

## CHAPTER 3

### Words and Meanings

[Mortimer Adler was a modern American philosopher who held to a "classical education" model, that young students should be taught about Socrates, Plato etc. He is offering an argument against Locke's treatise on *Human Understanding*.]

Every one of us has had the experience of looking at the pages of a foreign newspaper or of listening to a conversation being conducted in a foreign language. We realize that the printed marks on the page and the spoken sounds are words that have meaning for those who can read and speak the foreign language. But not for us. For us they are meaningless marks and sounds, and meaningless marks and sounds are no more words than are a baby's gurgles before the baby learns to make sounds that name things pointed at.

[This is basically saying that words...if we do not know them...have no meaning. We become like a baby who cannot yet speak and does not know any words.

When a baby learns to speak and later to read, or when we learn a foreign language, marks and sounds (let us use the word "notations" to cover both) that were at first meaningless become meaningful. A meaningful notation is a word. Notations can be meaningless, but there are no meaningless words. Another fact with which we are all acquainted is that most words have multiple meanings. One and the same word can have a wide variety of meanings. In addition, in the course of time, a word can lose one meaning and gain another—a new meaning.

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The baby is told that the animal in his playroom is a dog or a doggie. This may be repeated a number of times. Soon the baby, pointing at the animal, utters "dog" or "doggie" or something that sounds like that. A significant common name has been added to the baby's vocabulary. This will have to be confirmed by another step of learning. The baby may, on another occasion, find itself in the presence of another small animal, this time a cat,

and call it a doggie. The error of designation must be corrected. Not all small animals are dogs. When the word “cat” has been added to the baby’s vocabulary as a common name that signifies an object quite distinct from dog—both objects with which the baby has been directly acquainted—the two words not only have meaning for the child, but different meanings.

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The problem is further complicated by the fact that not all of the common names we use refer to objects that we perceive through our senses, such as cats and dogs. Not all signify perceptual objects with which we can have direct acquaintance. What about such common names as “liberty,” “equality,” “justice,” or “electron,” “neutron,” “positron,” or “inflation,” “credit,” “tax shelter,” or “mind,” “spirit,” “thought”? None of these is a perceptual object with which we can have direct acquaintance. How in these cases did what must have been at first meaningless notations get meaning and become useful words for us?

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The ideas each individual has in his or her own mind exist in a domain that is completely private. How can two individuals talk to one another about their ideas, if the words each of them uses refer only to his or her own ideas? Even more perplexing is the fact that two individuals cannot talk to one another about the things or events that really exist or occur in the world in which they both live.

Having said that “words cannot be signs voluntarily imposed on things a man knows not,” and having, throughout the Essay, maintained that we directly apprehend only our own ideas, not things existing in reality (which, according to Locke, act on our senses and cause us to have ideas), how can he explain our talking to one another about the real world that is constituted by “things a man knows not,” i.e., things a man cannot directly apprehend?

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our ideas do not have meaning, they do not acquire meaning, they do change, gain, or “lose” meaning. Each of our ideas is a meaning and that is all it is. Mind is the realm in which meanings exist and through which everything else that has meaning acquires meaning, changes meaning, or loses meaning.

Adler, Mortimer, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (London 1985), Chapter 3, pp.40-49