LOCKE'S SECOND 'SECRET REFERENCE'

Terence Moore

Locke's analysis of the origins of meaning is clear, coherent, cogent and devastating to our commonsense beliefs. His analysis establishes that in the last resort the meaning, he would say 'Signification', of words is ineluctably private, subjective, personal. Where meanings are concerned we are, Locke judged, irremediably solipsistic. 'Words', he notes, 'in their primary or immediate Signification stand for nothing but Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them.'

How is it then that semantic solipsists, locked in their private minds, are able to communicate with each other, at times quite successfully?

The key to Locke's answer is contained in two words, 'secret reference'. For Locke we solipsists naturally but tacitly make two 'secret references'.

Earlier Conversations with Locke have focused on the first secret reference. Roughly paraphrased, we tacitly presuppose the words we are using excite the same meanings in the minds of others as they do in ours. Whilst we cannot know whether this is true, the tacit presupposition is nevertheless a useful working hypothesis. At the very least it launches communication into public space.

Previous Conversations between Locke and Moore have focused on the consequences, implications and ramifications of this tacit presupposition, the first secret reference. This Conversation takes up Locke's second secret reference. Another tacit presupposition that, like the first, both helps and hinders our efforts at communicating.

Moore: In our previous Conversations we have focussed chiefly on the implications of your first secret reference

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for any hope we can entertain of communicating successfully. But there were two. This evening I'd like to get to grips with the second secret reference.

Locke: It's high time we did. For me the second secret reference is as important as the first. It's one of the two great generators of the misuse and misunderstanding of language.

Moore: The other great generator of misunderstanding being your first secret reference?

Locke: Of course.

Moore: Before we tackle the second secret reference I want to remind myself why in 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' we're so absorbed in problems of language.

Locke: I told you why at the end of Book II.

Moore: You did indeed. But you made the reason sound like an afterthought.

Locke: How so?

Moore: Well, after a very long detailed account of different sorts of Ideas you conclude, '... I find there is so close a connexion between Ideas and Words, ... that it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our Knowledge without considering, first, the Nature, Use, and Signification of Language, which must therefore be the business of the next book.'

Locke: You're right. It was an afterthought. I hadn't planned to write on language. And a difficult book to write it was. It cost me more pain than the other three put together!

Moore: For me it's the best book, the most insightful in the whole Essay. In particular in its emphasis on the private, subjective nature of meaning.

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Locke: 'Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them.'

Moore: Exactly. And you repeat that insight six or seven times in a Chapter barely three pages long! So it's important. It does however raise a fundamental question: how do we understand each other if our meanings for words are ultimately subjective, personal, private?

Locke: And I answer, because we tacitly presuppose others have in mind the same meanings for the words we use as we have in our minds.

Moore: That tacit presupposition is your first secret reference.

Locke: It's an absolute tacit presupposition serving as a useful working hypothesis. At the very least it launches the possibility of communicating.

Moore: And the second reference complements the first?

Locke: Ah. You're raising the question of the links between language, thought and the reality of things. The second reference is my attempt to build a sturdy bridge between words and the world. But the bridge I build is not the bridge people usually believe it is.

Moore: Without thinking about it too much people generally suppose their words stand for 'the reality of things', as you put it. Putting it crudely, the expression goes 'Nouns name things'. People would not want to think what you think, that words ultimately mark only those ideas we host in our own heads.

Locke: Nouns don't name things. They name our Ideas of things. That words stand for things is a presupposition the second reference categorically denies. The second secret reference asserts that words are only of 'Use and Signification' when there is a constant link between

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sound and Idea and the understanding that the one stands for the other.

Moore: Otherwise you say words are nothing but so much 'insignificant Noise'.

Locke: Exactly. As I wrote, 'It is a perverting of the use of Words, and brings unavoidable Obscurity and Confusion into their Signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those Ideas we have in our own Minds.'

Moore: Putting it another way, you're saying that the meanings of words each of us own are a projection of what's inside us, and what's inside us is a projection from outside.

Locke: Not sure I follow that. What I had in mind was that what knowledge I had of physical entities was through the mediation of Ideas.

Moore: Knowing indirectly, by way of Ideas.

Locke: Basically that's correct. It will need qualifying for some sorts of word, but as long as we recognise that general words, abstract terms, are all Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding we shall not go astray.

Moore: Elsewhere you say such words are, 'The Workmanship of the Understanding.'

Locke: It's that Workmanship that gets forgotten. But the second secret reference absolutely insists the Understanding's Workmanship is the keystone to the bridge between words and the world. In short we together make the world up. The creativity gets forgotten because individuals want to believe they are talking of things as they are, not mere fictions, Ideas in their heads. But it's the consequence of not recognising the second secret reference that matters.

Moore: The consequence of failing to understand that words do not stand for the reality of things is you say, I quote, ' . . .from whence proceeds Noise and Wrangling,

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without Improvement or Information, whilst Men take words to be the constant regular Marks of agreed notions, which in trruth are no more but the voluntary and unsteady signs of their own Ideas, . . .'

Locke: Exactly.

Moore: Why is it do you think we generally presuppose the links between words and the world are direct?

Locke: Perhaps because for some sorts of word it undoubtedly can appear to be the case.

Moore: What sort of word?

Locke: Take words for Simple Ideas.

Moore: Words such as . . .?

Locke: 'hot', 'white' 'cold', 'sweet'. The Ideas this sort of word mark are not remotely an Invention or a Fiction. A snowball appears what we call 'white' and feels what we call 'cold'.

Moore; This sort of word then is not 'the Workmanship of the Understanding.

Locke: Not at all. The special, unique character of words for Simple Ideas is that the mind receives Simple Ideas passively. These words serve as a kind of anchor tying us into the reality of things. Workmanship is not involved. Simple Ideas are not our creations, not inventions of our understanding.

Moore: In Book III you put it slightly differently. You write words for Simple Ideas 'intimate some real Existence'.

Locke: That, if I may say so, is a good way of putting it. Providing you don't forget that the meanings of words for Simple Ideas like all other meanings are still mind-dependent.

Moore: The mind-dependency of meanings is etched on my mind!

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Locke: Words for Simple Ideas have another unique feature. Unlike words for complex Ideas, they are not definable.

Moore; Define 'definable'.

Locke: For me to define is to clarify the meaning of a word by other words that are not synonymous with it.

Moore: Put differently, more briefly, to define is to declare the meaning of a word.

Locke: Too brief and highly likely to be misleading. To define is to use other words you hope will excite the same Idea in the head of your interlocutor as the Idea in your head.

Moore: In short you never define a substantial thing or, say, a natural object.

Locke: Exactly. You can only define, or attempt to define, the Ideas in your own mind.

Moore: So in the case of words for Simple Ideas all I can do is point to something, perhaps snow, and say 'white'.

Locke: Pointing is not defining, it's demonstrating.

Moore: Some might call it 'ostensive definition'.

Locke: I wouldn't. No words are involved. Pointing incidentally is not straightforward. Try pointing to a saucer of cream with a cat. It'll probably lick the end of your finger! Still the strength of words for Simple Ideas is that they are of all words the least likely to be misunderstood because the Ideas they mark link us directly to the world.

Moore: How about words for our Ideas of substances. 'Gold' is one of your favourite examples.

Locke: 'Gold', like 'horse', 'man', 'iron', 'bread', ... is an interesting exemplar of a word that is – how can I put it? – somehow halfway between words for Simple Ideas and words for General Terms.

Moore: What do you mean 'halfway'?

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Locke: What Ideas do I have in mind by 'halfway'. Well, like words for Simple Ideas our words for our Ideas of Substances do intimate some real Existence. But these Ideas are not received passively. The mind works on them.

Moore: So you're saying the meanings of our words for our Ideas of Substances are a consequence of the 'Workmanship of the Understanding'.

Locke: Just so. But, and here lies the problem, the workmanship of our minds can differ. Take the word 'gold' for example and the Ideas the word marks. An extreme example of how minds can differ would be the case of Fool's Gold. What appears to have happened is that the metallic lustre of iron pyrite, its brassy, yellow hue, has earned it its nickname. Clearly the perceiving a certain colour is enough for the Fool to believe the mineral is 'gold'.

Moore: A child might call a piece of iron pyrite 'Fairy's Gold'.

Locke: Who would want to spoil a child's fantasy! The point is that each of us, not knowing the real nature of things, their essence, makes a collection of Ideas about an object and calls it 'gold'. The point that matters is that while our individual minds may agree on some characteristics of the mineral we call 'gold', on others we may disagree or be ignorant of characteristics others, more knowledgeable than us, know.

Moore: For example?

Locke: Well, take the nominal essence of the word 'gold'. For me the collection of Ideas the word marks would include at least say, '. . .a Body of a certain weight, malleable, fusible and fixed.'

Moore: 'Nominal' might easily confuse a twenty-first century reader. 'Nominal' has come to excite ideas around 'superficiality', not the real thing.

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Locke: What Ideas do you have in mind?

Moore: Well, if I describe X as the nominal Head of an organisation, I'd be saying he's there in name only. He doesn't take the real decisions.

Locke: If you cut out any pejorative overtones, my nominal essence of 'gold' is not unrelated. We simply don't know the real essence of 'gold. We don't know what those characteristics I listed ultimately depend upon. Even the best natural philosophers, like my friend Boyle, are in the last resort ignorant. We just presuppose an essence exists. It's an absolute presupposition of ours.

Moore: So by nominal essence you have in mind the collection of ideas the word 'gold' excites in me.

Locke: Exactly. You may perhaps agree with the words for Ideas I just listed, but I have another word for a characteristic of 'gold' which you may not be in your collection.

Moore: And that is?

Locke: Soluble in acqua regia.

Moore: Solubility wasn't one of the strands the word 'gold' knotted for me I agree.

Locke: So you agree different individuals can make different collections of Ideas for the 'same' object. How about that for a breeding ground for misunderstanding! I could go on you know. Every word marking Ideas of a substance, unlike words for Simple Ideas, creates opportunities for misunderstanding. The word 'Man' especially.

Moore: No, no. I've grasped your point. Words for ideas of Substances are in part like words marking Simple Ideas in that they too, if I may borrow your expression, 'intimate some real existence'. They are unlike in that we create the collections of Ideas the words mark. They are indeed 'Inventions of our Understanding'. How about words for General Terms, abstract Ideas.

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Locke: Ah! They are at the other extreme from words for Simple Ideas. The collections of Ideas they mark are wholly creatures of our own making. In truth such words are the richest source of our misunderstanding of each other.

Moore: I sometimes wonder if at the core of Book III is a theory of the misuse and misunderstanding of language. Let's look at an example.

Locke: Before looking at an example let me remind you of the fundamental problem in using language.

Moore: Which is?

Locke: Words fail to successfully communicate our thoughts and feelings to each other whenever any word does not excite in our interlocutor the same, or at least similar, Ideas it marks in our minds. Take a moral term, say, 'Justice'. When I use it, or its adjective, 'just', the critical question is: do they excite the same, or similar, Ideas in your head as in mine?

Moore: Probably not. My ideas of what counts as 'Justice' aren't fixed. In practice they can vary from one occasion to another.

Locke: And so can mine. So our understanding of each other is going to be at best doubtful and surely uncertain.

Moore: In an earlier Conversation we considered the word 'torture'. Was its use ever morally justified?

Locke: I do recall it. Wasn't it about some practices in a detention and interrogation facility. I forget the name.

Moore: Guantanomo. The practice we scrutinised was the process of interrogating prisoners involving 'waterboarding'.

Locke: I recall our Conversation. A very cruel practice. Undoubtedly 'torture' in my book.

Moore: But not in the US Government's book. The Government morever was a signatory to International Conventions Against Torture.

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Locke: But all such Conventions and Declarations are couched in words. Possibly words like, 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment'. And we know – don't we? – how uncertain and doubtful interpretations of words can be.

Moore: True. But suppose it's a question for you and me. How might we go about achieving a 'Common Acceptation' for our understanding of 'torture'?

Locke: First of all we'd have to do the hard work of making our collections of Ideas excited by 'torture' determinate or perhaps better, less indeterminate.

Moore: If we did we might still find that though there was some similarity, there were still differences.

Locke: So we might learn to recognise that in the end it was feelings not thoughts that underpinned our use of moral terms.

Moore: I see what you mean about such words being a rich source of misunderstanding!

Locke: Which should remind us to throw in some charity when trying to understand others. There's one other sort of word the second secret reference indirectly bears on, Particles. Particles mark not so much our Ideas about the world but rather intimate the various stances we take towards the words, phrases, sentences we use. Take 'But' as an example.

Moore: You express only limited respect for grammarians' treatment.

Locke: It's easy enough to describe 'but' as a discretive Conjunction, like 'sed' in Latin, or 'mais' in French. But that leaves out the subtle ways in which particles like 'but' intimate the complex stances the mind can take towards its discourse. Particles help us to think in train.

Moore: For example?

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Locke: Let's revisit some examples from Chapter VII. First, 'BUT to say no more'. Secondly, 'I saw BUT two planets'. Thirdly, 'You pray; BUT it is not that God would bring you to the true Religion.' Fourthly, 'BUT that he would confirm you in your own.'

Moore: The last pair of BUTs strikes me as more subtle. The first of the pair denies a supposition, whereas the second suggests a direct opposition to that supposition.

Locke: I could go on with other ways 'BUT' signals different actions of our minds in relation to a discourse.

Moore: You've made the case for scrutinising the the ideas a particle can excite in us. The problem is the familiar one. As your second secret reference compels us to recognise, different minds can arrive at different, sometimes subtly different, meanings for the same word.

Locke: I never claimed understanding each others' words was straightforward. May I do a homily?

Moore: A brief homily is permitted.

Locke: I hope I can contribute to Truth, Peace, and Learning if I can encourage others to reflect on their own use of Language. Possibly give them Reason to suspect, since others can misuse words, they themselves too need to be wary in their use and be ready to be challenged by others.

Moore: Homily accepted. Until we converse again?

Locke: Agreed. To talk about?

Moore: We'll see.

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