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LOCKE ON THE PROSPECTS FOR SECRET REFERENCE

Terence Moore

Initially Locke is inclined to pour cold water on Moore's enthusiasm for spreading the word about Secret Reference. Locke believes it will remain a pearl hidden in the bushes of neglect. Moore, on the contrary, sees Secret Reference exercising a far-reaching influence on the way we approach our understanding of misunderstanding. For a start, Moore believes realizing meaning is inherently, not accidentally, indeterminate might help. Subsequently Locke begins to warm to Moore's beliefs. He proposes a possible way forward, though still not wholly convinced much can really be achieved given the kind of society we live in.

MOORE: I have a *'What If'?*

LOCKE: What's your *What If'?*

MOORE: What if 'Secret Reference' were no longer a secret? What if we told the world and people really got it? What if it became recognized as a key element in how we communicate? What would the outcome be? Wouldn't we misunderstand each other less? Might we even understand each other better?

LOCKE: Dreamer! Starry-eyed Idealist! Tell me, how long has my *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* been in print?

MOORE: Three centuries and counting.

LOCKE: Have there been any recent editions?

MOORE: Several. Among the best to my mind is one edited and introduced by P. H. Nidditch.

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Locke: And has a hungry reading public fallen on Book III, devouring 'Secret Reference'? Made it the anchor of their attempts to understand one another, to understand the language of the world around them, their political world, their religious world, their economic world?

Moore: Admittedly Book III has not yet set the academic philosophical or linguistic worlds on fire, nor the general reader of works on language. But I can think of two, independent, thinkers who, if they'd read it, would have cherished Book III. Both, alas, dead

Locke: Who do you have in mind?

Moore: Well, you and Jespersen would have got on like a house on fire.

Locke: Otto Jespersen, the great Dane, author of *The Philosophy of Grammar*. I've seen his book on your shelves.

Moore: Consider that book's epigraph. It runs: 'The essence of language is human activity – activity on the part of one individual to make himself understood by another, and activity on the part of that other to understand what was in the mind of the first.'

Locke: Perfect. The focus is exactly where it needs to be, on the individual, the content of their mind, and the activity involved in trying to get across that content to other minds whose exact content is uncertain. I must go back to Jespersen. Remind me where he is.

Moore: Third shelf down, on the right.

Locke: But is that epigraph widely known? Is it treated as a fundamental truth in manuals for improving our ability to communicate clearly?

Moore: Unfortunately not – as far as I know.

Locke: So why should you think your book of our Conversations – what are you calling it *Understanding Misunderstanding*, *Locke holds the Key*? – why should your efforts fare any better?

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MOORE: We have to keep trying. And I have the advantage of having translated your ideas into a modern idiom. I hope I've made 'Secret Reference' less of a secret.

LOCKE: You mentioned two thinkers you thought might have been drawn to Book III, if they'd discussed it. Who was the second?

MOORE: Michael Polanyi, Radiologist and Philosopher of Language and Mind. I'd like to know what you think of his 1958 book, *Personal Knowledge*. It's also on the third shelf. The title is a fair clue to its contents. Its focus on tacit knowing should resonate with you, given you were once the leading figure on the subjectivity of knowledge!

LOCKE: I'll put Polanyi at the top of my list. But I'm still puzzled. Why do you dream about the future prospects of the world really understanding 'Secret Reference'? The record suggests it will remain a pearl hidden in the bushes of neglect.

MOORE: Not when people fully realise how potent it can be. Believe me, it's made a real difference to me. Since I've taken 'Secret Reference' to heart I've understood more, misunderstood less.

LOCKE: True. You, currently, are my best student. But, let's face it, who are you? A mover and shaker in the world? The head you're shaking tells me you know you're not.

MOORE: Alright, you've made your point. Why should people listen to me? So where does this leave us?

LOCKE: Where we always are. Trying to make ourselves heard above the Babel of confused tongues.

MOORE: I agree. We'll have to shout pretty loud to have a chance of being heard.

LOCKE: But suppose we had a secret weapon.

MOORE: A secret weapon! As well as 'Secret Reference'!

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Locke: It's coming back to me. Do you recall a way forward you suggested in our very first Conversation?

Moore: No, I don't remember. Remembering things is not my strong point these days.

Locke: What you suggested was introducing our, your, book to young people, bringing its ideas into the schools. Make the discussion of words and meanings, degrees of understanding, the tacit, communal conspiracy we enter into in trying to understand each other, a regular part of the curriculum.

Moore: I can imagine a course – there'd have to be well-chosen examples – so young people could see the way words and meanings actually work. And, moreover, how easily misunderstandings can arise. They might then begin to apply it to their own lives. They might even discover language's dark secret.

Locke: What's language's dark secret?

Moore: That words themselves are meaningless.

Locke: To discover that we would need to get their teachers interested. Teachers are important people, very important. They can open minds, sow seeds. Teachers of English for example might find Locke's insights into the links between words and ideas helpful in clarifying the differences in understanding students show.

Moore: You're thinking of when their students are grappling with, say, poetry.

Locke: Exactly. And teachers of a foreign language might be willing to add an arrow to their quiver by not only teaching a language, but also teaching about language.

Moore: You're right. The distinction between knowing a language and knowing about language is vital. When I'm introduced as a linguist, I'm invariably asked, 'How many languages do you speak?' I appear to reflect and then answer: one. The laughter is only dispelled when I

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introduce the distinction between 'knowing a language' and 'knowing about language'. But do you really think our book could influence work in the classroom?

LOCKE: Why not? If we can catch the young before their minds get too firmly set!

MOORE: We could contact SAPERE.

LOCKE: Who's he?

MOORE: He's not a 'He', it's an organization, SAPERE's an acronym. It stands for: Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education.

LOCKE: The acronym's well-chosen. From the Latin, 'sapere', to 'know', be 'aware'.

MOORE: We still have 'sapient', 'deeply wise', not used very often!

LOCKE: What's this SAPERE's aim exactly?

MOORE: In essence it's to promote philosophically enquiring minds in children. There's some evidence their courses in thinking philosophically have a rippling effect, improving young people's performance in other subjects.

LOCKE: You think the young could be guided to approach language philosophically, be got to grasp the crucial distinction between what words do and what meanings are?

MOORE: Easily! If it were done not abstractly but by illustration, by examples, by instances taken from the language in the classroom. It's children after all who ask the big questions – 'What holds the sky up?', 'Why doesn't it fall?', 'How did language begin?', perhaps later: 'What's the meaning of life?', 'How should I live?', 'Where do I start?' – yet somehow as we grow up we seem to forget to ask. Of course . . .

LOCKE: Of course what?

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Moore: Of course to get teachers sowing these seeds we would need to think about where the teachers who teach young people are taught.

Locke: Where are teachers trained?

Moore: In a number of places with different names, Departments of Education, Institutes of Education, Faculties of Education, Colleges.

Locke: So, within these institutions you'd have teachers becoming skilled in discussing the implications of 'Secret Reference', of approaching language philosophically?

Moore: Exactly. And also discussing your ideas on the essential privateness of meanings, on the need to understand our inescapable subjectivity, on recognizing the inherent indeterminacy of meanings.

Locke: You're right. By expanding their own horizons, they would be well equipped to help students understand both understanding and misunderstanding. Future generations might reap a linguistic harvest! By exploring the ramifications of 'Secret Reference' there's a chance they would've got to grips with – how did your Jespersen put it – the complexity of the 'activity on the part of one individual to make himself understood by another'.

Moore: Absolutely. I've firmly convinced myself well-trained teachers might help to spread your insights into the roots of understanding and misunderstanding.

Locke: 'Might help' is right, Idealist!

Moore: We can always hope! Where would we be without hope!

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