

LOCKE'S ERROR?

Terence Moore

In the closing chapters of Book III of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Locke makes what seems to be an astounding error. What it is and why he appears to do it provides the meat of the tenth Conversation between John Locke and Terence Moore.

In the closing chapters of Book III of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Locke makes what seems to be an astounding error. What it is and why he appears to do it provides the meat of the tenth Conversation between John Locke and Terence Moore.

Locke: Your note said I'd made a mistake! A grave mistake? I like mistakes. I can learn from them.

Moore: I wrote the note in haste. Perhaps it's not so much an error as an oversight. But it's significant. It reveals a cast of mind antipathetic to the whole spirit of Book III, 'Of Words or Language in General'.

Locke: I'm intrigued. Is this oversight you seem to have found really that important?

Moore: I think so. Its importance depends on whether you believe it matters that you fail to recognise, or rather, fail to follow through the wide-ranging consequences of your dazzling insight into the complex relations between words and meanings. I think it does matter.

Locke: You say I've failed to follow through?

Moore: Absolutely. But luckily I have. I've recognised and followed through your insight into the fundamental nature of meaning.

Locke: Go on. You're really intriguing me.

Moore: Perhaps the clearest pointer is embedded in the title you gave to Chapter XI, Book III of 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding'. It reads, 'Of the Imperfections of Words'.

Locke: That's correct. What's wrong with the title?

Moore: Everything! Words aren't imperfect, are they? Words are just sounds, just words. It's us, the employers of words who are riddled with imperfections in the way we use words. Only an incompetent workman blames his tools. No, what we need to focus on is that the words of a language play a particular role. A role we need to come to terms with, rather than cast blame upon words for our misuse of them.

Locke: I can see you feel strongly. What particular role of words do you have in mind?

Moore: Well, you taught me about it so you should know.

Locke: Remind me. What exactly did I teach you?

Moore: One of the more important lessons was on the Law of Poverty, a key element for understanding the use of language.

Locke: The Law of Poverty. I don't recall ever using the expression.

Moore: You didn't name it. I did. But the inspiration came from you.

Locke: I'm glad I inspired you. But how?

Moore: It's best if we explore Book III, Chapter III, 'Of General Terms', particularly the opening. Basically you isolate one of the essential characteristics of words – one of the facts about language speakers and hearers really need to understand if we are not to misuse language.

Locke: What characteristic exactly?

Moore: You open Chapter III by suggesting it might be reasonable to suppose, since everything is a particular instance, there should be a word for every particular. Then we would be bound to understand each other because the word and the thing would be uniquely tied.

Locke: Yes. But then I argue it's not at all reasonable. The suggestion turns words into something that they're not.

Moore: Exactly. Words are not labels. At least not generally.

Locke: What do you mean, not generally?

Moore: Our syntacticians customarily draw a distinction between proper nouns and common nouns.

Locke: Proper nouns and common nouns?

Moore: Yes. A proper noun is a noun that labels a unique place, person, animal . . . The word 'Everest', for example, the name we give to our highest mountain, is a proper noun, usually with a capital letter. A common noun is a noun that refers to a class of objects or concepts. The word 'mountain', without a capital, is a common noun.

Locke: I see. So, I'm arguing firstly it's unreasonable to suppose every single thing could have its distinct peculiar name. What you would call a proper noun.

Moore: Don't say 'peculiar'.

Locke: Why not?

Moore: Nowadays 'peculiar' has come to excite Ideas like 'strange', 'odd', 'weird'.

Locke: Really. But that's not anything like what I have in mind by the word 'peculiar'.

Moore: Having read enough of your works I now realise that when you say a man has 'peculiar Ideas', the Ideas

'peculiar' excites for you, I can only capture by phrases like 'belongs exclusively to'.

Locke: So what should I say so you're less likely to misunderstand me?

Moore: Just change 'peculiar' to 'particular' or possibly 'specific'.

Locke: Right. So I'm arguing it's unreasonable to suppose every thing has its distinct particular name, a name belonging exclusively to it. It would be as if every single words was, in your terms, a proper noun.

Moore: Exactly. And that's impossible because ...

Locke: In a word, memory. Our capacity to memorise is not unlimited. Try to imagine the prodigious memory we'd each have to have to be able to frame and retain distinct words for all the particular things we encounter. It follows necessarily that language must be be poor enough to allow the same word to be used over and over again. Then it would become in common use memorable.

Moore: It's that necessity I choose to call the Law of Poverty. Your examples bear you out. Try naming each tree, each plant, each house, each chair, each table ... These examples show why our vocabulary must be poor in comparison with the richness, the multitude of particulars it may need to mark. The Law of Poverty marks a key characteristic of the vocabulary of every language that speakers and hearers need to bear in mind.

Locke: True. But it's not nearly as important as my second argument against the idea that words could name particulars. That argument is the chief thesis of Book III. Words aren't related directly to things in the world at all. They are not labels, tags. Words mark Ideas in our heads. Ideas created by our individual minds. A word's relationship to the world is by way of our own 'peculiar', in my sense, Ideas.

Moore: You're saying it's our Minds, each of us abstracting from the particulars we encounter, that create the Ideas our words mark. The corollary being that words by themselves have no meaning.

Locke: Exactly. I certainly did repeat several times 'Words have no Signification'.

Moore: I sometimes think the idea that words are meaningless is language's dark secret.

Locke: It's not a secret once you recognise how words grow meanings. The essential first step we need to make if we're to understand the way language works, I quote myself because it's important, is to 'quit Particulars'. Language works because intuitively we take that step. Our capacity to abstract is the operating principle of language. It enables each Mind to begin to group particulars into classes of things. These classes are the collections of Ideas we each have about the world as we individually experience it.

Moore: And words are our names for these collections of Ideas.

Locke: Correct. Collections which grow and change. When we quit particulars the meanings of the general terms we use ...

Moore: ... the words we use,

Locke; ... are nothing but, I cite myself again, 'Creatures of our own making. ... For the Signification they have is nothing but a relation the Mind of Man has added to them.'

Moore: So the truth of the matter is that in the end we make our own meanings. Meanings that may in use turn out to be similar, overlap or be quite different from the meanings others have made for themselves.

Locke: Precisely. So your Ideas of 'Covetousness', or 'Justice' or 'Cruelty' or 'House' may well overlap with

mine to the extent that we acquired our language in the same community. But if we consider words marking our Ideas about, for instance, moral issues then these are obvious candidates for being misunderstood.

Moore: So we can both agree the seeds of misunderstanding are easily sown. But that's not a consequence of a flaw in the character of words. In standing as signs for our individual Ideas words themselves are not being imperfect. They are just being what they have to be. It's up to us, language users, speakers and hearers, to recognise the true nature of words and not assume we'll be understood.

Locke: We do expect to be understood, I agree.

Moore: Actually we should expect to be misunderstood and be relieved when we find we are not! False expectations are as rife in the use of language today as they were in your day. Individuals use words that excite a certain meaning for them. They then expect those words to excite the same meaning for their interlocutor. They may be lucky. But the expectation, lucky or not, is false.

Locke: So my 'error' as you called it was to blame language for our misguided use of it.

Moore: In a word to describe language as 'imperfect'. If something is imperfect our task would be to remove its 'imperfections'. We can't remove the Law of Poverty and the operating principle of language, Abstraction. Language could not be otherwise than as it is. Recognising where the imperfections rife in our use of language lie is the essential first step to a less imperfect use of language. To use language well we need to understand the consequences of words themselves having no meaning.

Locke: Don't I do just that in the next Chapter, Chapter X, 'Of the Abuse of Language'?

Moore: Yes and no. Yes because in that Chapter you put the responsibility for the misuse of language where it rightly belongs. You write, '... there are several Wilful faults and Neglects, which Men are guilty of...'

Locke: Isn't that exactly what you were looking for?

Moore: Yes, but you say it in the context of repeating the canard about the imperfections that are you say, 'natural to language'.

Locke: I do at least list some of Men's wilful faults and neglects.

Moore: You do indeed. The first is our using words with no clear Ideas in our minds as to what the words mark.

Locke: I was thinking of philosophers and theologians, the Schoolmen and Metaphysicians, who seemed to me to be major offenders, using words exciting no clear Ideas.

Moore: They were not your only targets. You cited words like 'Glory', 'Grace', 'Wisdom', as examples of words that remained for many 'empty Sounds, with little or no Signification.'

Locke: There was another wilful fault that particularly pained me. It's a plain cheat when an author makes the same word mark one collection of Ideas in one place and a different collection in another place. It's as dishonest as if a mathematician were to claim 3 stands for three, sometimes four, sometimes eight. Being inconstant in use was a fault I found too often.

Moore: All you say on our wilful abuse is good sound stuff. You also pick out an abuse that in my experience goes almost unnoticed.

Locke: What's that?

Moore: It's to do with your account of propositions. We regularly make statements like your 'Gold is malleable', statements which have the ring of a proposition that is to

be taken as true. But, as you make abundantly clear, 'Gold' is a word exciting collections of Ideas in your mind which may or may not overlap with the Ideas in the minds of others. It's the same of course with the Ideas the word 'malleable' excites. But to return to your proposition, 'Gold is malleable', someone may retort, 'No, it's not'. To begin to resolve controversy the appropriate question needs to be not who is right, who is wrong, but what Ideas does each have in mind for those words.

Locke: Of course. Individuals mean things by words. Words don't mean. I suspect you're right. I should have made more of the importance of preceding any such statement with a phrase such as, 'What I call ...'. So what I should advise, if I'm true to my own beliefs about the nature of language, is to remind users of language to always precede a general proposition with a phrase indicating it's a personal belief. Perhaps something like, 'What I call 'Gold' is malleable.'

Moore: Much better. Perhaps more than just advise, insist. The need to recognise the importance of what in an earlier Conversation we called Personal Affirmation is indispensable. Your account of the nature of language demands we acknowledge our responsibilities in its use.

Locke: You're winning me over. The misuse, misunderstandings are not in language itself. The imperfections are in our use of language. I'll change the Chapter's title in the next edition! How about, 'Our failings in the use of Language'.

Moore: Or perhaps an overall title for Book III might be something along the lines of the limits and limitations, not imperfections, of language.

Locke: I'd like Book III to be useful,. How about 'Recognising, working within, the limitations of Language'?

Moore: Sounds good to me. So we're agreed. Words aren't imperfect. We are. Language isn't imperfect. Language has necessary limitations. Limitations essential to its being a language, not aberrations to be overcome.

Locke: Wasn't that the title of a book of yours, 'The Limitations of Language'.

Moore: Correct. A book Chris Carling and I wrote way back in the 1980s. But it didn't explore the foundations of the uncertainty and imprecision inherent in language the way we've been talking. It did keep though, to a distinction between limitations and imperfections!

Locke: Must put 'Limitations' on the top of the pile of books I want to read.

Moore: Good. It has some arresting poems you may enjoy. So can we agree the content of the last three Chapters of Book 111 can be briefly summarised as an injunction to study the fundamental nature of words.

Locke: Or perhaps more usefully an injunction to study the consequences of the complex relation between words and meanings for an appropriate use of language.

Moore: Not a very snappy title!

Locke: Maybe. But perhaps a more accurate pointer to what the language-using world needs – how do you put it nowadays? – to take on board.

Terence Moore is a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge.
tm15@cam.ac.uk