

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

Book III: Words

John Locke

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported on, between [brackets], in normal-sized type.

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Chapter vii: Particles

1. Besides words that name ideas in the mind, there are many others that we use to signify how the mind connects ideas or propositions with one another. To communicate its thoughts to others, the mind needs not only signs of the ideas it then *has before it*, but also signs to show what in particular it is *doing* at that moment with those ideas. It does this in several ways. For example, 'is' and 'is not' are the general marks of the mind's affirming or denying; and without these there would be in words no truth or falsehood. The mind also has ways of showing not only how it is connecting the parts of propositions to one another, but also how it is connecting whole sentences one to another, giving them various relations and dependencies so as to make a coherent discourse.

2. The words the mind uses to signify how it is connecting the various affirmations and negations that it is bringing together into a single continued reasoning or narration are generally called *particles*. The proper use of particles is the chief contributor to the clearness and beauty of a good style. To think well, it isn't enough that a man has ideas that are clear and distinct, nor that he observes the agreement or disagreement of some of them. He must also think *in sequence*, and observe the dependence of his thoughts and reasonings upon one another. And to express such methodical and rational thoughts well, he needs words to show what connection, restriction, distinction, opposition, emphasis, etc. he gives to each part of his discourse. If he gets any of these wrong he will puzzle his hearers instead of informing them. So these words that aren't the names of ideas are of constant and indispensable use in language, contributing greatly to men's expressing themselves well.

3. This part of grammar has, I suggest, been as much neglected as some others have been over-diligently cultivated. It is easy for men to work their way systematically through cases and genders, moods and tenses, gerunds and supines. With these and their like the grammarians have been diligent; and even particles have in some languages been set out and classified with a great show of exactness. But although 'preposition' and 'conjunction' etc. are names well known in grammar, and the particles contained under them carefully sorted into their distinct subdivisions, someone who wants to show the *right use* of particles, and what significancy [Locke's word] and force they have, must look elsewhere than in grammar books. He must take a little more pains, scrutinize his own thoughts, and observe in accurate detail the various *postures of his mind* when he talks.

4. Dictionaries usually explain these words through words of another language that come nearest to their meaning; but that isn't good enough, for what they mean is commonly as hard to grasp in the second language as in the first. They are all marks of something the mind is *doing* or *indicating*; so we need to attend diligently to the various views, postures, stands, turns, limitations, exceptions, and various other thoughts of the mind, for which we have no names—or no good ones. There is a great variety of these, far more than most languages have corresponding particles for; so it is no wonder that most particles have several meanings, sometimes almost opposite ones. In the Hebrew language there is a particle consisting of one single letter, which is said to have—was it *seventy*? anyway, certainly *more than fifty* different meanings.

5. 'But' is a particle, none more familiar in our language; and someone who calls it a 'discretive conjunction' and says that it corresponds to *sed* in Latin or to *mais* in French thinks he has sufficiently explained it. But it seems to me to indicate certain relations that the mind gives to various propositions or parts of them that it joins by this monosyllable. First, 'BUT to say no more'; here the word indicates that the mind has stopped in its course, before reaching the 'intended' end of it. Secondly, 'I saw BUT two planets': here it shows that the mind limits the sense to what is expressed, with a negation of everything else. 'The next two examples are intended as two halves of a single sentence'. Thirdly, 'You pray; BUT it is not that God would bring you to the true religion. . .': this indicates a supposition in the mind of something's not being as it should be. Fourthly, '. . . BUT that he would confirm you in your own': this shows that the mind makes a direct

opposition between that and what goes before it. Fifthly, 'All animals have sense; BUT a dog is an animal': here the word signifies little more than that the latter proposition is joined to the former as the minor 'premise' of a syllogism. [For example: 'All men are mortal, But Socrates is a man, So Socrates is mortal'. This use of 'But' was fairly standard well into the 20th century, but seems now to have expired.]

6. No doubt this particle has many other significations as well, . . . but it isn't my business to examine the word in all its uses, let alone to give a full explication of particles in general. What I have said about this word may lead us to reflect on the use and force of particles in language, and to think about the various actions of our minds when we are speaking—actions that we indicate to others by these particles. Some particles in some constructions, and others always, contain within them the sense of a whole sentence.

Chapter viii: Abstract and concrete terms

1. If the ordinary words of language, and our common use of them, had been attentively considered, they would have thrown light on the nature of our ideas. The mind has a power to abstract its ideas, and so they become essences, general essences, by which *sorts* of things are distinguished. Each abstract idea is distinct, so one such idea can never *be* another, so the mind will by its intuitive knowledge see the difference between any two ideas; and therefore no one whole idea can ever be affirmed of another. We see this in the common use of language, which doesn't permit any abstract

word, or name of an abstract idea, to be affirmed of another such. However certain it is that man is an animal, or is rational. . . everyone at first hearing sees the falsehood of 'Humanity is animality' and 'Humanity is rationality'. All our 'legitimate' affirmations are concrete ones, which don't affirm that one abstract idea *is* another, but *join* one abstract idea to another. . . . Where substances are concerned, the attributed abstract idea is most often the idea of a power; for example, 'A man is white' signifies that the thing that has the essence of a man has also in it the essence of whiteness,

which is nothing but power to produce the idea of whiteness in the eyes of sighted people. . . .

2. This difference among words points to a difference among our ideas. We find upon enquiry that our simple ideas all have abstract names as well as concrete ones: the former are substantives, .i.e. nouns, the latter adjectives; as 'whiteness' and 'white', 'sweetness' and 'sweet'. The same holds for ideas of modes and relations—'justice' and 'just', 'equality' and 'equal'. . . . For our ideas of substances we have very few if any abstract names. For though the schools have introduced 'animality', 'humanness', 'corporeity' [Locke gives these in Latin] and some others, they are infinitely outnumbered by the substance-names that the schoolmen *didn't* make fools of themselves by trying to match with abstract ones. Those

few that the schools constructed and put into the mouths of their scholars could never come into common use or win general approval. That looks to me like a tacit confession by all mankind that they have no ideas of the real essences of substances, since they have no names for any such ideas. They *would* have had such names if their awareness of their ignorance of them—that is, of real essences of substances—not kept them from trying anything so futile. And, therefore, although they had enough ideas to distinguish gold from a stone, and metal from wood, they approached in a gingerly fashion such terms as 'goldenness', 'stonehood', 'metallicity', and 'woodness' [Locke gives these in Latin]—names that would purport to signify the real essences of those substances, of which they knew they had no ideas. . . .

Chapter ix: The imperfection of words

1. From the preceding chapters it is easy to see what there is in language, and how the very nature of words makes it almost inevitable that many of them should be doubtful and uncertain in their meanings. To examine how words can be perfect or imperfect, we should first consider what our goals are in using them; for their fitness to achieve those goals is a measure of how perfect or imperfect they are. In earlier parts of this work I have often mentioned in passing a double use of words: we use them •for recording our own thoughts, and •for communicating our thoughts to others.

2. In the first of these, the recording our own thoughts as an aid to our memories, we are (so to speak) *talking to* ; and

for this purpose, any words will do. Sounds are voluntary and arbitrary signs of ideas, and a man can use any words he likes to signify his own ideas to himself. There will be no imperfection in them, if he constantly uses the same sign for the same idea, for in that case he can't fail to *have his meaning understood*, which is the right use and perfection of language.

3. Secondly, as to communication by words, that too has a double use: •Civil. •Philosophical. By their 'civil use' I mean the use of words to communicate thoughts and ideas in a manner that serves for upholding ordinary conversation and commerce about the everyday affairs and conveniences of

civil life. By the ‘philosophical’ use of words I mean the kind of use of them that can serve to convey precise notions of things, and to express in general propositions certain and undoubted truths that the mind may be satisfied with in its search for true knowledge. [In Locke’s time the meaning of ‘philosophical’ extended to ‘scientific’.] These two uses of language are very different, and one needs much less exactness than the other, as we shall see.

4. The chief end of language in communication is to be understood, and words don’t serve well for that end—whether in everyday or in philosophical discourse—when some word fails to arouse in the hearer the idea it stands for in the mind of the speaker. Sounds have no *natural* connection with our ideas; they get their meanings from the arbitrary decisions of men; so when they are doubtful and uncertain in their meaning (which is the imperfection I am here speaking of), the cause of this lies in the •ideas they stand for rather than in any •word’s being an inferior sign for a given idea—for in that respect they are all equally perfect. So, what makes some words more doubtful and uncertain in their meanings is the difference in the ideas they stand for.

5. The idea that each word stands for must be learned and remembered by those who want to exchange thoughts and have meaningful conversations with others in the language in question. •There are four kinds of situation where• this is especially hard to achieve:

- where the idea a word stands for is very complex, and made up of many constituent ideas put together (•discussed in section 6•),
- where the •constituent parts of the• idea the word stands for have no certain connection in nature, and so no settled standard anywhere in nature by which to correct the idea (•sections 7–10•),

- where the meaning of the word relates to a standard that isn’t easy to know (•sections 11–12•), and
- where the meaning of the word and the real essence of the thing are not exactly the same.

(These are difficulties that affect the meanings of various words that are nevertheless intelligible. I needn’t discuss ones that aren’t intelligible at all, such as a name for a simple idea that the hearer can’t acquire because of a lack in his sense-organs or his faculties. . . .) In all these cases we shall find an imperfection in words in their particular application to our different sorts of ideas. When I get into the details, we shall find that the names of mixed modes are most liable to doubtfulness and imperfection for the first two of these •four listed• reasons, and when the names of substances are defective it is usually for the third and fourth reasons.

6. Many names of mixed modes are liable to great uncertainty and obscurity in their meanings •for either of two reasons•. One is that many complex ideas are *extremely* complex. For words to be serviceable in communication, they must arouse in the hearer exactly the same idea they stand for in the speaker’s mind. Without this, men fill one another’s heads with noise and sounds but don’t convey their thoughts or lay their ideas before one another. But when a word stands for a very complex idea whose constituent simpler ideas are themselves complex, it isn’t easy for men to form and retain that idea exactly enough for the name in common use to stand for exactly the same precise idea. That is why men’s names of very complex ideas, such as most of the moral words, seldom have exactly the same meaning for two different men. [See note on ‘moral’ at the end of v.12.] Not only does one man’s complex idea seldom agree with another’s, but it also often differs from the idea that he himself had yesterday or the one he’ll have tomorrow.

7. Most names of mixed modes lack standards in nature in terms of which men could correct and adjust their meanings; and that makes them very various and doubtful. They are collections of ideas that the mind has put together to suit *its own* notions and in the furtherance of *its own* conversational purposes, not intending to copy anything that really exists but merely to name and sort things according to whether they agree with the archetypes or forms it has made. . . . Names that stand for collections of ideas that the mind makes at pleasure are bound to have doubtful meanings when such collections are nowhere to be found constantly united in nature. . . . What the word ‘murder’. . . signifies can never be known from things themselves. Many parts of the complex idea of *murder* are not visible in the murderous action itself: the intention of the mind, which is a part of ‘the idea of murder, has no necessary connection with the outward and visible action of the murderer; and the pulling of the trigger through which the murder is committed—possibly the only visible feature of the action—has no natural connection with those other ideas that make up the meaning of the word ‘murder’. All those ideas are united and combined only by the understanding, which unites them under one name; but when this is done without any rule or pattern it is inevitable that the meaning of the name should be different in the minds of different men.

8. It is true that common use—the ‘rule of propriety’—is of some help in settling the meanings in a language. It does this pretty well for ordinary conversation; but in the absence of any authority to establish the precise meanings of words, common use doesn’t suffice to fit them for philosophical discourses; because almost every name of any very complex idea has a great latitude in common use, and can be made the sign of widely different ideas without going beyond the

bounds of propriety. Also, the rule of propriety itself is indeterminate: it is often matter of dispute whether this or that way of using a word conforms to propriety of speech. So the names of such very complex ideas are naturally liable to the imperfection of lacking securely known and stable meanings, and don’t always stand for the same idea in ‘the minds of’ speaker and hearer, even when they *want* to understand one another. . . .

9. Doubtfulness over the meanings of the names of mixed modes comes partly from how they are ordinarily learned. How *do* children learn languages? To make them understand what the names of *simple ideas*, or of *substances*, stand for, people ordinarily show children the thing of which they want them to have the idea; and then repeat the name that stands for it—‘white’, ‘sweet’, ‘milk’, ‘sugar’, ‘cat’, ‘dog’. But as for *mixed modes*, especially the most important of them, moral words, the sounds are usually learned first; and then to know what complex ideas they stand for the child must look to explanations by adults or (more commonly) is left to find out for himself through his own observation and hard work. And since not much observation or hard work *is* expended on the search for the true and precise meanings of names, these moral words are in most men’s mouths little more than bare sounds; and when they have any meaning it is for the most part very loose and undetermined, and thus obscure and confused. [The remainder of the section is a lively complaint about the consequences of this situation in academic debates, especially on theological and legal topics. It concludes:] In the interpretation of laws, whether divine or human, there is no end. Comments beget comments, and explanations provide fodder for yet further explanations. . . . Many a man who was pretty well satisfied about the meaning of a text of scripture. . . . at a first reading has quite lost the

sense of it through consulting commentators! Idots. I don't say this with the thought that commentaries are needless, but only to show how uncertain the names of mixed modes naturally are, even in the mouths of those who had both the intention and the ability to speak as clearly as language would let them.

[Section 10 points out that Locke's view is confirmed by the amount of trouble we take trying to understand what great writers of the past meant by their writings. This holds especially for ones dealing with 'truths we are required to believe, or laws we are required to obey'. Where less is at stake, we are less concerned with exact meanings.]

11. Whereas the meanings of the names of *mixed modes* are uncertain because there are no real standards existing in nature by which to adjust those ideas, the names of *substances* have doubtful meanings for a contrary reason—namely because the ideas they stand for are supposed to conform to the reality of things, and *are* referred to standards made by nature. In our ideas of substances we are not free as we are with mixed modes simply to *choose* what combinations we want as criteria to rank and name things by. If we want our names to be signs of substances and to stand for them, we must follow nature, suit our complex ideas to real existences, and regulate the meanings of their names with guidance from the things themselves. Here we *do* have patterns to follow, but they are patterns that make the meanings of the names very uncertain, because the patterns either can't be known at all, or can be known only imperfectly and uncertainly.

12. The names of substances have a double reference in their ordinary use. First, sometimes they are made to stand for things' *real constitutions*—the constitutions that are the centre and source of all the things' properties. And so the

complex ideas that are the meanings of substance-names are supposed to fit with these real constitutions, or 'essences' as they are apt to be called. But they are utterly unknown to us, so any sound that is meant to stand for one of them must be very uncertain in its application. It will be impossible to know what things are properly called 'horse' or 'antimony' when those words are put for real essences of which we have no ideas at all. Thus, when the names of substances are taken in this way, and referred to standards that can't be known, their meanings can never be corrected and established by those standards.

13. Secondly, what the names of substances immediately signify are the simple ideas of qualities that are found to co-exist in the substances; so *these*, united as they are in the substance in question, are the proper standards by which to test and adjust the meanings of substance-names. But these patterns don't serve the purpose well enough to protect the names from a variety of uncertain meanings. The simple ideas that are united in a single substance are very numerous, and all have an equal right to enter into the complex idea that the specific name is to stand for; so people who want to talk about the same thing nevertheless form very different ideas about it; and so their name for it unavoidably comes to mean different things for different men. [In the remainder of this section Locke explains why so many simple ideas are eligible for inclusion in the meaning of a given substance name. Most of them concern powers to interact thus and so with other things; the number of such powers (for a given kind of substance) multiplied by the number of kinds of 'other thing' yields a formidable product; Locke calls it 'almost infinite'. And when men freely choose to make certain selections from this multitude, Locke remarks, it is inevitable that their complex ideas of substances will be very

various, and thus that the meanings of substance-names will be very uncertain.]

[Section **14** continues with the topic of the numerousness and variety of the eligible simple ideas.]

[In section **15** Locke concedes that most of our names for substances are determinate and uniform enough for everyday purposes, but ‘in philosophical enquiries and debates, where general truths are to be established and consequences drawn from positions laid down’, he insists, they are not.]

16. This is a natural and almost unavoidable imperfection in almost all names of substances, as soon as we move from confused or loose notions to stricter and more precise enquiries. . . . I was once in a meeting of very learned and able medical men when the question arose as to whether any liquor [= ‘fluid’] passes through the filaments of the nerves. After the debate had gone on for a good while, with a variety of arguments on each side, I suggested that before carrying on with this dispute they should first make sure that they all meant the same thing by ‘liquor’, and *what* they meant by it. (I had for some time suspected that most disputes are about the meanings of words more than they are about a real difference in the conception of things.) At first they were a little surprised at my proposal; everyone who was there thought he understood perfectly what the word ‘liquor’ stands for; and it is a tribute to their qualities of intellect that they didn’t treat the proposal as a very frivolous or extravagant one. They agreed to go along with my suggestion, and that led them to discover that the meaning of that word wasn’t as settled and certain as they had all imagined, and that each of them had made it a sign of a different complex idea. This showed them that the core of their dispute concerned the meaning of that term, and that they didn’t differ much in their opinions about some *fluid and*

very finely divided matter passing through the channels of the nerves. It wasn’t so easy to agree on whether it was to be called ‘liquor’ or not, but they came to think that this wasn’t worth wrangling over.

[In section **17** Locke discusses gold, the number and variety of its qualities and powers, and the resulting potential for uncertainty and interpersonal difference in the meaning of ‘gold’.]

18. From what I have said it is easy to see that the names of simple ideas are the least liable to mistakes, for the following two reasons. First: the ideas they stand for, each being just one single perception, are easier to acquire and to retain clearly than are the more complex ones. Second: they are never associated with any essence except the perception that they immediately signify, whereas the names of substances run into trouble through being associated with something else. Men who don’t use their words perversely or deliberately start quarrels seldom make mistakes involving the use and meaning of the names of simple ideas. ‘White’ and ‘sweet’, ‘yellow’ and ‘bitter’, carry a very obvious meaning with them, which everyone precisely comprehends or easily sees that he is ignorant of. But what precise collection of simple ideas ‘modesty’ or ‘frugality’ stand for in someone else’s use isn’t so certainly known. And however apt we are to think we know well enough what is meant by ‘gold’ or ‘iron’, the precise complex idea that others make them the signs of isn’t so certain; and I think it seldom happens that a speaker makes them stand for exactly the same collections as the hearer does. . . .

19. The names of simple modes are second only to those of simple ideas in their freedom from doubt and uncertainty (and for the same reasons). This is especially true of names of shapes and numbers. Who ever mistook the ordinary

meaning of 'seven' or of 'triangle'? In general the least complex ideas in every kind have the least dubious names.

20. So •mixed modes that are composed of only a few obvious simple ideas usually have names whose meanings are not very uncertain. But the names of •mixed modes that include a great number of simple ideas are commonly of a very doubtful and undetermined meaning, as I have shown. The names of substances. . . .are liable yet to greater imperfection and uncertainty, especially when we come to a philosophical use of them.

21. Given that the great disorder in our names of substances comes mostly from our lack of knowledge, and from our inability to penetrate into their real constitutions, you may be wondering why I call this an imperfection in our *words* rather than in our *understandings*. This question seems so reasonable that I think I must explain why I have followed this method. When I first began this treatise on the understanding, and for a good while after, it didn't occur to me that it needed to include any consideration of words. But after I had dealt with the origin and content of our ideas, I began to examine the extent and certainty of our knowledge; and then I found that knowledge is so closely connected with *words* that very little could be said clearly and relevantly about it unless attention were first paid to the power of words and to how they have meaning. Knowledge has constantly to do with propositions; and though it is ultimately about *things*, it gets to things so much by the intervention of words that they seemed hardly separable from our general knowledge. At least words interpose themselves so much between our understanding and the truth that it's trying to think about and grasp that their obscurity and disorder often cast a mist before our eyes (like fogged glass), and intrude on our understandings. In the fallacies that men inflict on

themselves and others, and in the mistakes in their disputes and in their thinking, much of the trouble comes from the uncertain or wrong meanings of words. So much so, indeed, that we have reason to think that defects in words are a large obstacle to getting knowledge. It is especially important that we should be carefully warned about this •confusion of language• because some people, so far from seeing it as a drawback, have studied the arts of *increasing* it, giving them the reputation of learning and subtlety, as we shall see in the next chapter. I'm inclined to think that if the imperfections of language, as the instrument of knowledge, were more thoroughly weighed, a great many of the controversies that make such a noise in the world would cease, and there would be a more open road than we now have to knowledge, and perhaps to peace also.

[In section **22** Locke says that the dependence of meaning on 'the thoughts, notions, and ideas' of the speaker implies that men must have trouble understanding speakers of their own language; and that the trouble is magnified when one tries to understand texts written far away and long ago in a foreign language. Therefore 'it would become us to be charitable to one another in our interpretations or misunderstanding of those ancient writings'.]

23. The volumes of interpreters and commentators on the Old and New Testaments are manifest proofs of this. Even if everything said in the text is infallibly true, the reader can't help being very fallible in his understanding of it. We shouldn't be surprised that the will of God, when clothed in words, should be liable to the doubt and uncertainty that inevitably goes with verbal communication; bear in mind that even his Son, while clothed in flesh, was subject to all the weaknesses and drawbacks of human nature, except for sin. We ought to magnify God's goodness in spreading

before all the world such legible testimony of his works and his providence, and giving all mankind a light of reason that is bright enough so that anyone who seeks the truth, even if he didn't have help from written word, couldn't avoid concluding that there is a God and that he owes obedience to him. So •the precepts of natural religion are plain and very intelligible to all mankind, and seldom disputed; and •other

revealed truths, conveyed to us by books and languages, are liable to the common and natural obscurities and difficulties that words bring with them. I think, then, that we would do well to be more careful and diligent in observing •the former, and less dogmatic, confident, and bullying in imposing our own sense and interpretations of •the latter.

Chapter x: The misuse of words

[The word 'misuse' replaces Locke's 'abuse'. The latter word was not as intensely judgmental then as it is today, so that Locke could use it often without sounding shrill, as 'abuse' does to our ears.]

1. In addition to language's *natural* imperfection, and the obscurity and confusion that it is so hard to avoid in the use of words, there are several *wilful* faults and failures that men are guilty of, making words less clear and distinct in their meanings than they need to be. •I shall deal with one of these in sections 2–4, a second in 5, a third in 6–13, a fourth in 14–16, a fifth in 17–21, a sixth in 22•.

2. The first and most palpable misuse is using words without clear and distinct ideas, or—even worse—using signs without *anything* being signified. This occurs in two ways.[The section continues with the first of the two, namely the founders of sects and systems who coin new words without giving them respectable meanings. If you want examples, Locke concludes:] you will get plenty of them from the schoolmen and metaphysicians, in which I include the disputing scientists and philosophers of recent times.

[In sections **3–4** Locke rails against those who take words that do have respectable common meanings and 'by an unpardonable negligence' use them 'without any distinct meaning at all'. In everyday life and speech men do what is needed to make themselves understood; but in academic debates there is no pressure to be intelligible to others. On the contrary, talking without clear meaning is a device for protecting oneself against being revealed to be wrong. Locke concludes:] When a person has no settled notions, drawing him out of his mistakes is like expelling a homeless person from his home!

5. Secondly, another great misuse of words is inconstancy in the use of them. It is hard to find a discourse on any subject, especially a controversial one, in which the same words—often ones that are crucial to the argument—are not used sometimes for one collection of simple ideas and sometimes for another. [The section continues with an explanation of why this is 'plain cheat and abuse', and of what makes it so serious. Locke asks whether we would

like to do business with someone who uses '8' sometimes for eight and sometimes for seven. He continues:] In arguments and learned disputes the same sort of proceeding is often mistaken for wit and learning. I see it as a greater dishonesty than the misplacing of counters in calculating a debt; and the cheat is greater by the amount that truth is worth more than money.

6. Thirdly, another misuse of language is intentional obscurity—either giving old words new and unusual meanings without explaining them, or introducing new and ambiguous terms without defining them, or combining words in such a way as to defeat their ordinary meanings. The Aristotelian philosophy has been most conspicuous in doing this, but other sects haven't been wholly clear of it. [In the rest of this section Locke continues the attack on people who shelter under the obscurity of their words, mentioning in passing the view that 'body' and 'extension' are synonymous, which he says is easily refuted by attention to the ordinary meanings of those words. See II.xiii.11.]

[Sections **7–8** continue the angry attack on those who make careers and reputations out of wilful obscurity.]

9. . . . The best way to defend strange and absurd doctrines is to guard them with legions of obscure, doubtful, and undefined words. Yet that makes these retreats more like dens of robbers or holes of foxes than like fortresses manned by sturdy warriors; and what makes it hard to get them—the absurd doctrines—out of their retreat isn't their strength but rather the dark tangle of briars and thorns they are surrounded with. Because untruth is unacceptable to the mind of man, the only defence left for absurdity is obscurity.

[In sections **10–11** Locke speaks of 'this learned ignorance', and condemns the practice of those who advance their own

causes, and sometimes win respect and admiration, by displays of idle subtlety through which they 'render language less useful than its real defects would have made it'—an achievement of which illiterate people are not capable.]

12. This mischief hasn't been confined to logical niceties, or mind-teasing empty speculations. Rather, it has •invaded the important affairs of human life and society, •obscured and tangled the significant truths of law and divinity, •brought confusion, disorder, and uncertainty into the affairs of mankind, and •harmed the two great guides, religion and justice—if not destroying them then at least making them mainly useless. Most of the commentaries and disputes concerning the laws of God and man have served only to make the meaning more doubtful, and to tangle the sense. All those intricate distinctions and fine points have merely brought obscurity and uncertainty, leaving the words *more* unintelligible and the reader *more* at a loss! That is why rulers are easily understood when giving ordinary spoken or written commands to their servants, but are *not* easily understood when they speak to their subjects in their laws. . . .

13. . . . Mankind's business is to know things as they are, and to do what they ought, and not to spend their lives in talking about things or tossing words to and fro. So wouldn't it be good for us if the use of words were made plain and direct, and if our language—which we were given for the improvement of knowledge and as a bond of society—were *not* employed to •darken truth and •unsettle people's rights, to •raise mists and •make both morality and religion unintelligible? Or if •these things do go on happening, wouldn't it be good if they stopped being thought of as signs of learning or knowledge? •That completes my discussion of the third of the misuses of words that I listed in section 1.

14. Fourthly, another great misuse of *words* is taking them for *things*. Although this in some degree concerns names of all kinds, it particularly affects names of substances. [As this section progresses, we find that by ‘taking words for things’ Locke means ‘uncritically assuming that certain noun phrases in which one has been indoctrinated *stand for real things*’. For example, someone brought up in the Aristotelian philosophy never doubts that phrases like ‘substantial form’, ‘vegetative soul’ and ‘abhorrence of a vacuum’ each stand for something real. Locke also gives examples from the vocabularies of Platonists and Epicureans.]

15. Attentive reading of philosophical writers gives one plenty of examples of how the understanding is led astray by taking names for things. I shall present just one familiar example. There have been many intricate dispositionutes about ‘matter’, as if there were some such *thing* really in nature, distinct from body; as it is evident that the *idea* for which the word ‘matter’ stands is different from that for which ‘body’ stands. If those two ideas were the same, the words would be interchangeable in all contexts, which they are not: it is all right to say ‘There is one matter of all bodies’ but not to say ‘There is one body of all matters’; we can say that one body is bigger than another, but it would sound wrong to say that one matter is bigger than another (and I don’t think anyone ever does say this). What makes the difference? Well, although matter and body aren’t *really distinct*—that is, aren’t distinct *things*—and so wherever there is one there is the other, yet the words ‘matter’ and ‘body’ stand for two different *conceptions*, one of them being incomplete, and a part of the other. For ‘body’ stands for a •solid extended shaped substance, of which ‘matter’ is a partial and more confused conception, apparently standing for the •substance and solidity of body, without taking in

its •extension and shape. That is why we always speak of matter as *one*, because it contains nothing but the idea of a solid substance that is everywhere the same, everywhere uniform. So we don’t think or speak of different matters in the world, any more than we do of different solidities; whereas we do think and speak of different bodies, because extension and shape are capable of variation. But solidity can’t exist without extension and shape, so wherever there is matter there is body, as well as vice versa. So when some philosophers took ‘matter’ to be the name of something really existing in that abstract form—possessing only the qualities mentioned in the definition of ‘matter’—they set off the obscure and unintelligible discussions and disputes that have filled the heads and books of philosophers concerning ‘*materia prima*’—*first matter*, conceived in Aristotelian philosophy as undifferentiated matter, lacking qualities that would differentiate parts of it from one another. I leave it to you to think about how many other examples of this trouble there have been. But I will say this: We would have many fewer disputes if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only, and not for things themselves. For when we argue about ‘matter’ or the like, we are really arguing only about the idea we express by that word, without regard for whether that precise idea agrees to anything really existing in nature. . . .

[In section **16** Locke expresses pessimism about curing anyone of such a verbal fault if he has lived with it for many years. This, he says, is a major reason why it is so hard to get men to give up their errors, ‘even in purely philosophical opinions, and ones where their only concern is with truth’.]

17. Fifthly, another misuse of words is to set them in the place of *things that they don’t and can’t signify*. My only examples of this are attempts to use words to signify *the*

real essences of substances; I shall discuss this through five sections. When we affirm or deny a proposition about some sort of substance, knowing only its nominal essence, we usually tacitly try to, or intend to, name the real essence of that sort of substance. When a man says *Gold is malleable*, he means and wants to get across more than merely

What I call 'gold' is malleable,
though truly that is all the sentence amounts to. Rather, he wants it to be understood that

Gold, i.e. what has the real essence of gold, is which amounts to saying that malleableness depends on and is inseparable from the real essence of gold. But since he doesn't know what that real essence consists in, what he connects malleableness with in his mind is really not that unknown essence but only the sound 'gold' that he puts in place of it. [The section then discusses futile debates about the proper definition of 'man', which have to be understood—Locke says—as concerning what qualities are inevitable consequences of the real essence of *man*.]

18. It is true that the names of substances would be much more useful, and propositions made with them would be much more certain, if the ideas in our minds that they signified *were* the real essences of the substances. It is because of our lack of knowledge of those real essences that our words convey so little knowledge or certainty when we talk about substances. So the mind is just trying to remove that imperfection as far as it can when it makes it a substance-name secretly stand for a thing having that real essence, as if that would somehow bring it nearer to the real essence. . . . Actually, far from lessening our words' imperfection, this procedure increases it; for it is a plain misuse to make a word stand for something that it can't be a sign of because our complex idea doesn't contain it.

19. This lets us explain why with *mixed modes* any change in the simple ideas entering into the complex one results in a new species, as can plainly be seen with 'manslaughter', 'murder', 'parricide'. The reason is that the complex idea signified by such a name is the *real* as well as *nominal* essence; and there is no secret reference of that name to any essence other than that. But with substances it is not so. It may happen that one man includes in his complex idea of what he calls 'gold' something that another omits, and vice versa; but they don't usually think they are talking about different species. That is because they secretly mentally assume that the word 'gold' is tied to a real unchanging essence of an existing thing, on which depend the properties included in the complex idea(s). When someone adds to his complex idea of gold the ideas of fixedness and solubility in aqua regia, which he had previously left out, he isn't thought to have changed the species he is talking about. Rather, he is thought only to have acquired a more complete idea by adding another simple idea that is always in fact joined with the others of which his former complex idea consisted. But relating the name to a thing of which we have no idea, far from helping us, merely serves to increase our difficulties. When the word 'gold' is used to stand merely for a more or less complete collection of simple ideas, it designates that sort of body well enough for everyday purposes; but when it is tacitly related to the real essence of that species, the word comes to have no meaning at all, because it is put for something of which we have no idea, so that it can't signify anything in the absence of the actual gold. You may think that there is no difference here; but if you think about it carefully you will see that arguing about gold in name—that is, arguing about it in the abstract, without actually having any on hand—is quite different from arguing about an actual portion of the stuff, e.g. a piece of gold laid before us.

20. Men are encouraged to ·try to· use names of species of substances to designate the real essences of the species by their supposition that nature works regularly in the production of things, and sets the boundaries to each species by giving exactly the same real internal constitution to each individual that we rank under one general name. ·See vi.14–18·. Yet anyone who observes their different qualities can hardly doubt that many of the individuals called by the same name differ in their internal constitutions as much as ones that are ranked under different specific names. But the supposition that exactly the same internal constitution always goes with the same specific name encourages men to take those names to represent those real essences, though really they signify only the complex idea in the speaker's mind. . . . This is bound to cause a great deal of uncertainty in men's discourses, especially of those who have thoroughly absorbed the doctrine of *substantial forms*, by which, they are sure, the species of things are fixed and distinguished.

[In section **21** Locke says that the 'preposterous' belief that we are referring to real essences is visibly at work when men ask such questions as whether a certain monkey or 'monstrous foetus' is a man or not. If they knew that they can only use 'man' to name their complex idea of *man*, they would see that there is nothing to wonder or argue about. He continues:] In this wrong way of using the names of substances, two false suppositions are contained. First, that *nature makes all particular things according to certain precise essences, by which they are distinguished into species*. Of course everything has a real constitution that makes it what it is, and on which its sensible qualities depend; but I think I have proved that this doesn't underlie *our* sorting, distinguishing, and naming of the species. Secondly, this ·mistake· also tacitly insinuates that *we have ideas of these*

proposed essences. What would the point be of enquiring whether this or that thing has the real essence of the species *man* if we didn't suppose that such a specific essence was known to us? which yet is utterly false. . . .

[In section **22** Locke presents his sixth misuse of words, which he says is 'more general, though perhaps less observed' than the others. It consists in assuming too confidently that others mean the same by a given word as one does oneself, a misuse of which both speakers and hearers are often guilty. He cites the word 'life' as one that turns out to be far from having exactly the same meaning in the minds of all English-speakers, though most people would feel almost insulted if they were asked to explain what they mean by 'life'. It is important to ask such questions, Locke says, because:] This misuse of taking words on trust has nowhere spread so far nor with such ill effects as amongst men of letters. Why have there been so many, and such obstinate, disputes laying waste the intellectual world? The main cause has been the poor use of words. For though it is generally believed that there is great diversity of *opinions* in the books and debates the world is distracted with, it seems to me that the learned men on the opposite sides of controversies are merely *speaking different languages*. I suspect that if they got away from *words* and attended to *things*, and became clear about what they think, it would turn out that they all *think* the same—though they might differ in what they *want*.

23. To conclude this consideration of the imperfection and misuse of language: the ends of language in our discourse with others are chiefly **1** to make one man's thoughts or ideas known to another, **2** to do that as easily and quickly as possible, and **3** thereby to convey knowledge of things. Language is either misused or deficient when it fails in any of these three purposes.

23a. [This is really just a part of **23**. The reason for marking it off separately will appear shortly.] Words fail in the first purpose, and don't bring one man's ideas into the view of others, **(1)** when men have words in their mouths with no corresponding determinate ideas in their minds; **(2)** when they apply established words of a language to ideas to which common usage in that language doesn't apply them, and **(3)** when they apply words very unsteadily, making them stand first for one idea and then for another.

24. Secondly, men fail to convey their thoughts as quickly and easily as they could, when they have complex ideas without having any distinct names for them. This is sometimes the fault of the language itself, which doesn't contain a word with the required meaning; and sometimes the fault of the man, who hasn't yet learned the word for the idea he wants to exhibit to his hearer.

25. Thirdly, no knowledge of things is conveyed by men's words when their ideas don't agree with the reality of things. This is basically a defect in our •ideas, which are defective in not being as true to the nature of things as they would be if we were more careful and thorough; but it also stretches out to become a defect in our •words too, when we use them as signs of real things that don't exist and never did.

26. ·A comment on **(1)** in 23a·: Someone who has words of a language with no distinct ideas in his mind to be their meanings uses them in conversation only make a noise without any sense or meaning; and no matter how learned he may seem through his use of hard words or learned terms, none of this makes him knowledgeable, any more than a man would count as learned if he had in his study nothing but the bare titles of books, without having their the contents. . . .

27. ·A comment on 24·: Someone who has complex ideas without particular names for them is no better off than a

bookseller whose warehouse contains only unbound volumes, without titles, so that he could make them known to others only by showing the loose pages. This man is hindered in his discourse by lack of words to communicate his complex ideas, so that he is forced to make them known by an enumeration of the simple ideas that make them up, with the result that he often has to use twenty words to express what another man signifies in one.

28. ·A comment on **(3)** in 23a·: Someone who doesn't constantly use the same sign for the same idea, instead using a word sometimes with one meaning and sometimes with another, ought to be viewed in academic and social circles with as much disapproval as someone who in commercial circles sells different things under the same name.

29. ·A comment on **(2)** in 23a·: Someone who applies the words of a language to ideas different from those to which the common use of that country applies them won't be able to convey much to other people by the use of *those* words unless he defines them—even if he has much to convey. . . .

30. ·A comment on 25·: Someone who imagines to himself substances such as never have existed, and fills his head with ideas that don't correspond to the real nature of things, and gives these ideas settled and defined names, may fill his discourse and perhaps his hearer's head with the fantastical imaginations of his own brain, but he'll be far from advancing a step in real and true knowledge.

[Section **31** briefly recapitulates the content of sections 26–30.]

32. In our notions concerning substances we are liable to all those mishaps. For example, someone •who uses the word 'tarantula' without having any idea of what it stands for, . . . •who in a newly discovered country sees various sorts

of animals and vegetables, . . . but can speak of them only by descriptions, . . . •who uses the word 'body' sometimes for pure extension and sometimes for extension and solidity together, . . . •who uses the word 'horse' with the meaning common usage gives to 'mule', . . . •who thinks the word 'centaur' stands for some real thing, . . .

33. With modes and relations generally we are liable only to the first four of these troubles. **1** I may have in my memory the names of modes, for example 'gratitude' or 'charity' and yet have no precise ideas attached in my thoughts to those names. **2** I may have ideas and not know the words that express them. For example, I may have the idea of a man's drinking till his colour and mood are altered, till his tongue trips, his eyes look red, and his feet fail him—and yet not know that the word for this is 'drunkenness'. **3** I may have the ideas of virtues or vices, and have names for them also, but apply the names wrongly. For example when I apply the word 'frugality' to the idea that others signify by 'covetousness'. **4** I may use any of those names in an inconstant manner. **5** But with modes and relations I can't have ideas disagreeing with the existence of things; for modes are complex ideas that my mind makes at its pleasure, and relations come from considering or comparing two things together, and so they are also ideas of my own

making; so these ideas can hardly be found to disagree with anything existing! I don't have them in my mind as copies of things regularly made by nature, or as 'ideas of' properties inseparably flowing from the internal constitution or essence of any substance. I have them only as patterns lodged in my memory, with names attached to them, to apply to actions and relations as they come to exist. . . .

34. Wit and imagination get a better welcome in the world than dry truth and real knowledge; so people will hardly think that the use of *figurative language* and *literary allusion* constitutes an imperfection or misuse of language. In contexts where we seek pleasure and delight rather than information and improvement, such ornaments are indeed not faults. But if we want to speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric (except for order and clearness)—all the artificial and figurative application of words that eloquence has invented—serve only to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so they are perfect cheats. . . . It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric—that powerful instrument of error and deceit—has its established practitioners, is publicly taught, and has always been highly regarded. No doubt I will be thought rash or oafish to have spoken against it. . . .

Chapter xi: The remedies of those imperfections and misuses

1. We have examined at length the imperfections, both natural and contrived, of languages. As speech is the great bond that holds society together, and the channel through which knowledge is conveyed •from man to man and •down the generations, it would be thoroughly worthwhile to consider seriously what remedies are to be found for the above-mentioned troubles.

2. I would cut a ridiculous figure if I tried to effect a complete reform of the language of my own country, let alone of the languages of the world! To require that men use their words always in the same sense, and only for determined and uniform ideas, would be to think that all men should have the same notions and should talk only of what they have clear and distinct ideas of; and no-one can try to bring that about unless he is vain enough to think he can persuade men to be either very knowing or very silent! . . .

3. Well, the shops and business offices can be left to their own ways of talking, and social chatter can be allowed to continue as it always has. But, though the schools and men of argument might object to any proposal to make their disputes shorter or fewer, I think that those who claim to search seriously after truth, or to maintain it, *ought* to study how they might say what they have to say without obscurity, doubtfulness, or ambiguity—to all of which men's words are naturally liable if care is not taken.

[In sections **4–6** Locke adds colour and detail to his picture of the prevalence of misuses of language and of the damage that they do. In section **4** he says there is reason to suspect that 'language, as it has been employed, has contributed less to the improvement than to the hindrance of knowledge

amongst mankind'. Sections **5** and **6** expand this thought with angry passion.]

7. 'Is a bat a bird?' That isn't the question—which it would be quite absurd to ask—whether a bat is something other than what it is, or has qualities other than those it has. There are two questions that *could* be being asked. **1** Between people who admit to being not quite clear about just what a bat is and just what a bird is, the question may arise as part of an endeavour to learn whether all the simple ideas to which in combination they both give the name 'bird' are all to be found in a bat. Understood in this way, it is a question asked only by way of enquiry, not dispute. **2** The question might come up between disputants one of whom says that a bat *is* a bird while the other denies this. In that case the question is purely about the meaning of 'bat' or of 'bird' or of both. . . . If the disputants agreed about the meanings of these two names, there couldn't possibly be any dispute about them. [The section continues with the suggestion that most disputes are 'merely verbal', reflecting differences in what people mean by the same word.]

8. To provide some remedy for the defects of speech that I have mentioned, and to prevent the troubles that follow from them, I think it would be useful to conform to the following rules. First, a man should take care to use no word without a meaning, no name without an idea that he makes it stand for. [The remainder of the section sketches evidence that this rule is often broken.]

9. Secondly, it isn't enough for a man to use his words as signs of some ideas; the ideas must be •if simple then clear and distinct, and •if complex then determinate—that

is, he must have a definite collection of simple ideas firmly in mind, and have attached to it a word that is his sign of just that collection and no other. [The section continues with remarks about the need for this, and about how it is flouted in people's uses of words like 'justice'. Locke describes the procedure one would have to go through to be sure and clear about one's meaning for 'justice', and then continues:] I don't say that a man should recall this analysis and run through it in detail every time he encounters the word 'justice'; but he should at least be able to do that when he wants to, as a result of having examined the meaning of the word and settled the idea of all its parts in his mind. . . . This •exactness may be thought to be too much trouble, and therefore most men will let themselves off from settling the complex ideas of mixed modes so precisely in their minds. But until they do this they can expect to have a great deal of obscurity and confusion in their own minds and a great deal of wrangling in their conversations with others.

10. More is required for a right use of the names of *substances* than merely determined ideas. Here the names must also fit things as they exist; but I shall say more about this later ·in sections 19–25·. This •exactness is absolutely necessary in the search for philosophical and scientific knowledge, and in controversies about truth. It would be good if it also carried over into common conversation and the ordinary affairs of life, but I suppose that's hardly to be expected. Unlearned notions suit unlearned talk; and although both are confused enough they still serve quite well the market and the village fête. Merchants and lovers, cooks and tailors, have the words they need to conduct their ordinary affairs; and I think the same might also be true of philosophers and disputants if they really wanted to understand and be clearly understood.

11. Thirdly, it isn't enough that men have ideas, determined ideas, for which they make these signs stand; they must also do their careful best to give their words meanings that are as near as possible to the ones common usage has attached them to. For words, especially in languages already formed, are •no man's private possession but rather •the common measure of commerce and communication, so no-one is at liberty to please himself about what to mean by them—and if you really need to change a word's meaning you should declare that you are doing so. ·And that oughtn't to happen often·. aim in speaking is or should be to be understood, and that will be thwarted if we give frequent explanations, demands, and other such awkward interruptions that occur when men don't follow common usage. . . .

[In section **12** Locke says ('Fourthly') that there may be a legitimate need to declare clearly and explicitly what one means by some word. One may be introducing a useful new word, or using a common word in a new sense.]

13. The ideas that men's words stand for are of different sorts, and there are corresponding differences in the ways of making clear, as needed, *what* those ideas are. *Definition* is ·generally· thought to be the right way to make known the proper meaning of a word; but •some words can't be defined; •others have meanings that can't be elucidated except through definition; and perhaps there is •a third kind of word that has something in common with each of the other two kinds ·in being capable of having their meanings explained through definitions or in other ways·. Let us see all this in action in connection with the names of •simple ideas, •modes, and •substances.

14. First, when a man uses the name of a *simple idea*, and sees that it isn't understood or risks being misunderstood, he ought. . . .to declare his meaning. I have shown that he can't

do this with a definition (·iv.7·); and he has only two other resources. He can •name some object in which ·a quality signified by· that simple idea is to be found—e.g. telling a farmer what ‘*feuillemorte*’ means, by saying that it is the colour of withered leaves falling in autumn. But the only sure way of telling someone the meaning of the name of any simple idea is •by presenting to his senses an object which produces in his mind the idea that word stands for.

[In section **15** (‘Secondly’) Locke turns to mixed modes. Because they are constructions of ideas voluntarily put together by the mind, someone who employs a name of a mixed mode is perfectly placed to define it, i.e. set out explicitly what *he* means by it; and because they have no patterns in nature, their names can’t be explained in any other way. Locke objects fiercely to obscurity in ‘moral discourses’, because the topic is of great importance and there is no excuse for unclarity because the cure for it—verbal definition—is easy to provide.]

16. That is why I venture to think that morality is capable of demonstration, as well as mathematics. The precise real essences—which are also the nominal essences—of the things that moral words stand for can be perfectly known; and so the congruity and incongruity of the things themselves can be certainly discovered, which is to say that there can be perfect knowledge of them. It may be objected that the names of substances are often used in morality, and that they will introduce obscurity; but they won’t. When substances are involved in moral discourses, their various natures aren’t being *enquired into* but *presupposed*. For example, when we say that *man is subject to law*, all we mean by ‘man’ is a corporeal rational creature, with no concern for what the real essence or other qualities of that creature are. Whether a certain imbecile is a man in a

physical sense is something the scientists may dispute about, but it doesn’t affect the moral man—so to call him—which is this immovable unchangeable idea, *a corporeal rational being*. For if we found a monkey or any other creature that had enough use of reason to be able to understand general signs and to draw conclusions using general ideas, he would no doubt be *subject to law* and in that sense be ‘a man’, however much he differed in shape from the rest of us. The names of substances, if they are used as they should be, can no more make trouble in moral discourses than they do in mathematical ones: if a mathematician speaks of a cube or globe of gold, he has his clear settled idea that doesn’t vary even if by mistake he is applying it to a particular body that isn’t gold.

[In section **17** Locke repeats and develops a little his view that the defining of names of mixed modes is important (especially in moral discourses) and easy, so that there is no excuse for not doing it:] It is far easier for men •to form an idea to serve as their standard for the name ‘justice’, so that actions fitting that pattern will be called ‘just’, than •to see Aristides and form an idea that will in all things be exactly like him. Aristides is as he is, whatever idea men choose to make of him! For •the former, all they need is to know the combination of ideas that are put together in their own minds; for •the latter they must enquire into the whole nature and abstruse hidden constitution and various qualities of ·Aristides·, a thing existing outside them.

[Section **18** repeats that verbal definition is our only way of making the meanings of such names clearly known.]

19. Thirdly, for explaining the meanings of the names of substances, as they stand for the ideas we have of their different species, each of the previously mentioned ways—showing and defining—is often needed. Within our

complex idea of a kind of substance there are usually a few •*leading qualities* to which we suppose the other ideas to be attached; and we readily apply the specific name to anything that has that •characteristic mark that we take to be the most distinguishing idea of that species. These salient or *characteristic* ideas (so to call them) are mostly of shape in the species of animals and plants, and of colour (and sometimes shape as well) in inanimate bodies, as I pointed out in vi.29 and ix.15.

20. Now, these leading perceptible qualities are •the chief ingredients in our ideas of species of substances, which makes them also •the most conspicuous and invariable elements in the definitions of our names of those species. The sound ‘man’ is in itself as apt to signify *animality and rationality, united in the same subject* as to signify any other complex idea; but when we use that sound to stand for creatures that we count as being of our own kind, it may be that *outward shape* is as essential an ingredient in our complex idea as any other. So it won’t be easy to show that Plato’s ‘featherless biped’ is a worse definition than ‘rational animal’ for the word ‘man’, as a label for creatures of that sort. For the leading quality that most often seems to determine that species is *shape*, rather than *a faculty of reasoning*; indeed, reason doesn’t show up in the early stages of human life, and in some it never shows up. If you don’t agree with this, I don’t see how you can avoid condemning as *murderers* those who kill new-born monsters (as we call them) because of their extraordinary shape, without knowing whether they have a rational soul—for *that* question can’t be answered at the birth of any infant, however it is shaped. And •you can’t get out of this by pleading that the strange shape is evidence for the lack of a rational soul: who has told us that a rational soul can’t inhabit a lodging that doesn’t have such

and such a kind of exterior—i.e. that it can’t join itself to and inform a body unless the body has such and such an outward structure?

21. These leading qualities are best made known by *showing*, and can hardly be made known in any other way. Seeing a horse or an ostrich will give an idea of its shape a thousand times better than could be done in words; and the only way to get idea of the particular colour of gold isn’t by description but by frequently seeing it; which is why people who are used to gold can often tell true gold from counterfeit, pure gold from alloy, by sight alone, where the rest of us, though our eyes are all right, can’t see any difference because we don’t have the precise fine-grained idea of that particular yellow. . . .

22. But many of the simple ideas that make up our specific ideas of substances are *powers* that are not immediately observable in the ordinary appearance of the things; so in explaining our names of substances we do better if part of the meaning is given by enumerating those simple ideas rather than showing the substance itself. If someone has acquired through sight the idea of the yellow shining colour of gold, and then adds to that—from my enumerating them—the ideas of great ductility, fusibility, fixedness, and solubility in aqua regia, he will have a more complete idea of gold than he could get just by seeing a piece of gold and thereby imprinting on his mind its obvious qualities. But if the formal constitution •or real essence• of this shining, heavy, ductile thing lay open to our senses as does the formal constitution or essence of a triangle, the meaning of the word ‘gold’ might as easily be ascertained as that of ‘triangle’.

23. This reminds us of how much the foundation of all our knowledge of the physical world lies in our senses. Unembodied spirits are sure to have much better knowledge

and ideas of these things than we have; but we haven't the slightest idea about how they might *get* such knowledge. The whole extent of our knowledge or imagination reaches only as far as our own ideas, which are limited to our ways of perception. It isn't to be doubted that spirits of a higher rank than those immersed in flesh—as we are—may have as clear ideas of the radical constitution of substances as we have of a triangle, and so perceive how all their properties and operations flow from that; but we can't conceive how they could come by that knowledge.

24. But although definitions serve to explain our substance-names as they stand for our *ideas*, they do a poor job of explaining them as they stand for *things*. For our names of substances are not merely signs of our ideas; they are also used ultimately to represent things, and so are put in the place of things; therefore their meaning must agree with the truth of things as well as with men's ideas. Where substances are concerned, therefore, we shouldn't always rest content with the ordinary complex idea that is commonly accepted as the meaning of that word. Instead we should go a little further and enquire into the nature and properties of the things themselves, and thereby make our ideas of their species as complete as possible. For since their names are meant to stand not only for •the complex idea in other men's minds that in their ordinary meaning they stand for, but also for •collections of simple ideas [here = 'qualities'] that really do exist in things themselves, their names can't be defined properly unless *natural history is enquired into* and their properties are discovered through careful examination. For avoiding troubles in discourse and disputes about natural bodies and substantial things, it isn't enough merely to have learned the confused or otherwise imperfect idea that gives each word its common meaning, and to keep the words to

those ideas in our use of them. We must also •acquaint ourselves with the natural history of each species that we speak about, •on that basis •rectify and settle our complex idea belonging to the name of the species, and when there is a need for it •explain to others what the complex idea is that we use the name to stand for. [The remainder of the section exclaims about what a great need for this is created by the sloppiness of most people's talk and thought.]

25. So it would be a good thing if people who are experienced in scientific enquiries, and acquainted with the various sorts of natural bodies, would list the simple ideas—or rather the corresponding qualities—which they observe the individuals of each sort to have in common. That would remove much of the confusion that occurs when different people apply the same name to smaller or larger collections of perceptible qualities, in proportion to the breadth or the carefulness of their experiences of the species in question. But a dictionary of that sort—containing a natural history, so to speak—would require too many people, as well as too much time, cost, trouble and intelligence, ever to be hoped for. Lacking that, we must content ourselves with such definitions of the names of substances as explain the meanings that men give to them in use. It would be good if those, at least, were provided when there is a need for them; but this isn't usually done. [Locke continues with remarks about the need for such clarifications; and about the shortage of them, which he traces to a misplaced confidence that the meanings of common words are settled and uniform, and to a misguided sense that there is something shameful in having about to ask about meanings. He goes on:] Though such a dictionary as I mentioned above would be too demanding to be hoped for these days, I still think it is reasonable to suggest that words standing for things that are

known and distinguished by their outward shapes should be expressed by little pictures of them. A vocabulary-list made in that way could perhaps teach the true meanings of many terms, especially in languages of remote countries or ages, more easily and quickly than do all the large and laborious comments of learned critics. Naturalists who treat of plants and animals have found the benefits of this procedure, and anyone who has had occasion to consult their pictures will have reason to concede that he has a clearer idea of *apium* or *ibex* from a little print of that plant or animal than he

could have from a long definition of the names of either of them. [The section continues with further examples.]

[In sections **26–7** Locke says that men often change what they mean by a word in the course of a single discourse, and that sometimes they are ‘forced’ to do this because ‘the provision of words is so scanty in respect to the infinite variety of thoughts’. In some cases the context makes clear enough what change has occurred; but where it does not do so the speaker or writer ought to declare the change openly.]