

LOCKE'S ARGUMENT FROM SIGNIFICATION

WALTER R. OTT

1. Introduction

It is clear that Locke intends what I shall call his 'linguistic thesis', the claim that words signify nothing but ideas, to tell against the Aristotelian. But it is equally clear, or so I shall argue, that we have not yet accorded this thesis its proper role in Locke's anti-essentialist arguments.¹ For according to the two most important recent interpretations,² Locke's linguistic thesis is able to yield anti-essentialist conclusions only when conjoined with his epistemology or theory of ideas.³ But this is not how Locke sees the matter.

¹ By 'essentialism' I mean the claim that there are mind-independent essences understood in the Aristotelian, not the Lockian, sense. I set out the Aristotelian position in section 2 below.

² I am referring to the work of E. J. Ashworth and Norman Kretzmann, discussed below. Briefly, Ashworth claims that Locke's thesis amounts to this: words primarily make known or express ideas, but can be said to make known or refer to extra-mental objects mediately. For Ashworth, see especially 'Do Words Signify Ideas or Things?', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 19 (1981), 299–326, and 'Locke on Language', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (1984), 45–73. Martha Bolton adopts Ashworth's view and makes use of it in 'The Relevance of Locke's Theory of Ideas to his Doctrine of Nominal Essence and Anti-Essentialist Semantic Theory', in *Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 214–25. Paul Guyer largely accepts Ashworth's view in 'Locke's Philosophy of Language', in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 115–45, and Michael Ayers's comments on Guyer in his review of the *Companion* in *The Locke Newsletter*, 28 (1997), 157–88, indicate that he, too, endorses her position. The most influential opposing view is that put forth by Norman Kretzmann in 'The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantic Theory', *Philosophical Review*, 77 (1968), 175–96, reprinted in *Locke on Human Understanding*, ed. I.C. Tipton (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 123–40 (page references are to the Tipton volume). On Kretzmann's view, Locke's thesis is that words refer to things but only through the mediation of ideas. See below, section 3.

³ Of course, many commentators hold that Locke's anti-essentialist arguments in some way invoke his philosophy of language; e.g. Paul Guyer argues that Locke's two claims, that (a) the immediate signification of a word is an idea in the speaker's mind, and (b), that

In a largely neglected chapter of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,⁴ Locke argues that it is an abuse of words to set them 'in the place of Things, which they do or can by no means signify' (III. x. 17: 499).⁵ For words are 'the Signs of our Ideas only' (III. x. 15: 499). It is both natural and pernicious, Locke thinks, to suppose that one's words signify things other than ideas:

[T]hough the Word *Man* or *Gold*, signify nothing truly but a complex *Idea* of Properties, united together in one sort of Substances: Yet there is scarce any Body in the use of these Words, but often supposes each of those names to stand for a thing having the real Essence, on which those Properties depend. (III. x. 18: 500)⁶

species are the workmanship of the understanding, 'combine to ground a cautionary view of language' (op.cit., 143) that challenges the Aristotelian. But the real work of the argument Guyer reconstructs, to the effect that our classifications of things are arbitrary, is done by the theory of ideas and the ontology of mechanism. The thesis that words primarily signify ideas means, on Guyer's view, simply that words refer to things by making known the speaker's ideas (op.cit., 122). Why this would not be perfectly acceptable to the essentialist Guyer leaves unclear, except to say, with Ashworth and indeed her rival Kretzmann, that it fits in nicely with (or 'has its roots in') Locke's representationalism. Ayers, op.cit., argues that in fact the argument Guyer attributes to Locke (based on III. vi. 39: 463–4) is dependent on Locke's mechanist world view. Locke argues that even if one knew the real essence of a thing, our classing it as this or that would still depend on our abstract ideas and in that sense would be arbitrary; we would be left with a choice. But as Ayers points out, this argument appeals to mechanism in an obvious and crucial way: it is because the real essences of things are their inner constitutions (III. vi. 6: 442) and yield only resemblances, any one of which is capable of serving as a basis for classification, that our decision is arbitrary: 'for', as Ayers puts it, 'one mechanical difference is as good a ground for distinction as another...Guyer's attempt to extract from all this an argument based *purely* on a theory of meaning and totally independent of Locke's world-view...gets no support here' (op.cit., 176).

⁴ All references to the *Essay* are to the edition of P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

⁵ Discussions of the chapter (III. x) in the literature are more scarce than one would imagine; indeed, Martha Bolton never refers to it in her article (1998). A notable exception is Roland Hall's 'Locke's Doctrine of Signification', *The Locke Newsletter*, 29 (1998), 85–104; see esp. 101 f.

⁶ Note that Locke here, as elsewhere, treats 'signify' and 'stand for' as interchangeable. He also says that ideas are signs of and 'stand for' things (IV. v. 6: 576), indicating that he

The unreflective are apt to suppose that in making a claim such as 'gold is malleable', or 'man is a rational animal', they are doing more than merely setting out the contents of one of their abstract ideas. On Locke's view, categorical statements at best report co-existence,⁷ while definitions are useful for getting our terms straight; neither kind of statement has any connection with a thing's real essence, whether in the Lockian or Aristotelian sense.

I shall argue that Locke's linguistic thesis is not the innocuous late scholastic slogan it is often taken to be, but is instead at odds with that tradition. On my reading, the thesis amounts to the claim that words indicate ideas or mental acts in the mind of the speaker.⁸ The failure to see the independence and significance of what I shall call Locke's argument from signification is due to the more fundamental failure to understand Locke's linguistic thesis itself. On its basis, Locke builds an argument that purports to show that words do not signify real essences. If Locke is right, the Aristotelian view rests on a mistake about the nature and workings of language. For it is a crucial part of that view that we can, at least in principle, use words to pick out extra-mental things and their real essences. Locke thinks the Aristotelian's claims involve her in a confusion about the nature of language; specifically, it commits her to the (he thinks, absurd) position that words are signs (on my reading, indications) of extra-mental entities. If I am right, our understanding of Locke's overall argumentative strategy must be revised, for the argument presupposes *neither* the theory of abstract ideas nor the

thinks the same relation as obtains between a word and an idea in the mind of the speaker can obtain between an idea and its object. I discuss this issue in greater detail below.

⁷ 'Thus when we pronounce concerning *Gold*, that it is fixed, our Knowledge of this Truth amounts to no more but this, that fixedness, or a power to remain in the Fire unconsumed, is an *Idea*, that always accompanies, and is join'd with that particular sort of Yellowncss, Weight, Fusibility, Malleableness, and Solubility in *Aqua Regia*, which make our complex *Idea*, signified by the word *Gold*' (IV. i. 6: 527).

⁸ A similar interpretation has been offered by E. J. Lowe; see his *Locke on Human Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1995), ch. 7.

mechanist ontology deployed in the more familiar anti-essentialist arguments.⁹

2. The Aristotelian Position

We must begin with a sketch of the position under attack.¹⁰ According to the Aristotelian family of views, definition proceeds by assigning a difference to a genus: thus in the definition of man, animal is the genus, rationality, the difference.¹¹ The *properties* of the thing (such as risibility in humans) flow from its essence; they

⁹ I explore the so-called 'idea-theoretic' argument in more detail below, as, at least on Bolton's reading, it in some way makes use of the linguistic thesis. For the metaphysical arguments, which conclude that nothing exists that could do the work that the Aristotelian claims that forms and real essences can do, Ayers's discussion in vol. ii of his *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1991) is unsurpassed. Note that Ayers also discusses what he calls 'the argument from language' (op. cit., ii. 51–64) (see III. viii. 1–2: 474–5 and III. x. 6: 493), which does not appeal to the linguistic thesis but turns instead on Locke's claim that the fact that we can intelligibly distinguish between a substance and what is supposed to be its essence (as with body and extension, for example) shows that we have not yet pinned down that essence. This, of course, is independent of the argument from signification I shall attribute to Locke.

¹⁰ This account is drawn from Thomas Spencer, *The Art of Logic* (London, 1628, Scholar Press facsimile), 57 f., cited in Ayers, 'Locke Versus Aristotle on Natural Kinds', *Journal of Philosophy*, 88 (1981), 242–72, and John Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted Against the Fancies of the Ideists* (New York: Garland, 1984), 288 f., as well as the works of Aquinas. I am attempting here only to extract what is common to these authors; I go on below to point up their differences (see note 17).

¹¹ This, it should be noted, is only the most prominent kind of definition in the Aristotelian tradition. In *Posterior Analytics*, II. 8–11, Aristotle introduces another definition of 'definition,' viz. that which 'makes clear why a thing is' (93b39), in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: PUP, 1984), i. 155. For example, if we define thunder as the extinguishing of fire in the clouds, we thereby give an account of thunder through its cause. See also *Metaphysics*, Z 17, as well as Aquinas's commentary on the relevant chapters of the *Posterior Analytics*. This class of definitions is seldom discussed in the modern period, whether by Aristotelians or their opponents. One important exception to this is Hobbes, who contends that definitions of caused things 'must consist of such names as express the cause or manner of their generation' (*De Corpore*, 6 in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth, 5 vols. (London: Richards, 1839–45), i. 81).

are not essential, but instead are a result of the essence. Other traits are accidents, which do not flow from the essence. Within accidents, we can distinguish separable ones (such as baldness in humans) from inseparable (such as the blackness of a crow). A definition expresses the essence of a substance.¹² Indeed, an essence just *is* the substance, in so far as it is knowable.¹³ In Aquinas's terminology, 'definition' refers to the definiens, which is not of subject-predicate form: 'definitions...do not declare that something is or is not.'¹⁴ *Rational animal*, construed as a real nature, is the definition of human being; similarly, the definiendum is not a linguistic entity but a real nature, existing enmattered, outside of the mind. This is not to say, however, that an individual can be defined *qua* individual; for on Aquinas's view, *materia signata*, matter thought of as underlying certain defined dimensions, is the principle of individuation and cannot enter into a definition.¹⁵ To arrive at a definition of Socrates *qua* human being, we must abstract the form, a universal, from the particular entity, Socrates. This means merely that we consider the specific nature apart from its individuating characteristics.¹⁶ A true definition (here, in the sense of a prop-

¹² See, e.g., Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. T. McDermott (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 93.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I q. 3 a. 5 ad 1, in *Basic Writings*, ed. A. C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), i. 32; cf. I q. 29 a. 2, *op. cit.*, 293. See also Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 30.

¹⁴ *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, I. 19, trans. F. R. Larcher (New York: Magi Books, 1970), 62.

¹⁵ *De Ente et Essentia*, in McDermott (1993), 94. Aquinas does, however, argue that matter in general, e.g. flesh and bone in general, can enter into the definition. This 'undemarcated' matter itself, it seems, is simply form at a different level, and can be included in a definition: 'Socrates's essence differs from human essence [which includes 'flesh and bones in general'] only by being demarcated' (*De Ente et Essentia*, 94). For more on Aquinas's view, see M. D. Roland-Gosselin, *Le 'De Ente et Essentia' de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Le Saulchoir: Kain, 1926).

¹⁶ *Summa*, I q. 85 a. 1 ad 1, in Pegis (1945), i. 813–14.

osition) of 'human being' has a predicate that consists of terms signifying the essence of human beings. This essence exists only in individual matter; it is the business of the intellect to know such natures, but not *as* individualized natures. Aquinas offers an account of this process according to which an intelligible species is present in the intellect as a likeness of the thing understood. But it is crucial that we not mistake this intelligible species for the object of thought or definition. It is that by which we understand, not that which is understood.¹⁷

What precisely were Locke's contemporary opponents claiming when they said that the words of a *de re* definition 'signify' a thing's essence? By the early sixteenth century, E. J. Ashworth tells us, the standard definition of '*significare*' was 'to represent some thing or some things or in some way to the cognitive power', where

¹⁷ *Summa*, I q. 85 a. 2, in Pegis (1945), i. 817. It seems, however, that Aristotelians of Locke's age were apt to miss this distinction. John Sergeant, for instance, argues against 'the Schoolmen' that what is present in us in the act of intellection cannot be merely the likeness of a thing, for then we will not understand the thing, but merely something that imperfectly resembles it. 'The Schoolmen...invented their *Species Intentionales*; which, if they were not the *Same* with our *Notions*, or the *Things* in our Knowledge, were mere *Resemblances* coined by Fancy, as our Modern *Ideas* generally are' (Sergeant, op. cit., 60). He continues: 'If they [intentional species] be *imperfectly like* the Thing, they are no more but mere *Resemblances* of it; then, 'tis already abundantly demonstrated, that the Thing can *never* be known *by them*' (ibid. 61). Sergeant is referring to an earlier discussion, not of the Schoolmen, but of Locke, where Sergeant writes, 'That only is Known, which I have *in my Knowledge*, or *in my Understanding*... Therefore, if I have *only the Idea*, and not the *Thing*, in my Knowledge or Understanding, I can only know the *Idea*, and *not the Thing*; and by consequence, I know nothing *without me*, or nothing in Nature' (ibid. 30). Kenelm Digby argues in precisely the same way in *Two Treatises: In the one of which, the Nature of Bodies; in the other, the Nature of Mans Soule; is Looked into: In Way of Discovery, of the Immortality of Reasonable Soules* (Paris, 1644), Second Treatise, ch. i, §§3-4). This argument would not make sense unless it assumed that what is in the mind is the thing apprehended or understood, rather than part of the mechanism whereby the mind is directed to that thing. Sergeant and Digby both insist that direct realism demands that, in the latter's words, 'when we apprehend any thing, that very thing is in us' (ibid. 358). For Locke's derisive critique of Sergeant's direct realism, see his letter to Stillingfleet in *The Works of John Locke*, 11th edn., 10 vols. (London: Otridge et al., 1812), iv. 390-1. What is common to both the seventeenth-century Aristotelianism of Sergeant and Digby on one hand and that of Aquinas et al. on the other is the claim that words in definitions signify real essences that exist in physical objects.

'in some way' was introduced in order to cover the case of such syncategorematic terms as 'all' and 'none'.¹⁸ A word's *significatio* 'included its reference', as well as 'elements which belong to meaning rather than reference'.¹⁹ The best parallels in English, according to Ashworth, are 'make known', 'reveal', 'manifest', or 'express'.²⁰ To say that a word signifies a thing's essence, on this view, is to say that the word at once refers to and makes known that essence.²¹

With this rough sketch as background, we are now in a position to explore Locke's view. Before setting out the argument from signification, however, we must understand what sort of signification is at issue in Locke's linguistic thesis.

3. Recent Interpretations of Lockian Signification

It is fair to say that the two most influential readings of Locke's linguistic thesis are those of the late Norman Kretzmann and E. J. Ashworth. In this section, I shall raise difficulties with both pos-

¹⁸ Ashworth (1984), 60; cf. (1981), 310.

¹⁹ Ashworth (1981), 310. I find Ashworth's view obscure on this point. Her evidence that *significatio* included aspects of a term's meaning is that Alphonsus Pratus claimed that in order for two words to be synonymous, they had to have not only the same significates (i.e. extension), but also the same mode of signifying. But this does not entail that *significatio* incorporates anything to do with meaning as opposed to reference, even if a *mode* of signifying does. The point of talking about a word's mode of signifying seems to be to block the inference from the premise that two terms are co-referring to the conclusion that they are synonymous. More generally, it is unclear to me precisely how, on Ashworth's view, signification incorporates some aspects of both sense and reference and not others, unless it is multiply ambiguous. For the view seems to entail that our words refer to ideas, a conclusion Ashworth would dispute (1984), 64.

²⁰ Ashworth (1981), 311.

²¹ Cf. Bolton (1998). She says little to characterize Locke's scholastic opponents apart from saying that they hold a 'referential view' according to which at least some words refer to real essences. But if Ashworth is correct, this is not an adequate characterization of the contemporary Aristotelian view.

itions that suggest we look elsewhere for the meaning of Lockian signification.²²

Kretzmann notes that Locke sometimes states his linguistic thesis with an apparent restriction to primary or immediate signification (see, e.g., III. ii. 2: 405, quoted above).²³ On Kretzmann's view, it is only immediately that a word signifies nothing but an idea; since our ideas represent things in a public environment, those things are *mediately* signified by words. Locke is thus not committed to linguistic idealism, the claim that our words refer to mental entities. Kretzmann's primary signification is naturally identified with *Sinn*; mediate signification, with *Bedeutung*.²⁴ Locke's linguistic thesis, then, is to be read as providing a restriction on reference: no secondary signification without primary signification, i.e. no reference without sense. If we conjoin this with Locke's claim that we lack ideas of real essences, the application to Aristotelian views is obvious. For in such a case there is no way that our sortal terms can refer to the real essences of things.

Ashworth, by contrast, reads Lockian signification as late scholastic *significatio*.²⁵ This notion is obviously distinct from those of sense or reference, even if, as she says, it includes aspects of both. Like Kretzmann, she emphasizes the difference between primary and secondary signification: even though words primarily express or make known ideas in the mind of the speaker, they, through the mediation of these ideas, are able to make known extra-

²² My treatment of Ashworth and Kretzmann here is rather brief, as I have argued against their views extensively in 'Locke and Signification', *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 27 (2002). Readers wishing a more detailed exposition and critique of these authors' views are encouraged to consult that article, in which I also discuss a number of other, less prominent interpretations of Lockian signification.

²³ On the alleged distinction between primary and secondary signification, see below, section 5.

²⁴ Although Kretzmann does seem to say that secondary or mediate signification is reference (op. cit., 133), the identification of primary signification with sense is not explicit. See Ashworth (1981), 302.

²⁵ This is most explicit in Ashworth (1984), 46.

mental objects. On her view, Locke's disagreement with the late scholastics is not over the nature of signification; the linguistic thesis must be conjoined with the claim that we lack ideas of real essences in order to tell against the Aristotelian.

One difficulty with the accounts of both Kretzmann and Ashworth is that the main arguments they see Locke as deploying in favour of his thesis are problematic at best. Ashworth attributes to Locke an argument found in Smiglecius that runs thus: since 'words can only signify things by means of the concept [*ratio*] whereby the things are conceived', the primary significates of words must be these concepts.²⁶ But how does the fact that ideas are necessary for signification imply that they themselves are what is signified, whether primarily or otherwise? A great number of things are similarly necessary conditions for this, and no one is tempted to claim that *they* are the significates of words. In fact, Smiglecius himself, in the very text Ashworth supposes Locke to be drawing from, goes on to point out the fallacy.²⁷

²⁶ Ashworth (1984), 62; in (1981), 317, she says that the argument is 'very closely related, if not identical to...the argument from representative ideas' Kretzmann develops (see below). Ashworth lays out a total of four arguments she finds in scholastic sources, in particular, Smiglecius: the first is an appeal to the authority of Aristotle; the second, the argument from the uses of words to the effect that since our ideas lie hidden in our minds we need an external sign to make others aware of them (III. ii. 2: 404–5, also discussed in Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, 127 ff.); the third, an argument from the premise that one who conceives nothing signifies nothing; and fourth, an inference from the premise that words can only signify things by means of concepts (which I address in the text). She says that 'each one of them, apart from the appeal to Aristotle, is found in Locke's chapter on the signification of words' (1984), 62. See also (1981), 312 ff. The third and fourth arguments are guilty of the fallacy set out in the text above, while the second, the argument from the uses of words, establishes at most that words signify ideas and so is not an argument for the thesis as construed either by Kretzmann or Ashworth.

²⁷ See Smiglecius, *Logica* (Oxoniae: Guil. Turner, 1638), 436–8. In Ashworth's words: 'the move from the premise that ideas are necessary for the significant use of language to the conclusion that ideas are what is signified has been left unjustified' (1981), 302. She gives the impression that her later discussion of the argument will provide some justification for this move. Instead, she adduces the objection from Smiglecius, which seems to me to be decisive. It also makes it extremely unlikely that Locke borrowed the argument from Smiglecius.

Kretzmann, for his part, sees Locke as deploying two arguments. First, the 'argument from the uses of words' infers from the purpose with which we use language, namely, to make our ideas known to others, to the conclusion that words primarily or immediately signify ideas. As Kretzmann notes, even if this establishes that words are signs of ideas, it does nothing to show that they primarily signify *nothing but* ideas; why couldn't words be said to signify things in addition to words? To secure this crucial aspect of the thesis, Kretzmann reconstructs what he calls the 'argument from representative ideas'. This is a *reductio ad absurdum* that runs thus: since 'whenever I genuinely use and do not just mouth a word, parrot fashion, that utterance...signifies *immediately* some idea of mine', 'to suppose that I can apply a word to signify X [a thing other than an idea of mine] *immediately* is to suppose that I can apply a word to signify X while I have no idea of X, which is impossible'.²⁸ Given that words immediately signify ideas, to suppose that they can immediately signify something other than ideas is to suppose that I can perform such signification without having an idea of the thing signified. But surely Locke's opponent need not claim that in immediately signifying x she lacks an idea of x. She might grant that having an idea of x is a necessary condition for signifying x, and still deny that the idea is the thing signified, whether immediately or otherwise. Even if she were to grant that ideas are immediately signified, why should she grant that a word cannot immediately signify *both* an idea and a thing? Where is the absurdity in this? Perhaps Kretzmann has Locke assuming that a word can only immediately signify one thing at a time; if so, he simply begs the question.

What I hope to have done in this section is merely to point out some *prima facie* difficulties faced by the most popular readings of Lockian signification. I do not claim to have refuted them.²⁹ Both Kretzmann and Ashworth attribute arguments to Locke that are, if

²⁸ Op. cit., 132–3.

²⁹ I do, however, claim to have done so in Ott (2002).

not obviously fallacious, subject to serious difficulties. Furthermore, neither of their views can intelligibly connect the linguistic thesis with the anti-Aristotelian arguments, since the thesis, in each case, must be supplemented by further premises in order to tell against Locke's opponents. But Locke, as I shall argue, thinks the thesis capable in itself of damaging the Aristotelian position. All of this suggests that we should examine the text more carefully in hopes of discovering a notion of signification that will allow us to make better sense not only of the linguistic thesis but of its deployment in the anti-Aristotelian arguments as well.

4. Ideas as Signs

A natural place to begin is Locke's discussion of ideas, which he also calls signs.³⁰ A reading that is able to account for his use of this term and its relatives in both ideational and linguistic contexts naturally has the advantage.³¹

Locke argues that our simple ideas 'agree to the reality of things' whether or not they resemble anything in the external world. For they are 'designed to be the Marks, whereby we are to know, and distinguish Things, which we have to do with' (II. xxx. 2: 372–3). Whether they are 'only constant Effects, or else exact Resemblances of something in the things themselves', such ideas are dependable marks or signs³² of their causes. Ideas of sensation serve as grounds for inference to their causes: when I have a piece of paper before me in certain conditions, the idea *white* is produced in my mind, 'by

³⁰ 'There are two sorts of Signs commonly made use of, viz. *Ideas* and *Words*' (IV. v. 2: 574).

³¹ Kretzmann, by contrast, is driven to claim that Locke equivocates when he calls both ideas and words 'signs' (op. cit., 135).

³² Note that Locke uses the terms 'mark' and 'sign' interchangeably. For example, immediately after stating that words signify ideas in III. ii, Locke writes, 'That then which *Words* are the Marks of, are the *Ideas* of the Speaker: Nor can any one apply them, as Marks, immediately to any thing else, but the *Ideas*, that he himself hath' (III. ii. 2: 405).

which I know, that that Quality or Accident (*i.e.* whose appearance before my Eyes, always causes that *Idea*) doth really exist' (IV. xi. 2: 631). In this case, my having the idea *white* gives me a basis for inference to the presence of a secondary quality in a physical object.³³ It is in this sense that the idea is a sign or mark of its cause. Consider Locke's response to the inverted spectrum problem. We have seen that an idea of sensation is a sign of its cause. Locke uses this premise to argue that it would not 'carry any Imputation of *Falshood* to our simple *Ideas*, if by the different Structure of our Organs, it were so ordered, That *the same Object should produce in several Men's Minds* [qualitatively] *different Ideas* at the same time' (III. xxxii. 15: 389).³⁴ What matters about the idea we connect with 'blue' is not its qualitative content, but rather its epistemic role. That the same object should produce in us qualitatively different ideas in no way undermines our claim to have the same ideas, because the criteria of sameness here are not qualitative.³⁵ Instead, Locke appeals to what we might call *significative* sameness, sameness of idea *qua* sign. Two ideas of a secondary quality are the same, on this view, if they are evidence for the presence of the same extra-mental object or quality that causes them.³⁶

This notion of a sign as an evidence or an indication stands in a

³³ On this issue, see Michael Ayers, 'The Foundations of Knowledge and the Logic of Substance: The Structure of Locke's General Philosophy', in Chappell, ed. (1998), 24–47, as well as his (1991), vol. i.

³⁴ This passage suggests that we must be careful to distinguish different criteria for the sameness of ideas. For if numerical identity is at issue, it is obvious that the same object must produce different ideas in distinct minds. The sentence immediately following the one quoted in the text makes clear that qualitative difference is what is meant here.

³⁵ Nevertheless, given our common physical make-up, Locke is 'very apt to think, that the sensible *Ideas*, produced by any Object in different Men's Minds, are most commonly very near and undiscernibly alike' (II. xxxii. 15: 389). But by Locke's lights, this is a side issue to be settled by physiology rather than philosophy.

³⁶ On the inverted spectrum issue, see Michael Losonsky, 'Locke on Meaning and Signification', in *Locke's Philosophy: Content and Context*, ed. G. A. J. Rogers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 123–42.

well-known and hoary tradition. Thomas Hobbes defines a sign thus:

Now, those things we call SIGNS are the *antecedents of their consequents, and the consequents of their antecedents, as often as we observe them to go before or follow after in the same manner*. For example, a thick cloud is a sign of rain to follow, and rain a sign that a cloud has gone before, for this reason only, that we seldom see clouds without the consequence of rain, nor rain at any time but when a cloud has gone before.³⁷

Not all signs are natural. Hobbes says that a bush hung up outside a building, for example, is a sign that wine is sold on the premises; a stone set in a field is a sign of a property boundary. As these examples make clear, Hobbes cannot mean 'antecedent' and 'consequent' in their temporal senses.³⁸ In fact, like Locke and Pierre Gassendi, Hobbes is making use of a notion of sign drawn from Aristotelian and Stoic sources.³⁹

In the *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle says that a sign is πρότασις ἀποδεικτικὴ ἢ ἀναγκαία ἢ ἔνδοξος (70a6–7), 'a proposition, either necessary or reputable, used to show something'.⁴⁰ Signs, then,

³⁷ Hobbes, *De Corpore*, in Hobbes (1839–45), i. 14–15. The same notion of sign is present in the Port-Royal *Logic* of Arnauld and Nicole. See *La Logique, ou L'art de Penser* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), esp. 80–2.

³⁸ This is especially clear in the case of conventional signs. The observational sequences mentioned by Hobbes involved in our knowledge of natural signs seems to have suggested to him that in these cases the logical and temporal senses of 'antecedent' and 'consequent' overlap.

³⁹ Augustine is also an important source. He says that a sign is 'something which is itself sensed and which indicates to the mind something beyond the sign itself' (*De Dialectica*, v, trans. Darrell Jackson (Boston: D. Reidel, 1975), 87; cf. *De Doctrina Christiana*, I. ii. 2 and *De Trinitate*, XV. xi. 20). See also R. A. Markus, 'St. Augustine on Signs', *Phronesis*, 2 (1957), 60–83. Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (London: Routledge, 1989), ch. 3, offers perhaps the best discussion of Augustine's views on language. Kirwan quotes *Essay* III. ii. 1 and comments that 'Augustine agrees with most of this' (op. cit., 40).

⁴⁰ The translation is Myles Burnyeat's, from 'The Origins of Non-Deductive Inference', in *Science and Speculation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 1982) 193–238, at 198. It seems odd to say that a proposition is a signal in the examples of both Aristotle

have a role in inference; sign-inferences are arguments, namely enthymemes, according to Aristotle (see *Prior Analytics*, 70a10 and *Rhetoric*, 1355a6). A sign-inference naturally takes a conditional form, with the sign figuring in the antecedent. Thus, if, to take one of Gassendi's favourite examples (itself drawn from the tradition), sweat is a sign of invisible pores in the skin, we can cast the sign-inference thus: if there is sweat, then such pores are present.⁴¹ It is in this sense that, in Hobbes's examples, both rain and a bush outside a wine shop are 'antecedents'. Note that although the sign itself must be perceived, what it signifies need not be;⁴² further, this notion of signification is independent of temporal considerations in that it can obtain whether sign and significate are simultaneous

and Hobbes, signs seem to be objects. But Burnyeat (op. cit.) points out that ordinary Greek, and ordinary English, both allow us to say interchangeably 'X is a sign of...', 'that p is a sign of...', and 'the fact that p is a sign of...'. He thinks that neither Aristotle nor the Stoics meant to define a sign as a linguistic entity. This is particularly clear in the latter case, for on the Stoic account, a proposition is a *lekton* that is incorporeal and so cannot, strictly speaking, be said to exist (see *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (eds.), 2 vols. (New York: CUP, 1987), i. 195–201). Aristotle also says, '[A]nything such that when it is another thing is, or when it has come into being the other has come into being before or after, is a sign of the other's being or having come into being' (*Prior Analytics*, 70a8–10, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols., ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: PUP, 1984), i. 112). This omits the epistemic considerations common to most other definitions of 'sign'. But I take it that the characterization of signs given in the text above remedies this by bringing out the role signs have in inference.

⁴¹ See *The Selected Works of Pierre Gassendi*, ed. Craig Brush (New York: Johnson Reprints, 1972), 332. As Michael Ayers (1991) and (1998) has emphasized, Gassendi is an important source for Locke's epistemology and his thought about signs generally. Gassendi's lengthy discussion of signs in the *Syntagma* includes the distinction between reminiscent and indicative signs drawn by Sextus. See below.

⁴² Thus Sextus: '[a]n indicative sign, they [the dogmatists] say, is that which is not evidently observable together with that which it is a sign of, but, as a result of its own peculiar nature and constitution, signifies that of which it is a sign, as, for example, the motions of the body are signs of the soul' (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 2. 97–101 in *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (eds.) (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 214). Sextus seems to equate the Stoic notion of a sign ('the antecedent proposition in a sound conditional revelatory of the consequent') with his own notion of an indicative sign, but there are clear differences. For example, unlike the Stoic's definition, that of Sextus demands that the significate be hidden.

or not.

This, of course, is not the only sense of 'sign' or its cognates available in the semiotic tradition.⁴³ Indeed, Sextus Empiricus contrasts these signs, which he calls 'indicative signs', with 'reminiscent' or 'empirical' signs. The latter serve merely as reminders based on previously observed conjunctions. Thus to say that smoke is a reminiscent sign of fire is just to say that since one has often observed smoke and fire together, the idea of smoke naturally brings to mind that of fire. My claim is that it is the indicative sign, to use Sextus's terminology, that is invoked by Locke in his discussions of simple ideas.

5. Words as Signs

I have been arguing that in his epistemology Locke exploits a notion of mark or sign as an indication or an evidence, a ground for inference. Given this, the most natural interpretation of Locke's claim that *words* are marks of ideas in the mind of the speaker is that words serve as indicators or signals of those ideas.⁴⁴

⁴³ For more on the scholastic understanding and how it departs from its ancestors, see John P. Doyle, 'The *Conimbricenses* on the Relations Involved in Signs', *Semiotica* 1984, ed. John Deeley (New York: University Press, 1984), 567–76, and Ashworth, 'Domingo de Soto and the Doctrine of Signs', in *De Ortu Grammaticae*, ed. G. L. Bursill-Hall, Sten Ebbesen, and Konrad Koerner (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990), 35–47.

⁴⁴ Locke's discussion of particles (III. vii: 471–3) adds indirect support to this reading. In addition to words that signify ideas, we also need words that signify acts of the mind. These acts combine or separate our ideas, and so allow us to make mental propositions, which admit of truth and falsity, as opposed to mere jumbings of ideas. Commentators have had difficulty in reconciling this with the linguistic thesis: how is Locke entitled to say that such words signify acts, whereas in all other cases, signification is limited to ideas? (See, e.g., Gabriel Nuchelmans, 'The Historical Background to Locke's Account of Particles', *Logique et Analyse*, 29 (1986), 53–71, and David Berman, 'Particles and Ideas in Locke's Theory of Meaning', *The Locke Newsletter*, 15 (1984), 15–24.) But on my reading of signification, Locke's claim makes perfect sense. Particles are words we use to signal others that we are combining or separating the ideas signified by the categorematic words of the proposition.

Locke follows the spirit, but not the letter, of Hobbes's distinction between two uses of words, as signs and as *marks*. Hobbes writes,

[T]he first use of names, is to serve for *Markes*, or *Notes* of remembrance. Another is, when many use the same words, to signify by their connexion and order, one to another, what they conceive, or think of each matter; and also what they desire, fear, or have any passion for. And for this use they are called signs.⁴⁵

A speaker or writer can use words to remind himself of thoughts he had previously. Their use in this capacity is purely private; that is, they are marks only for the person who writes or speaks them. In their second use, as signs, they allow others to infer what is present in the mind of the speaker. Immediately before stating the linguistic thesis in III. ii. 2, Locke writes,

The use Men have of these Marks [i.e., words], being either to record their own Thoughts for the Assistance of their own Memory; or as it were, to bring out their *Ideas*, and lay them before the view of others: *Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them...*(III. ii. 2: 405)

Note that this statement of the thesis declares not just that words are signs of ideas in the mind of the speaker, as is usually the case, but more broadly, in the mind of the person making use of the words. This allows for words to serve as Hobbesian marks, a use I take to involve, at least paradigmatically, writing rather than speech. One might jot down words for his own use and come back to them later, so as to remind himself of what he had been thinking. Or one might use them as signs to others of his ideas. Either way, they are signs only of the user's ideas.

Locke's focus is almost always on the role of words in interpersonal communication, and thus, on words *qua* Hobbesian signs. It is because our ideas lie hidden in our minds that we need some

⁴⁵ *Leviathan*, I. iv, in Hobbes, op.cit., iii. 19–20.

outward signal to let people know what they are (III. ii. 1: 404–5; II. xi. 8–9). The case is exactly parallel with that of ideas of sensation: they, too, must serve as signs of what is hidden, since only our ideas (and perhaps our own minds)⁴⁶ are immediately present to us. Note that the signification relation in the case of ideas of sensation is dependent on causation; it is the fact that an idea of blue, for instance, is caused by an object with the proper secondary quality that allows the idea to serve as a sign of that quality. To say that words are conventional signs is just to say that the signification relation in their case is dependent upon their role in an artificial, shared convention rather than in a natural relation such as causation.

The central text with which I am concerned, III. x, includes several statements of the linguistic thesis. None of these, however, includes the restriction to ‘primary’ or ‘immediate’ signification, so prominent in earlier statements of the thesis, such as that just quoted above (III. ii. 2: 405; see III. ii. 1: 405, III. ii. 4: 406; III. ii. 8: 408). Both Kretzmann and Ashworth claim, reasonably enough, that these earlier passages imply a contrast between two kinds of signification. But some hesitation is warranted here. Not only does Locke let the restriction to primary or immediate signification drop in the course of Book III, he never so much as uses the phrases ‘mediate’ or ‘secondary’ signification; still less does he explain these notions.

Traditionally, the distinction between primary and secondary signification was drawn in order to set apart ideas and things as distinct classes of significates of words. This distinction is easily accommodated on my account, for Hobbes specifies a sense (albeit a degenerate one) in which one may say that words signify things. Hobbes writes, ‘for that the sound of this word *stone* should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this, that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone’.⁴⁷ We must note, as Kretzmann and Ashworth do not, that Locke

⁴⁶ For the suggestion that our own minds might be immediately present to us, see IV. xxi. 4: 720–1.

⁴⁷ *De Corpore*, I. ii. 5, in Hobbes, *op. cit.*, i. 17.

claims that words '*properly* and immediately signify' (III. ii. 4: 406, my emphasis; see III. ii. 7: 407) nothing but ideas, implying that they can only improperly be said to signify things. If my suggestion is correct, we can easily see why Locke would say this, for only in an attenuated sense can we say that words signify things. By contrast, Kretzmann and Ashworth cannot account for the fact that Locke contrasts 'primary' and 'immediate' signification with 'improper' signification.⁴⁸

It is important to see that Locke's philosophy of language is partly normative. His claim is that the purpose of speech is to allow us to offer each other sensible signs of our ideas (III. i–ii; cf. III. xi. 11: 514). But this is not to say that experience cannot set up a connection between a word and the idea it is used to indicatively signify such that one, without making an inference, passes from the sound of the word to that idea. Indeed, this is precisely the kind of laziness that Locke thinks responsible for so much confusion. Consider the case of a person who has already mastered one language attempting to master another. On Locke's view there is a two-step process. First, one tries to infer the ideas a speaker has in his mind. We can check our progress, Locke thinks, by means of ostensive definition.⁴⁹ After a time, a different kind of connection is set up, this time, not between a word and the idea in the speaker's mind, but between the word and an idea in one's own mind, with which one customarily associates that idea. Locke writes,

there comes by constant use, to be such a Connexion between certain Sounds, and the Ideas they stand for, that the Names heard, almost as readily excite certain Ideas, as if the Objects themselves, which are apt to produce them, did

⁴⁸ It is also worth noting that Sergeant attributes to Locke the view that words signify ideas in the mind of the speaker; nowhere does Sergeant mention primary/immediate, or secondary/mediate signification. In his marginal notes on *Solid Philosophy*, Locke never hesitates to correct what he perceives as misconstruals of his position. But he is silent on this point. See Sergeant (1984), esp. 33–5.

⁴⁹ This will seem problematic to anyone who accepts the arguments of Wittgenstein (see esp. *Philosophical Investigations*, §§28–33 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953)) and Augustine (*De magistro*, 10. 29) that ostensive definition underdetermines the definiendum.

actually affect the Senses... [B]y familiar use from our Cradles, we come to learn certain articulate Sounds very perfectly, and have them readily on our Tongues, and always at hand in our Memories... (III. vii. 6, 7: 407; see II. viii. 7: 134)

So after constantly conjoining a word with an idea, our thoughts move without hesitation from the one to the other. Locke never says that this activity is signification. Indeed, the causal connection presupposes, and so cannot explain, the conventional link established through signification.

Words, by their immediate Operation on us, cause no other *Ideas*, but of their natural Sounds: and 'tis by the Custom of using them for Signs, that they excite, and revive in our Minds latent *Ideas*; but yet only such *Ideas*, as were there before. For Words seen or heard, re-call to our Thoughts those *Ideas* only, which to us they have been wont to be Signs of: But cannot introduce any perfectly new, and formerly unknown simple *Ideas*. (IV. xviii. 3: 689)

Locke is here arguing that even if a man be inspired by God, he cannot communicate to others any simple ideas they have not already had. What is crucial for our purposes is the clear relation of dependence Locke draws between words as causes of ideas in the hearer's mind and words as indicators. It is only in virtue of their role as signs of ideas in the speaker's minds that they are able to revive ideas in us.

At a minimum, then, it seems we can ascribe to Locke the position that senseful speech requires (a) a suitable convention and (b) an intention to communicate by participating in that convention (III. i. 2: 402, III. ii. 2: 405). What is necessary on the hearer's side? First let us ask what it is to understand other kinds of conventional sign. What is it to understand, for example, what a stone at the boundary of a field means? It is at least this: (c) to take it as a sign of the boundary of a field, and (d) to be *correct* in so taking it. (c) will be possible only if one has knowledge of the convention invoked in (a), whereas (d) depends on (b) the intentions of the person, if such there be, who put the stone there. Similarly, we might say that to understand speech is for the hearer (c) to take the

words as indicative signs of ideas in the mind of the speaker (or mental acts), and (d) to be correct in so taking them.⁵⁰

The arguments in the early pages of Book III, then, support the conclusion that words have been set up as signs of ideas in the mind of the speaker. But this does not seem to exhaust the possible roles of words, on Locke's account. For Locke often speaks, in other contexts, of words' 'denominating' things; we are said to 'rank things under names' (see, e.g., III. iii. 13: 415; III. vi. 1: 438). Does Locke, then, have room for a semantic relation between words and extra-mental things, in addition to the semiotic relation between words and ideas? This question is difficult to answer precisely because Locke is so loose in his terminology. For he often says that words *name* ideas (III. vii. 1: 471; II. xi. 8–9: 158–9). Moreover, although he spends a great deal of time arguing that words signify (or primarily signify) nothing but ideas, he tells us nothing about what this other semantic category is supposed to be. Certainly 'naming' cannot be reference; otherwise, Locke would be guilty of holding linguistic idealism. I think it is most reasonable, in the light of Locke's linguistic thesis and the emphasis he puts on it, to read the 'denomination' of things by words as reducible to the signification of ideas. There are three key considerations here. First, since Locke says almost nothing by way of arguing for or even explicating the claim that words denominate or name things, it is difficult to see how we could be justified in interpreting him as undertaking a commitment to an altogether new semantic category. Second, Locke can easily reduce the denomination of things to the signification of ideas: to say that 'x' denominates x is just to say that someone uttering 'x' is indicating that she has x in mind. And if my reading is correct, it is hardly surprising that Locke should require

⁵⁰ This has some counterintuitive consequences. Someone who hears a parrot say, 'Evelyn Waugh was a fascist', cannot then, it seems, be said to understand those words. This is rather odd, for surely we want to say that the words mean *something*. Locke's reply would be that the words spoken by the parrot have meaning in the same way written words do, if the parrot's speech derived from some human being who himself had the conceptions conventionally linked with those words. Teaching a parrot to speak a phrase seems no different in kind from writing words on a page.

a shorthand for this cumbersome analysis. Finally, as we shall see, Locke spends a great deal of time in III. x and elsewhere deploying the linguistic thesis against the Aristotelian. If he did think that words refer to extra-mental things, it is very hard to understand why he would do so, for he would no longer be disagreeing with the Aristotelian: both could happily claim that words refer to things. By contrast, Locke believes that striving for Aristotelian real definitions is a result of misunderstanding the role of words as signs of ideas. I do not suppose that this last consideration can be persuasive in the absence of a clear understanding of Locke's argument from signification, to which I now propose to turn.

6. The Argument from Signification

It would be a great mistake, Locke thinks, to suppose that one's own spoken words are signs of ideas *in the minds of others*. Thus he writes:

They [men] suppose their Words to be Marks of the Ideas in the Minds also of other Men, with whom they communicate: For else they should talk in vain, and could not be understood, if the Sounds they applied to one Idea, were such, as by the Hearer, were applied to another, which is to speak two Languages. But in this, Men stand not usually to examine, whether the Idea they, and those they discourse with have in their Minds, be the same: But think it enough, that they use the Word, as they imagine, in the common Acceptation of that Language; in which case they suppose, that the Idea, they make it a Sign of, is precisely the same, to which the Understanding Men of that Country apply that Name. (III. ii. 4: 406–7)

The situation envisioned here is one in which a speaker supposes that the words he uses as indicative signs of his own ideas are also signs of the same ideas in his hearers. So a speaker might (legitimately) think that his uttered word *f* is an indicative sign he gives to his audience of an idea *y* in his mind; but he also might (illegitimately) think *f* an indicative sign of the same idea in his hearers. He might run the inference the wrong way. This is more

perspicuous if put in the conditional framework provided by Aristotle et al.: the right kind of inference occurs when the *hearer* judges, 'if x speaks f, then x is having an idea of type z'; the wrong inference occurs when the *speaker* judges, 'if I speak f, then my hearer is having an idea of type z'. Again, words are signs only of ideas in the speaker's mind.

The philosophically interesting mistake, however, arises when we suppose that words are signs of extra-mental objects. The fifth abuse of words Locke discusses in III.x consists in '*setting them in the place of Things, which they do or can by no means signify*' (III. x. 17: 499). Of the two 'secret references'⁵¹ Locke discusses in III. ii. 4–5: 406–7, this is the most important. Because '*Men would not be thought to talk barely of their own Imaginations, but of Things as really they are; therefore they often suppose their Words to stand also for the reality of Things*' (III. ii. 5: 407). Since our words do not signify real essences, the knowledge they convey is limited to the fact that the speaker is having certain ideas or performing certain operations upon them. Our dissatisfaction with this makes us apt to suppose that the contrary is the case.

On Locke's view, this 'secret Supposition' (II. x. 18: 500) is part and parcel of our natural tendency to construe categorical statements as making claims, not about the contents of one's abstract ideas, but rather about things themselves. Locke writes:

When we put [the names of substances] into Propositions, and affirm or deny any thing about them, we do most commonly tacitly suppose, or intend, they should stand for the real Essence of a certain sort of Substances. For when a Man says *Gold is malleable*, he means and would insinuate something more than this, that *what I call Gold is malleable*, (though truly it amounts to no more) but would have this understood, *viz. that Gold; i.e. what has the real*

⁵¹ We must be careful as well not to assume that 'reference' in 'secret reference' means *Bedeutung*. Locke says that the confusion proper to ideas 'still carries with it a secret reference to Names' (II. xxix. 12: 367), and he obviously does not mean that such confusion secretly *refers* (in the Fregean sense) to names. Rather, all he seems to be saying is that an account of confused ideas will have to involve names, even though it at first sight might appear otherwise.

Essence of Gold is malleable, which amounts to thus much, that Malleableness depends on, and is inseparable from the real Essence of Gold. (III. x. 17: 499–500)

As this passage demonstrates, Locke treats together the supposition that a word is a sign of an extra-mental thing and the claim that it signifies a real essence.⁵² In the use of substance words such as 'gold', 'there is scarce any Body...but often supposes each of those names to stand for a thing having the real Essence, on which [its] Properties depend' (III. x. 18: 500). The pernicious supposition, then, is that malleableness is a property (in the Aristotelian sense specified above) of gold: while not part of the essence of gold, it flows from and depends upon that essence. This, Locke thinks, is to suppose 'gold' the sign of the enmattered real essence of gold, and 'malleable', the sign of a property of that essence. Allegedly *de re* definitions involve us in a similar confusion, for the Aristotelian view has it that the definiendum is an extra-mental real essence, neither an intentional species in the mind (which is merely that by which the intellect apprehends the real essence) nor an idea representing that essence. Locke continues:

Thus when we say, that *Animal rationale* is, and *Animal implume bipes latis unguibus*, is not a good definition of a Man; 'tis plain, we suppose the Name *Man* in this case to stand for the real Essence of a Species, and would signifie, that a *rational Animal* better described that real Essence, than a *two-leg'd Animal with broad nails, and without Feathers*. For else, why might not *Plato* as properly make the Word *ἄνθρωπος* or *Man* stand for his complex *Idea*, made up of the *Ideas* of a Body, distinguished from others by a certain shape and other outward appearances, as *Aristotle*, make the complex *Idea*, to which he gave the Name *ἄνθρωπος* or *Man*, of Body, and the Faculty of reasoning join'd together; unless the name *ἄνθρωπος* or *Man*, were supposed to stand

⁵² To complicate matters, Locke seems in these passages to be thinking of these claims as interchangeable. It is not clear to me why he would assume this, unless, like Descartes, he is supposing that a thing is only conceptually distinct from its essence. But this, of course, is not a characteristic Aristotelian assumption, although, as I have noted, Aristotelianism in the seventeenth century is in some ways quite different from the Aristotelianism of earlier eras.

for something else, than what it signifies; and to be put in the place of some other thing, than the *Idea* a Man professes he would express by it? (III. x. 17: 500)

Locke's point is that there is no motivation for attempting to distinguish good from bad definitions on other than purely pragmatic grounds,⁵³ or for indulging in disputes about definitions, unless one is labouring under the misapprehension that the word signifies a thing rather than an idea. The only thing necessary is to get our definitions straight, that is, make sure that we are annexing the same idea-type to a given word-type. But this is simply to define a word; it takes us no closer to *de re* definition.

Why is it that words do not signify real essences? It is common enough to declare that definitions are merely *de dicto*. But Locke is not simply stipulating this, as Richard Robinson suggests.⁵⁴ Instead, the claim follows from the nature of signification, and the contingent fact that when one says, e.g. 'stone', a stone does not thereby materialize. Once one understands what is meant by 'sign', the claim should be uncontroversial. In *De Corpore*, Hobbes had already argued in this way that words can only be signs of ideas.⁵⁵ Locke makes precisely the same move when he argues that the word *gold* understood as signifying a real essence 'comes to have no signification at all':

[B]y this tacit reference to the real Essence of that Species of Bodies, the Word *Gold*...comes to have no signification at all, being put for somewhat, whereof we have no *Idea* at all, and so can signify nothing at all, when the Body it self is away. (III. x. 19: 501)

If a sign serves as an evidence for what it signifies in virtue of being a signal or indicator of its significate, it would be absurd to

⁵³ See III. iv. 6: 422.

⁵⁴ Richard Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 9 ff.

⁵⁵ *De Corpore*, I. ii. 5, in Hobbes, *op. cit.*, i. 17, quoted above.

say that a word can signify the real essence of gold. If we had an idea of the essence, we could, of course, signify it; in the absence of the physical stuff, 'gold' would signify our idea of its real essence. But as matters stand, if 'gold' were a sign for the physical stuff, or for its real essence, it could be a sign only when the speaker is in the presence of gold. 'When the body itself is away', the word no longer indicates or signals anything. If a sign is an indication, one can, of course, use a word to signify an extra-mental thing such as gold: one simply utters the word when and only when one is in the presence of gold. One might, in this way, become a gold-indicator. But although words *can* signify extra-mental things in this way, this is not the purpose for which they were designed.⁵⁶ This option would hardly be attractive to Locke's Aristotelian opponents, and the linguistic thesis is not compromised by his admitting the possibility of signifying things in this way. If anything, it makes the structure of Locke's argument for the thesis more perspicuous: words signify ideas precisely because of the special tasks for which we employ them (III. ii; see II. xi. 8–9).

The linguistic thesis is not an a priori truth; it flows instead from the sort of work we expect words to do and the sort of things with which they can be so correlated as to found inferences. In order to use language, one must 'be able to use these [articulate] Sounds, as Signs of internal Conceptions; and to make them stand as marks for the Ideas within his own Mind, whereby they might be made known

⁵⁶ This passage poses a problem for the interpretations of Kretzmann and Ashworth. On Kretzmann's view (op. cit., 134), Locke is arguing that, since we have no ideas of real essences, we cannot secondarily signify (refer) to them. Kretzmann's reading is unable to explain the conclusion of the argument at III. x. 19: why should it be that in the absence of an idea of a real essence, 'gold' signifies nothing at all 'when the Body itself is away?' If Kretzmann were right, the conclusion should be that 'gold', understood as referring to or mediately signifying a real essence, is nonsense. What does this have to do with the question of whether or not the speaker is in the physical presence of the object whose real essence is at issue? Ashworth's account is liable to similar difficulties. Note also that on either view, Locke's thesis entails that one can never signify that of which one lacks an idea. But Locke's text implies just the opposite: when one is in the presence of the object, one *can* signify it. I shall not argue these points further, since they are developed at length in Ott (2002).

to others...' (III. i. 2: 402).⁵⁷ This means that one cannot offer a *de re* definition simply because there is no way for the real essence to stand in the place of the definiendum: what one defines is a word, not a thing. This kind of definition consists merely in setting out the idea with which the word is customarily linked.⁵⁸

Let us be clear about the logical structure of the argument from signification. It is designed to function independently of the more familiar planks of Locke's anti-essentialist position, such as the theory of abstract ideas and the mechanist ontology. The linguistic thesis itself is a consequence of the nature of signs, together with obvious (but contingent) facts about the sorts of things one can profitably use words to signify. Unlike the arguments for the thesis attributed to him by Kretzmann and Ashworth, this argument is both intuitively plausible and free of fallacy.⁵⁹

Moreover, we are now able to see how this thesis tells against the Aristotelian. According to Locke, considerations about the nature and purpose of language suffice to undermine the project of attaining *de re* definitions. Given that words are conventional signs or indications, they can signify neither objects in a public environment nor their enmattered real essences. This point is independent not only of Locke's metaphysics and his theory of ideas, but of his

⁵⁷ The same point recurs in the next chapter: 'The Comfort, and Advantage of Society, not being to be had without Communication of Thoughts, it was necessary, that Man should find out some external sensible Signs, whereby those invisible *Ideas*, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others' (III. ii. 1: 405, also quoted in Ashworth (1981), 313). See also II. xi. 9: 159 ('The use of Words then being to stand as outward Marks of our internal *Ideas*...') as well as Locke's 'Epistle to the Reader', 13.

⁵⁸ 'For Definition being nothing but making another understand by Words, what *Idea*, the term defined stands for...' (III. x. iii: 413).

⁵⁹ I would not wish to claim the same thing for the argument from the uses of words (III. ii. 1: 404–5), which is meant to establish that words are signs of ideas. What I think is plausible is the conditional claim: if words are conventional signs in the sense I have specified, they can profitably be used to signify nothing but mental contents and events.

denial that we have ideas of real essences as well.⁶⁰ If we did have such ideas, our definitions would be of them and not of what they would represent.

If successful, the argument from signification would in fact undermine crucial parts of late scholastic doctrine, particularly those pertaining to science. For Aristotelian science is essentially classificatory: it proceeds via demonstration on the basis of definitions.⁶¹ If these definitions turn out to be merely nominal in Locke's sense, so does all that is built upon them. What is more, categorical predications other than definitions were construed by the Aristotelian as being true or false in virtue of the relation between an essence and the properties flowing from it; now their truth or falsity depends instead on the contents of a speaker's mind.

The most obvious charge against Locke's argument is simply that no one has ever held the position he attacks. It would indeed be absurd to think that words are indicators of the sorts of physical objects of which we desire *de re* definitions. The Aristotelian might protest that Locke is just equivocating on 'signify', substituting his use of the word for theirs. Thus the first line of resistance Locke's argument will meet is a challenge to the claim about language on which it is based, viz. that words are signs in the sense I have been suggesting. In order to meet this challenge, Locke will advert to the purpose of words: their use is to inform others of our own con-

⁶⁰ Locke may or may not have the positions of Sergeant and Digby in mind in III. x. As noted above, in so far as they are committed to the thesis that words are signs of the real essences of physical objects, it seems they are vulnerable to Locke's argument. But since, on their view, there is a numerical identity between the thing as it exists in the world and as it exists in the mind, they might resist the argument of III. x. 19 by saying that, on their view as well as Locke's, words signify mental contents; these mental contents themselves just are enmattered real essences, or the physical objects possessing them. But against this view, Locke makes two points: first, if this is true, why are we unable to deduce the properties of a thing from our idea of it; second, how can the identity between the mental content and the thing in the world be made intelligible? (See the references to Locke in note 17 above.)

⁶¹ See, e.g., Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I. i. But see the caveat about Aristotelian definition by cause in note 11 above.

ceptions and mental acts performed on those conceptions, such as combination and separation (III. i. 2: 402; see also II. xi. 19: 159 and III. ii. 1: 404–5). According to Locke, this entails that words are signs in Hobbes's sense, and the argument examined above is then deployed to show that words can be signs in this sense only of mental acts and contents. To the charge of equivocation, then, Locke will reply that the Aristotelian has been mistaken all along about the nature of language; once she properly understands this nature, she will see how absurd her view really is.⁶²

By way of conclusion, I would like to examine one well-known attempt to carve out a role for the linguistic thesis in Locke's anti-Aristotelian arguments, that of Martha Bolton. Bolton follows Ashworth's reading of the thesis and then casts it as a premise in an 'idea-theoretic' argument. This argument exploits certain features⁶³ of abstract ideas to argue that the class of things represented by an abstract idea is determined, not by an extra-mental real essence, but only by the content of that idea.⁶⁴ Bolton writes:

Locke's traditional semantic formula conjoined with this epistemic requirement [viz. that if we do not know what a real essence is, then we cannot have an idea of the kind determined by it] implies that we *cannot* have a name that signifies things in a kind determined by an *unknown* real essence. It follows at once that the 'referential' theory is false. It says we *can* have names for kinds whose boundary-determining essences we do not know.⁶⁵

⁶² Another tempting way to challenge Locke's argument is to insist that, in addition to being signs in Locke's sense, words also refer to things, in a sense not reducible to that of Lockian signification. But one might point out that if Locke has indeed established that words are signs in his sense, and that they can therefore fulfill the function for which they were designed, then, absent further argument, parsimony dictates that we not admit that words have this other feature. The onus is on the objector to establish the need for irreducible reference.

⁶³ These are: '(a) that an abstract idea is what it is immediately perceived to be and (b) that the idea represents exactly those things that "agree to it"' (op. cit., 220).

⁶⁴ Bolton writes, 'Locke's anti-essentialist doctrine of nominal essence...says that the kind represented by an abstract idea is determined by nothing but that idea...' (ibid. 224).

⁶⁵ Ibid. 219.

On Bolton's view, Locke presupposes both the theory of abstract ideas and our ignorance of real essences; it is supposed to follow that the 'referential theory', that at least some of our natural kind terms refer to things in 'naturally determined kinds',⁶⁶ is false. 'Nor indeed *can we rank, and sort Things, and consequently...denominate them by their real Essences, because we know them not*' (III. vi. 9: 444).⁶⁷ The idea-theoretic argument is independent of the question of essentialist metaphysics. For even if such Aristotelian real essences *did exist*, and we knew them, it would still be ideas, and not those essences, that determine kind-membership. The classificatory scheme embodied in our network of abstract ideas would, in such a case, map precisely those distinctions found among species.⁶⁸

How robust a role does Bolton assign the linguistic thesis in the idea-theoretic argument? As Bolton herself emphasizes, it is the nature of Lockian ideas that is crucial. The thesis, on Bolton's reading, is of a piece with the very body of doctrine Locke takes himself to be attacking. But Locke clearly thinks that the thesis *does* undermine the Aristotelian picture. We can begin to see this only if we recognize that the thesis is not a bit of scholastic detritus Locke failed to expunge, but rather part of a tradition deeply at odds with the debased, albeit commonplace, late scholastic understanding

⁶⁶ Ibid. 217. Note that Bolton does not mention by name any figure who might have held this view. Indeed, if Ashworth is right about '*significare*' and its cognates, one has grounds to suspect that Bolton's Aristotelian opponent is a mythical figure.

⁶⁷ See Bolton, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ At this point, we might suspect that the argument proves too little. True, given our ignorance, we cannot sort things according to their essences any more than a blind man can sort things according to their colours (III. vi. 9: 444). But even this is not enough, for it might just happen that our abstract ideas map distinctions in nature. If successful, the idea-theoretic argument shows at most that the extension of an abstract idea is fixed by agreement to that idea, not that its extension cannot include all and only those members of a mind-independent natural kind. This kind of worry, I think, is what has led commentators such as Ayers to hold that the doctrine of abstract ideas is offered, not as an assumed premise in an argument against the essentialists, but rather as an alternative to their theory. See Ayers (1991), ii. 66.

of signification to which Ashworth adverts.⁶⁹ Locke stands with Hobbes and Gassendi, not with Smiglecius, and Burgersdijck, and the rest.

If my interpretation is correct, Locke's argument from signification must take its place alongside the idea-theoretic and metaphysical arguments. This argument attempts to move from a view about the nature of language to the conclusion that the project of attaining *de re* definitions is incoherent. Now, this is surely not the first time that a philosopher has thought considerations about the nature of language relevant to epistemological and metaphysical concerns. Locke takes his place in the Baconian tradition of heaping scorn upon the learned gibberish of the Schoolmen. But he does more than this: he presents a developed theory of the nature of language he thinks capable of cutting Aristotelian nonsense off at the root and showing up pretensions to *de re* definition.⁷⁰

East Tennessee State University

⁶⁹ One might argue that Locke's reading of signification has a better claim to Aristotelian pedigree than that of his scholastic competitors. For more on the differences between Aristotelian and late scholastic signs, see the references in note 43 above.

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Dan Devereux, Harold Langsam, and Jorge Secada for their comments and criticisms.