, if we think of real life situations in which learning a language is involved the labelling notion is not prima facie absurd.

The further suggestion that it is ideas which are named by our words, and not things, is itself not without merit. One main advantage it has is that apparently at least it avoids the criticism levelled at naming theories of meaning to the effect that, for example, the name 'Charles Dickens' has a meaning yet it names nothing existent; as Ryle has said, it does not have a bearer.¹ The seventeenth-century empiricists were always able to say that their names possessed a bearer for the 'object' named was the thought or conception in our minds. The 'centaurs' and 'golden mountains' had bearers though no objects corresponding to these names existed in reality.

¹. See Ryle's review of Carnap's Meaning and Necessity in Philosophy (1949).
Surely also, if it is possible to point to an object or describe an 'idea' in reply to the question 'what does such-and-such a word mean?' then it is not *prima facie* implausible to say that this object or idea was the meaning of the word? I am not suggesting here, of course, that naming theories of meaning are in fact worthwhile theories; I am merely wanting to say that until the telling criticisms of our own century, notably that of Wittgenstein, they had considerable plausibility and a definite attraction.

The complexity of the naming explanations of meaning offered in the seventeenth century may be made sufficiently clear by taking a further look at the theories advanced by Hobbes and Locke. We saw earlier that, essentially, for Hobbes 'man is a universal' says only "man" may be used to refer to more than one thing", that 'man' is the name of many things as opposed to, say, 'Saturn', which is the name of one thing only. The word 'universal' is the name, not of something existing, but of names: to say of 'x' that it is universal is to say that it refers, but refers in a manner different from the referring associated with proper names. It is to say, in short, that it is *used* in a certain way.
It is also worth noting again at this juncture something that has already been touched on, namely, that in speaking of certain 'names' Hobbes considers them to be meaningful even though they do not refer to a particular determinate image, to an object, or to many objects of the same class. I am referring here to words such as 'nothing' and 'less than nothing', determinate images or real objects corresponding to which do not, and cannot, exist. These Hobbes says, are 'not useless'. In mathematics, for example, 'the mind feigns such remains as these for doctrine's sake'. If we wish to recall in memory an occasion when we have removed from five objects, first two, then three more, we wish to talk about 'nothing' being left. In this use of 'nothing' we do not refer to anything in the sense in which Hobbes expects most of our words to refer, but nevertheless, the word 'nothing' is useful. Hobbes seems here to be saying that the fact that we find the word 'nothing' useful in actual speech is itself sufficient for us to say that the word is used with meaning, even though it does not refer in any normal manner. Sentences in

which 'nothing', a non-referential word, occurs are certainly not, because of this fact, meaningless, and he seems almost to be saying that the fact that the word is used in discourse is itself the criterion by which we judge it to have meaning. If he is saying this, as I think he is, he has altered the simple naming-model of meaning far beyond the extension of naming to cover the possibilities of naming any individual member of a class. He has, over part of the area of language, approached much more closely to modern theories with their emphasis upon the equivalence of use and meaning than have any of his predecessors. If we could question Hobbes more closely to-day he might nevertheless wish to say that, despite this, the word 'nothing' still names an 'idea' which we have, even though there is no real object in the world corresponding to the idea. If he were to do this, however, he would have to give up his belief in the existence of determinate imagery alone as the stuff of our thoughts. That is to say, either Hobbes is taking an extremely advanced view here regarding the nature of the meaning of at least certain words, or, he can no longer be regarded as holding the view of ideas commonly attributed to him. He would have to be understood, on the contrary, as holding some quasi-
dispositional view of the nature of ideas in at least some cases: he would not, that is to say, always be able to hold to the belief in an idea as some sort of entity, but would be compelled to hold that to have an idea of $x$ was more or less to know what $x$ was, or to know how and where to use '$x$'. Hobbes's views upon the determinacy of images cannot be doubted and it seems more reasonable to suggest therefore that, at least in some restricted field, his explanations of meaning have a very modern tinge. I shall later show that this interpretation of Hobbes finds echoes in subsequent theorizing in the seventeenth century.

These are not the only hints of a more fruitful theory of meaning to be found in Hobbes. One of the attitudes which I am concerned to dispute seems to be implied by such remarks as 'Hobbes' theory of the meaning of words is co-extensive with his theory of names':¹ this view is often taken to imply that the theory of meaning put before us by Hobbes is of a simple 'Fido'-Fido type, that all words used in scientific or descriptive discourse are substantives which refer to one element or another of our experience in the way

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that 'Fido' may be said to refer to Fido. We have
already seen abundant evidence, however, that Hobbes's
view is not in fact as naive as this. As well as
providing a careless and inadequate analysis of language
Hobbes also appears to be completely indifferent to the
existence of many glaringly obvious inconsistencies in
the body of his work: that such an acute thinker as
Hobbes was unaware of these inconsistencies is itself
unlikely and I can only suggest that many of these
inconsistencies arise out of the fundamental division
existing in all empiricist thought, namely, their
destructive and constructive tendencies. Hobbes is
prepared to adopt a certain theory in order to refute
scholasticism - i.e. that words only refer to experienced
entities - but he is not beyond altering his theory when
he comes to explain the meanings of the 'names' of, say,
impossibilities or inconceivabilities. For polemical
purposes he over-simplifies: although he is sufficiently
acute to realize that this over-simplified model does
not provide a full explanation of the functioning of
language even at the descriptive level, he nevertheless
refuses to admit the failure of this model to account
satisfactorily for the functioning of certain words.
In effect, he does not provide us with a theory of
language at the descriptive level: rather, on the
assumption that everything we know is given us in experience, he shows that a certain theory, the 'Fido'-Fido theory offered by the traditional philosophy, is incorrect. He does not deny the correctness of the 'Fido'-Fido theory as such, but he does deny that the referents of many words are those spoken of by the scholastics: these are, of course, the abstract essences, real natures, and so on of medieval philosophy. By reliance upon a theory regarding the psychology of perception with an associated theory of knowledge, he is able to show the needlessness of the occult qualities of traditional philosophy: these are replaced by the phantasms, notions, and ideas of human experience.

When philosophers speak of 'names' we are inclined to think of each grammatically distinct word-form as a name, and, because of this, we find difficulty in granting any plausibility at all to the view put forward. A word, we are inclined to say, is a linguistically discrete occurrence and if this is all that Hobbes means by a name he is going to have to say that any descriptive statement contains many names. However, this is not the case: it is true that Hobbes does use 'word' in this way but it is equally true that he uses it to mean more than one word in the
grammatical sense. We find an example of the latter use in his statement that 'any number of words put together to signify one thing' is a name;\(^1\) an example of the former use is to be found in any of his numerous remarks to the effect that a name is 'a word'.\(^2\) This ambiguity in the use of 'word' is one result of the carelessness of analysis referred to earlier.

His position regarding the word 'name' becomes clear only when he moves on to a discussion of the propositions of descriptive discourse: a proposition is defined as 'a speech consisting of two names copulated'.\(^3\) The propositions of scientific discourse are, for Hobbes, either categorical propositions or are reducible to categorical propositions, propositions which he analyzes on the basis of traditional logical distinctions. 'Cats are furry' has the same status, so far as the number of 'names' within it are concerned, as does 'The man in the green hat is the uncle of my neighbour's gardener' - both are descriptive propositions.

\( \text{\footnotesize 2. See. e.g., ibid., p. 16.} \)
\( \text{\footnotesize 3. Ibid., p. 30.} \)
consisting of 'two names copulated'. Here, as in all categorical propositions, both the subject-expression and the predicate-expression are names, and the fact that they are thought to be names of the same thing is signified or referred to by the use of the copula. The copula also, in English, is a name although it is a name of a peculiar sort: it is a name whose function can be performed by other devices such as the use of a verbal termination in the predicate or simply by the order of the words used.

When we are doing philosophy it is wise, if we are to avoid confusion, to reduce any obscure proposition to its most simple and categorical form; in which the copulative word is must be expressed by itself, and not mingled in any manner either with the subject or predicate, both of which must be separated and clearly distinguished, one from another. (1)

Thus, essentially, for Hobbes a name is that which may appear as the subject or predicate of a categorical proposition. To say that something is a name should not be taken to imply that it is a single grammatical word.

I have already spoken briefly of what it is

1. Ibid., pp. 39-40.
that Hobbes considers is named by these subject and predicate expressions, but this needs to be looked at more closely if it is to be shown that Hobbes's theory of meaning is not co-extensive with his theory of naming in the sense suggested by Peters. 'Naming' is a relation existing between a name and some entity, or entities: what entities does Hobbes consider our names to refer to? Hobbes's first view, as we saw, is that names are signs of our 'conceptions' and these are nothing more nor less than the images we have which are derived from sense-experience.\(^1\) By 'conception', as has been pointed out, 'Hobbes meant a concrete determinate image'.\(^2\) An image for Hobbes is a picture or copy of something sensible and, he goes on to say, it can equally well be called an 'idea', an 'idol', an 'apparition', or a 'phantasm'.\(^3\) At another place Hobbes notes that images are equivalent to 'our conceptions of things', and that the 'notice' we take of the external world is our 'conception' of this world.\(^4\) The names we use are signs also of our 'thoughts'.\(^5\)

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1. Ibid., p. 17.  
Thus Hobbes in various places throughout his work uses 'image', 'phantasm', 'idea', 'thought', and 'conception' interchangeably, a use which makes it more than difficult to take a definite line as to the nature of the mental occurrents which we are supposed to experience. Our task is not made easier by the realization that though there can only be images of 'bodies visible' yet we are able to think about and speak about centaurs\(^1\) - 'centaur' in fact is a name, and must on Hobbes's view be a sign of the presence of an image in the mind of the speaker.

So far as Hobbes is attacking current philosophical jargon he is concerned with discussions of the things in the world, the things that the ordinary man takes notice of through his senses. We receive images from things, Hobbes contends, and our thinking consists of a sort of mental juggling with these images. To communicate our knowledge to others we attach names to our conceptions and are thus able to signify to others that we are entertaining certain thoughts. This works very well at the level of proper names: I am able to say 'John Smith is fat' and make

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 649.
out a plausible case for holding that this signifies the presence of a certain image or idea in my mind. Difficulty arises, however, for this imagist theory in the case of most of the propositions that we wish to call known propositions simply because these are all general propositions. If I make a statement in which 'all men' occurs as the subject-expression Hobbes insists that I must have in my mind a determinate image of one man or another, or a succession of images of different men; yet this is not all that Hobbes wishes to say is signified by this name. The name, 'all men', names all the men there are, irrespective of the accompanying images in my mind. It is in dealing with words of this nature that Hobbes first puts forward the view that names are names, not of our ideas, but of the things themselves: as the far greater number of substantives which we use are general it does seem more appropriate to say that they name the things to which they may be properly applied rather than certain mental entities in the mind of the speaker. I think it needs to be noted here that, to my knowledge, Hobbes nowhere says that words are names of ideas, but simply that they

1. Ibid., p. 17.
are signs of them.

There is a clear difference between being a 'sign of' a conception and 'naming' a thing which might be expressed by saying that on Hobbes's view, any use of a name derived from something really existing is a sign that we are entertaining an idea or thinking a thought, and to this extent the name is a sign of our idea. That which is named is not an idea, but is the thing or things in the world to which the name may be applied, to which it in fact refers. Where he says that names 'are signs of our conceptions' and 'are not signs of the things themselves' I think we may reasonably interpret him as saying that the use of any name is certainly a sign that the user is having such-and-such a thought but it creates no presumption that there are objects in the world corresponding to the idea entertained by the speaker. It is not to our purpose here to pursue the shortcomings of the imagist theory of thinking put forward by Hobbes; rather we should be concerned simply to show that the determinate images in which Hobbes so firmly believed are not the reference of our names, and so far, they are not the stuff of our thoughts. I think it is more consistent with Hobbes's practice to say that any use of words
in descriptive discourse is always accompanied by images of one sort or another, but we cannot say our words name the images we happen to have. Our words signify our thoughts, conceptions, or images, in the sense that they signify that we are thinking, but they do not name or refer to our thoughts.

What I have been saying so far amounts to a denial that Hobbes's account of 'idea' and its cognate words, and his confusions regarding these, is of any importance for a discussion of his theory of language. That we do receive 'images' from sense-experience most of us would not wish to deny; neither would we wish to deny that discourse of a scientific or knowledge-providing type was evidence of the occurrence of thought, although we might wish to deny that it is evidence of some shadowy shuffling of images within the mind which itself constitutes the thinking. Since Hobbes does not avail himself of either Locke's general idea or Berkeley's representative idea it is clear that in the case of most substantives the reference of our words cannot be the ideas we have but must instead be the things in the world from whence these ideas are derived. The ideas that accompany our speech, which Hobbes often considers as if they were
the thinking process, were made much of by him because of his wish to show that as all ideas are determinate we can have no idea of an essence or abstract nature - we can only have ideas of the individuals met with in experience. Apart from this, or perhaps better, because of this, they are not relevant to a discussion of his meaning-theory simply because they are not terms of the relation of meaning - and to say this, of course, is simply to emphasize his outspoken nominalism. The relation of meaning for Hobbes is a relation of referring existing between names and the things that are named. These latter, at least in the case of ordinary descriptive statements about the world, are objects of some sort. An 'object' in this way of using the term may be a 'body' in the world, an 'accident' of a body, a 'phantasm', or even a 'name'. It must not of course be thought here that to say a 'phantasm' is a nameable object is in fact to say that words name our ideas; all that Hobbes means here is that we may give a name to, say, a certain dream-image. Hobbes's treatment of the word 'name' and his tendency to equate words such as

1. Ibid., p. 58.
'thought', 'conception', 'idea', both indicate that
his naming-theory in respect of scientific discourse
is not a simple naming theory. Its complexity is
brought out further if we re-consider the many different
types of names which he admits into prose of this sort.
While it is only approximately true to say that all
words are names for Hobbes, it is certainly true to say
that there are different types of names and that these
function in different ways.

For a large number of words, then, it is true
to say that they are names of objects in the world
around us; proper to one object, or common to many
objects. There is also, of course, a class of words
which are the names of images, namely, the class of
words referring to 'fictions' or fictitious entities.
The ideas to which these names are attached are
derived by us from experience by putting together
certain experienced elements in combinations different
from those combinations in which they occur in
nature; 'As for example, the sense showeth at one
time the figure of a mountain, and at another time the
colour of gold; but the imagination afterwards hath
them both at once in a golden mountain'.¹ Thus, if we

adopt the same sort of analysis which Hobbes has used for words which refer to objects, we may say that the name 'centaur' refers to all the 'imaginations' of centaurs that there are though any particular use of the word will be accompanied in the mind of the speaker by the occurrence of this or that image of a centaur — or, to put this more clumsily but less misleadingly, it would be accompanied by this or that image of a centaur-image. It would appear that we distinguish between images of this sort and the images of sense by the fact that in the former case we are aware of the absence of an object and we are also aware that it is we who combine the elements of the image.¹

Other words, however, which Hobbes classifies as names, certainly cannot be either the names of existent objects or names common to a class of images. The 'names' I refer to here are such as 'that which is impossible', 'the future' and 'nothing'. All these Hobbes classifies as names, not because they refer to an entity of some sort, but for different sorts of reasons. Because we sometimes think of the French revolution vis-a-vis the Russian revolution, or because

we can and do consider the growth of capitalism alongside the growth of communism, because, in Hobbes's words, we 'knit together things past with those that are present.' We use the word 'future' to 'signify' this conjunction. Presumably also the word 'impossible' signifies the impossibility of the exemplification of a certain concept in experience, as, for example, if we said that 'An immortal man is impossible' — although we shall see shortly that this example is ill-chosen because for Hobbes 'an immortal man' is without signification. Thus names, as well as referring to 'things' may also signify or refer to mental processes. A different criterion for the inclusion of words among the class of names is adopted by Hobbes when he comes to support his contention that 'nothing' is a name — we find as we saw before, that in certain situations the word 'is not unuseful' and is therefore to be classified as a name.

We should be inclined to say that on Hobbes's view any word which is classified as a name must \textit{ipso facto} have a meaning. This is not so, however:

'round quadrangle signifies nothing, but is a mere sound'. The reason Hobbes advances for denying that there can be any possible referent of phrases such as 'a round square' is that the proposition 'a square is round' is a false proposition and, wherever it is false that 'A is B', nothing can be signified by the name 'AB'. That this must be the case is in accordance with the traditional logic that Hobbes employed. Given that 'A' and 'B' are names applicable to two classes then if it is everywhere and always false to say that some A's are B's (which is after all the limiting case) then the classes A and B can never overlap. If it were the case that no women were beautiful then it would be meaningless for Hobbes, in the sense of insignificant, to use the name 'beautiful women' for this would be a name without a possible reference.

Hobbes also discusses a class of words where we are unable to image that which is named because of the limits of our conceptual apparatus. The name 'infinite' is a member of this class. 'Infinite', however, is still a name and it signifies, in any particular use, the speaker's inability 'to conceive the

ends, and bounds, of the things named'.

Although in this way 'infinite' is a name of our recognition that our powers of conception are limited, Hobbes also says that a name of this sort signifies that its opposite is not the name of the thing in question; i.e. 'space is infinite' on this latter view says 'space is not finite'. In saying this Hobbes in effect denies the view which he strongly supports elsewhere that the copula of any proposition is always 'is' or some allied word; to say that the use of 'infinite' is to deny that 'finite' is the name of that which is being discussed is to adopt the later view put forward by John Stuart Mill that positive and negative are possible distinctions between propositions and that in a negative proposition the copula consists of the words 'is not'.

Although it is not our concern here, it is worth noting that in the case of these last two classes of words the images which Hobbes insists accompany our use of names could in no sense be regarded as copies or pictures of something really existing which the words name: these words are certainly not meant

1. Ibid., p. 17.
to be the names of things in the world as is the word 'man'; neither are they the names of a class of determinate images as is the word 'centaur'. They do not signify \( x \) or \( y \), but rather signify that such-and-such is the case. If images accompany their use, and Hobbes does not say definitely that they do, there can be no link other than a purely associative one between name and image. On the other hand of course all names for Hobbes are signs of our thoughts and, despite what he says about the equation of thoughts with 'ideas' or 'images', we may reasonably conclude that, for all practical purposes, he does not wish us to understand that the referent of a name is always some concrete determinate image occurring in the speaker's mind. In point of fact, of course, such an image is never the reference of a word. Sometimes this is true because our words refer to real things; at other times it is true because there cannot be a determinate image of the sort required.

Thus, even at the level of descriptive language, it is at the worst quite wrong and, at the best, misleading, to say that Hobbes's theory of meaning and his theory of names are co-extensive. The word 'name' is itself used so widely that to say his theory of meaning is a theory of names is in
effect to say very little, if anything at all. Obviously, if it is said that all words are names then a description of the way names function will be a description of a theory of meaning; but names function in so many different ways for Hobbes, even at this level, that it can be misleading to say he holds a theory of naming co-extensive with his theory of meaning with its implication that 'naming' is a certain single, simple, relation between a word and an entity.

Hobbes's outspoken nominalism strikes at the base of what appears at first sight to be a strictly private view of meaning and at the notion of a private language which goes along with this. We have noted already that his emphasis upon the importance of our conceptions and the connexion of these with our experience is used by Hobbes as a tool to destroy what he took to be certain misleading tendencies in traditional accounts of the meaning-relation. This same interest in ideas however led him to suggest that images always accompanied our discourse, and to hold that we can think in 'ideas' without the use of words. We can think, he wants to say, not as a baby or an animal may be said to think but - with ideas alone, without using language -
we can pursue logical connexions and acquire scientific knowledge. This sort of attitude, however, goes against his contention that our private words simply 'mark' our thoughts and do not 'signify'. By using our private 'marks' we may call up certain determinate images in a required order. It is impossible, however, to see how universality is obtainable from this, yet this is required if we are to think in any full sense, if we are to acquire knowledge. Hobbes himself seems to be fully aware of this when he notes that 'living creatures that have not the use of speech, have no conception or thought in the mind, answering to a syllogism made of universal propositions'.

Nevertheless, the view that we can possess knowledge in vacuo, as it were, lingered on both with Hobbes and with his contemporaries: it was in fact the common view of the seventeenth century that the solitary man could proceed as far in knowledge of the world as could the social man. This is part and parcel of the seventeenth-century emphasis upon the particular and the individual; the emphasis which led, among other results, to the love of individual

'experiment' so many examples of which appear in the early transactions of the Royal Society. This common belief of the time might be expressed by saying that if particular item of knowledge were piled upon particular item of knowledge sooner or later 'the penny would drop' and we would know all there was to be known. It was, in this respect, an age of incurable optimism.

The sort of vacillation which we see in Hobbes between the privacy and publicity of meaning and of knowledge, the equivocation he shows in speaking of his 'names', his confusion regarding the status of 'thoughts', 'conceptions', 'ideas', and 'images', all stem from the tendentiousness of his writing. The causes he wished to advance were those of empiricism and science, as opposed to those of scholasticism and obscurantism: the weapon of 'ideas' which he adopted for his destructive purpose proved inadequate for construction. He, like others in his century, - as we shall see - proposed a reform of existing scientific language as part of the pathway towards a growth of knowledge about the world: the attempt to clear up the confusions regarding language of this sort, however, by no means exhausted his interest in linguistic questions.
There is no doubt that it is misleading to say that Hobbes held a simple naming theory of meaning at the level of scientific discourse, although it is equally beyond question that he wished to develop a language which functioned in this way for the purpose of promoting knowledge. If Hobbes held the sort of theory commonly attributed to him he would be forced to forgo the use of many expressions which are still necessary in any catalogue of knowledge about the world, for these expressions do not name anything existent, neither do they name any possible 'determinate image'. His account of scientific language, therefore, amounts to a statement of the way language should function. At the simple level of describing the everyday world as experienced language should function in this way if the scientists of his century are to acquire more knowledge about the world. In setting out the conditions for the formation of such a language, however, he is not content to say that all words in this language must name things, ideas, or mental processes; he introduces also the concept of utility as being a sufficient condition for the inclusion of certain expressions within the language. If an expression is found to be useful - if it is found to assist the functioning of our language - it may, because of this,
be said to be meaningful regardless of whether it can either name something existing in the world or name a possible 'idea'. Even at the level of scientific prose a possible answer to the question 'Why has this expression a meaning?' is 'Because we find it useful, because it has a use' - that the expression should stand in a relation to an entity in the way that 'Fido' stands to Fido is not necessary for the expression to be meaningful. We shall see that this notion of usefulness as being a sufficient criterion of the meaningfulness of words recurs throughout Hobbes's discussion of language as, indeed, it does throughout the seventeenth century.

Section 2  Locke

Like Hobbes before him, Locke's attack upon scholasticism and his desire to 'remove the rubbish' from scientific language led him to develop a theory of meaning - a theory which we have seen is normally held to be a naming theory of a fairly simple type. We shall see in what follows, however, that his apparently simple naming theory of meaning is not as simple as it is at first thought to be; neither was he unimpressed by nor did he disregard either the
linguistic reform movements of the century or the emphasis upon the legitimacy of other uses of language than that of the scientist.

However, let us first examine the possible contention that Locke holds a simple naming theory of meaning. We have seen that the theory of meaning usually attributed to Locke is that our words are signs of mental entities of some sort, entities which our words name: words are conventionally agreed upon to 'represent' or 'signify' an element, not of the physical world, but of our mental life. These elements of our mental life are in turn 'representatives' of the world of physical things, effects of the world upon us acting through the medium of our sense-organs. Things in the world, we are told, cause 'ideas' to arise in us which we communicate to others by means of sounds conventionally agreed upon to stand for or signify these ideas which in turn 'signify', or even 'picture', the real world. The meanings of words are equated with the relation of 'signification': the word 'Peter' means my idea of Peter in the sense that my uttering this word 'signifies', 'is a sign of', the fact that I am thinking about or have an idea of Peter. Words are names or labels which we attach to our thoughts.
There is no doubt that this common interpretation of Locke as holding a naming theory of what we may call the 'word-idea-thing' type is consistent with at least certain sections of the Essay. That men use sounds to signify their 'internal conoeptions', that they 'make them stand as marks for the ideas' in their own mind is explicitly asserted in the opening sections of Book III and is from time to time re-asserted throughout the rest of the discussion of language.¹ This is also the view which is at first sight most consistent with the 'new way of ideas' put forward in Book II of the Essay. Although commentators upon Locke have recognized that by 'idea' he means much more than a mere image it is, I think, true to say that despite the surface recognition of the wide scope of this term in the Essay his expounders have for the most part been misled by the commonly held view of ideas derived particularly from Berkeley and Hume. Despite their protestations to the contrary they have regarded Locke's ideas as mental entities of some sort, representative of the real world. Thus they have been led to hold that Locke is putting forward

¹. See, Locke, Essay, III.1.2; cf. III.2.2.
a naming theory of a fairly simple type.

We saw before that Locke is concerned with two significatory relations. There is, firstly, the relation of signification existing between the idea and the thing, which appears to saddle Locke with all the difficulties attendant upon a representative theory of perception; secondly, there exists a relation of signification between the word and the idea. This last is a man-made relation whose sole purpose is to show either ourselves or others that we have certain ideas or thoughts 'in mind'. O'Connor points out quite rightly that if Locke means by 'idea' a sense-datum or image then it is simply not correct to say that upon uttering the word 'cat' I either am experiencing cats or have an image of them in my mind. However, I think we have already sufficiently seen that although Locke does include images among ideas this is far from being his only or most basic account of what an idea is. 'When you tell me', says Locke, 'what you mean by these names, I shall presently reply that there, then, are the ideas that you have of them in your mind': this view can only be seen as a denial of the necessity for a 'picture' to be entertained upon the utterance of a word.
How are we to tell someone 'what we mean' by a name? Simply by describing the thing to which we would normally refer the name and this ultimately is reducible, surely, to showing our hearer that we have the ability to recognize such and such a thing as a bearer of the name. When we say 'I have an idea of redness' we can mean that we have a red sense-datum, or a red mental image. On the other hand, we may simply be able to recognize cases of redness when they occur. If I have an idea of a cat I may have a mental image of a cat although images are not an invariable accompaniment of thinking. On Locke's view, however, when I utter the word 'cat' I do have an idea of it and when I tell my hearer 'what I mean' by this word this very act of telling is in some way the idea which I have. Thus, if asked what do I mean by 'cat' I may reply 'A furry animal with four legs'; then Locke would say that my idea of a cat is of a furry animal with four legs. If I am presented with furry four-legged animals and deny that they are cats, e.g. opossums, I need to add further differentia to my first statement. I might then say that I meant by 'cat' a furry animal with four legs that 'meows', and so on. What then does having an idea of a cat now amount to? Surely to nothing other than a preparedness and ability to recognize
certain objects as cats; in a very real sense 'I know what I mean by "cat"' because I am prepared to say of any object either that it is or is not a cat. This amounts to saying that Locke uses the word 'idea' in a dispositional sense though he is far from being free from confusion on this point. However, if I have an idea of cat, or red, or justice, I am prepared to classify certain objects, colours, or actions, as either being or not being objects, colours, or actions to which I would apply these names.

Therefore, while O'Connor is quite correct in saying that sense-data - except of the actual words we use - and images do not always accompany the use of words, it is reasonable of Locke to say that ideas always accompany the words we use if he is using 'idea' in the way that I have suggested. On this view when I use the word 'cat' I merely indicate to my hearers that I know what this word means, I have an idea of it, in the sense that I am able to recognize cats when the need arises. To say I have an idea of red, of a cat, of Heisenberg's principle, is simply to say I know what 'red' means, what 'cat' means, what 'Heisenberg's principle' means, where 'means' involves me only in being able ultimately to point to instances or give a
Locke often speaks as if there is a third relation of signification with which he is concerned, namely, that existing between the word and the thing. His clear statements, however, upon the 'proper' and 'immediate' signification of words leave us in no doubt that there is no direct relation between words and things - words do not name things, but name ideas. Whenever Locke speaks as though the word is the name of a thing it should be remembered that this is an elliptical expression: we must always presume the presence of an idea between the word and the thing. On the other hand, to interpret Locke as saying that ideas are merely shadows of reality, as O'Connor does, is quite mistaken. Of course, if they were mere 'shadow-things' it would be needless to assume them as intermediaries between words and things; it has, however, emerged quite clearly from our discussion of Locke's use of 'idea' that he does not primarily consider ideas to duplicate reality in the sense required for O'Connor's criticism to be valid. The number of names in our language is not identical with the number of things in the world. Of course it is true that we do use language to duplicate or 'picture' reality. Locke
would not deny this: but he would have to deny that this duplication of reality is a simple matter of one word representing one part of reality, another representing another part, and so on. Any 'duplication' in this respect is a very complex sort of thing. Thus although to interpret the sections of the Essay that we have so far considered as putting forward a simple naming theory, in fact, a simple picture theory of meaning, is at first sight reasonable, our opinion must alter when we consider Locke's most important and consistent use of the word 'idea'.

Bearing this in mind, it is reasonable to interpret a large amount of what Locke is saying, even in the early chapters of Book III, as a denial of any simple picture theory of meaning. This is of course largely recognized nowadays but the recognition of this fact was delayed partly by the apparent prevalence in the seventeenth century of simple meaning theories of this sort. We have seen, however, that philosophical theories of meaning, even prior to Locke, went much further than this. It was certainly the case that views of this sort were put forward but only as part of the attack upon the jargon of the schools, and - as we shall see - in the attempts to develop an ideal language for
dealing with the propositions of science.

In apparently putting forward a simple naming theory of meaning Locke was - like his contemporaries - on the one hand attacking the linguistic habits of his forbears and, on the other hand, paving the way for a special language of science. It is doubtful whether Locke himself thought that in these respects he was saying anything particularly new, for it is notorious that he was unclear and ambiguous in his use of the word 'idea', and we have seen that any denial of the simplicity of Locke's theory has so far depended upon the equivocal nature of 'idea' and the relation of 'signifying' as they occur in the Essay. That he was ambiguous indicates, I suggest, that he was aware of the difficulties associated with the current views upon this problem: although he never solved these problems I shall later show that his thought on this question developed far beyond that of any other thinker of his own or, indeed, the next century. Thus, while I want to go on to say here that the common interpretations of Locke upon the question of meaning place him squarely within the acknowledged practice of his century, I also want to say that even a discussion of those elements of Locke's theory which are normally taken to support this
view reveal important differences between Locke's actual practice and the accepted account of the empirical tradition in these matters. The simplicity of his theory is only an apparent simplicity; the common notion of ideas as 'phantasms' or 'images' prevents us from seeing the very real differences which exist between Locke's theory and those others with which it has so much in common.

It needs to be borne in mind at this point that this thesis is only concerned with Locke's use of 'idea' so far as it bears upon his philosophy of language in general. That is to say, in order to show that it was commonly held in seventeenth-century England that words mean the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, and that these ideas are in turn derived from things, - the view normally attributed to Locke - it is not necessary for us to discuss the specific nature of ideas for the different thinkers of the period. The nature of Locke's 'ideas' need only be discussed in order to show that the charge cannot successfully be maintained that Locke believes in a simple picturing of reality by our thoughts, and consequently by our words.

That Locke, even when speaking of words as the names of ideas, is denying any simple picture theory of
meaning becomes clearer when he is discussing the subject of general words. It is to make words really useful that they are made to be capable of standing for a 'multitude of particular existences';¹ that is, for words to fulfil their function adequately they need to be general. There is some doubt here again as to the interpretation of the relation between a word, an idea, and a thing. Although at first sight it would appear that the 'multitude of particular existences' designated by one word would be different ideas (in the sense of sense-data), on the interpretation of 'idea' which we have seen to provide the most consistent interpretation of what Locke has to say in Book II we should like to be able to interpret him here as saying that the general word bears a one-one relation to the idea, a general idea, while the idea is a universal, the idea of a quality identical in its many exemplifications in different particulars. Support is lent to this view of the relation between word, idea, and thing - in the case of general words at least - by a sentence which Locke added to the second edition of the Essay. Here it is said that general terms are made to stand for a 'multitude of particular

¹. Locke, Essay, III.1.3.
existences' by being 'made to stand for general ideas'.¹ In short, general words do not stand for many particular ideas of the same sort but stand for one idea which in turn signifies many particular things: 'signifies', that is, in a different sense from that in which the word signifies the idea. The idea signifies many particular things in the sense that the idea is an idea of the generic quality that all these particulars possess. For Locke general words stand for a 'sort of things', not directly, but 'by being the sign of an abstract idea in the mind';² they are essential to language and 'become general by being made the signs of general ideas'.³ Here again we see that though we may speak of words as standing for or signifying things, this is always a shorthand description of the process which actually occurs, for the idea is always assumed as an intermediary between the word and the thing. Also, the question of the relation between general words and things again emphasizes that it is quite wrong to regard ideas in the Essay as simply duplicates or shadows

¹. Ibid., III.1.3.
². Ibid., III.3.12.
³. Ibid., III.3.6.
of reality.

Locke suggests that the 'greatest part of words that make all languages are general terms'\(^1\) and even goes so far as to say of names - i.e., all words except particles and negative terms - that 'all (except proper names) are general'.\(^2\) This is important, for if Locke were holding a simple picture theory of meaning his ideas would be mere shadows of reality, mere duplicates, bearing a one-one relation to the world; that this is not his view has already been made clear. So far is this from being the case for Locke that, although a one-one relation does hold between the word and the idea, between the idea and the thing there exists a one-many relation - a view which necessarily precludes any suggestion that language pictures the world in any direct sense. We should also notice in passing that for Locke not even all words are names. At III.1.4 he discusses words which we 'make use of' not to signify an idea but to signify its absence - words, he says, which we cannot properly regard as belonging to or signifying

\(^{1}\) Ibid., III.3.1.

\(^{2}\) Ibid., III.1.6.
any idea whatever. There is also of course another large class of words - which Locke calls 'particles' - which do not signify ideas but are rather 'signs of the relations between ideas or between propositions'; these words, according to Locke, are all 'marks of some action or intimation of the mind'. Thus, if Locke were holding any simple picture theory of meaning, general words, particles, and negative terms would be excluded from his theory: it is not, therefore, too much to say that we can see a large amount of what Locke has to say in Book III as a denial of the representative character of meaning.

Thus, even if we consider Locke to be holding a naming theory of meaning we cannot say that this is a simple theory, just as we saw that - although largely for different reasons - we cannot accuse Hobbes of a similar naivety. The naming theories of meaning usually put forward in the seventeenth century were designed as a specific against the excess verbiage of, and the confusion resulting from, the attempt of traditional scholastic philosophy to give an account of the world. They were

2. O'Connor, John Locke, p. 129.
primarily weapons of destruction and this task they served very well indeed. The thinkers with whom we are concerned, however, were also interested in making language an adequate instrument for dealing with the growth of knowledge resulting from the scientific movement of the century. In the language of science we shall see that they hoped to do this by advocating various more or less drastic reforms, at the same time as reserving a proper place for more ordinary uses of language. Locke's very close alliance with the currents of philosophical and scientific thought of his time, attested to by Gibson, would lead us to expect his work to reflect these two tendencies which prevailed in much earlier thought.
PART TWO

THE CONSTRUCTIVE PHILOSOPHERS - The Builders
OVERLOOKED ASPECTS OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ACCOUNTS OF MEANING

Section 1 Common Use and Context

Not only were the naming theories offered by seventeenth-century thinkers not simple theories, but also these philosophers were well aware that even if theories of this sort did offer an explanation of the phenomenon of meaning it was only a partial explanation over a very restricted field of possible language uses. Philosophers of this century were not unaware of the multitudinous uses to which language could be put; neither were they unfamiliar with the distinction to be drawn between 'common' use and other uses of language; nor were they unacquainted with the notion of contextual meaning. Hobbes, for example, recognizes that there are other, equally important, uses of language which function quite differently from the descriptive model, though as a philosopher he concerns himself only with giving an account of any statement that 'expresseth truth or falsity', the statements of 'those that affirm or deny'.

For philosophy this is the only kind of 'speech' that is useful.

Any actual use of language carries with it, on the part of the speaker, an intention: in the case of scientific language, for example, the speaker's intention is to 'lay his thoughts' before another and to communicate knowledge to his hearer. Hobbes recognizes that other intentions also govern certain uses of language. The intention to obtain knowledge lies behind questioning; we also intend by certain language-uses to obtain something, as in prayer; to bring people to perform or refrain from some action, as in commanding, threatening, persuading, and advising. These and other uses of language which Hobbes is prepared to classify under the general heading of 'speech' are all at times spoken of in terms of the result which it is intended that their use should achieve. Only in certain cases, however, as we shall see, is the intention of the speaker a defining characteristic of the use in question.

More often Hobbes takes as basic the notion that uses of language other than philosophical or scientific signify human desires, feelings, or passions to those who are being addressed.¹ If I ask 'Why does the moon

¹. Ibid., p. 29.
shine at night?' I signify, in Hobbes's language, my desire to obtain knowledge; in saying 'I am in pain' I signify a certain feeling that I am experiencing. As well as desires and feelings we are also able to signify our opinions or attitudes: for example, in praising something we signify our 'opinion of the goodness' of that thing.¹ 'Signification' of course always involves a reference to a definite hearer and it is this aspect of language-uses of the above types that Hobbes wishes to emphasize here: by, for example, asking a question, I 'lay before others' my desire to obtain knowledge. As well as the significatory function of this sort of word-use, however, there is also an expressive function; as well as signifying my desires and feelings I express them by making the utterances which I in fact do make. For Hobbes however the expressive function of language must always be linked with its significatory function because he refuses to count the paradigm case of 'expressive' language, namely, 'cursing' and 'swearing', as 'speech' at all.² He sees this rather as a conditioned response to stimuli which would, for him, be on a par with animal

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2. Ibid., p. 49.
cries.

There are some types of 'speech', however, which are defined solely in terms of the ends in respect of human actions that they are to bring about - examples of these are 'instigation', 'persuasion' and 'counselling'. If we advise someone it cannot be said that we signify or express our desire that he should do so-and-so for advice may be given with tongue in cheek: if my supervisor advises me to learn a trade I cannot \textit{prima facie} be sure whether he wishes me to do so, whether he feels that the Australian economy suffers from the shortage of tradesmen, or whether he is expressing a belief in the futility of philosophy. I can, however, be sure that he intends me to pursue a certain course of action; it is in terms of the ends to be achieved in this way that Hobbes defines language-uses of this sort.\footnote{Hobbes, \textit{English Works}, Vol. IV, p. 75.}

Hobbes, then, is careful to recognize that the language in which the naming-model might possibly be applied is only a small part of the whole range of human linguistic activities. In these other activities
words do not name entities, either ideas or things, and questions about the meaning of such utterances are answered by saying that this or that word-use shows to the hearer that the speaker wants something or feels in a certain state. We classify verbal forms by means of the function they are designed to perform, by means of their use: the language of wishes and emotions is distinguished from the language of science by virtue of the different uses to which each is put. A prayer is used to signify to others a desire for something, a 'proposition' is used to convey knowledge. For Hobbes, if it is asked of any particular utterance 'What sort of discourse is this?' an answer is supplied by answering the further question 'To what use is this put?'.

Another way in which Hobbes shows his divergence from a naming-model of meaning is to be found in his emphasis upon context as a guide to meaning. We have already seen that words do not 'mean' in isolation but only acquire meaning, even in scientific prose, when they occur within a proposition, whereas we would be inclined to expect that if the meaning of a name is x, then 'x' has a meaning whether or not it occurs with anything else. If one person says to another the word 'man', while this may promote an image of some one man
in the hearer's mind, it nevertheless cannot, on Hobbes's view be said to have meaning. This is simply because the hearer does not know, and cannot know, what to do with this word; he does not know what response is expected of him or what action he should take. Only if something is said with the word so that an appropriate response is elicited in the hearer can the word be said to have meaning.

In the language of desire, however, the emphasis upon the necessity of contextual considerations for arriving at a proper estimation of the meaningfulness of expressions becomes more important. 'Forms of speech' of this sort are not 'certain signs' of our feelings because whether we feel in a certain way or not we are able to use these expressions. 'The best signs of passions present, are either in the countenance, motions of the body, actions, and ends, or aims, which we otherwise know the man to have'. ¹ In our attempt to find out what is meant by any particular language-use, we must pay attention, not to isolated words, but to whole statements or more: we must also, especially in discourse other than scientific, attend to the gesture,

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facial expression, and actions of the person speaking, for these signify the state of mind of the speaker more surely than do the actual words used.

Even scientific language cannot carry out its task of signifying our conceptions 'without the help of many circumstances'. Language needs to be interpreted and the hearer's job of interpretation is assisted by his paying attention to the 'time, place, countenance, [and] gesture' of the speaker. It is not always easy to understand the meanings of words unless we consider the 'drift', 'occasion' and 'contexture' of the whole utterance. While all these considerations can be helpful in enabling us to determine another's opinions and conjectures nothing can be more helpful in this regard than 'our sight of his actions'. It is the absence of this possibility which leads to difficulties and mistakes in making historical analyses for 'these men that are gone from us long ago' have left nothing but their writing for us to judge their meaning by; we have great difficulty in interpreting the past because we are not living in the

3. Ibid., p. 75.
same period, are unaware of the problems that beset the thinkers and ordinary men of the time. In language 'signification' is not carried by words alone but by a wide variety of contextual circumstances most of which are transitory accompaniments of discourse itself.

As well as the emphasis placed upon uses of language other than descriptive and upon contextual considerations in determining meaning, seventeenth-century thinkers were very conscious of the part played in human affairs by what they usually called 'common discourse'. Although for the most part they tended to hold naming theories of meaning in certain spheres, we have seen that they were not unaware that language is not the simple phenomenon these theories would have us believe it to be - they were aware that language has other uses such as an emotive and expressive use. They were also aware that statements as such were not always a reliable guide to meaning, for wider contextual issues were all found to bear upon this question. This consciousness of the variegated forms of language is reflected also in their feeling for the necessity and meaningfulness of the language of the ordinary man. Hobbes goes further than this, however, by seeming to want to say in many places that in ordinary linguistic
usage a different criterion of meaningfulness is to be adopted from that which he advocates for scientific discourse: this criterion is in effect one of utility. Any form of words which achieves the purposes for which it is designed is to be accounted meaningful. We have already seen that even in so-called 'scientific' discourse Hobbes is prepared to admit, for example, the word 'nothing' to be meaningful solely upon the grounds of its usefulness for certain purposes.

Throughout the seventeenth century the view that 'the end and use of speech is for humane utility and mutual converse' was always to the fore. Basically, of course, this view resulted from the belief in the possibility of a growth of scientific knowledge; when remarks of this sort were made, it was often with the thought in mind that 'humane utility' was best served by promoting such knowledge and that this in turn could best be done by adhering to some naming theory of meaning. While this is true, a corollary of this viewpoint was that if utility were best served by any other form of language-use then this type of discourse was acceptable for this reason alone. While the tendency,

1. J. Wilkins, Real Character, p. 18.
as we shall see, was to demand a greater rigour in scientific language, alongside this it was believed that ordinary language need not be interfered with. Certainly it was not the philosopher's task to do so.

Language develops at the level of ordinary folk and 'words are generally framed and applied according to the conceptions of the vulgar';¹ as it is the 'people's charter' to develop language as they see fit, the philosopher only interferes with it for his special purpose.² This special purpose is the development and communication of knowledge about the world, for which the language of ordinary men is far from adequate: the indefinite use of words which always appears in common discourse is 'an impediment to knowledge', an impediment which British philosophers of the seventeenth century were concerned to alleviate. It was the fault of the scholastics that they thought they could, with ordinary language, do the task which can only be accomplished by a more rigid 'scientific' language: their speculations 'were spent on words, or at any rate on popular notions (which is much the same

thing), not on facts or nature.¹ Glanvill puts this point in a metaphor which brings out very well the seventeenth-century belief that a nicer use of language will make clear to us the innermost structure of the world:

And that there is an America of secrets, and unknown Peru of Nature, whose discovery would richly advance them [i.e. the arts and professions], is more than conjecture. Now while we either say by the Land of gross and vulgar Doctrine, or direct our Enquiries, by the Cynosure of meer abstract notions; we are not likely to reach the Treasures on the other side of the Atlantick: The directing of the World the way to which, is the noble end of true Philosophy. (2)

Thus Glanvill and Bacon assert the necessity for a wary approach to ordinary discourse: such discourse is not to be done away with, even if it could be, for it serves human utility and this is all that is required to give it standing as an acceptable use of language. The notion of there being two main types of discourse, one 'scientific' or 'philosophical', the other ordinary, common, or 'civil', is commonplace in the seventeenth century. We have already seen that Professor Aaron notes this distinction in Locke.

Kenelm Digby, as early as 1644,

distinguished two types of language: one common to all mankind, the other specialized and used in the sciences, arts, and trades. In both cases one discovers the meanings of the words employed in the language by noting carefully how the words are used. Departure from common usage constituted for Digby an important source of error. (1)

Hobbes does not explicitly draw a distinction in this manner though much that he says may be seen as indicative of the same general view. We often, he says, make the mistake of taking 'the habitual discourse of the tongue for ratiocination'; those that do this make the mistake, that Bacon has laid at the door of scholasticism, of relying upon the customary usage of words in order to make pronouncements about the world which purport to provide us with 'scientific' knowledge. There is nothing wrong, as such, with the common use of words so long as such uses are directed towards the affairs of everyday life. What is a mistake is to extend this use into a sphere where it does not and cannot have any application, to attempt to increase or disseminate the

store of human knowledge without becoming much more self-conscious about word use in its relation to the things spoken of. Philosophers, 'whatsoever the common use of words be', have a duty to alter language in the cause of the greater understanding of the world.¹ It cannot be too strongly emphasized, however, that Hobbes does not wish to say that ordinary language is either meaningless or otiose; he simply protests against extending the ordinary ways of speaking into realms where they cannot be fruitful.

John Towers, a commentator upon the work of Cumberland, finds there this same recognition of and respect for the language of ordinary people. Cumberland has contrasted the unmethodical and confused gathering of evidence from 'obvious experience and daily observation' characteristic of the ordinary man, with the 'intellectual Reasonings, philosophical Demonstrations, and Deductions mathematically demonstrated', which is conceived as being the proper method of the philosopher in his search for knowledge.² Towers finds the origin for this view in the work of Bacon and refers to the latter's belief that 'false Notions ... follow from the lax and indefinite Use

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2. Cumberland, De Legibus Naturae, p. 43.
of Words in ordinary Discourse; which occasions great Ambiguities and Uncertainties in philosophical Debates'.

Again in Towers and in Cumberland, as with Bacon, Hobbes, Glanvill, and Wilkins it is implied that ordinary discourse is, within its own sphere, of great use and benefit to mankind, but it is the extension of this beyond the bounds within which it has application that militates against a growth of philosophical knowledge. This is a 'faulty Method of proceeding in Philosophy' though it is not, because of this, to be condemned completely.

Wherever in the century we find this distinction, either implicitly or explicitly, we find also a parallel distinction between two methods of observation and two kinds of knowledge. 'Vulgar' observation results in something which for all practical purposes - though with some misgivings - may be called 'knowledge', although it is more often referred to as opinion or practical judgement. By means of judgement of this sort we are enabled to carry on the normal affairs of life, and for this reason the language-use associated with it is one which has a pragmatic justification. It is, therefore,

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1. Towers, in a fn. to Cumberland, De Legibus Naturae, pp. 43ff.
not to be decried. However, an increase of knowledge about the world demands a different sort of language-use; the seventeenth-century belief that this was necessary led to the suggested reforms of language for philosophical purposes which are to be discussed below.¹

Section 2 Language and Reality

This apparent lack of rigidity in meaning theories of the century springs from the distrust of all language engendered in the minds of philosophers by the 'excess verbiage' of the scholastics.

The distrust of scholastic 'jargon' referred to earlier led in turn to a general deep-rooted distrust of all language as a means of acquiring and disseminating knowledge about the world. Language was a tool which man used to control and understand his world: if he were to do this with any degree of success, he must pay close attention to his language. Otherwise he might be misled by it into postulating the existence of unknown and unknowable entities whose sole function would appear

¹. See below, Ch. 6, sect. 2.
to lie in the aptitude they have for increasing our confusion and inhibiting the growth of knowledge. While the distrust of scholasticism provoked an analysis primarily of scientific or knowledge-expressing language, in the course of this analysis it came to be seen that the problems associated with language were not so simple and straightforward as they were previously thought to be.

In its extreme form this dissatisfaction with language took the form of a tendency to eschew language altogether. More truly representative of the century, however, was the view which emphasized the need for observation of natural things in our search for knowledge and which advocated an attitude of suspicion towards the writer whose works appeared over-full of subtle distinctions, literary allusions, and figures of speech.

1. Much later, Swift was to make use of this tendency:
'The first project was to shorten discourse by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles, because in reality all things imaginable are but nouns. The other project was a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever; and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health as well as brevity....An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on.' Swift, Gulliver's Travels (1726), 'A Voyage to Laputa', Pt. 3, Ch. 5.
Language was a necessity; it was necessary on two grounds; firstly, for the continuance of the ordinary affairs of human life, and secondly, as an instrument indispensable for the acquiring and communication of knowledge.

To deal adequately with the environment man must be aware of the relation his language bears to the world around him; he must, that is, attempt an analysis of the nature of language. The legacy of scholastic science which they inherited had been found to be 'chimerical'; it had been found to be wanting precisely because current verbal uses were incapable of presenting the picture of the everyday world that the new scientist had come to demand as essential for human progress. This analysis of the nature of language receives different emphasis from the several writers we are considering but again Bacon may be seen as setting the pattern of much that was to follow. Bacon, of course, wished to replace the 'old' science by the new science founded upon his better and more certain 'method of intellectual operation', which was essentially a method of careful induction upon 'notions and axioms' derived from experience.\footnote{Bacon, \textit{Works}, Vol. IV, p. 50; cf. p. 111.} The 'notions' which we are
to derive so carefully from experience, however, are to be such that they 'picture' the things from which they are derived. It is for Bacon true that our words represent our notions, but for knowledge to be obtained our notions must also be representative of reality. We need first, however, to 'sweep away all theories and common notions, and to apply the understanding, thus made fair and even, to a fresh examination of particulars'.

It was a fault of existing philosophical language that although the words used possibly represented notions, these notions themselves had either no connexion at all with reality, or else had a very tenuous connexion indeed.

Although not as concerned as some of his successors with questions of language, Bacon, by his insistence upon the anchoring of words in experience, determined the direction that later analyses were to take.

For Hobbes also, distrust of language runs deep: he finds in language both a possible key to knowledge and, more importantly here, he also finds it responsible for error so far as we misunderstand or misuse language.

'For speech has something in it like to a spider's

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1. Ibid., p. 93.
2. Ibid., p. 61.
web ... for by contexture of words tender and delicate
wits are ensnared and stopped; but strong wits break
easily through them.\(^1\) One way to avoid the errors
following from language was to ground our words upon
experience as Bacon had suggested.

Distrust of language set the stage for the
advancement of learning by insisting that only by directly
relating words to experience, by avoiding the use of
metaphor, and by insisting upon a plain, direct, speech
would this advancement come about. Words to have meaning
were to indicate elements of experience, not the 'entities'
of the schools: \('\text{Nullius in Verba}'\)^2 became not only the
motto of the Royal Society but became also the necessary
condition of an increase in knowledge for most of the
learned men of the century. Convinced as they were of
the uselessness of existing language as a tool for the
advancement of knowledge they were compelled to analyse
its functioning in scientific discourse, and to make
suggestions for its improvement as an instrument for this
purpose. In so doing, as we shall see, they developed

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in verba magistri'.}
strands of thought which have had echoes within our own time.

There are two main suggestions apparent so far in seventeenth-century attitudes towards language. The first of these is that for statements about the world to be meaningful the words contained in them must be cashable in terms of human experience; that is to say, it would amount to a refutation of the truth-claim of an apparently factual statement to show that the proposer of the statement is unable either to describe the elements of experience which constitute the reference of his statement or to point to them in the world. Statements about the world are publicly checkable statements, at least in principle, and no statements not checkable in this way can be statements about the world. We are able legitimately to regard this demand for cashability as a forerunner of modern statements of the verification theory of meaning - for any supposedly empirical statement to be meaningful it must be verifiable in the sense that the facts referred to in the world by the statement must in principle be inter-subjectively observable. Of course, all seventeenth-century thinkers talked in terms of 'phantasms', 'notions', 'ideas', or 'images', and we have seen that many of them speak at
times as though these subjective 'entities' are the meanings of our words: we saw that this is partly true, but only partly. Images and notions while they may be the direct reference of our words must themselves represent elements of the physical world, or at least they must do so when we are speaking at the scientific level. So far as language is a public phenomenon our statements have a reference to that which is publicly observable in one way or another. For a statement, then, to be classed as scientific, or as giving us knowledge about the world, some sort of possible 'verification' of this statement is demanded. It is important to note further that, like the verificationists of later centuries, the empiricists of this time attacked the existing philosophy not by showing that it was a false view of reality but by showing that propositions hitherto considered as conveying certain factual information were not actually able to do so; they refuted the existing philosophy by adopting a criterion of meaning for scientific discourse which rules out as meaningless the pronouncements of the scholastics.

The second suggestion which we should note at this point is the emphasis given in the early seventeenth century to the notion of language as instrumental.
language at the scientific level has no other use than to assist us in gaining or communicating knowledge about the world. So far as it achieves this aim it is 'good' language; so far as it falls short of this it is to be avoided and corrected. Language to be called such must be useful, and its scientific use is to refer to and give an account of natural phenomena. There will be occasion later to speak at more length concerning the pragmatic aspects of seventeenth-century philosophies of language; for the moment we need only bear in mind that their conception of language as an instrument was of first importance for their analysis of the nature of scientific language. The seventeenth-century empiricists offer two criteria for determining whether or not any given piece of language is 'scientific' in the broad sense in which I am using this word: on the one hand, language is of this nature if it refers to the world, if, that is, its statements are verifiable; on the other hand, it is scientific language if it is useful for the gaining or communicating of knowledge about the world. In a manner of speaking these criteria are the same or at least, are co-extensive in the range of statements which they admit into the class of scientific statements, for no non-referential statement, according to these
thinkers, can be useful for the propagation of knowledge, and no proposition which propagates knowledge can be non-referential. However, it is worthwhile noting these suggestions separately for two reasons: firstly, because in different thinkers they naturally receive different emphasis; and secondly, the interest of these men in the utility of language assumes extra importance when they come to discuss questions of ordinary language.

We have seen that the puzzlement of the seventeenth-century English empiricists over linguistic questions arose because of their interest in and desire for an increase of scientific knowledge as being a source of benefit for humanity. It was a corollary of this desire that they should distrust existing philosophical linguistic usages which were seen as standing in the way of the scientific advance which they anticipated; their consequent criticism of scholastic discourse took the form of an attack upon the supposed meaningfulness of the assertions it contained, an attack which issued in the verdict that existing philosophical talk was for the most part to be judged meaningless so far as it purported to provide us with knowledge about the world. This special distrust led to a distrust of language in general as an instrument for gaining and communicating
knowledge, and this in turn led to a widespread interest in the analysis of the nature of actual scientific language. Convinced as they were that substantives in scientific discourse always - directly or indirectly - referred to something in the world which was the meaning of the word, they condemned scholastic language as being quite literally meaningless; i.e. without a referent which could be its meaning. They did not deny that forms of language other than scientific could have meaning; but they could not have empirical meaning.

The removal of certain philosophical puzzles, which were seen to originate in a particular use of language, by the adoption of a meaning-criterion which rules the statements involved in these puzzles to be meaningless has certain resemblances to views which have been thoroughly canvassed in our century. It is, of course, reminiscent of the later Wittgenstein's view that philosophical perplexity arises from certain snares associated with the use of language: clear these away, or perhaps - to adopt a common seventeenth-century metaphor - clear the undergrowth surrounding these snares away and we see that no reason for perplexity remains. The puzzles raised by these
pitfalls of language are the unanswerable yet unconvincing questions of philosophy, but they are also more than this; they are the reason why disagreement persists among philosophers. These views are also, and perhaps more strikingly, connected with the more popular semanticists of the twentieth century, such as Stuart Chase, and through them with the work of Ogden and Richards. Nothing could be more Hobbesian than the appeal in The Meaning of Meaning 'to the horrid example of Meinong's theory of objects: that is what happens, they warn us, if we dare to suppose that abstract nouns name entities'.

Philosophically, however, it is the logical positivists who bear the closest resemblance to the seventeenth-century empiricists on linguistic questions; whereas Wittgenstein in the Philosophical Investigations for the most part said that philosophical questions were not to be solved, but dissolved, for the logical positivists there were still important questions to be answered. Their disagreement with earlier philosophy was over the question of what can be said, and they produced grounds for dismissing certain types of

statement as meaningless, just as the seventeenth century did vis-a-vis the philosophy of scholasticism. They are nearer to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* when he comments that the correct philosophical method is to state only that which can be said, namely, the statements of natural science, than they are to the later Wittgenstein's remark, 'Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it'.¹ We shall see that the empiricist movement of the seventeenth century did wish to 'interfere' with language in various, more or less drastic, ways.

Their concern was with language which gives us knowledge of the real world; and it was hoped that their analyses of this sort of language would assist in bringing about the great advances in science which the century expected. The net result of the current distrust of language arising from the anti-scholastic temper of the time is more easily seen against the background of seventeenth-century criticism of existing linguistic practice, together with the suggestions that were made for the removal of these abuses. To these we now turn.

Section 3 The Criticism of Existing Linguistic Practices

While language is necessary for the acquisition and communication of knowledge, for the seventeenth-century philosophers it was a necessary evil which, in the best of all possible worlds, would probably not exist. Because our thinking is 'the bond-slave of words' any advance in thought and in knowledge in the actual world can only follow from our paying greater attention than hitherto both in choosing our words and in developing our style. The seventeenth-century attack upon the obscurity of philosophical style chose as an obvious target the use of metaphor and other similar devices in learned writing and speaking. Alongside this attack went the philosophers' demand throughout the century for a 'plain style' of speaking and writing, the origins of which we may again find in the work of Francis Bacon. This 'plain style' was demanded in all forms of language, whether written or spoken, theological or secular.

Bacon considers one of the 'vanities ... whereby learning hath been most traduced' is the 'affectionate study of eloquence and copie of speech' which flourished

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in the work of the scholastics. This love of eloquence has led men 'to hunt more after words than matter' and in doing this they laid themselves open to the charge that they studied words and not the things in the world.¹ Bacon called men back from their eloquent disputatious way of talking to a type of discourse more consonant with his demand that the way to knowledge lay in careful observation. The scientific method he advocated favoured plainness in both speech and writing; as only a 'plain' style can bring about intellectual clarity it was the duty of the philosopher 'to set everything forth, as far as may be, plainly and perspicuously' in order to assist the growth of human knowledge.²

And for all that concerns ornaments of speech, similitudes, treasury of eloquence, and such like emptinesses, let it be utterly dismissed. Also let all those things which are admitted be themselves set down briefly and concisely, so that they may be nothing less than words. (3)

Although Bacon was the first to demand plain speech and writing in the century his influence upon subsequent thought in this respect is at least doubtful.

3. Ibid., p. 254.
His own practice falls far short of the plainness which he advocated, and - as has been pointed out\(^1\) - the lavishly ornamented and effusive nature of later Elizabethan prose and the ornateness of style common to the Interregnum showed little evidence of Bacon's strictures. He was not alone, however, in his advocacy and from now until near the end of the century it became fashionable among philosophers imbued with the spirit of Baconian science to emphasize the need for plainness in serious discourse. Bishop Wilkins, in an early work, *Ecclesiastes, or a Discourse Concerning the Gift of Preaching*, first published in 1646, not only advocated a plain style of speaking and writing but also avoided, as far as possible, the linguistic sins which he was decrying. Some twenty years after this attack upon the use of rhetoric in preaching Wilkins was still protesting against the 'imposture of phrases' and 'cantic forms of speech' which for him constituted thegravest menace to the advance of knowledge.\(^2\) William Petty, in a work published two years after *Ecclesiastes*, was yet another scientist and mathematician to attack the prevailing use


\(^{2}\) See J. Wilkins, *Real Character*, p. 18.
of figures of speech in learned discourse: he was later to co-operate with Wilkins and to assist in the movement for linguistic reform within the Royal Society.

The Baconian distrust of poetry had later echoes in Hobbes. As metaphors are founded upon something in reality it is generally worth our while, in the search for knowledge, to enquire into the 'real ground' of the figure of speech, for its factual content can be expressed in 'proper words'. However, it is only 'the advantage of names' that makes men capable of attaining scientific knowledge and the names we use in scientific discourse can only suffer from the introduction of metaphors and other figures of speech. The use of figures of speech 'instead of words proper' is one of the causes of absurd conclusions: if we are to avoid absurdity in philosophy we must begin from 'perspicuous

1. W. Petty, The Advice of W.F. to Mr. Samuel Hartlib for the Advancement of Some Particular Parts of Learning (1648).


words' just as - as we shall see later - we must proceed by means of exact and unambiguous definitions. Hobbes, with his feet firmly on the ground, his interest centred in simply listing and explaining the causes and effects of the things he finds in the world, sees no need for rhetorical ornament in scientific discourse. Many minor figures echoed the pleas of Bacon and Hobbes that we should pay greater heed to the misleading nature of metaphor.

The demand that metaphor be avoided in favour of a plain style appeared also in the literary criticism and preaching of the period: basically, however, it was an outgrowth of the increasing interest in the world encouraged by the new science and the presumption that man could, given the right instruments, make great advances in understanding his world. One of these instruments was language. Now that educated men were coming to believe that knowledge was not limited to what they had inherited from classical and medieval times, they sought reasons for the mistakes and lack of progress

1. Ibid., pp. 34-6.

2. E.g., Eachard, Hall, and Webster. For a fairly full account of these see R.F. Jones, *The Seventeenth Century*. 

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of their predecessors and found the misuse of language to be one of the most important direct causes of past errors. It was perhaps natural, therefore, that they should come to think of an improvement of ways of speaking and writing as providing at least part - if not all - of the answer to the problem of understanding the world. A reform of language, together with the Baconian observation and careful experiment, could lead to an understandable and mastered world as opposed to the superstition, credulity, and ignorance encouraged by medieval science.

In mid-century the scientific movement became focussed in the Royal Society, a group of 'philosophers' - mathematicians, scientists, theologians - who had been meeting at Oxford and at London for many years before their official incorporation in London in 1660. Some of the original members of the Society - notably Wilkins, Petty, Boyle, and Willis - were among those who had already supported publicly the scientific demand for plain speech and writing. That the Society, as such, shared this point of view is borne out by alterations made by Glanvill to his Vanity of Dogmatizing when he re-published it as Sceptics
sci-entific in 1664.¹ In The Vanity of Dogmatizing
Glanvill, in attacking the scholastics, by implication
supported the proponents of the plain style, at least
in scientific discourse; however, as with Bacon, his
own practice did not live up to his professed beliefs.
Scepsis Scientifica, however, which was directed
specifically to the Royal Society and was the
occasion for Glanvill's admission as a member of this
body in 1664, largely corrects the ornateness of style
in the earlier work.

With the publication in 1667 of Thomas Sprat's
History of the Royal Society the attack on metaphor
and the request for a 'plain style' received the
official approval and support of the Society. Sprat's
History, printed by order of the Society, may be seen
as presenting not only Sprat's views, but also the
views of the Royal Society upon questions of language,
one of the topics with which Sprat deals. This work,
in effect, puts forward the official programme
regarding the desirable type of prose to be achieved by
scientists. The members of the Society, Sprat tells us,
have been careful with their discourse and have been

¹. The alterations have been noted in detail by R.F. Jones.
inclined to the belief - as is Sprat himself - that 'eloquence' ought to be banish'd out of all civil societies'. The use of 'Tropes' and 'Figures', the 'trick of Metaphors' have clothed our knowledge in doubt and uncertainty; our very upbringing and formal education tempt us to be more sympathetically disposed towards all forms of eloquence than we should be if it is our object to seek after certain knowledge. Because of this conviction among members of the Royal Society they have 'been most rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this extravagance; and that has been a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions and swellings of style': we must in our discourse return to a 'primitive purity' unadulterated either by metaphor or by an over-abundance of classical quotation.1

Further evidence - if such were needed - of the preoccupation of seventeenth-century philosophers with the need for plainness of style as a specific for the cure of ignorance is to be found in the writings of Richard Burthogge. Burthogge insists upon

1. T. Sprat, The History of the Royal Society of London, for the improving of natural knowledge (1702; first published 1667); pp. ill-3.
a plain style, not on the grounds of literary
elegance or appropriateness, but because of its
usefulness in the advancement of knowledge. One of
the 'conditions' for forming 'clear and distinct'
ideas is

a Due Illumination of the Object; by
which I mean here but Perspicuity of
Expression: a Representation of things
unto the Minde in plain, apt, and
significant words, and in a plain and
instructive order and method. Plainness
of Expression and Method is the Light of
a Discourse ... (1)

Well to the fore in Burthogge's mind is the need, in
giving an account of the world, to emphasize the
importance of dealing as directly as we can with things
and to avoid being misled by words: 'Take heed of being
abused with agreement of Words, into a belief of answerable
Agreement in Things'.

This tendency to insist upon the necessity of
dealing with things rather than words which was also
associated with the work of the Royal Society was
itself part of the century's interest in the growth
of scientific knowledge. It was the scientific
attitude par excellence which said in effect that a

growth of scientific knowledge could only come about by dealing directly with things without the intervention of language; it was this attitude which led some few people to hope that language could be dispensed with altogether and which led the remainder to regard it as an unavoidable necessity, with such a power to mislead in its present form that corrective measures of reform were needed in order that it could again serve the end for which the scientist needed it, namely, for the advancement of knowledge. From time to time - and sometimes in quite strange places - the request was made that we should deal with things, not words. John Hall, a minor poet, journalist, and pamphleteer, presents, in his Humble Motion to Parliament, a Baconian attitude to the possibility of advancing knowledge in which he emphasizes how much better it is 'to grave things in the mindes of children, then words'. The way to knowledge is through 'solid Ideas and sound representations of things', not through reliance upon the wisdom of tradition.¹ Sprat's History of the Royal Society is again responsible for giving this doctrine the

¹. See John Hall, The Advancement of Learning (1649); ed. by A.K. Croston (1953); pp. 33 and 34.
official approval of the scientific movement; the Royal Society 'did not regard the credit of Names, but Things: rejecting or approving nothing, because of the title, which it bears'. And the 'primitive purity' demanded in the speech of members was a demand for a fairly exact correspondence between the number of words we use and the number of things described.

This sought-for correspondence between words and things was linked with the literal belief in the beginning of language with Adam. English thinkers were disturbed at the lack of knowledge in the world, a nescience which they quite literally thought to stem from the Fall. Prior to Adam's disgrace he had the power to see the innermost structure of things, to perceive the workings of the things in the world, to know the 'essential structure' of all that existed. The world, it was believed, is not formed in any random, haphazard way but is a result of Divine planning, of

2. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VIII:

   '... to speak I tri'd, and forthwith spake, My Tongue obeyed, and readily could name What e're I saw.

   'I nam'd them, as they passed, and understood Thir nature ...'
interaction between minute particles, all explicable in causal terms. With Adam's fall, however, the knowledge he possessed of the inner reality of things was lost to mankind. 'The Mysterious influence of the Moon, and its causality on the sea's motion' was not an unexplained problem for Adam any more than the motion of a clock's hands is unexplainable by us;\(^1\) because of his all-pervading knowledge, Adam was able to, and did, name things, not on the basis of any appearance such as occurs in 'the enchanted glass of our minds', but upon the solid foundation of their essential nature. There was, in some way, a complete correspondence between the things named and the names applied to them. It was with this in mind that the seventeenth-century reformers of language suggested that we return to a 'primitive purity' in naming things, that we attempt to achieve as exact a correspondence as is possible between things and words. The path to knowledge was seen to lie in a return to the stage of human existence when we 'deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words'.\(^2\) The belief among some that, although

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languages differ throughout the world, the 'ideas' we receive from objects are the same in all of us, was itself sufficient reason for this emphasis upon a more exact correspondence between words and things. For as the 'notions' about which we agree or disagree, and 'upon which Agreement all affirmative Truth is established', are obtained 'from Nature' dispute would be lessened and the way to knowledge eased by a re-naming of the things in the world in a manner more akin to that followed by Adam. ¹ Verbal disputes would automatically disappear and the energies of men could be directed towards the accumulation of knowledge, both for human utility and the glory of God.

The growing conception of scientific knowledge as being directed towards the end of increasing human utility, the notion that knowledge was only worth obtaining if it could be used to man's advantage in the world, naturally brought with it this demand for a plain style of speaking and writing. The spirit of utility which was to pervade seventeenth-century science demanded that language be seen as a means and not as an end in itself. In science it was to be a means to the acquiring and communication of knowledge.

¹. Cumberland, De Legibus Naturae, p. 133.
about the world, knowledge which was expected to increase the sum of human happiness and well-being. The only way in which language could assist in achieving this end was by eliminating from it all unnecessary extravagances and leaving it as simple, as plain, as straightforward as possible. Language in science was to be reduced to its simplest terms and then it would be better equipped to present us with a clear and accurate picture of the real world.

The storehouse of knowledge, like all houses, was built for use; science was to be judged by its 'fruits' and not by its 'uniformitie' or by its coherence or consistency with that which had been traditionally believed. Similarly, as language was a necessary instrument for the increase of knowledge, it, too, needed to be tailored to meet the requirements of utility. Any advance in our thought, and hence in our knowledge, relies first of all upon a proper use of words. This utilitarian view of language was not peculiar to Bacon. Hobbes, for example, finds human utility to be the chief end of all speech and his remarks are echoed many years later by Wilkins who is quite clear that 'the end and use of Speech is for humane utility and mutual converse'.

As we would expect, Sprat's *History* gave added impetus to the scientific utilitarianism of the century: Bacon's main effect upon Sprat's *History* 'lies in Sprat's insistence upon the utilitarian fruit of science, as opposed to the fruitless dried pods of that dogmatism fostered in the schools. This utilitarianism permeates the whole of Sprat's apology'.\(^1\) Inextricably bound up with this emphasis upon the utilitarian aspects of science is the current belief that earlier science was made ineffectual by needless verbal disputes: Sprat's demand for a utilitarian science therefore carried with it the suggestion that language should be so formed and used as to assist in the achievement of the aims of the scientist. Language was a means to an end, and its use could only be justified by reference to the degree of success it displayed in the attainment of this end.