

**An Essay Concerning
Human Understanding** By John Locke
Book III: Words
Ch 2: Signification of Words; Ch 3: General Terms

[Selected sections by R.A. Baker, PhD. for class reading.]

[With this reading from John Locke, we are now moving from the ancient writers into more modern philosophers.

Remember, this is an "Introduction," so we will return with some readings from the Middle Age philosophers, but I wanted to race you ahead to see the stark contrast from what we have been reading to more modern views.

In this reading John Locke (1689) is searching for the limits of human understanding...trying to determine what a person can truly claim to **know** for certain and what a person cannot know.

Many of you did not like Plato's abstract thinking – you preferred Aristotle. Please remember that I am only giving you very small readings – Aristotle does deal with abstract concepts.

This reading in John Locke gets out there....]

Chapter 2

II.5. Secondly, because a man wants his hearers to think he is talking not merely about his own imagination but *about things as they really are*, he will often suppose *his words to stand ·not just for his ideas but· also for the reality of things*. This relates especially to substances and their names...so I shall deal more fully with these two different ways of applying words when I come to discuss the names of mixed modes and especially of substances. Let me just say here that it is a perverting of the use of words, and brings unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but ideas in our own minds...

[What do you think about this? He is saying that the ideas in our minds **ONLY** truly exist *in our mind*.]

6. Two further points about words are worth noting. First, because they immediately signify one's own ideas, . . . the constant use of a word may create such a connection between that sound and the idea it signifies that hearing the word excites the idea almost as readily as if the relevant kind of object were presented to the senses. This is manifestly so in regard to all the obvious perceptible qualities, and in regard to in all substances that frequently come our way.

[The words we use are ONLY connecting to what is in OUR mind.]

7. Secondly, through familiar use of words 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, yet aren't always careful about what exactly they mean; and so it comes about that men, even when they want to think hard and carefully, often direct their thoughts more to words than to things... [I think here Locke means that we focus too much on the words rather than on the concept. So a word or phrase means one thing for me and something else for you ("it's really raining out there").]

Indeed it goes further. Many words are learned before the ideas for which they stand are known [like "justice"], and so it happens that some people—not only children, but adults—utter various words just as parrots do, because they have learned them and have been accustomed to those sounds. But so far as words are useful and significant, so far is there a constant connection between the sound and the idea, and a designation that the one stands for the other. 'Words' that are not thus connected with ideas are nothing but so much insignificant noise.

....

[What do you think of this last paragraph?]

Chapter 3

III.3. ...Nothing would be achieved by heaping up names of particular things: that wouldn't help us to communicate our thoughts. The only reason to learn names and use them in talk with others is so as to be understood; and for that to happen the sound I make through my organs of speech must arouse in your mind the same idea that I had in mind when I

spoke. This can't be done through names that stand only for particular things of which I alone have the ideas in my mind. If you haven't encountered those very same things, the words that I use to stand for them won't be intelligible to you.

....

[What is Locke saying here?

It appears to me that he is pushing for what become existentialism...MY reality is the only one I can know....and the only one that matters.

Nobody else can "see" or "understand" MY reality.]

What does this mean?

What does this lead to?

If you cannot "see" and "understand" MY reality...then you are a bigot...or an idiot...or just stupid.

11. To return to general words, it is plain from what I have said that *generality* and *universality* are not properties of reality itself, but are something the understanding has invented for its own convenience, and they apply only to ·verbal and mental· signs—words and ideas. I repeat:

- a word is general when it is used as a sign of a general idea, so that it applies to many particular things; and
- an idea is general when it is taken to represent many particular things; but universality doesn't belong to things themselves, which are all particular in their existence – even the words and ideas that have general meanings. ·For example, the word ‘chapter’ at the end of your copy of the last section is in itself a particular array of ink on a page; but its meaning isn't particular but general, because it is applicable to any chapter·. So the only general items there are have been created by us, and they are ‘general’ only in the sense that we can use them to signify [= ‘mean’] or represent many particulars. Their meaning is nothing but a relation that is added to them by the human mind.