Locke's "Of Words"[1] was not the first, the longest, or the deepest discussion of language in 17th century Europe. But it was one of the most important. It played a pivotal role in the disappearance of the Aristotelian-Adamic paradigm for language and set much of the tone and agenda underlying the rise of modern linguistics in the 18th Century. Whether or not Locke intended his discussion to be so pivotal, it indeed was.

I wish to discuss, however, not the consequences that followed from Locke's publication of Book III of the *Essay* but rather what went into its composition and the text itself. Locke's thinking about language, I shall argue, was driven by his conception of what we might call the problem of lexical reliability and reading it from this perspective bring much of the published text itself into sharper focus.

The Problem of Lexical Reliability

When he introduced Book III of the published version of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke explained that he had not originally thought he'd need to talk about words and language, but in the course of wrestling with ideas he discovered "so close a connexion between *Ideas* and Words" that he felt compelled to include a substantial discussion of words before moving on to knowledge.[2] It has been argued that Locke's turn to language was caused by the recognition that "Knowledge … all consists in Propositions."[3] Although it is certainly true that Locke was fully committed to that principle, it was not what in fact prompted Locke to turn his attention to words and language. We can plausibly date Locke's turn to words and language to 1671, between composing Drafts A and B of the *Essay*.[4] And these materials tell a different story regarding Locke's turn. Let's take a look.

Almost immediately in Draft A, Locke found himself wrestling with words and definitions as he tried to lay out the complex ideas of things. He was so embroiled with them that he was driven to insert a comment about words and their significance into the very first section:

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[1] All references to the *Essay* are to the Nidditch edition by book, chapter, section, and page number: John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding,* edited by Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

[2] "Having thus given an account of the original, sorts, and extent of our Ideas, with several other Considerations, about these (I know not whether I may say) Instruments, or Materials, of our Knowledge, the method I at first proposed to my self, would now require, that I should immediately proceed to shew, what use the Understanding makes of them, and what Knoweldge we have by them. This was that, which, in the first general view I had of this Subject, was all that I thought I should have to do: but upon a nearer approach, I find, that there is so close a connexion between Ideas and Words; and our abstract Ideas, and general Words, have so constant a relation one to another, that it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our Knowledge, which all consists in Propositions, without considering, first, the Nature, Use, and Signification of Language; which therefore must be the business of the next Book." (Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.19, 401)

[3] Ruth Mattern ("Locke: Our Knowledge, which all consists in Propositions," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 8 [1978]: 677-95) and David Soles ("Locke on Knowledge and Propositions," Philosophical Topics 13 [1985]: 19-30) defend and develop this line of explanation.

[4] We are fortunate in that the materials have survived and that we can see how Locke's thinking unfolded and evolved on this point. Critical editions of Drafts A and B have been published in The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke: *John Locke, Drafts for the Essay Concerning Human Understanding and Other Philosophical Writings,* edited by Peter H. Nidditch and G.A.J. Rogers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). All references are to this edition. I will occasionally include material changes Locke made to the text, but only if they affect my argument or they are philosophically interesting and noteworthy.

> But yet though imperfect collections of simple Ideas supposed all to be united in a thing which hath [a] one certaine name produces wrong definitions & there by great uncertainty in the significations of words & endless disputes about them rather than about the things them selves, yet this one thing is of vast inconvenience because men conveying their imaginations knowledg & reasoning to one an other almost only by words & most commonly [regulateing] fixing their owne thoughts within them [by] upon words when they would think of things, imperfect & wrong definitions of words cause endless doubt confusions & errors in mens owne mindes by them selves as wel as in their discourses with others, which is a thing of great moment in our present enquire & well to be consiered if we would make any discovery what knowledg our understanding<s> are capable of things abstracted from words and well destinguish between the understanding of words & the knowledg of things. (Draft A, § 1, 4)[5]

This insertion seems to be a realization that Locke came to after working through two examples of complex ideas of substance, the sun and gold. At the time concerns about ambiguities inherit to linguistic expressions were floating around Europe, but (pace Dawson) Locke's struggles with language here did not seem to arise from such general or antecedent worries.[6] Instead, Locke's struggles seem directly connected with a specific issue underlying the complex ideas of natural substances[7] and the definitions of their names, the problem of their lexical reliability.

The root of this problem is two-fold, the complexity of the ideas of natural substances and the nature and limitations of the human mind and human experience. In Draft A, Locke was targeting the Aristotelian conception of simple terms and offering an Epicurean-inspired compositional alternative. As Locke framed it, this was fundamentally an issue concerning concept formation. Locke's sketched out his alternative process of concept formation in § 1 of Draft A. According to Locke, upon first encountering a particular object, the mind senses several simple ideas, which are caused

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[5] We know that this insertion occurred early in the actual drafting of the text because it is partially interpolated in the running text of section one. The insertion begins in the margin of the second folio of the text, but seven lines of it interrupt the body of a later portion on that folio. You can see it for yourself an image of the upper portion of the folio on page 5 of Nidditch and Rogers' edition of Drafts A and B.

[6] Hannah Dawson has documented this while contextualizing Locke's thinking about language: see *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Her book is great and significantly influenced the line I'm developing in this paper. But she may not agree with some of the specific connections or analyses I'm offering.

[7] Interestingly, at this point in Locke's thinking (early-mid 1671, Draft A), the issue was not about substances per se, but about natural substances. Locke excluded "artificial things" from this on the grounds that "the artificer designd & therefor well knows the Idea of" it. (Locke, Draft A, § 2, 11) Of course this distinction is lost (or at least significantly repressed) in the published *Essay*. Simple ideas were not so afflicted because of their simplicity. The case of complex ideas of relations is more interesting. Locke began § 3 making names of relations to be akin to the those of artificial things, being "made by our owne minds [they] are of a more certaine signification." But in § 4 moral relations the problem of lexical unreliability arises for customary names, "the knowne & vulgar names," and is a problem only for "men borne in societys where men have specific names made in abundance to their hands but must them selves make the Ideas which they will ranke under & expresse by those names." (Locke, Draft A, §§ 3–4, 11-13 passim)

by the object. These simple ideas then coalesce into a composite idea of that particular object, call it Φ_1.[8] Next, the mind notes that some of these simple ideas "goe constan<t>ly togeather" and "supposes [that] they rest & are united in some fit & common subject." This does not happen immediately or all at once, Locke suggested. Rather, it happens through "the repeated exercise of our senses about that object which we call experience & observation," when "by frequent conversation" a thing is "often shewed" to mind. It is here that the concept, properly speaking, is formed in Locke's account. This step in the process involves the iteration of a variety of particular ideas of the object, $\Phi_1 + \Phi_2 + \Phi_3 + \ldots + \Phi_n$, which give rise to the above noticing and supposition. From this set of particular ideas of the object, the mind notices a pattern or cluster of simple ideas of sense of types $q_{1–i}$ and thus uses this pattern to formulate a new, general idea of the substance, call it Φ and have $\Phi = <q_1, q_2, q_3, \ldots q_i>$.[9] The process Locke is describing is, obviously, a straightforward version of Aristotelian induction, except that a composite set of simple ideas of sense rather than a singular (i.e. simple) idea of a substantial form is the result.[10]

At this point the problem of lexical reliability emerges: the composite general idea is "imperfect" in a couple of ways and the significations of our names of substances inherits those imperfections, or more precisely those limitations. First, the composite general ideas are limited because they are (almost) always proper subsets of the simple ideas of sense contained within our experiences. And even if they were not proper subsets, there would be no basis for thinking that our experience contained anywhere near the indefinitely large sum of sensible ideas, and other causal powers, that an object itself possesses. Thus, the concepts we formulate are doubly limited, and for all practical purposes are imperfect by being deficient. But it gets even worse. There is, moreover, no guide for our selection of sensible ideas types $q_{1\text{-}i}$. The vagaries of experience could easily lead us to identify a different cluster or pattern; indeed, other minds might be framing the same concept with different sensible idea types based on their own different set of experience. The general idea constituting our concept might thus be relatively different from that framed by others, or from what we might have framed, or even from what we will frame in the future. Thus, the concepts we formulate are not universal or the same for everyone, which was a fundamentally anti-Aristotelian and, in 1671, unconventional result.[11]

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[8] Locke doesn't say much about this particular idea or its coalescing and jumps ahead in his presentation of the process, but presumably it consists of particular ideas of sense and could be represented as: $\Phi_1 = <q_{11}, q_{12}, q_{13}, \ldots q_{1n}>$, where Φ designates the object, the subscript on phi designates the numeric identity of the perception or idea it composes, the q designates the quality perceived or the sensible idea, the first subscript on q designates the numeric identity of the perception or idea it is a part of, and the second subscript designates the quality's type. In Locke's example of the idea of the sun (Draft A § 1, 2), a numerically distinct perception of the sun would be Φ_1 and the qualities of "round, bright, hot, having a constant set motion a good way from us, &c." would be, respectively, q_1, q_2, q_3, q_4, and so forth out to q_n.

[9] Notice in the representation the loss of the marker for the numeric identity of the perception and that we have a proper subset 1–i of the set 1-n.

[10] Hence Locke's opening salvo in Draft A § 1: that "by inadvertency we are apt afterwards to talke of & consider as one simple Idea, which is indeed a complication of many simple Ideas togeather." (Draft A, § 1, 1)

[11] A central feature of late Scholastic philosophy of language was that the natural signs that our conventional signs (*verba*) signify were the same for all humans. See *De interpretatione* 1, 16a3–8: "Now spoken sounds

It is at this point that language comes into Locke's picture. We have, Locke suggested, a natural propensity to attribute a single name to this object-type Φ, and thus we use this concept as the signification of that name. It doesn't seem to matter to Locke at this point whether we are members of an existing linguistic community attributing a customary name to an object (although this is how he presented the gold case) or devising our own name for the object.[12] His central concern was that the definition we use for any name of a natural substance will inherit the imperfections and uncertainties bound up within the concept created by this enumerative process. It is this that makes our words fundamentally unreliable. And from this lexical unreliability cascade some important and damaging cognitive and epistemic problems as previously mentioned. This, therefore, was the connection between ideas, words, and knowledge that Locke came to see while composing Draft A and which drove him to reflect on language more extensively and deeply.

The damaging epistemic consequences of the above problem of lexical reliability are interesting. The first stems from the fact that some much of our knowledge is dependent on "discourses with others," which are necessarily language-based. That a Baconian committed to a "historical" methodology would be so sensitive to this point is hardly surprising: case histories must be written up and shared among other natural philosophers. Yet it is obvious that interpersonal learning breaks down between natural philosophers if their communication breaks down, and when they do not possess the same lexicons, communication is fraught at best. Moreover, these distracting disputes between natural philosophers tend to appear substantial but are, rather, merely verbal. Remember Locke's story about the "meeting of learned and ingenious physicians" discussing "whether any liquor passed through the filaments of the nerves"?[13] Even though everyone thought themselves to perfectly understand what that word "Liquor" signified, Locke reported that they discovered that because each made it the sign of a different complex idea, they did not and their debate was really about words rather than things. This was exactly the point Locke himself was uncovering in 1671 at this very point in composing Draft A. But things are even worse than that, Locke realized. Even in intrapersonal instances of knowledge, the problem of lexical reliability produces harms because people "most commonly fix their owne thoughts within them upon words when they would thinke of things."[14] This is interesting for what it might mean concerning Locke's early conception of the mind and ideas. What he was claiming here was that words can take the

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are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same." (Aristotle, *De interpretatione* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], 1: 25)

[12] Locke has not yet developed the normatively-loaded feature of "having a right to the name," which plays such an important role in the published edition of the *Essay*. Thus, this distinction is not nearly so important here as it will be in the published edition.

[13] Locke, *Essay*, III.ix.16-17, 484-86.

[14] Notice how Locke's alternations to the text, changing "regulate … by" to "fixing … upon" transform it into a stronger and more problematic scenario: our minds are not simply following these significations but are latched onto them in some way.

place of ideas in our own "imaginations knowledg & reasoning" and by doing so cause cognitive and epistemic failures when we follow their unreliable significations rather our real conceptions of things. How a word—and its signification!—that is not itself an idea can take the place of an idea in the mind is not so obvious, especially on the traditional characterization of Lockean minds and ideas. But nevertheless, this possibility was central to Locke's early Draft A conception of the close and problematic relationship between ideas, words, and knowledge. It was, moreover, not a remote or "mere" possibility that Locke was speculating about as some kind of thought-experiment; it was something that all of us do to a certain extent and that some of us do quite a lot. It was, in other words, a natural propensity human minds seemed to have, according to Locke's presentation: "the greatest part of men take the sound of words for the notions of things or else very carelesly & loosely apply them to their imperfect & inconstant notions, presumeing yet that in the use of these common received sounds they understand others & are understood by them i.e. have the same notions which yet is very seldome & almost never soe."[15]

This focus on the problem of lexical reliability as an epistemic and cognitive threat never leaves Locke's thinking about language or its place in his inquiry "into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge."[16] To be sure Locke's thinking about words and language grew and developed through Draft B and into the published version of the Essay. But it retains this focus and orientation throughout that growth. This is what I wish to show next.

Real and Nominal Essences

Locke's focus on lexical reliability certainly explains the overall structure of Book III of the published Essay. After laying down some general features and principles of language (III.i–ii), Locke turned to the relationship of abstract ideas (III.iii) which raises the problem of lexical reliability, discussed its manifestation among the different types of terms (III.iv–vi), and finished with the "vast inconvenience" that this poses and remedies for mitigating it (III.ix–xi). Locke's focus on lexical unreliability also explains the structure of III.iii, "Of General Terms." After providing a rational justification for why "the far greatest part of Words…are general Terms," he turned to consider "how general Words came to be made," where he presented a refined version of his enumerative account of concept creation from Draft A.[17] Indeed, the relativity of essences, and the names expressing those essence, being rooted in the relativity of our abstract ideas, which Locke expressed in III.iii.14, is a clear summary of the whole problem of lexical reliability initially faced in Draft A.[18]

[15] Locke, Draft A, § 4, 13.
[16] Locke, *Essay*, I.ii.2, 43.
[17] Locke, *Essay*, III.iii.1, 409 and III.iii.6, 410.
[18] "these *Essences*, or abstract *Ideas*, … at least the complex ones are often, in several Men, different Collections of simple *Ideas*: and therefore that is *Covetousness* to one Man, which is not so to another. Nay, even in Substances, where their abstract *Ideas* seem to be taken from Things themselves, they are not constantly the same; … in truth *every distinct abstract* Idea*, is a distinct Essence*: and the names that stand for such distinct *Ideas*, are the names of Things essentially different." (Locke, *Essay*, III.iii.14, 416)

There are of course several notable developments in Locke's published presentation: greater detail regarding how the mind identifies the patterns of qualities that "goe constan<t>ly togeather," i.e. the process of abstraction; greater emphasis on genera and species being "the Workmanship of the Understanding;" and the qualification that "Nature in the Production of Things, makes several of them alike" and that this provides the "foundation" for the mind's making abstract ideas. But two are especially noteworthy from the perspective of Locke's philosophy of language and bring together all of his developments: (a) the concept of having a right to a name and (b) the distinction between real and nominal essences. Let's begin with the latter.

As noted above, in Draft A Locke first began wrestling with the problem of lexical reliability. In Draft B, he sought to deepen his understanding of that problem and especially its sources. He began to see it as a more general problem about terms with complex significations and he began seeing it as revolving fundamentally around definitions. Locke's preferred solution to the problem is obvious enough, that we provide clear and complete, enumerative definitions of our terms and we consistently abide by them when talking and thinking.[19] But this doesn't happen much—why not?

It is in asking this question that Locke ran smack into the issue of real essences. Locke identified traditional teachings about essences as one obstacle to taking up his clear definitions solution to the problem of lexical reliability: "An other reason why generall words or the specific names of Substances modes & relations … have not had determinate destinct complex Ideas to which they have been constantly applyd & annexd, hath been that men have been taught that the severall species of things have had destinct essences the knowledg whereof was necessary for the cleare knowledg of this or that species."[20] Notice that as Locke presented it here, the traditional teaching about essences has two core principles, one metaphysical (that "things have had destinct essences") and one epistemological (that the knowledge of a thing's distinct essence is "necessary for the cleare knowledg of this or that species").

At this point, Locke needs to make a distinction to help him cut through this traditional teaching and properly analyze its role in causing trouble for our definitions. The distinction that he will eventually make (which doesn't appear in Draft B) is that between real and nominal essences. We can easily see how this distinction helps with the problem considered in Draft B. Real essences concern only the metaphysical principle. To be sure, Locke was a believer in real essences, just not as traditionally characterized by the Aristotelians. But from the standpoint of ideas and words, real essences are irrelevant precisely because they are unknown and quite possibly unknowable.[21]

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[19] "the first & mayne remedy were to get a full & perfect collection of all those qualitys which are in & belong to any sort or species of things which make them to be all of a kinde & destinguishes them from all others & then to those complex Ides to give setled & fixed names." (Locke, Draft B, § 72, 176)

[20] Locke, Draft B, § 73, 177.

[21] From the perspective of his philosophy of language, Locke's critique of Aristotelian real essences (III.iii.15, 17 and III.vi.14-18, 23-24) is a sideshow, a philosophically important and interesting one, but a sideshow nonetheless. Locke may have been unduly pessimistic regarding the prospects of coming to know corpuscularian real essences, but he was certain that Aristotelian real essences could not function as required. And he was even more certain that neither version of real essence could play any role in human cognition, classification, and knowledge (at that time) because both were unknown.

It is the nominal essences that play roles in human cognition and classification because only they are present to us. Nominal essences, for Locke, just are those proper subsets of quality-ideas suggested to us by experience that were describe previously, those abstract, general ideas involved in concept development. Leibniz famously complained that Locke's novelty here was confusing (and confused), and that Locke should not have been calling these things nominal *essences*.[22] It is, however, Leibniz who was confused here, or better was missing Locke's point (perhaps not without reason, it must be said). Locke did mean to label these things essences and he was right to do so because they do indeed delimit a domain of real possibility just as Leibniz emphasized that an essence should. Indeed, imbuing abstract, general ideas with that function was Locke's very point in calling them essences and drawing his distinction between real and nominal essences.

In Locke's account, the nominal essence functions as a standard, a measure against which things are compared.[23] In some cases, it is the ultimate standard, which makes them archetypes. But in other cases (i.e. real substances), it lies beneath a higher standard and so is not an archetype. Nonetheless, nominal essences are standards for classification regardless of the type of entity involved. And it is through this function as a standard for classification that abstract ideas ground definitions within a language. And it is all because of this regulating function that Locke was right to call these things "nominal *essences*." (Moreover, because they were ipso facto the grounds for creating definitions Locke was right to call them "*nominal* essences.") And by labeling them "essences," Locke was emphasizing that they are imposing real distinctions upon conceptual space and thus delimiting real possibility. Locke's idiom and the state of philosophical progress made it difficult for him to clearly express this but invoking the traditional language of "essence" and using it in this novel way was a perfectly reasonable tact for Locke to take at the time to express this.

For Locke, that these semantic and cognitive functions must be performed by nominal essences comes down to the fact that they are epistemically accessible to us whereas the real essences are not. That if we are to use something when classifying

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[22] "It seems to me that your way of putting things constitutes a very novel mode of expression. People have certainly spoken of 'nominal' *definitions* and 'causal' or 'real' ones, but so far as I know they have not until now spoken of *essences* other than real ones, unless a 'nominal essence' is understood to be a false and impossible one.... Essence is fundamentally nothing but the possibility of the thing under consideration. Something which is thought possible is expressed by a definition, but if this definition does not at the same time express this possibility then it is merely nominal, since in this case we wonder whether the definition expresses anything real—that is, possible—until experience comes to our aid by acquainting us *a posteriori* with the reality (when the thing actually occurs in the world.) This will do, when reason cannot acquaint us *a priori* with the reality of the thing defined by exhibiting its cause or the possibility of its being generated. So, it is not within our discretion to put our ideas together as we see fit, unless the combination is justified either by reason, showing its possibility, or by experience, showing its actuality and hence its possibility. To reinforce the distinction between essence and definition bear in mind that although a thing has only one essence, this can be expressed by several definitions, just as the same structure or the same town can be represented by different drawings in perspective depending on the direction from which it is viewed." (Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996] III.iii.15, 293–94)

[23] "The measure and boundary of each Sort, or *Species*, whereby it is constituted that particular Sort, and distinguished from others, is that we call its *Essence*, which *is* nothing but that *abstract* Idea *to which the Name is annexed*." (Locke, *Essay*, III.vi.2, 439)

objects, that something be epistemically available to us is not an unreasonable principle to adopt. And Locke has convincingly argued that only these enumerative abstract ideas are available, that none of the versions of real essences are either *a priori* or *a posteriori* available. Leibniz might disagree with that claim, but Locke was certainly within his rights to call the abstract idea an "essence" when it functions in this regulatory way as a standard for classification.

In Locke's eyes, the real problem here, what he sought to address in Draft B, lay in thinking that the inaccessible real essence was necessary for knowing real things or regulating our classificatory practices. Believing this drives us to a futile search for real essences to use: "& soe men have been lead into a fruitlesse enquiry after the essences of things thereby to find their different species."[24] All we have, however, are the collections "of certein number of simple Ideas, which usually have been observed to goe togeather,"[25] the nominal essences. Improving these collections is a hard and difficult path, one that requires much care, diligence, and effort: "But because a tolerable history of things is not to be made without long time & great industry & soe the simple Ideas and all their active & passive capacitys not easily collected & soe stated & setled complex Ideas with their proper appellations or general names affixed to them agreed on & received."[26] In Draft B (§§ 73–92, 177-199), Locke was focused on the difficulties of warily compiling a subset of experimentally-based, quality-ideas, whether compiled by an individual, by a group of experts, or by a community as a whole. Yet Locke recognized in Draft B that even were we to have such a subset of quality-ideas, it would not suffice to avoid the problem of lexical reliability. We also require agreement that this collection is the nominal essence and we'd have to receive it as such, by which Locke had in mind we be regular and consistent in our using the word in the agreed upon sense.[27] These components are present in Draft B, even if do not take centerstage there. By making the enumerative abstract, general idea out to be an essence in the published *Essay*, however, Locke pushed these normative and regulative features closer to the front.

This brings us to the second noteworthy point above, a thing having a right to a name. Locke wrote of this in only a couple of places, but they are at points central to his philosophy of language. In III.iii.12, this concept lies at the heart of the way in which Locke's abstract, general ideas signify: "the having the Essence of any Species, being that which makes any thing to be of that Species, and the confirmity to the *Idea*, to which the name is annexed, being that which gives **a right to that name**, the having the Essence and the having that Conformity, must needs be the same thing: Since to be of any Species, and **to have a right to the name** of that Species, is all one."[28] This should be contrasted with III.vi.23, where Locke denies that the "power of propagation" is a feasible guide to locating a real essence that could alternatively ground a creature's right to the name of a

[24] Locke, Draft B, § 73, 177.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., § 85, 192.
[27] "yet this is the least that can be expected from them [speakers], that … he should use the same word constantly in the same sence." (Locke, Draft B, § 89, 197)
[28] Locke, *Essay*, III.iii.12, 414-15, my emphasis. See also III.iii.18, 419 and III.iii.19, 420 where the abstract ideas of gold and circle are flagged by Locke as the standards giving a thing a right to those names.

species. It should also be contrasted with a couple of places where Locke denies that any particular quality-idea has a right to be included in the abstract, general idea that constitutes a nominal essence, or rather they all have at least as good of a right as any other. These passages occur in II.xxxi.8, III.vi.31, and III.ix.13.[29] These places are all significant because they lie at the conceptual core of Locke's thinking about the semantics of common names.

Now, in Locke, this phraseology of "having a right to" is inherently normative and more commonly found in the *Two Treatises* and the *Letters concerning Toleration*. It centers around the concepts of privilege and authority for Locke. Notice how Locke used it in an uncontroversial setting: "A *Citizen* or *Burgher*, is one who **has a Right to** certain Privileges in this or that place. All this sort [of Relation] depending upon Men's Wills, or Agreement in Society, I call *Instituted*, or *Voluntary*: and may be distinguished from the natural, in that they are most, if not all of them, some way or other alterable, and separable from the Persons to who they have sometimes belonged, though neither of the Substances, so related, be destroyed."[30] Transferring this over to Locke's discussion of language is obvious: to have a right to a name is to have an Instituted normative relation obtaining between a thing with that right and thing defining that right, in this case the abstract idea functioning as a nominal essence. Because this is an Instituted relation in Locke's conception, it is the sort of thing that can only obtain within a linguistic community that has consented (most likely tacitly, of course) to use and abide by words in a certain way. This is an interesting feature of Locke's semantics in that is provides a robustly communal underpinning to his thinking about semantics. For it seems to be the case that the normativity involved in linguistic signification is for Locke rooted in compacts and agreements between users in a linguistic community. Of course, it may nevertheless be possible for a linguistic community of one to obtain. But it seriously constrains the power a user has to legitimately develop an alternative semantic while remaining a member of the linguistic community.[31] Much scholarly emphasis is placed on the individualistic and

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[29] "Men…endeavouring to make the significations of their specifick Names as clear, and as little cumbersome as they can, they make their specifick *Ideas* of the sorts of Substances, for the most part, of a few of those simple *Ideas*, which are to be found in them: But these having no original precedency, or **right to be put in**, and make the specifick *Idea*, more than others that are left out…." (Locke *Essay*, II.xxxi.8, 381); "The yellow shining Colour, makes *Gold* to Children; others add Weight, Malleablenes, and Fusibility; and other yet other Qualities, which they find joined with that yellow Colour, as constantly as its Weight and Fusibility: For in all these, and the like Qualities, **one has as good a right to be put into the complex *Idea*** of that Substance, wherein they are all join'd, as another." (Locke, *Essay*, III.vi.31, 458); "Because these simple *Ideas* that co-exist and are united in the same Subject, being very numerous, and **having all an equal right to go into the complex specifick *Idea***, which the specifick Name is to stand for, Men, though they propose to themselves the very same Subject to consider, yet frame very different *Ideas* about it; and so the Name they use for it, unavoidably comes to have, in several Men, very different significations." (Locke, *Essay*, III.ix.13, 482)

[30] Locke, *Essay*, II.xxviii.3, 350. A citizen can of course be denaturalized and lose all her rights and privileges of citizenship without either her or the state being destroyed or altered in their natural properties.

[31] "No one hath the Power to make others have the same *Ideas* in their Minds, that he has, when they use the same Words, that he does. And therefore the great *Augustus* himself, in Possession of that Power which ruled the World, acknowledge, he could not make a new Latin Word: which was as much as to say, that he could not arbitrarily appoint, what *Idea* any Sound should be a Sign of, in the Mouths and common Language of his Subjects." (Locke, *Essay*, III.ii.8, 408)

relativistic problems that loom when thinking about Lockean nominal essences. But by placing Locke's discussion back into its original context and considering how he saw it as a solution to the problem of lexical reliability, we can see how the normative features Locke tried to bind to abstract, general ideas functioning as nominal essences can in fact help avoid the relativistic and individualistic problems arising from these significations being the workmanship of the understanding. In the end, Locke's might not be the best solution, or even a philosophically viable one, but it is important to recognize that it was Locke's and that it played a central role in his thinking about language, and we ought to pay attention to the consequences the follow therefrom.

Signification

Signification is one of the most prominent ideas we find when reading the published version of the *Essay*. E. Jennifer Ashworth has already conclusively uncovered the origin and fundamental nature of Locke's doctrine of signification.[32] According to Ashworth, Locke's doctrine of signification was essentially Scholastic, and the core of his theory of language would have been familiar to any schoolman from the late 17th century. I direct interested readers to her works for more details regarding what Locke's doctrine was. Our discussion thus far suggests two further questions: Why did Locke graft an essentially Scholastic architectonic onto his anti-Aristotelian semantics of general terms and resolution to the problem of lexical reliability? And what were the philosophical consequences thereof?

Regarding the first questions, I haven't seen much evidence pertinent to it. We can presume, however, that Locke accepted these Scholastic principles and believed that they provided the correct account of language and the proper basis and context for presenting his novel thoughts regarding abstract, general terms and lexical reliability.[33] Let's grant that Locke was correct about all that. How, then, do these Aristotelian principles regarding language fit with Locke's anti-Aristotelian thinking about the semantics of general terms and the problem of lexical reliability?

The centerpiece of Locke's doctrine is his principle of signification: "*Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the* Ideas *in the Mind of him that uses them*."[34] Signification among the Scholastics is commonly presented as a psycho-causal relation[35] obtaining among words, things (*res*), and minds. How

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[32] E.J. Ashworth, "Locke on Language," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14 (1984): 45–74 and idem, "Do Words Signify Ideas or Things: The Scholastic Sources of Locke's Theory of Language," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 299-326. Walter Ott attempts to criticize Ashworth's Scholastic reading in *Locke's Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29-31. Ashworth herself rebutted Ott's criticisms in her review of his book published in *The Philosophical Review* 115 (2006): 530-32.

[33] Reader may recall that I earlier suggested that Locke's thought was pivotal in the downfall of the Aristotelian-Adamic paradigm for language. It does not follow from that that Locke himself rejected all or even any aspects of this paradigm. Ashworth has shown that Locke clearly accepted much of the Aristotelian content; Hans Aarsleff has shown that Locke clearly rejected much of the Adamic content (*From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). My claim was that a historic consequence of Locke's thinking was the subversion of the Aristotelian-Adamic paradigm.

[34] Locke, *Essay*, III.ii.2, 405.

[35] We can see Locke's presentation of the psycho-causal character of signification in III.ii.6, 407.

signification typically works is that when an act of imposition[36] foists a signification onto a sound/image, the sound/image acquires a power to direct a mind to the object signified because signification consists in an intensional relationship between the sound/image and the thing (broadly construed to include possibilia and even according to some impossibilia and absences) that is represented. For this reason, signification is typically characterized as a word's presenting a thing to a mind. The scholastic debate over direct and indirect signification focused on whether this intensional relationship linking word and thing had to go through the mind in some way or whether it could somehow obtain directly between a sound/image and an object independently of any mental mediation. Locke adopted an indirect or mediating conception of signification. He made it clear, multiple times, that he thought words signified things and that words could only ever immediately signify ideas. So how does this work?

On Locke's view, for every name *α* within the language, the community has imposed and maintains a relationship between name *α* and object *o* (which is represented by *α*). Moreover, this relationship grants object *o* the right to name *α*. The first aspect of any instantiation of this relationship involves the immediate signification of the idea of object *o* by name *α*. Upon perceiving the name *α*, the perceiver is caused to have the idea of the object represented by the name and her idea is supposed to be the same as the speaker's idea. So far so good, but how do we get to the object itself? We probably shouldn't think of this in terms of another act of immediate signification obtaining between the idea and the object. First, Locke was careful to restriction signification to words; almost never did he suggest that ideas themselves can immediately signify—words signify and have significations, ideas are signified.[37] This limitation is probably not accidental. But in any case, signification does not seem to be the right sort of thing that can bridge the idea→object gap. Signification, remember, is supposed to be psycho-causal and there is nothing causally imposed on objects by the ideas of them and a psycho-causal relation is a category mistake when applied to them. The idea→object connection must be something else. It is helpful to recognize that whatever this connection should turn out to be, it will be what completes the famous semiotic triangle or triad for Locke's doctrine. Thinking about it in this way points us in the right direction, for it points us to the dualistic "secret reference" people give to words "in their Thoughts."[38] One strand of this secret reference, Locke said, comes about when we "*suppose our Words to be Marks of the* Ideas *in the Minds also of other Men, with whom we communicate*." The other strand occurs when we "*suppose our Words to stand also for the reality of Things*." This "secret" or tacit reference closes the semiotic triangle for Locke and simultaneously binds our

[36] Imposition is a scholastic technical term that Locke himself repeated when describing the creation of language: "by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an *Idea*." (Locke, *Essay*, III.ii.1, 405)

[37] There are 438 instances of "signify" or its cognates in the published *Essay*. Three of those involve Locke attributing signification to signs generally (II.xxi.5, 236; IV.v.2, 574; and IV.xviii.3, 689) and one conjoins ideas with words when talking about the signification of general terms (III.iii.11, 414). We have long recognized that Lockean ideas are signs and we have been prone to easily slide to attributing signification to them.

[38] Locke, *Essay*, III.ii.4-5, 406–407. Note how Locke presented this as a single reference with dual referents. This is important for unifying everything within a single relationship of signification.

linguistic use to the norms of the community as a whole. This "secret reference" is what closes the idea→object gap and complete the signification relation for Locke. Locke presented (and requires) a model of immediate and mediate signification that is structurally very different from Berkeley's model of immediate and mediate perception. It is very different because it involves a single relation (signifying) with complexly intertwined aspects entangling the mind, the natural world, and the social world.

These secret references are really the key to mentalistic restrictions imposed on language and signification. Parrot talk does not constitute speech, for Locke, not because parrots lack ideas when they vocalize; they do have ideas[39] and perhaps even ideas connected with and appropriate to the sounds they are vocalizing. What parrots lack in their minds or thoughts is this secret reference to the ideas in others and the reality of things. Having these thoughts (or if you rather, ideas infused with this reference) while using a language is precisely what Locke meant by being presented with a signification. Being so presented in not a matter of having an idea but rather is a special way of perceiving an idea, the idea that constitutes the nominal essence. When Locke explained the three sorts of perceptions an understanding could exemplify, it was no accident that he separated perceiving ideas from perceiving significations;[40] parrots can perceive ideas and make sounds, but they cannot perceive the significations of signs. Locke privileged speakers, probably as the instigators of utterances and because speakers may speak without being understood or even heard (imagine Lear without his fool, raging against the storm); but all users of a language will have this secret reference bound up with their nominal essence ideas functioning as significations.

This complex intertwining is the key as well to Locke's problem with lexical reliability and to Locke's solution of it. The problem of lexical reliability, remember, centers around the relativity of the sets of quality-ideas each of us puts into our abstract, general idea. Of course those ideas are the ideas that are triggered in our minds whenever we use a word; as Locke liked to emphasize, words "*in every Mans' Mouth, stand for the* Ideas*, he has*, and which he would express by them…each can apply them only to his own *Ideas*; nor can he make them stand, as Signs of such complex *Ideas*, as he has not."[41] How could it be otherwise? However, the secret reference imposed on these ideas when they are established as nominal essences functioning as significations, connect them into a common system of linguistic norms bound together by our collective, tacit consent. That gives us the opportunity and means to regulate our significations and to regiment everyone's nominal essences to a shared standard. "Common use, by a tacit Consent, appropriates certain Sounds to certain *Ideas* in all Languages, which so far limits the signification of that Sound, that unless a Man applies it to the same *Idea*, he does not

[39] "*Perception*, I believe, is in some degree, *in all sorts of Animals*." (Locke, *Essay*, II.ix.12, 148)
[40] "The power of Perception is that which we call the *Understanding*. Perception, which we make the act of the Understanding, is of three sorts: 1. The Perception of *Ideas* in our Minds. 2. The Perception of the signification of Signs. 3. The Perception of the Connexion or Repugnancy, Agreement or Disagreement, that there is between any of our *Ideas*. All these are attributed to the *Understanding*, or perceptive Power, though it be the two latter only that use allows us to say we understand." (Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.5, 236)
[41] Locke, *Essay*, III.ii.3, 406.

speak intelligibly."[42] Locke recognized that in civil discourse, the common-use regulation need not be so rigid and things work well enough, but in philosophical discourse, which is Locke's primary concern, it does not and we would do well to take greater care ourselves or even to establish and follow certain semantic experts regarding the significations of some words. Regardless of how we might wish to regulate our significations, the complex intertwining of the aspects of the secret reference of nominal essences, by grounding our ideas in a unified practice, makes it possible for us to resolve our lexical unreliability through the establishment of stable, interpersonal standards to settle our significations on. The specific details and recommendations for resolution as contained in III.xi and discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume.

So, I hope to have shown that far from being in tension with, or even inconsistent with, Locke's anti-Aristotelian account of the semantics of general terms and the problem of lexical reliability, Locke's fundamentally Aristotelian account of signification is central to his solution of the problem. And I hope to have also shown the importance of approaching our reading and understanding of Locke's thinking about language and signification from the standpoint of his approach to and resolution of the problem of lexical reliability.

[42] Locke, *Essay*, III.ii.8, 408.