

Chapter 32

Thomas Reid

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Thomas Reid (1710–1796) studied human language in order to learn important facts about the human mind. “Language is the express image and picture of human thoughts,” wrote Reid, and “from the picture, we may often draw very certain conclusions with regard to the original.” He developed views on speech acts, language learning, natural and conventional meaning, linguistic phenomenology, the relation between language and sense perception, reference, kind terms, metaphor, and vagueness.

Anticipating themes in speech act theory from the mid-twentieth century, including J.L. Austin, Reid argued that the primary function of language was not to make assertions (what Reid called “expressing a judgment,” a “solitary act”), but rather to perform the “social acts” of *questioning*, *commanding*, and *promising*. Human language’s “primary and direct” purpose is to “express” these “social operations of the mind.” Reid lamented philosophers’ narrow focus on judgment and its content, the “proposition,” at the considerable cost of neglecting the social acts.

Reid defines human language as “all those signs” which humans “use in order to communicate to others their thoughts and intentions, their purposes and desires.” Reid divides these signs, and by extension language, into two categories: natural and artificial. Artificial signs are defined as those signs that have no meaning except for “what is affixed to them by compact or agreement among those who use them.” For example, the English word “star” refers to stars because we agree that it will. Natural signs are defined as those signs which, prior to any “compact or agreement, have a meaning which every man understands by the principles of his nature.” Reid divides natural signs into three basic types: “modulations of the voice, gestures, and

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features.” Pointing is a gesture naturally understood as calling our attention to the thing ostended. Reid’s natural signs closely resemble what Paul Grice later called “natural meaning.” To illustrate natural meaning, Grice used the example, “those spots mean measles;” to illustrate natural signs, Reid used examples such as “smoke is a natural sign of fire” and a certain countenance on a human face is “a natural sign of anger.”

Reid argued that natural language has priority over artificial language, because we must have a system of natural signs in order to learn or develop a system of artificial signs. Artificial signs must be invented and their meaning agreed among those who effectively use them to communicate. But in order to agree on an artificial sign’s meaning, we must have some a prior way to achieve agreement, which requires communication, which requires signs. We might use already-existing artificial signs to do this, but this can’t continue indefinitely in the case of humans. Natural signs must have been the ultimate basis of the invention of artificial signs.

Reid made important observations about the phenomenology of fluent linguistic communication, which bear important similarities to his views on the phenomenology of ordinary perceptual cognition. Upon undergoing a sensation of hardness, we pay no attention to the sensation itself, and instead immediately conceive of and believe in the existence of a hard external body, which in no way resembles the sensation. The body, not the sensation, commands our attention. The sensation is a sign of the body; by a “principle of our nature,” we interpret the sensation as a sign of the body. Similarly, when someone speaks to us in a language we well understand, “we hear certain sounds” but we ignore the sounds and instead “fix our attention” on the thing the sound signifies. For example, when I hear someone say “stars,” I immediately think of stars, the heavenly bodies, which bear no resemblance to the word that signifies them. This is why Reid describes *sensations* as a “visual language.” In this respect, Reid is a faithful student of Berkeley, who thought of visual sensations as a language by which God communicated to us for our benefit.

Reid divided all artificial words into “proper names” and “general words.” Proper names simply designate individuals in the world—they are mere signs or tags—and have no meaning beyond reference. Here Reid anticipates the Millian view of proper names and disagreed with Locke, who thought that all words signified ideas. All other words are general, according to Reid, including terms for genera and species, predicates, adjectives, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. Reid accepts that general words do have a meaning, which can be properly defined, which suggests that they differ importantly from proper names. However, there is some tension in Reid’s thought on this point because he also claims that a general word’s meaning is nothing more than its referent: “to conceive the meaning of a general word, and to conceive that which it signifies, is the same thing.” Although the meaning of a general term is exhausted by its referent – its sense = its referent – the referent turns out to be a mental entity. General terms refer either to our conception of the attributes of individual things, as adjectives do, or to our conception of attribute agreement among individuals, as terms for genera and species do. A general term “expresses” and “is the sign of a general conception.”

Everything that actually exists is a specific individual, Reid claims, and generality emerges initially only at the level of thought. General words owe their generality to the general thoughts they signify. General thoughts, and in turn general words, can be either precise or vague. Vagueness derives not from generality per se, since there can be perfectly precise general terms, such as “triangle.” Rather, vagueness derives from sloppiness or indecision on our part, either individually in our intentions, or collectively in our habits of common usage. By locating the source of vagueness in indecision or convention, Reid anticipates modern linguistic theories of vagueness. Reid also observed that vagueness can be beneficial. For example, precisely defining “human” might have “unforeseen consequences” when enforcing laws. It might be better to leave the task of precisification to the discretion “of a judge or of a jury.”

Further Reading

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32.1 *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* IV.2; V.3; and VI.19

Chapter 4, Section 2: Of natural language

One of the noblest purposes of sound undoubtedly is language; without which mankind would hardly be able to attain any degree of improvement above the brutes. Language is commonly considered as purely an invention of men, who by nature are no less mute than the brutes, but having a superior degree of invention and reason, have been able to contrive artificial signs of their thoughts and purposes,

and to establish them by common consent. But the origin of language deserves to be more carefully inquired into, not only as this inquiry may be of importance for the improvement of language, but as it is related to the present subject, and tends to lay open some of the first principles of human nature. I shall therefore offer some thoughts upon this subject.

By language I understand all those signs which mankind use in order to communicate to others their thoughts and intentions, their purposes and desires. And such signs may be conceived to be of two kinds: First, such as have no meaning, but what is affixed to them by compact or agreement among those who use them; these are artificial signs: Secondly, such as, previous to all compact or agreement, have a meaning which every man understands by the principles of his nature. Language, so far as it consists of artificial signs, may be called *artificial*; so far as it consists of natural signs, I call it *natural*.

Having premised these definitions, I think it is demonstrable, that if mankind had not a natural language, they could never have invented an artificial one by their reason and ingenuity. For all artificial language supposes some compact or agreement to affix a certain meaning to certain signs; therefore there must be compacts or agreements before the use of artificial signs; but there can be no compact or agreement without signs, nor without language; and therefore there must be a natural language before any artificial language can be invented: Which was to be demonstrated.

Had language in general been a human invention, as much as writing or printing, we should find whole nations as mute as the brutes. Indeed even the brutes have some natural signs by which they express their own thoughts, affections, and desires, and understand those of others. A chick, as soon as hatched, understands the different sounds whereby its dam calls it to food, or gives the alarm of danger. A dog or a horse understands, by nature, when the human voice caresses, and when it threatens him. But brutes, as far as we know, have no notion of contracts or covenants, or of moral obligation to perform them. If nature had given them these notions, she would probably have given them natural signs to express them. And where nature has denied these notions, it is as impossible to acquire them by art, as it is for a blind man to acquire the notion of colours. Some brutes are sensible of honour or disgrace; they have resentment and gratitude; but none of them, as far as we know, can make a promise, or plight their faith, having no such notions from their constitution. And if mankind had not these notions by nature, and natural signs to express them by, with all their wit and ingenuity they could never have invented language.

The elements of this natural language of mankind, or the signs that are naturally expressive of our thoughts, may, I think, be reduced to these three kinds; modulations of the voice, gestures, and features. By means of these, two savages who have no common artificial language, can converse together; can communicate their thought in some tolerable manner; can ask and refuse, affirm and deny, threaten and supplicate; can traffic, enter into covenants, and plight their faith. This might be confirmed by historical facts of undoubted credit, if it were necessary.

Mankind having thus a common language by nature, though a scanty one, adapted only to the necessities of nature, there is no great ingenuity required in

improving it by the addition of artificial signs, to supply the deficiency of the natural. These artificial signs must multiply with the arts of life, and the improvements of knowledge. The articulations of the voice, seem to be, of all signs, the most proper for artificial language; and as mankind have universally used them for that purpose, we may reasonably judge that nature intended them for it. But nature probably does not intend that we should lay aside the use of the natural signs; it is enough that we supply their defects by artificial ones. A man that rides always in a chariot, by degrees loses the use of his legs; and one who uses artificial signs only, loses both the knowledge and use of the natural. Dumb people retain much more of the natural language than others, because necessity obliges them to use it. And for the same reason, savages have much more of it than civilized nations. It is by natural signs chiefly that we give force and energy to language; and the less language has of them, it is the less expressive and persuasive. Thus, writing is less expressive than reading, and reading less expressive than speaking without book; speaking without the proper and natural modulations, force, and variations of the voice, is a frigid and dead language, compared with that which is attended with them; it is still more expressive when we add the language of the eyes and features; and is then only in its perfect and natural state, and attended with its proper energy, when to all these we superadd the force of action.

Where speech is natural, it will be an exercise, not of the voice and lungs only, but of all the muscles of the body; like that of dumb people and savages, whose language, as it has more of nature, is more expressive, and is more easily learned.

Is it not pity that the refinements of a civilized life, instead of supplying the defects of natural language, should root it out, and plant in its stead dull and lifeless articulations of unmeaning sounds, or the scrawling of insignificant characters? The perfection of language is commonly thought to be, to express human thoughts and sentiments distinctly by these dull signs; but if this is the perfection of artificial language, it is surely the corruption of the natural.

Artificial signs signify, but they do not express; they speak to the understanding, as algebraical characters may do, but the passions, the affections, and the will, hear them not: these continue dormant and inactive, till we speak to them in the language of nature, to which they are all attention and obedience.

It were easy to show, that the fine arts of the musician, the painter, the actor, and the orator, so far as they are expressive; although the knowledge of them requires in us a delicate taste, a nice judgment, and much study and practice; yet they are nothing else but the language of nature, which we brought into the world with us, but have unlearned by disuse, and so find the greatest difficulty in recovering it.

Abolish the use of articulate sounds and writing among mankind for a century, and every man would be a painter, an actor, and an orator. We mean not to affirm that such an expedient is practicable; or, if it were, that the advantage would counterbalance the loss; but that, as men are led by nature and necessity to converse together, they will use every mean in their power to make themselves understood; and where they cannot do this by artificial signs, they will do it, as far as possible, by natural ones: and he that understands perfectly the use of natural signs, must be the best judge in all the expressive arts.

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Chapter 5, Section 3: Of natural signs

As in artificial signs there is often neither similitude between the sign and thing signified, nor any connection that arises necessarily from the nature of the things; so it is also in natural signs. The word *gold* has no similitude to the substance signified by it; nor is it in its own nature more fit to signify this than any other substance: yet, by habit and custom, it suggests this and no other. In like manner, a sensation of touch suggests hardness, although it has neither similitude to hardness, nor, as far as we can perceive, any necessary connection with it. The difference between these two signs lies only in this, that in the first, the suggestion is the effect of habit and custom; in the second, it is not the effect of habit, but of the original constitution of our minds.

It appears evident from what has been said on the subject of language, That there are natural signs, as well as artificial; and particularly, That the thoughts, purposes, and dispositions of the mind, have their natural signs in the features of the face, the modulation of the voice, and the motion and attitude of the body; That without a natural knowledge of the connection between these signs, and the things signified by them, language could never have been invented and established among men; and, That the fine arts are all founded upon this connection, which we may call *the natural language of mankind*. It is now proper to observe, that there are different orders of natural signs, and to point out the different classes into which they may be distinguished, that we may more distinctly conceive the relation between our sensations and the things they suggest, and what we mean by calling sensations signs of external things.

The first class of natural signs comprehends those whose connection with the thing signified is established by nature, but discovered only by experience. The whole of genuine philosophy consists in discovering such connections, and reducing them to general rules. The great Lord Verulam had a perfect comprehension of this, when he called it *an interpretation of nature*. No man ever more distinctly understood, or happily expressed the nature and foundation of the philosophic art. What is all we know of mechanics, astronomy, and optics, but connections established by nature, and discovered by experience or observation, and consequences deduced from them? All the knowledge we have in agriculture, gardening, chemistry, and medicine, is built upon the same foundation. And if ever our philosophy concerning the human mind is carried so far as to deserve the name of science, which ought never to be despaired of, it must be by observing facts, reducing them to general rules, and drawing just conclusions from them. What we commonly call natural *causes* might, with more propriety, be called natural *signs*, and what we call *effects*, the things signified. The causes have no proper efficiency or causality, as far as we know; and all we can certainly affirm, is, that nature has established a constant conjunction between them and the things called their effects; and has given to mankind a disposition to observe those connections, to confide in their continuance, and to make use of them for the improvement of our knowledge, and increase of our power.

A second class is that wherein the connection between the sign and thing signified, is not only established by nature, but discovered to us by a natural principle, without reasoning or experience. Of this kind are the natural signs of human thoughts, purposes, and desires, which have been already mentioned as the natural language of mankind. An infant may be put into a fright by an angry countenance, and soothed again by smiles and blandishments. A child that has a good musical ear, may be put to sleep or to dance, may be made merry or sorrowful, by the modulation of musical sounds. The principles of all the fine arts, and of what we call *a fine taste*, may be resolved into connections of this kind. A fine taste may be improved by reasoning and experience; but if the first principles of it were not planted in our minds by nature, it could never be acquired. Nay, we have already made it appear, that a great part of this knowledge, which we have by nature, is lost by the disuse of natural signs, and the substitution of artificial in their place.

A third class of natural signs comprehends those which, though we never before had any notion or conception of the things signified, do suggest it, or conjure it up, as it were, by a natural kind of magic, and at once give us a conception, and create a belief of it. I showed formerly, that our sensations suggest to us a sentient being or mind to which they belong; a being which has a permanent existence, although the sensations are transient and of short duration; a being which is still the same, while its sensations and other operations are varied 10,000 ways; a being which has the same relation to all that infinite variety of thoughts, purposes, actions, affections, enjoyments, and sufferings, which we are conscious of, or can remember. The conception of a mind is neither an idea of sensation nor of reflection; for it is neither like any of our sensations, nor like anything we are conscious of. The first conception of it, as well as the belief of it, and of the common relation it bears to all that we are conscious of, or remember, is suggested to every thinking being, we do not know how.

The notion of hardness in bodies, as well as the belief of it, are got in a similar manner; being, by an original principle of our nature, annexed to that sensation which we have when we feel a hard body. And so naturally and necessarily does the sensation convey the notion and belief of hardness, that hitherto they have been confounded by the most acute inquirers into the principles of human nature, although they appear, upon accurate reflection, not only to be different things, but as unlike as pain is to the point of a sword.

It may be observed, that as the first class of natural signs I have mentioned, is the foundation of true philosophy, and the second, the foundation of the fine arts, or of taste; so the last is the foundation of common sense; a part of human nature which has never been explained.

I take it for granted, that the notion of hardness, and the belief of it, is first got by means of that particular sensation, which, as far back as we can remember, does invariably suggest it; and that if we had never had such a feeling, we should never have had any notion of hardness. I think it is evident, that we cannot, by reasoning from our sensations, collect the existence of bodies at all, far less any of their qualities. This has been proved by unanswerable arguments by the Bishop of Cloyne, and by the author of the *Treatise of Human Nature*. It appears as evident, that this

connection between our sensations and the conception and belief of external existences cannot be produced by habit, experience, education, or any principle of human nature that has been admitted by philosophers. At the same time, it is a fact, that such sensations are invariably connected with the conception and belief of external existences. Hence, by all rules of just reasoning, we must conclude, that this connection is the effect of our constitution, and ought to be considered as an original principle of human nature, until we find some more general principle into which it may be resolved.

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Chapter 6, Section 19: Of Dr. Brigg's theory, and Sir Isaac Newton's conjecture on this subject

...it was observed, in the beginning of this chapter, that the visible appearances of objects serve only as signs of their distance, magnitude, figure, and other tangible qualities. The visible appearance is that which is presented to the mind by nature, according to those laws of our constitution which have been explained. But the thing signified by that appearance, is that which is presented to the mind by custom.

When one speaks to us in a language that is familiar, we hear certain sounds, and this is all the effect that his discourse has upon us by nature, but by custom we understand the meaning of these sounds; and therefore we fix our attention, not upon the sounds, but upon the things signified by them. In like manner, we see only the visible appearance of objects by nature; but we learn by custom to interpret these appearances, and to understand their meaning. And when this visual language is learned and becomes familiar, we attend only to the things signified; and cannot without great difficulty, attend to the signs by which they are presented. The mind passes from one to the other so rapidly, and so familiarly that no trace of the sign is left in the memory, and we seem immediately and without the intervention of any sign, to perceive the thing signified.

When I look at the apple tree which stands before my window, I perceive, at the first glance, its distance and magnitude, the roughness of its trunk, the disposition of its branches, the figure of its leaves and fruit.

I seem to perceive all these things immediately. The visible appearance which presented them all to the mind, has entirely escaped me; I cannot, without great difficulty, and painful abstraction, attend to it, even when it stands before me. Yet it is certain that this visible appearance only, is presented to my eye by nature, and that I learned by custom to collect all the rest from it. If I had never seen before now, I should not perceive either the distance or tangible figure of the tree, and it would have required the practice of seeing for many months, to change that original perception which nature gave me by my eyes, into that which I now have custom.

The objects which we see naturally and originally, as has been before observed, have length and breadth, but no thickness, nor distance from the eye. Custom, by a kind of legerdemain, withdraws gradually these original and proper objects of sight, and substitutes in their place objects of touch, which have length, breadth, and thickness, and a determinate distance from the eye. By what means this change is

brought about, and what principles of the human mind concur in it, we are next to inquire.

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32.2 *Essays Concerning the Intellectual Powers of Man* I.1–2, 5, and 8; V.1–3 and 5

Essay 1, Chapter 1: Explication of Words

There is no greater impediment to the advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words. To this chiefly it is owing that we find sects and parties in most branches of science; and disputes, which are carried on from age to age, without being brought to an issue.

Sophistry has been more effectually excluded from mathematics and natural philosophy than from other sciences. In mathematics it had no place from the beginning: Mathematicians having had the wisdom to define accurately the terms they use, and to lay down, as axioms, the first principles on which their reasoning is grounded. Accordingly we find no parties among mathematicians, and hardly any disputes.

In natural philosophy, there was no less sophistry, no less dispute and uncertainty, than in other sciences, until about a century and a half ago, this science began to be built upon the foundation of clear definitions and self-evident axioms. Since that time, the science, as if watered with the dew of Heaven, has grown apace; disputes have ceased, truth has prevailed, and the science has received greater increase in two centuries than in 2,000 years before.

It were to be wished, that this method, which has been so successful in those branches of science, were attempted in others: For definitions and axioms are the foundations of all science. But that definitions may not be sought, where no definition can be given, nor logical definitions be attempted, where the subject does not admit of them, it may be proper to lay down some general principles concerning definition, for the sake of those who are less conversant in this branch of logic.

When one undertakes to explain any art or science, he will have occasion to use many words that are common to all who use the same language, and some that are peculiar to that art or science. Words of the last kind are called *terms of the art*, and ought to be distinctly explained, that their meaning may be understood.

A definition is nothing else but an explication of the meaning of a word, by words whose meaning is already known. Hence it is evident, that every word cannot be defined; for the definition must consist of words; and there could be no definition, if there were not words previously understood without definition. Common words, therefore, ought to be used in their common acceptance; and, when they have different acceptations in common language, these, when it is necessary, ought to be distinguished. But they require no definition. It is sufficient to define words that are uncommon, or that are used in an uncommon meaning.

It may farther be observed, that there are many words, which, though they may need explication, cannot be logically defined. A logical definition, that is, a strict and proper definition, must express the kind of thing defined, and the specific difference, by which the species defined, is distinguished from every other species belonging to that kind. It is natural to the mind of man to class things under various kinds, and again to subdivide every kind into its various species. A species may often be subdivided into subordinate species, and then it is considered as a kind.

From what has been said of logical definition, it is evident, that no word can be logically defined which does not denote a species; because such things only can have a specific difference; and a specific difference is essential to a logical definition. On this account there can be no logical definition of individual things, such as London or Paris. Individuals are distinguished either by proper names, or by accidental circumstances of time or place; but they have no specific difference; and therefore, though they may be known by proper names, or may be described by circumstances or relations, they cannot be defined. It is no less evident, that the most general words cannot be logically defined, because there is not a more general term, of which they are a species.

Nay, we cannot define every species of things, because it happens sometimes that we have not words to express the specific difference. Thus a scarlet colour is, no doubt, a species of colour; but how shall we express the specific difference by which scarlet is distinguished from green or blue? The difference of them is immediately perceived by the eye; but we have not words to express it. These things we are taught by logic.

Without having recourse to the principles of logic, we may easily be satisfied that words cannot be defined, which signify things perfectly simple, and void of all composition. This observation, I think, was first made by DESCARTES, and afterwards more fully illustrated by LOCKE. And however obvious it appears to be, many instances may be given of great philosophers who have perplexed and darkened the subjects they have treated, by not knowing, or not attending to it.

When men attempt to define things which cannot be defined, their definitions will always be either obscure or false. It was one of the capital defects of ARISTOTLE's philosophy, that he pretended to define the simplest things, which neither can be, nor need to be defined; such as *time* and *motion*. Among modern philosophers, I know none that has abused definition so much as CAROLUS WOLFIUS, the famous German philosopher, who, in a work on the human mind, called *Psychologia Empirica*,¹ consisting of many hundred propositions, fortified by demonstrations, with a proportional accompaniment of definitions, corollaries, and scholia, has given so many definitions of things, which cannot be defined, and so many demonstrations of things self-evident, that the greatest part of the work consists of tautology, and ringing changes upon words.

There is no subject in which there is more frequent occasion to use words that cannot be logically defined, than in treating of the powers and operations of the mind. The simplest operations of our minds must all be expressed by words of this

¹[Christian Wolff, *Psychologia Empirica* ... (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1737).]

kind. No man can explain by a logical definition what it is to think, to apprehend, to believe, to will, to desire. Every man who understands the language has some notion of the meaning of those words; and every man, who is capable of reflection, may, by attending to the operations of his own mind, which are signified by them, form a clear and distinct notion of them; but they cannot be logically defined.

Since therefore it is often impossible to define words which we must use on this subject, we must as much as possible use common words, in their common acceptance, pointing out their various senses where they are ambiguous; and when we are obliged to use words less common, we must endeavour to explain them as well as we can, without affecting to give logical definitions, when the nature of the thing does not allow it.

The following observations on the meaning of certain words are intended to supply, as far as we can, the want of definitions, by preventing ambiguity or obscurity in the use of them.

1. By the *mind* of a man, we understand that in him which thinks, remembers, reasons, wills. The essence both of body and of mind is unknown to us. We know certain properties of the first, and certain operations of the last, and by these only we can define or describe them. We define body to be that which is extended, solid, moveable, divisible. In like manner, we define mind to be that which thinks. We are conscious that we think, and that we have a variety of thoughts of different kinds; such as seeing, hearing, remembering, deliberating, resolving, loving, hating, and many other kinds of thought, all which we are taught by nature to attribute to one internal principle; and this principle of thought we call the *mind* or *soul* of a man.

2. By the *operations* of the mind, we understand every mode of thinking of which we are conscious.

It deserves our notice, that the various modes of thinking have always, and in all languages, as far as we know, been called by the name of operations of the mind, or by names of the same import. To body we ascribe various properties, but not operations, properly so called; it is extended, divisible, moveable, inert; it continues in any state in which it is put; every change of its state is the effect of some force impressed upon it, and is exactly proportional to the force impressed, and in the precise direction of that force. These are the general properties of matter, and these are not operations; on the contrary, they all imply its being a dead inactive thing, which moves only as it is moved, and acts only by being acted upon.

But the mind is from its very nature a living and active being. Everything we know of it implies life and active energy; and the reason why all its modes of thinking are called its operations, is, that in all, or in most of them, it is not merely passive as body is, but is really and properly active.

In all ages, and in all languages, ancient and modern, the various modes of thinking have been expressed by words of active signification, such as seeing, hearing, reasoning, willing, and the like. It seems therefore to be the natural judgment of mankind, that the mind is active in its various ways of thinking; and for this reason they are called its operations, and are expressed by active verbs.

It may be made a question, What regard is to be paid to this natural judgment? may it not be a vulgar error? Philosophers who think so, have, no doubt, a right to

be heard. But until it is proved that the mind is not active in thinking, but merely passive, the common language with regard to its operations ought to be used, and ought not to give place to a phraseology invented by Philosophers, which implies its being merely passive.

3. The words *power* and *faculty*, which are often used in speaking of the mind, need little explication. Every operation supposes a power in the being that operates; for to suppose anything to operate, which has no power to operate, is manifestly absurd. But, on the other hand, there is no absurdity in supposing a being to have power to operate, when it does not operate. Thus I may have power to walk, when I sit; or to speak, when I am silent. Every operation therefore implies power; but the power does not imply the operation.

The *faculties* of the mind, and its *powers*, are often used as synonymous expressions. But as most synonyms have some minute distinction that deserves notice, I apprehend that the word *faculty* is most properly applied to those powers of the mind which are original and natural, and which make a part of the constitution of the mind. There are other powers which are acquired by use, exercise, or study, which are not called faculties, but *habits*. There must be something in the constitution of the mind necessary to our being able to acquire habits, and this is commonly called *capacity*.

4. We frequently meet with a distinction in writers upon this subject, between things *in the mind*, and things *external* to the mind. The powers, faculties, and operations of the mind are things in the mind. Everything is said to be in the mind, of which the mind is the *subject*. It is self-evident, that there are some things which cannot exist without a subject to which they belong, and of which they are attributes. Thus colour must be in something coloured; figure in something figured; thought can only be in something that thinks; wisdom and virtue cannot exist but in some being that is wise and virtuous. When therefore we speak of things in the mind, we understand by this, things of which the mind is the subject. Excepting the mind itself, and things in the mind, all other things are said to be external. It ought therefore to be remembered, that this distinction between things in the mind, and things external, is not meant to signify the place of the things we speak of, but their subject.

There is a figurative sense in which things are said to be in the mind, which it is sufficient barely to mention. We say such a thing was not in my mind, meaning no more than that I had not the least thought of it. By a figure, we put the thing for the thought of it. In this sense external things, are in the mind as often as they are the objects of our thought.

5. *Thinking* is a very general word, which includes all the operations of our minds, and is so well understood as to need no definition.

To *perceive*, to *remember*, to be *conscious*, and to *conceive* or *imagine* are words common to Philosophers, and to the vulgar. They signify different operations of the mind, which are distinguished in all languages, and by all men that think. I shall endeavour to use them in their most common and proper acceptation, and I think they are hardly capable of strict definition. But as some Philosophers, in treating of the mind, have taken the liberty to use them very improperly, so as to corrupt the

English language, and to confound things, which the common understanding of mankind has always led them to distinguish, I shall make some observations on the meaning of them, that may prevent ambiguity or confusion in the use of them.

6. *First*, We are never said to *perceive* things, of the existence of which we have not a full conviction. I may *conceive* or *imagine* a mountain of gold, or a winged horse; but no man says that he perceives such a creature of imagination. Thus *perception* is distinguished from *conception* or imagination. *Secondly*, Perception is applied only to external objects, not to those that are in the mind itself. When I am pained, I do not say that I perceive pain, but that I feel it, or that I am conscious of it. Thus *perception* is distinguished from *consciousness*. *Thirdly*, The immediate object of perception must be something present, and not what is past. We may remember what is past, but do not perceive it. I may say, I perceive such a person has had the smallpox; but this phrase is figurative, although the figure is so familiar that it is not observed. The meaning of it is, that I perceive the pits in his face, which are certain signs of his having had the smallpox. We say we perceive the thing signified, when we only perceive the sign. But when the word *perception* is used properly, and without any figure, it is never applied to things past. And thus it is distinguished from *remembrance*.

In a word, perception is most properly applied to the evidence which we have of external objects by our senses. But as this is a very clear and cogent kind of evidence, the word is often applied by analogy to the evidence of reason or of testimony, when it is clear and cogent. The perception of external objects by our senses, is an operation of the mind of a peculiar nature, and ought to have a name appropriated to it. It has so in all languages. And, in English, I know no word more proper to express this act of the mind than perception. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching or feeling, are words that express the operations proper to each sense; perceiving expresses that which is common to them all.

The observations made on this word would have been unnecessary, if it had not been so much abused in philosophical writings upon the mind; for, in other writings, it has no obscurity. Although this abuse is not chargeable on Mr HUME only, yet I think he has carried it to the highest pitch. The first sentence of his *Treatise of Human Nature* runs thus: "All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct heads, which I shall call impressions and ideas."² He adds a little after, that, under the name of impressions, he comprehends all our sensations, passions, and emotions. Here we learn, that our passions and emotions are perceptions. I believe no English writer before him ever gave the name of a perception to any passion or emotion. When a man is angry, we must say that he has the perception of anger. When he is in love, that he has the perception of love. He speaks often of the perceptions of memory, and of the perceptions of imagination; and he might as well speak of the hearing of sight, or of the smelling of touch: For, surely, hearing is not more different from sight, or smelling from touch, than perceiving is from remembering or imagining.

² [David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 1.1.1, p. 1.]

7. *Consciousness* is a word used by Philosophers, to signify that immediate knowledge which we have of our present thoughts and purposes, and, in general, of all the present operations of our minds. Whence we may observe, that consciousness is only of things present. To apply consciousness to things past, which sometimes is done in popular discourse, is to confound consciousness with memory; and all such confusion of words ought to be avoided in philosophical discourse. It is likewise to be observed, that consciousness is only of things in the mind, and not of external things. It is improper to say I am conscious of the table which is before me. I perceive it, I see it, but do not say I am conscious of it. As that consciousness by which we have a knowledge of the operations of our own minds, is a different power from that by which we perceive external objects, and as these different powers have different names in our language, and, I believe, in all languages, a Philosopher ought carefully to preserve this distinction, and never to confound things so different in their nature.

8. *Conceiving, imagining, and apprehending*, are commonly used as synonymous in our language, and signify the same thing which the Logicians call simple apprehension. This is an operation of the mind different from all those we have mentioned. Whatever we perceive, whatever we remember, whatever we are conscious of, we have a full persuasion or conviction of its existence. But we may conceive or imagine what has no existence, and what we firmly believe to have no existence. What never had an existence cannot be remembered; what has no existence *at present* cannot be the object of perception or of consciousness; but what never had, nor has any existence, may be conceived. Every man knows that it is as easy to conceive a winged horse or a centaur, as it is to conceive a horse or a man. Let it be observed therefore, that to *conceive*, to *imagine*, to *apprehend*, when taken in the proper sense, signify an act of the mind which implies no belief or judgment at all. It is an act of the mind by which nothing is affirmed or denied, and which therefore can neither be true nor false.

But there is another and a very different meaning of those words, so common and so well authorised in language, that it cannot easily be avoided; and on that account we ought to be the more on our guard, that we be not misled by the ambiguity. Politeness and good-breeding lead men, on most occasions, to express their opinions with modesty, especially when they differ from others whom they ought to respect. Therefore, when we would express our opinion modestly, instead of saying, "This is my opinion," or, "this is my judgment," which has the air of dogmatism, we say, "I conceive it to be thus, I imagine or apprehend it to be thus;" which is understood as a modest declaration of our judgment. In like manner, when anything is said which we take to be impossible, we say, "We cannot conceive it," meaning, that we cannot believe it.

Thus we see that the words *conceive, imagine, apprehend*, have two meanings, and are used to express two operations of the mind, which ought never to be confounded. Sometimes they express simple apprehension, which implies no judgment at all; sometimes they express judgment or opinion. This ambiguity ought to be attended to, that we may not impose upon ourselves or others in the use of them. The ambiguity is indeed remedied in a great measure by their construction. When

they are used to express simple apprehension, they are followed by a noun in the *accusative case*, which signifies the object conceived. But when they are used to express opinion or judgment, they are commonly followed by a verb in the *infinitive mood*. "I conceive an Egyptian pyramid." This implies no judgment. "I conceive the Egyptian pyramids to be the most ancient monuments of human art." This implies judgment. When the words are used in the last sense, the thing conceived must be a proposition, because judgment cannot be expressed but by a proposition. When they are used in the first sense, the thing conceived may be no proposition, but a simple term only, as a pyramid, an obelisk. Yet it may be observed, that even a proposition may be simply apprehended without forming any judgment of its truth or falsehood: For it is one thing to conceive the meaning of a proposition; it is another thing to judge it to be true or false.

Although the distinction between simple apprehension and every degree of assent or judgment, be perfectly evident to every man who reflects attentively on what passes in his own mind; although it is very necessary, in treating of the powers of the mind, to attend carefully to this distinction; yet, in the affairs of common life, it is seldom necessary to observe it accurately. On this account we shall find, in all common languages, the words which express one of those operations frequently applied to the other. To think, to suppose, to imagine, to conceive, to apprehend are the words we use to express simple apprehension; but they are all frequently used to express judgment. Their ambiguity seldom occasions any inconvenience in the common affairs of life, for which language is framed. But it has perplexed Philosophers, in treating of the operations of the mind, and will always perplex them, if they do not attend accurately to the different meanings which are put upon those words on different occasions.

9. Most of the operations of the mind, from their very nature, must have objects to which they are directed, and about which they are employed. He that perceives, must perceive something; and that which he perceives is called the object of his perception. To perceive, without having any object of perception, is impossible. The mind that perceives, the object perceived, and the *operation* of perceiving that object, are distinct things, and are distinguished in the structure of all languages. In this sentence, "I see, or perceive the moon;" *I* is the person or *mind*; the active verb *see* denotes the operation of that mind; and the *moon* denotes the object. What we have said of perceiving, is equally applicable to most operations of the mind. Such operations are, in all languages, expressed by active transitive verbs: And we know, that, in all languages, such verbs require a thing or person, which is the agent, and a noun following in an oblique case, which is the object. Whence it is evident, that all mankind, both those who have contrived language, and those who use it with understanding, have distinguished these three things as different, to wit, the operations of the mind, which are expressed by active verbs, the mind itself, which is the nominative to those verbs, and the object, which is, in the oblique case, governed by them.

It would have been unnecessary to explain so obvious a distinction, if some systems of philosophy had not confounded it. Mr HUME's system, in particular, confounds all distinction between the operations of the mind and their objects. When he speaks of the ideas of memory, the ideas of imagination, and the ideas of sense, it is

often impossible, from the tenor of his discourse, to know whether, by those ideas, he means the operations of the mind, or the objects about which they are employed. And indeed, according to his system, there is no distinction between the one and the other.

A Philosopher is, no doubt, entitled to examine even those distinctions that are to be found in the structure of all languages; and, if he is able to show that there is no foundation for them in the nature of the things distinguished; if he can point out some prejudice common to mankind which has led them to distinguish things that are not really different; in that case, such a distinction may be imputed to a vulgar error, which ought to be corrected in philosophy. But when, in his first setting out, he takes it for granted, without proof, that distinctions found in the structure of all languages, have no foundation in nature; this surely is too fastidious a way of treating the common sense of mankind. When we come to be instructed by Philosophers, we must bring the old light of common sense along with us, and by it judge of the new light which the Philosopher communicates to us. But when we are required to put out the old light altogether, that we may follow the new, we have reason to be on our guard. There may be distinctions that have a real foundation, and which may be necessary in philosophy, which are not made in common language, because not necessary in the common business of life. But I believe no instance will be found of a distinction made in all languages, which has not a just foundation in nature.

10. The word *idea* occurs so frequently in modern philosophical writings upon the mind, and is so ambiguous in its meaning, that it is necessary to make some observations upon it. There are chiefly two meanings of this word in modern authors, a popular and a philosophical.

First, In popular language, *idea* signifies the same thing as conception, apprehension, notion. To have an idea of anything is to conceive it. To have a distinct idea, is to conceive it distinctly. To have no idea of it is not to conceive it at all. It was before observed, that conceiving or apprehending has always been considered by all men as an act or operation of the mind, and on that account has been expressed in all languages by an active verb. When, therefore, we use the phrase of having ideas, in the popular sense, we ought to attend to this, that it signifies precisely the same thing which we commonly express by the active verbs conceiving or apprehending.

When the word *idea* is taken in this popular sense, no man can possibly doubt whether he has ideas. For he that doubts must think, and to think is to have ideas.

Sometimes, in popular language, a man's ideas signify his opinions. The ideas of ARISTOTLE, or of EPICURUS, signify the opinions of these Philosophers. What was formerly said of the words *imagine*, *conceive*, *apprehend*, that they are sometimes used to express judgment, is no less true of the word *idea*. This signification of the word seems indeed more common in the French language than in English. But it is found in this sense in good English authors, and even in Mr LOCKE. Thus we see, that having *ideas*, taken in the popular sense, has precisely the same meaning with conceiving, imagining, apprehending, and has likewise the same ambiguity. It may, therefore, be doubted, whether the introduction of this word into popular discourse, to signify the operation of conceiving or apprehending, was at all necessary. *For, first*, We have, as has been shown, several words which are either originally

English, or have been long naturalized, that express the same thing; why therefore should we adopt a Greek word in place of these, any more than a French or a German word? Besides, the words of our own language are less ambiguous. For the word *idea* has, for many ages, been used by Philosophers as a term of art; and in the different systems of Philosophers means very different things.

Secondly, According to the philosophical meaning of the word *idea*, it does not signify that act of the mind which we call thought or conception, but some object of thought. Ideas, according to Mr Locke, (whose very frequent use of this word has probably been the occasion of its being adopted into common language), “are nothing but the immediate objects of the mind in thinking.”³ But of those objects of thought called Ideas, different sects of Philosophers have given a very different account. BRUCKERUS, a learned German, wrote a whole book giving the history of ideas.⁴

The most ancient system we have concerning ideas, is that which is explained in several dialogues of PLATO, and which many ancient, as well as modern writers, have ascribed to PLATO as the inventor. But it is certain that PLATO had his doctrine upon this subject, as well as the name *idea*, from the school of PYTHAGORAS. We have still extant a tract of TIMÆUS the Locrian, a Pythagorean Philosopher, concerning the soul of the world, in which we find the substance of PLATO’s doctrine concerning ideas.⁵ They were held to be eternal, uncreated, and immutable forms or models, according to which the Deity made every species of things that exists, of an eternal matter. Those Philosophers held, that there are three first principles of all things. *First*, An eternal matter, of which all things were made. *Secondly*, Eternal and immaterial forms or ideas, according to which they were made; and, *thirdly*, An efficient cause, the Deity, who made them. The mind of man, in order to its being fitted for the contemplation of these eternal ideas, must undergo a certain purification, and be weaned from sensible things. The eternal ideas are the only object of science; because, the objects of sense being in a perpetual flux, there can be no real knowledge with regard to them.

The Philosophers of the Alexandrian school, commonly called *the latter Platonists*, made some change upon the system of the ancient Platonists with respect to the eternal ideas. They held them not to be a principle distinct from the Deity, but to be the conceptions of things in the divine understanding, the natures and essences of all things being perfectly known to him from eternity.

It ought to be observed, that the Pythagoreans and the Platonists, whether elder or latter, made the eternal ideas to be objects of science only, and of abstract contemplation, not the objects of sense. And in this the ancient system of eternal ideas differs from the modern one of Father MALEBRANCHE. He held in common with other modern Philosophers, that no external thing is perceived by us immediately, but only by ideas: But he thought, that the ideas, by which we perceive an

³ [John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.1.8, p. 47.]

⁴ [Johann Jacob Brucker, *Historia philosophica doctrinae de ideis* (Augsburg, 1723).]

⁵ [Timaeus Locrus, *De anima mundi* (probably first century AD; Venice, 1555).]

external world, are the ideas of the Deity himself, in whose mind the ideas of all things past, present, and future, must have been from eternity; for the Deity being intimately present to our minds at all times, may discover to us as much of his ideas as he sees proper, according to certain established laws of nature: And in his ideas, as in a mirror, we perceive whatever we do perceive of the external world.

Thus we have three systems, which maintain, that the ideas, which are the immediate objects of human knowledge, are eternal and immutable, and existed before the things which they represent. There are other systems, according to which, the ideas, which are the immediate objects of all our thoughts, are posterior to the things which they represent, and derived from them. We shall give some account of these; but as they have gradually sprung out of the ancient Peripatetic system, it is necessary to begin with some account of it.

ARISTOTLE taught, that all the objects of our thought enter at first by the senses; and, since the sense cannot receive external material objects themselves, it receives their species; that is, their images or forms, without the matter; as wax receives the form of the seal without any of the matter of it. These images or forms, impressed upon the senses, are called *sensible species*, and are the objects only of the sensitive part of the mind: But, by various internal powers, they are retained, refined, and spiritualized, so as to become objects of memory and imagination, and, at last, of pure intellection. When they are objects of memory and of imagination, they get the name of *phantasms*. When, by farther refinement, and being stripped of their particularities, they become objects of science; they are called *intelligible species*: So that every immediate object, whether of sense, of memory, of imagination, or of reasoning, must be some phantasm or species in the mind itself.

The followers of ARISTOTLE, especially the schoolmen, made great additions to this theory, which the author himself mentions very briefly, and with an appearance of reserve. They entered into large disquisitions with regard to the sensible species, what kind of things they are; how they are sent forth by the object, and enter by the organs of the senses; how they are preserved and refined by various agents, called internal senses; concerning the number and offices of which they had many controversies. But we shall not enter into a detail of these matters.

The reason of giving this brief account of the theory of the Peripatetics, with regard to the immediate objects of our thoughts, is, because the doctrine of modern Philosophers concerning ideas is built upon it. Mr LOCKE, who uses this word so very frequently, tells us, that he means the same thing by it, as is commonly meant by *species* or *phantasm*.⁶ GASSENDI, from whom LOCKE borrowed more than from any other author, says the same.⁷ The words *species* and *phantasm*, are terms of art in the Peripatetic system, and the meaning of them is to be learned from it.

⁶[See Locke, *Essay*, 1.1.8, p. 47.]

⁷[For example, “that image which is present to the mind, indeed is thrust before it almost, when we think, is customarily referred to by several other names; for it is also called idea, form [Lat. *Species*], and, borrowing the name from the action, concept, preconception, anticipation, innate concept (in as much as it has been acquired previously), conception, and phantasm, in as much as it has its root in the phantasy or imaginative faculty;” (*Pierre Gassendi’s Institutio Logica* (1658),

The theory of DEMOCRITUS and EPICURUS, on this subject, was not very unlike to that of the Peripatetics. They held, that all bodies continually send forth slender films or spectres from their surface, of such extreme subtlety, that they easily penetrate our gross bodies, or enter by the organs of sense, and stamp their image upon the mind. The sensible species of ARISTOTLE were mere forms without matter. The spectres of EPICURUS were composed of a very subtle matter.

Modern Philosophers, as well as the Peripatetics and Epicureans of old, have conceived, that external objects cannot be the immediate objects of our thought; that there must be some image of them in the mind itself, in which, as in a mirror, they are seen. And the name *idea*, in the philosophical sense of it, is given to those internal and immediate objects of our thoughts. The external thing is the remote or mediate object; but the idea, or image of that object in the mind, is the immediate object, without which we could have no perception, no remembrance, no conception of the mediate object.

When, therefore, in common language, we speak of having an idea of anything, we mean no more by that expression, but thinking of it. The vulgar allow, that this expression implies a mind that thinks; an act of that mind which we call thinking, and an object about which we think. But, besides these three, the Philosopher conceives that there is a fourth, to wit, the *idea*, which is the immediate object. The idea is in the mind itself, and can have no existence but in a mind that thinks; but the remote or mediate object may be something external, as the sun or moon; it may be something past or future; it may be something which never existed. This is the philosophical meaning of the word *idea*; and we may observe, that this meaning of that word is built upon a philosophical opinion: For, if Philosophers had not believed that there are such immediate objects of all our thoughts in the mind, they would never have used the word *idea* to express them.

I shall only add on this article, that, although I may have occasion to use the word *idea* in this philosophical sense in explaining the opinions of others, I shall have no occasion to use it in expressing my own, because I believe *ideas*, taken in this sense, to be a mere fiction of Philosophers. And, in the popular meaning of the word, there is the less occasion to use it, because the English words *thought*, *notion*, *apprehension*, answer the purpose as well as the Greek word *idea*; with this advantage, that they are less ambiguous. There is, indeed, a meaning of the word *idea*, which I think most agreeable to its use in ancient philosophy, and which I would willingly adopt, if use, the arbiter of language, did permit. But this will come to be explained afterwards.

11. The word *impression* is used by Mr HUME, in speaking of the operations of the mind, almost as often as the word *idea* is by Mr LOCKE. What the latter calls ideas, the former divides into two classes; one of which he calls impressions, the other ideas. I shall make some observations upon Mr HUME's explication of *that* word, and then consider the proper meaning of it in the English language.

A Critical Edition with Translation and Introduction by Howard Jones (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), Part 1, "On Simple Imagination," pp. 83–84.]

“We may divide, (says Mr HUME, *Essays*, vol. 2 p. 18.), all the perceptions of the human mind into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity. The less lively and forcible are commonly denominated thoughts or ideas. The other species want a name in our language, and in most others; let us therefore use a little freedom, and call them impressions. By the term *impressions*, then, I mean all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. Ideas are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned.”⁸

This is the explication Mr HUME has given in his *Essays* of the term *impressions*, when applied to the mind; and his explication of it, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, is to the same purpose.

Disputes about words belong rather to Grammarians than to Philosophers; but Philosophers ought not to escape censure when they corrupt a language, by using words in a way which the purity of the language will not admit. I find fault with Mr HUME’s phraseology in the words I have quoted,

First, Because he gives the name of perceptions to every operation of the mind. Love is a perception, hatred a perception. Desire is a perception, will is a perception; and, by the same rule, a doubt, a question, a command is a perception. This is an intolerable abuse of language, which no Philosopher has authority to introduce.

Secondly, When Mr HUME says, *that we may divide all the perceptions of the human mind into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their degrees of force and vivacity*, the manner of expression is loose and unphilosophical. To differ in species is one thing; to differ in degree is another. Things which differ in degree only must be of the same species. It is a maxim of common sense, admitted by all men, that *greater* and *less* do not make a change of species. The same man may differ in the degree of his force and vivacity, in the morning and at night; in health and in sickness: But this is so far from making him a different species, that it does not so much as make him a different individual. To say, therefore, that two different classes, or species of perceptions, are distinguished by the degrees of their force and vivacity, is to confound a difference of *degree* with a difference of *species*, which every man of understanding knows how to distinguish.

Thirdly, We may observe, that this author, having given the general name of perception to all the operations of the mind, and distinguished them into two classes or species, which differ only in degree of force and vivacity, tells us, that he gives the name of impressions to all our more lively perceptions; to wit, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. There is great confusion in this account of the meaning of the word *impression*. When I see, this is an *impression*. But why has not the author told us, whether he gives the name of *impression* to the object seen, or to that act of my mind by which I see it? When I see the full moon, the full moon is one thing, my perceiving it is another thing. Which of these two things does he call an impression? We are left to guess this; nor does all that this author writes about impressions clear this point. Everything he says tends to darken it, and to lead

⁸[David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, eds L.A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), First *Enquiry*, Sect. 2, p. 18.]

us to think, that the full moon which I see, and my seeing it, are not two things, but one and the same thing.

The same observation may be applied to every other instance the author gives to illustrate the meaning of the word *impression*. “When we hear, when we feel, when we love, when we hate, when we desire, when we will.”⁹ In all these acts of the mind there must be an *object*, which is heard, or felt, or loved, or hated, or desired, or willed. Thus, for instance, I love my country. This, says Mr HUME, is an *impression*. But what is the *impression*? Is it my country, or is it the affection I bear to it? I ask the Philosopher this question; but I find no answer to it. And when I read all that he has *written* on this subject, I find this word *impression* sometimes used to signify an operation of the mind, sometimes the object of the operation; but, for the most part, it is a vague and undetermined word that signifies both.

I know not whether it may be considered as an apology for such abuse of words, in an Author who understood the language so well, and used it with so great propriety in writing on other subjects, that Mr HUME’s system, with regard to the mind, required a language of a different structure from the common; or, if expressed in plain English, would have been too shocking to the common sense of mankind. To give an instance or two of this. If a man receives a present on which he puts a high value; if he sees and handles it, and puts it in his pocket, this, says Mr HUME, is an *impression*. If the man only dreams that he received such a present, this is an *idea*. Wherein lies the difference between this impression and this idea; between the dream and the reality? They are different classes or species says Mr HUME: so far all men will agree with him. But he adds, that they are distinguished only by different degrees of force and vivacity. Here he insinuates a tenet of his own, in contradiction to the common sense of mankind. Common sense convinces every man, that a lively dream is no nearer to a reality than a faint one; and that if a man should dream that he had all the wealth of Croesus, it would not put one farthing in his pocket. It is impossible to fabricate arguments against such undeniable principles, without confounding the meaning of words.

In like manner, if a man would persuade me that the moon which I see, and my seeing it, are not two things, but one and the same thing, he will answer his purpose less by arguing this point in plain English, than by confounding the two under one name, such as that of an *impression*: For such is the power of words, that if we can be brought to the habit of calling two things that are connected, *by the same name*, we are the more easily led to believe them to be one and the same thing.

Let us next consider the proper meaning of the word *impression* in English, that we may see how far it is fit to express either the operations of the mind, or their objects.

When a figure is stamped upon a body by pressure, that figure is called an *impression*, as the impression of a seal on wax, of printing types, or of a copperplate, on paper. This seems now to be the literal sense of the word; the effect borrowing its name from the cause. But by metaphor or analogy, like most other words, its meaning is extended, so as to signify any change produced in a body by the operation of

⁹[Hume, *First Enquiry*, Sect. 2, p. 18.]

some external cause. A blow of the hand makes no impression on a stonewall; but a battery of cannon may. The moon raises a tide in the ocean, but makes no impression on rivers and lakes.

When we speak of making an impression on the mind, the word is carried still farther from its literal meaning; use, however, which is the arbiter of language, authorises this application of it. As when we say that admonition and reproof make little impression on those who are confirmed in bad habits. The same discourse delivered in one way, makes a strong impression on the hearers; delivered in another way, it makes no impression at all.

It may be observed, that, in such examples, an impression made on the mind always implies some change of purpose or will; some new habit produced, or some former habit weakened; some passion raised or allayed. When such changes are produced by persuasion, example, or any external cause, we say that such causes make an impression upon the mind. But when things are seen or heard, or apprehended, without producing any passion or emotion, we say that they make no impression.

In the most extensive sense, an impression is a change produced in some passive subject by the operation of an external cause. If we suppose an active being to produce any change in itself by its own active power, this is never called an impression. It is the act or operation of the being itself, not an impression upon it. From this it appears, that to give the name of an impression to any effect produced in the mind, is to suppose that the mind does not act at all in the production of that effect. If seeing, hearing, desiring, willing, be operations of the mind, they cannot be impressions. If they be impressions, they cannot be operations of the mind. In the structure of all languages, they are considered as acts or operations of the mind itself, and the names given them imply this. To call them impressions, therefore, is to trespass against the structure, not of a particular language only, but of all languages.

If the word *impression* be an improper word to signify the operations of the mind, it is at least as improper to signify their objects; for would any man be thought to speak with propriety, who should say that the sun is an impression, that the earth and the sea are impressions?

It is commonly believed, and taken for granted, that every language, if it be sufficiently copious in words, is equally fit to express all opinions, whether they be true or false. I apprehend, however, that there is an exception to this general rule, which deserves our notice. There are certain common opinions of mankind, upon which the structure and grammar of all languages are founded. While these opinions are common to all men, there will be a great similarity in all languages that are to be found on the face of the earth. Such a similarity there really is; for we find in all languages the same parts of speech, the distinction of nouns and verbs, the distinction of nouns into adjective and substantive, of verbs into active and passive. In verbs we find like tenses, moods, persons and numbers. There are general rules of grammar, the same in all languages. This similarity of structure in all languages shows an uniformity among men in those opinions upon which the structure of language is founded.

If, for instance, we should suppose that there was a nation who believed that the things which we call attributes might exist without a subject, there would be in their language no distinction between adjectives and substantives, nor would it be a rule with them that an adjective has no meaning, unless when joined to a substantive. If there was any nation who did not distinguish between acting and being acted upon, there would in their language be no distinction between active and passive verbs, nor would it be a rule that the active verb must have an agent in the nominative case; but that, in the passive verb, the agent must be in an oblique case.

The structure of all languages is grounded upon common notions, which Mr HUME's philosophy opposes, and endeavours to overturn. This no doubt led him to warp the common language into a conformity with his principles; but we ought not to imitate him in this, until we are satisfied that his principles are built on a solid foundation.

12. Sensation is a name given by Philosophers to an act of mind, which may be distinguished from all others by this, that it has no object distinct from the act itself. Pain of every kind is an uneasy sensation. When I am pained, I cannot say that the pain I feel is one thing, and that my feeling it is another thing. They are one and the same thing, and cannot be disjoined, even in imagination. Pain, when it is not felt, has no existence. It can be neither greater nor less in degree or duration, nor anything else in kind, than it is felt to be. It cannot exist by itself, nor in any subject, but in a sentient being. No quality of an inanimate insentient being can have the least resemblance to it.

What we have said of pain may be applied to every other sensation. Some of them are agreeable, others uneasy, in various degrees. These being objects of desire or aversion, have some attention given to them; but many are indifferent, and so little attended to, that they have no name in any language.

Most operations of the mind, that have names in common language, are complex in their nature, and made up of various ingredients, or more simple acts; which, though conjoined in our constitution, must be disjoined by abstraction, in order to our having a distinct and scientific notion of the complex operation. In such operations, sensation for the most part makes an ingredient. Those who do not attend to the complex nature of such operations, are apt to resolve them into some one of the simple acts of which they are compounded, overlooking the others: And from this cause many disputes have been raised, and many errors have been occasioned with regard to the nature of such operations.

The perception of external objects is accompanied with some sensation corresponding to the object perceived, and such sensations have, in many cases, in all languages, the same name with the external object which they always accompany. The difficulty of disjoining by abstraction, things thus constantly conjoined in the course of nature, and things, which have one and the same name in all languages, has likewise been frequently an occasion of errors in the philosophy of the mind. To avoid such errors, nothing is of more importance than to have a distinct notion of that simple act of the mind which we call *sensation*, and which we have endeavoured to describe. By this means we shall find it more easy to distinguish it from every external object that it accompanies, and from every other act of the mind that

may be conjoined with it. For this purpose, it is likewise of importance, that the name of *sensation* should, in philosophical writings, be appropriated to signify this simple act of the mind, without including anything more in its signification, or being applied to other purposes.

I shall add an observation concerning the word *feeling*. This word has two meanings. *First*, It signifies the perceptions we have of external objects, by the sense of touch. When we speak of feeling a body to be hard or soft, rough or smooth, hot or cold; to feel these things, is to perceive them by touch. They are external things, and that act of the mind by which we feel them, is easily distinguished from the objects felt. *Secondly*, The word *feeling* is used to signify the same thing as *sensation*, which we have just now explained; and, in this sense, it has no object; the feeling and the thing felt are one and the same.

Perhaps between feeling, taken in this last sense, and sensation, there may be this small difference, that sensation is most commonly used to signify those feelings which we have by our external senses and bodily appetites, and all our bodily pains and pleasures. But there are *feelings* of a nobler nature accompanying our affections, our moral judgments, and our determinations in matters of taste, to which the word *sensation* is less properly applied.

I have premised these observations on the meaning of certain words that frequently occur in treating of this subject, for two reasons, *first*, That I may be the better understood when I use them; and *secondly*, That those who would make any progress in this branch of science, may accustom themselves to attend very carefully to the meaning of words that are used in it. They may be assured of this, that the ambiguity of words, and the vague and improper application of them, have thrown more darkness upon this subject, than the subtlety and intricacy of things.

When we use common words, we ought to use them in the sense in which they are most commonly used by the best and purest writers in the language; and, when we have occasion to enlarge or restrict the meaning of a common word, or give it more precision than it has in common language, the reader ought to have warning of this, otherwise we shall impose upon ourselves and upon him.

A very respectable writer has given a good example of this kind, by explaining in an appendix to his *Elements of Criticism*, the terms he has occasion to use.¹⁰ In that appendix, most of the words are explained on which I have been making observations. And the explication I have given, I think, agrees, for the most part, with his.

Other words that need explication shall be explained as they occur.

Essay 1, Chapter 2: Principles taken for granted

As there are words common to Philosophers and to the vulgar, which need no explication; so there are principles common to both, which need no proof, and which do not admit of direct proof.

One who applies to any branch of science must be come to years of understanding, and consequently must have exercised his reason, and the other powers of his mind,

¹⁰[Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 5th edition, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1774), 2:505–536.]

in various ways. He must have formed various opinions and principles by which he conducts himself in the affairs of life. Of those principles, some are common to all men, being evident in themselves, and so necessary in the conduct of life, that a man cannot live and act according to the rules of common prudence without them.

All men that have common understanding agree in such principles, and consider a man as lunatic or destitute of common sense, who denies, or calls them in question. Thus, if any man were found of so strange a turn as not to believe his own eyes; to put no trust in his senses, nor have the least regard to their testimony; would any man think it worthwhile to reason gravely with such a person, and, by argument, to convince him of his error? Surely no wise man would. For before men can reason together, they must agree in first principles; and it is impossible to reason with a man who has no principles in common with you.

There are, therefore, common principles, which are the foundation of all reasoning, and of all science. Such common principles seldom admit of direct proof, nor do they need it. Men need not to be taught them; for they are such as all men of common understanding know; or such, at least, as they give a ready assent to, as soon as they are proposed and understood.

Such principles, when we have occasion to use them in science, are called *axioms*. And, although it be not absolutely necessary, yet it may be of great use, to point out the principles or axioms on which a science is grounded.

...

6. I take it for granted that, in most operations of the mind, there must be an object distinct from the operation itself. I cannot see, without seeing something. To see without having any object of sight is absurd. I cannot remember, without remembering something. The thing remembered is past, while the remembrance of it is present; and therefore the operation and the object of it must be distinct things. The operations of our minds are denoted, in all languages, by active transitive verbs, which, from their construction in grammar, require not only a person or agent, but likewise an object of the operation. Thus the verb "know" denotes an operation of mind. From the general structure of language, this verb requires a person; "I know," "you know," or "he knows." But it requires no less a noun in the accusative case, denoting the thing known; for he that knows, must know something; and to know, without having any object of knowledge, is an absurdity too gross to admit of reasoning.

7. We ought likewise to take for granted, as first principles, things wherein we find a universal agreement, among the learned and unlearned, in the different nations and ages of the world. A consent of ages and nations, of the learned and vulgar, ought, at least, to have great authority, unless we can show some prejudice, as universal as that consent is, which might be the cause of it. Truth is one, but error is infinite. There are many truths so obvious to the human faculties, that it may be expected that men should universally agree in them. And this is actually found to be the case with regard to many truths, against which we find no dissent, unless perhaps that of a few sceptical Philosophers, who may justly be suspected, in such cases, to differ from the rest of mankind, through pride, obstinacy, or some favourite passion. Where there is such universal consent in things not deep nor intricate, but

which lie, as it were, on the surface, there is the greatest presumption that can be, that it is the natural result of the human faculties; and it must have great authority with every sober mind that loves truth. "For the majority usually drift as the current of their own natural inclinations carries them," (CIC. *de Off.* 1.41).¹¹

Perhaps it may be thought, that it is impossible to collect the opinions of all men upon any point whatsoever, and, therefore, that this maxim can be of no use. But there are many cases wherein it is otherwise. Who can doubt, for instance, whether mankind have, in all ages, believed the existence of a material world, and that those things which they see and handle are real, and not mere illusions and apparitions? Who can doubt, whether mankind have universally believed, that everything that begins to exist, and every change that happens in nature must have a cause? Who can doubt, whether mankind have been universally persuaded that there is a right and a wrong in human conduct? Some things which, in certain circumstances, they ought to do, and other things which they ought not to do? The universality of these opinions, and of many such that might be named, is sufficiently evident, from the whole tenor of men's conduct, as far as our acquaintance reaches, and from the records of history, in all ages and nations, that are transmitted to us.

There are other opinions that appear to be universal, from what is common in the structure of all languages, ancient and modern, polished and barbarous. Language is the express image and picture of human thoughts; and, from the picture, we may often draw very certain conclusions with regard to the original. We find in all languages the same parts of speech, nouns substantive and adjective, verbs active and passive, varied according to the tenses of past, present, and future; we find adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions. There are general rules of syntax common to all languages. This uniformity in the structure of language shows a certain degree of uniformity in those notions upon which the structure of language is grounded.

We find, in the structure of all languages, the distinction of acting and being acted upon, the distinction of action and agent, of quality and subject, and many others of the like kind; which shows, that these distinctions are founded in the universal sense of mankind. We shall have frequent occasion to argue from the sense of mankind expressed in the structure of language; and therefore it was proper here to take notice of the force of arguments drawn from this topic.

8. I need hardly say, that I shall also take for granted such facts as are attested to the conviction of all sober and reasonable men, either by our senses, by memory, or by human testimony. Although some writers on this subject have disputed the authority of the senses, of memory, and of every human faculty; yet we find, that such persons, in the conduct of life, in pursuing their ends, or in avoiding dangers, pay the same regard to the authority of their senses, and other faculties, as the rest of mankind. By this they give us just ground to doubt of their candour in their professions of scepticism.

This, indeed, has always been the fate of the few that have professed scepticism, that, when they have done what they can to discredit their senses, they find themselves, after all, under a necessity of trusting to them. Mr HUME has been so candid

¹¹ [Cicero, *De officiis*, trans. W. Miller (London: William Heinemann, 1961), 1.41.147, p. 151.]

as to acknowledge this; and it is no less true of those who have not shown the same candour: For I never heard that any sceptic run his head against a post, or stepped into a kennel, because he did not believe his eyes.

Upon the whole, I acknowledge that we ought to be cautious, that we do not adopt opinions as first principles, which are not entitled to that character. But there is surely the least danger of men being imposed upon in this way, when such principles openly lay claim to the character, and are thereby fairly exposed to the examination of those who may dispute their authority. We do not pretend, that those things that are laid down as first principles may not be examined, and that we ought not to have our ears open to what may be pleaded against their being admitted as such. Let us deal with them, as an upright judge does with a witness who has a fair character. He pays a regard to the testimony of such a witness, while his character is unimpeached. But if it can be shown that he is suborned, or that he is influenced by malice or partial favour, his testimony loses all its credit, and is justly rejected.

...

Essay 1, Chapter 5: Of the Proper Means of Knowing the Operations of the Mind

Since we ought to pay no regard to hypotheses, and to be very suspicious of analogical reasoning, it may be asked from what source must the knowledge of the mind, and its faculties, be drawn?

I answer, the chief and proper source of this branch of knowledge is accurate reflection upon the operations of our own minds. Of this source we shall speak more fully, after making some remarks upon two others that may be subservient to it. The first of them is attention to the structure of language.

The language of mankind is expressive of their thoughts, and of the various operations of their minds. The various operations of the understanding, will, and passions, which are common to mankind, have various forms of speech corresponding to them in all languages, which are the signs of them, and by which they are expressed: And a due attention to the signs may, in many cases, give considerable light to the things signified by them.

There are in all languages modes of speech, by which men signify their judgment, or give their testimony; by which they accept or refuse; by which they ask information or advice; by which they command, or threaten, or supplicate; by which they plight their faith in promises or contracts. If such operations were not common to mankind, we should not find in all languages forms of speech, by which they are expressed.

All languages, indeed, have their imperfections; they can never be adequate to all the varieties of human thought; and therefore things may be really distinct in their nature, and capable of being distinguished by the human mind, which are not distinguished in common language. We can only expect, in the structure of languages, those distinctions which all mankind in the common business of life have occasion to make.

There may be peculiarities in a particular language, of the causes of which we are ignorant, and from which, therefore, we can draw no conclusion. But whatever we

find common to all languages, must have a common cause; must be owing to some common notion or sentiment of the human mind.

We gave some examples of this before, and shall here add another. All languages have a plural number in many of their nouns; from which we may infer, that all men have notions, not of individual things only, but of attributes, or things which are common to many individuals; for no individual can have a plural number.

...

Essay 1, Chapter 8: Of Social Operations of Mind

There is another division of the powers of the mind, which, though it has been, ought not to be overlooked by writers on this subject, because it has a real foundation in nature. Some operations of our minds, from their very nature, are *social*, others are *solitary*.

By the first, I understand such operations as necessarily suppose an intercourse with some other intelligent being. A man may understand and will; he may apprehend, and judge, and reason, though he should know of no intelligent being in the universe besides himself. But, when he asks information, or receives it; when he bears testimony, or receives the testimony of another; when he asks a favour, or accepts one; when he gives a command to his servant, or receives one from a superior: when he plights his faith in a promise or contract; these are acts of social intercourse between intelligent beings, and can have no place in solitude. They suppose understanding and will; but they suppose something more, which is neither understanding nor will; that is, society with other intelligent beings. They may be called intellectual, because they can only be in intellectual beings: But they are neither simple apprehension, nor judgment, nor reasoning, nor are they any combination of these operations.

To ask a question, is as simple an operation as to judge or to reason; yet it is neither judgment, nor reasoning, nor simple apprehension, nor is it any composition of these. Testimony is neither simple apprehension, nor judgment, nor reasoning. The same may be said of a promise, or of a contract. These acts of mind are perfectly understood by every man of common understanding; but, when Philosophers attempt to bring them within the pale of their divisions, by analysing them, they find inexplicable mysteries, and even contradictions, in them. One may see an instance of this, of many that might be mentioned, in Mr HUME's *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, sect. 3, part 2, note, near the end.¹²

The attempts of Philosophers to reduce the social operations under the common philosophical divisions, resemble very much the attempts of some Philosophers to reduce all our social affections to certain modifications of self-love. The author of our being intended us to be social beings, and has, for that end, given us social intellectual powers, as well as social affections. Both are original parts of our constitution, and the exertions of both no less natural than the exertions of those powers that are solitary and selfish.

¹²[Hume, Second *Enquiry*, Sect. 3, Part 2, pp. 199–201, n.1.]

Our social intellectual operations, as well as our social affections, appear very early in life, before we are capable of reasoning; yet both suppose a conviction of the existence of other intelligent beings. When a child asks a question of his nurse, this act of his mind supposes not only a desire to know what he asks; it supposes likewise a conviction that the nurse is an intelligent being, to whom he can communicate his thoughts, and who can communicate her thoughts to him. How he came by this conviction so early, is a question of some importance in the knowledge of the human mind, and therefore worthy of the consideration of Philosophers. But they seem to have given no attention either to this early conviction, or to those operations of mind which suppose it. Of this we shall have occasion to treat afterwards.

All languages are fitted to express the social as well as the solitary operations of the mind. It may indeed be affirmed, that, to express the former is the primary and direct intention of language. A man, who had no intercourse with any other intelligent being, would never think of language. He would be as mute as the beasts of the field; even more so, because they have some degree of social intercourse with one another, and some of them with man. When language is once learned, it may be useful even in our solitary meditations; and, by clothing our thoughts with words, we may have a firmer hold of them. But this was not its first intention; and the structure of every language shows that it is not intended solely for this purpose.

In every language, a question, a command, a promise, which are social acts, can be expressed as easily and as properly as judgment, which is a solitary act. The expression of the last has been honoured with a particular name; it is called a proposition; it has been an object of great attention to Philosophers; it has been analysed into its very elements of subject, predicate, and copula. All the various modifications of these, and of propositions which are compounded of them, have been anxiously examined in many voluminous tracts. The expression of a question, of a command, or of a promise, is as capable of being analysed as a proposition is; but we do not find that this has been attempted; we have not so much as given them a name different from the operations which they express.

Why have speculative men laboured so anxiously to analyse our solitary operations, and given so little attention to the social? I know no other reason but this, that in the divisions that have been made of the mind's operations, the social have been omitted, and thereby thrown behind the curtain.

In all languages, the second person of verbs, the pronoun of the second person, and the vocative case in nouns, are appropriated to the expression of social operations of mind, and could never have had place in language but for this purpose: Nor is it a good argument against this observation, that, by a rhetorical figure, we sometimes address persons that are absent, or even inanimate beings, in the second person. For it ought to be remembered, that all figurative ways of using words or phrases suppose a natural and literal meaning of them.

...

Essay 5, Chapter 1: Of General Words

The words we use in language are either general words or proper names. Proper names are intended to signify one individual only. Such are the names of men, kingdoms, provinces, cities, rivers, and of every other creature of God, or work of man, which we choose to distinguish from all others of the kind, by a name appropriated to it. All the other words of language are general words, not appropriated to signify any one individual thing, but equally related to many.

Under general words therefore, I comprehend not only those which Logicians call general terms, that is, such general words as may make the subject or the predicate of a proposition, but likewise auxiliaries or accessories, as the learned Mr HARRIS calls them; such as prepositions, conjunctions, articles, which are all general words, though they cannot properly be called general terms.¹³

In every language, rude or polished, general words make the greatest part, and proper names the least. Grammarians have reduced all words to eight or nine classes, which are called parts of speech. Of these there is only one, to wit, that of *nouns*, wherein proper names are found. All *pronouns*, *verbs*, *participles*, *adverbs*, *articles*, *prepositions*, *conjunctions*, and *interjections*, are general words. Of *nouns*, all *adjectives* are general words, and the greater part of *substantives*. Every substantive that has a plural number, is a general word; for no proper name can have a plural number, because it signifies only one individual. In all the 15 books of EUCLID's *Elements*, there is not one word that is not general; and the same may be said of many large volumes.

At the same time it must be acknowledged, that all the objects we perceive are individuals. Every object of sense, of memory, or of consciousness is an individual object. All the good things we enjoy or desire, and all the evils we feel or fear, must come from individuals; and I think we may venture to say, that every creature which God has made, in the heavens above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth, is an individual.

How comes it to pass then, that in all languages general words make the greatest part of the language, and proper names but a very small and inconsiderable part of it?

This seemingly strange phenomenon may, I think, be easily accounted for by the following observations.

First, Though there be a few individuals that are obvious to the notice of all men, and therefore have proper names in all languages; such as the sun and moon, the earth and sea; yet the greatest part of the things to which we think fit to give proper names are local; known perhaps to a village or to a neighbourhood, but unknown to the greater part of those who speak the same language, and to all the rest of mankind. The names of such things being confined to a corner, and having no names answering to them in other languages, are not accounted a part of the language, any more than the customs of a particular hamlet are accounted part of the law of the nation.

¹³[James Harris, *Hermes: Or, A Philosophical Inquiry concerning Language and Universal Grammar* (London, 1751), Book 1, ch. 3 and Book 3, chs 2–3.]

For this reason, there are but few proper names that belong to a language. It is next to be considered why there must be many general words in every language.

Secondly, It may be observed, that every individual object that falls within our view has various attributes; and it is by them that it becomes useful or hurtful to us: We know not the essence of any individual object; all the knowledge we can attain of it is the knowledge of its attributes; its quantity, its various qualities, its various relations to other things, its place, its situation, and motions. It is by such attributes of things only that we can communicate our knowledge of them to others: By their attributes, our hopes or fears from them are regulated; and it is only by attention to their attributes that we can make them subservient to our ends; and therefore we give names to such attributes.

Now all attributes must from their nature be expressed by general words, and are so expressed in all languages. In the ancient philosophy, attributes in general were called by two names which express their nature. They were called *universals*, because they might belong equally to many individuals, and are not confined to one. They were also called *predicables*, because whatever is predicated, that is, affirmed or denied of one subject, may be, of more, and therefore is a universal, and expressed by a general word. A *predicable* therefore signifies the same thing as an attribute, with this difference only, that the first is Latin, the last English. The attributes we find either in the creatures of God, or in the works of men, are common to many individuals. We either find it to be so, or presume it may be so, and give them the same name in every subject to which they belong.

There are not only attributes belonging to individual subjects, but there are likewise attributes of attributes, which may be called secondary attributes. Most attributes are capable of different degrees and different modifications, which must be expressed by general words.

Thus it is an attribute of many bodies to be moved; but motion may be in an endless variety of directions. It may be quick or slow, rectilinear or curvilinear; it may be equable, or accelerated, or retarded.

As all attributes, therefore, whether primary or secondary, are expressed by general words, it follows, that in every proposition we express in language, what is affirmed or denied of the subject of the proposition must be expressed by general words: And that the subject of the proposition may often be a general word, will appear from the next observation.

Thirdly, The same faculties by which we distinguish the different attributes belonging to the same subject, and give names to them, enable us likewise to observe, that many subjects agree in certain attributes, while they differ in others. By this means we are enabled to reduce individuals which are infinite, to a limited number of classes, which are called kinds and sorts; and in the scholastic language *genera* and *species*.

Observing many individuals to agree in certain attributes, we refer them all to one class, and give a name to the class: This name comprehends in its signification not one attribute only, but all the attributes which distinguish that class; and by affirming this name of any individual, we affirm it to have all the attributes which characterize the class: Thus men, dogs, horses, elephants, are so many different

classes of animals. In like manner we marshal other substances, vegetable and inanimate, into classes.

Nor is it only substances that we thus form into classes. We do the same with regard to qualities, relations, actions, affections, passions, and all other things.

When a class is very large, it is divided into subordinate classes in the same manner. The higher class is called a *genus* or kind; the lower a *species* or sort of the higher. Sometimes a species is still subdivided into subordinate species; and this subdivision is carried on as far as is found convenient for the purpose of language, or for the improvement of knowledge.

In this distribution of things into *genera* and *species*, it is evident that the name of the species comprehends more attributes than the name of the genus. The species comprehends all that is in the genus, and those attributes likewise which distinguish that species from others belonging to the same genus; and the more subdivisions we make, the names of the lower become still the more comprehensive in their signification, but the less extensive in their application to individuals.

Hence it is an axiom in logic that the more extensive any general term is, it is the less comprehensive; and on the contrary, the more comprehensive, the less extensive. Thus, in the following series of subordinate general terms, animal, man, Frenchman, Parisian, every subsequent term comprehends in its signification all that is in the preceding, and something more; and every antecedent term extends to more individuals than the subsequent.

Such divisions and subdivisions of things into *genera* and *species* with general names, are not confined to the learned and polished languages; they are found in those of the rudest tribes of mankind. From which we learn, that the invention and the use of general words, both to signify the attributes of things, and to signify the *genera* and *species* of things, is not a subtle invention of Philosophers, but an operation which all men perform by the light of common sense. Philosophers may speculate about this operation, and reduce it to canons and aphorisms; but men of common understanding, without knowing anything of the philosophy of it, can put it in practice; in like manner as they can see objects, and make good use of their eyes, although they know nothing of the structure of the eye, or of the theory of vision.

Every genus, and every species of things, may be either the subject or the predicate of a proposition, nay of innumerable propositions; for every attribute common to the genus or species may be affirmed of it; and the genus may be affirmed of every species, and both genus and species of every individual to which it extends.

Thus of man it may be affirmed, that he is an animal made up of body and mind; that he is of few days, and full of trouble; that he is capable of various improvements in arts, in knowledge, and in virtue. In a word, everything common to the species may be affirmed of man; and of all such propositions, which are innumerable, man is the subject.

Again, of every nation and tribe, and of every individual of the human race that is, or was, or shall be, it may be affirmed that they are men. In all such propositions, which are innumerable, man is the predicate of the proposition.

We observed above an extension and a comprehension in general terms; and that in any subdivision of things the name of the lowest species is most comprehensive,

and that of the highest genus most extensive. I would now observe that, by means of such general terms, there is also an extension and comprehension of propositions, which is one of the noblest powers of language, and fits it for expressing, with great ease and expedition, the highest attainments in knowledge, of which the human understanding is capable.

When the predicate is a *genus* or a *species*, the proposition is more or less comprehensive, according as the predicate is. Thus, when I say that this seal is gold, by this single proposition, I affirm of it all the properties which that metal is known to have. When I say of any man that he is a Mathematician, this appellation comprehends all the attributes that belong to him as an animal, as a man, and as one who has studied mathematics. When I say that the orbit of the planet Mercury is an ellipse, I thereby affirm of that orbit all the properties which APOLLONIUS and other Geometricians have discovered, or may discover, of that species of figure.¹⁴

Again, when the subject of a proposition is a *genus* or a *species*, the proposition is more or less extensive, according as the subject is. Thus when I am taught, that the three angles of a plane triangle are equal to, two right angles, this properly extends to every species of plane triangle, and to every individual plane triangle that did, or does, or can exist.

It is by means of such extensive and comprehensive propositions that human knowledge is condensed, as it were, into a size adapted to the capacity of the human mind, with great addition to its beauty, and without any diminution of its distinctness and perspicuity.

General propositions in science may be compared to the seed of a plant, which, according to some Philosophers, has not only the whole future plant enclosed within it, but the seeds of that plant, and the plants that shall spring from them through all future generations.

But the similitude falls short in this respect, that time and accidents, not in our power, must concur to disclose the contents of the seed, and bring them into our view; whereas the contents of a general proposition may be brought forth, ripened, and exposed to view at our pleasure, and in an instant.

Thus the wisdom of ages, and the most sublime theorems of science, may be laid up, like an Iliad in a nutshell, and transmitted to future generations. And this noble purpose of language can only be accomplished, by means of general words annexed to the divisions and subdivisions of things.

What has been said in this chapter, I think, is sufficient to show, that there can be no language, not so much as a single proposition, without general words; that they must make the greatest part of every language, and that it is by them only that language is fitted to express, with wonderful ease and expedition, all the treasures of human wisdom and knowledge.

Essay 5, Chapter 2: Of General Conceptions

As general words are so necessary in language, it is natural to conclude that there must be general conceptions, of which they are the signs.

¹⁴[*Apollonii Pergaei locorum planorum libri II*, ed. Robert Simson (Glasgow, 1749).]

Words are empty sounds when they do not signify the thoughts of the speaker; and it is only from their signification that they are denominated general. Every word that is spoken, considered merely as a sound, is an individual sound. And it can only be called a general word, because that which it signifies is general. Now, that which it signifies is conceived by the mind both of the speaker and hearer, if the word have a distinct meaning, and be distinctly understood. It is therefore impossible that words can have a general signification, unless there be conceptions in the mind of the speaker, and of the hearer, of things that are general. It is to such that I give the name of general conceptions. And it ought to be observed, that they take this denomination, not from the act of the mind in conceiving, which is an individual act, but from the object, or thing conceived, which is general.

We are therefore here to consider whether we have such general conceptions, and how they are formed.

To begin with the conceptions expressed by general terms, that is by such general words as may be the subject or the predicate of a proposition. They are either attributes of things, or they are *genera* or *species* of things.

It is evident, with respect to all the individuals we are acquainted with, that we have a more clear and distinct conception of their attributes, than of the subject to which those attributes belong.

Take, for instance, any individual body we have access to know, what conception do we form of it? Every man may know this from his consciousness. He will find that he conceives it as a thing that has length, breadth, and thickness, such a figure, and such a colour; that it is hard, or soft, or fluid; that it has such qualities, and is fit for such purposes. If it is a vegetable, he may know where it grew, what is the form of its leaves, and flower, and seed. If an animal, what are its natural instincts, its manner of life, and of rearing its young. Of these attributes belonging to this individual, and numberless others he may surely have a distinct conception; and he will find words in language by which he can clearly and distinctly express each of them.

If we consider, in like manner, the conception we form of any individual person of our acquaintance, we shall find it to be made up of various attributes, which we ascribe to him; such as, that he is the son of such a man, the brother of such another, that he has such an employment or office, has such a fortune, that he is tall or short, well or ill made, comely or ill favoured, young or old, married or unmarried; to this we may add, his temper, his character, his abilities, and perhaps some anecdotes of his history.

Such is the conception we form of individual persons of our acquaintance. By such attributes we describe them to those who know them not; and by such attributes historians give us a conception of the personages of former times. Nor is it possible to do it in any other way.

All the distinct knowledge we have or can attain of any individual is the knowledge of its attributes. For we know not the essence of any individual. This seems to be beyond the reach of the human faculties.

Now, every attribute is what the ancients called a universal. It is, or may be, common to various individuals. There is no attribute belonging to any creature of God

which may not belong to others; and on this account, attributes, in all languages, are expressed by general words.

It appears likewise, from every man's experience, that he may have as clear and distinct a conception of such attributes as we have named, and of innumerable others, as he can have of any individual to which they belong.

Indeed, the attributes of individuals is all that we distinctly conceive about them. It is true, we conceive a subject to which the attributes belong; but of this subject, when its attributes are set aside, we have but an obscure and relative conception, whether it be body or mind.

This was before observed with regard to bodies, *Essay II. ch. 19* to which we refer, and it is no less evident with regard to minds. What is it we call a mind? It is a thinking, intelligent, active being. Granting that thinking, intelligence, and activity are attributes of mind, I want to know what the thing or being is to which these attributes belong? To this question I can find no satisfying answer. The attributes of mind, and particularly its operations, we know clearly; but of the thing itself we have only an obscure notion.

Nature teaches us, that thinking and reasoning are attributes, which cannot exist without a subject; but of that subject I believe the best notion we can form implies little more than that it is the subject of such attributes.

Whether other created beings may have the knowledge of the real essence of created things, so as to be able to deduce their attributes their essence and constitution, or whether this be the prerogative of him who made them, we cannot tell; but it is a knowledge which seems to be quite beyond the reach of the human faculties.

We know the essence of a triangle, and from that essence can deduce its properties. It is a universal, and might have been conceived by the human mind, though no individual triangle had ever existed. It has only what Mr LOCKE calls a nominal essence, which is expressed in its definition. But everything that exists has a real essence, which is above our comprehension; and therefore we cannot deduce its properties or attributes from its nature, as we do in the triangle. We must take a contrary road in the knowledge of God's works, and satisfy ourselves with their attributes as facts, and with the general conviction that there is a subject to which those attributes belong.

Enough, I think, has been said, to show, not only that we may have clear and distinct conceptions of attributes, but that they are the only things, with regard to individuals, of which we have a clear and distinct conception.

The other class of general terms are those that signify the *genera* and *species* into which we divide and subdivide things. And if we be able to form distinct conceptions of attributes, it cannot surely be denied that we may have distinct conceptions of *genera* and *species* because they are only collections of attributes which we conceive to exist in a subject, and to which we give a general name. If the attributes comprehended under that general name be distinctly conceived, the thing meant by the name must be distinctly conceived. And the name may justly be attributed to every individual which has those attributes.

Thus, I conceive distinctly what it is to have wings, to be covered with feathers, to lay eggs. Suppose then that we give the name of *bird* to every animal that has

these three attributes. Here undoubtedly my conception of a bird is as distinct as my notion of the attributes which are common to this species: And if this be admitted to be the definition of a bird, there is nothing I conceive more distinctly. If I had never seen a bird, and can but be made to understand the definition, I can easily apply it to every individual of the species without danger of mistake.

When things are divided and subdivided by men of science, and names given to the *genera* and *species*, those names are defined. Thus the genera and species of plants, and of other natural bodies, are accurately defined by the writers in the various branches of natural history; so that, to all future generations, the definition will convey distinct notion of the genus or species defined.

There are, without doubt, many words signifying genera and species of things, which have a meaning somewhat vague, and indistinct; so that those who speak the same language do not always use them in the same sense. But if we attend to the cause of the indistinctness, we shall find that it is not owing to their being general terms, but to this, that there is no definition of them that has authority. Their meaning, therefore, has not been learned by a definition, but by a kind of induction, by observing to what individuals they are applied by those who understand the language. We learn by habit to use them as we see others do, even when we have not a precise meaning annexed to them. A man may know, that to certain individuals they may be applied with propriety; but whether they can be applied to certain other individuals, he may be uncertain, either from want of good authorities, or from having contrary authorities, which leave him in doubt.

Thus, a man may know that when he applies the name of beast to a lion or a tiger, and the name of bird to an eagle or a turkey, he speaks properly. But whether a bat be a bird or a beast, he may be uncertain. If there was any accurate definition of a beast and of a bird that was of sufficient authority, he could be at no loss.

It is said to have been sometimes a matter of dispute, with regard to a monstrous birth of a woman, whether it was a man or not. Although this be in reality a question about the meaning of a word, it may be of importance, on account of the privileges which laws have annexed to the human character. To make such laws perfectly precise, the definition of a man would be necessary, which I believe legislators have seldom or never thought fit to give. It is, indeed, very difficult to fix a definition of so common a word, and the cases wherein it would be of any use so rarely occur, that perhaps it may be better, when they do occur, to leave them to the determination of a judge or of a jury, than to give a definition, which might be attended with unforeseen consequences.

A genus or species, being a collection of attributes, conceived to exist in one subject, a definition is the only way to prevent any addition or diminution of its ingredients in the conception of different persons; and when there is no definition that can be appealed to as a standard, the name will hardly retain the most perfect precision in its signification.

From what has been said, I conceive it is evident, that the words which signify genera and species of things have often as precise and definite a signification as any words whatsoever; and that when it is otherwise, their want of precision is not owing to their being general words but to other causes.

Having shown that we may have a perfectly clear and distinct conception of the meaning of general terms, we may, I think, take it for granted, that the same may be said of other general words, such as prepositions, conjunctions, articles. My design at present being only to show, that we have general conceptions no less clear and distinct than those of individuals, it is sufficient for this purpose, if this appears with regard to the conceptions expressed by general terms. To conceive the meaning of a general word, and to conceive that which it signifies, is the same thing. We conceive distinctly the meaning of general terms, therefore we conceive distinctly that which they signify. But such terms do not signify any individual, but what is common to many individuals; therefore we have a distinct conception of things common to many individuals, that is, we have distinct general conceptions.

We must here beware of the ambiguity of the word *conception*, which sometimes signifies the act of the mind in conceiving, sometimes the thing conceived, which is the object of that act. If the word be taken in the first sense, I acknowledge that every act of the mind is an individual act; the universality, therefore, is not in the act of the mind, but in the object, or thing conceived. The thing conceived is an attribute common to many subjects, or it is a genus or species common to many individuals.

Suppose I conceive a triangle, that is, a plain figure terminated by three right lines. He that understands this definition distinctly has a distinct conception of a triangle. But a triangle is not an individual; it is a species. The act of my understanding in conceiving it is an individual act, and has a real existence; but the thing conceived is general, and cannot exist without other attributes, which are not included in the definition.

Every triangle that really exists must have a certain length of sides and measure of angles; it must have place and time. But the definition of a triangle includes neither existence, nor any of those attributes; and therefore they are not included in the conception of a triangle, which cannot be accurate if it comprehend more than the definition.

Thus I think it appears to be evident, that we have general conceptions that are clear and distinct, both of attributes of things, and of genera and species of things.

Essay 5, Chapter 3: Of General Conceptions formed by Analysing Objects

We are next to consider the operations of the understanding, by which we are enabled to form general conceptions.

These appear to me to be three; *first*, The resolving or analysing a subject into its known attributes, and giving a name to each attribute, which name shall signify that attribute, and nothing more.

Secondly, The observing one or more such attributes to be common to many subjects. The first is by Philosophers called *abstraction*; the second may be called *generalising*; but both are commonly included under the name of *abstraction*.

It is difficult to say which of them goes first, or whether they are not so closely connected that neither can claim the precedence. For on the one hand, to perceive an agreement between two or more objects in the same attribute, seems to require nothing more than to compare them together. A savage, upon seeing snow and chalk, would find no difficulty in perceiving that they have the same colour. Yet, on the

other hand, it seems impossible that he should observe this agreement without abstraction, that is, distinguishing in his conception the colour, wherein those two objects agree, from the other qualities wherein they disagree.

It seems therefore, that we cannot generalise without some degree of abstraction; but I apprehend we may abstract without generalising. For what hinders me from attending to the whiteness of the paper before me, without applying that colour to any other object. The whiteness of this individual object is an abstract conception, but not a general one, while applied to one individual only. These two operations, however, are subservient to each other; for the more attributes we observe and distinguish in any one individual, the more agreements we shall discover between it and other individuals.

A *third* operation of the understanding, by which we form abstract conceptions, is the combining into one whole a certain number of those attributes of which we have formed abstract notions, and giving a name to that combination. It is thus we form abstract notions of the genera and species of things. These three operations we shall consider in order.

With regard to abstraction, strictly so called, I can perceive nothing in it that is difficult either to be understood or practised. What can be more easy than to distinguish the different attributes which we know to belong to a subject? In a man, for instance, to distinguish his size, his complexion, his age, his fortune, his birth, his profession, and twenty other things that belong to him. To think and speak of these things with understanding is surely within the reach of every man endowed with the human faculties.

There may be distinctions that require nice discernment, or an acquaintance with the subject that is not common. Thus, a critic in painting may discern the style of RAPHAEL or TITIAN, when another man could not. A lawyer may be acquainted with many distinctions in crimes, and contracts, and actions, which never occurred to a man who has not studied law. One man may excel another in the talent of distinguishing, as he may in memory or in reasoning; but there is a certain degree of this talent, without which a man would have no title to be considered as a reasonable creature.

It ought likewise to be observed, that attributes may with perfect ease be distinguished and disjoined in our conception, which cannot be actually separated in the subject. Thus, in a body, I can distinguish its solidity from its extension, and its weight from both. In extension I can distinguish length, breadth, and thickness, yet none of these can be separated from the body, or from one another. There may be attributes belonging to a subject, and inseparable from it, of which we have no knowledge, and consequently no conception; but this does not hinder our conceiving distinctly those of its attributes which we know.

Thus, all the properties of a circle are inseparable from the nature of a circle, and may be demonstrated from its definition; yet a man may have a perfectly distinct notion of a circle, who knows very few of those properties of it which mathematicians have demonstrated and a circle probably has many properties which no mathematician ever dreamed of.

It is therefore certain, that attributes, which in their nature are absolutely inseparable from their subject, and from one another, may be disjoined in our conception; one cannot exist without the other, but one can be conceived without the other.

Having considered abstraction, strictly so called, let us next consider the operation of generalising, which is nothing but the observing one or more attributes to be common to many subjects.

If any man can doubt whether there be attributes that are really common to many individuals, let him consider whether there be not many men that are above 6 ft high, and many below it; whether there be not many men that are rich, and many more that are poor; whether there be not many that were born in Britain, and many that were born in France. To multiply instances of this kind would be to affront the reader's understanding. It is certain therefore, that there are innumerable attributes that are really common to many individuals; and if this be what the schoolmen called *universale a parte rei*, we may affirm with certainty, that there are such universals.

There are some attributes expressed by general words, of which this may seem more doubtful. Such are the qualities which are inherent in their several subjects. It may be said that every subject has its own qualities, and that which is the quality of one subject cannot be the quality of another subject. Thus the whiteness of the sheet of paper upon which I write cannot be the whiteness of another sheet, though both are called white. The weight of one guinea is not the weight of another guinea, though both are said to have the same weight.

To this I answer, that the whiteness of this sheet is one thing, whiteness is another; the conceptions signified by these two forms of speech are as different as the expressions: The first signifies an individual quality really existing, and is not a general conception, though it be an abstract one: The second signifies a general conception, which implies no existence, but may be predicated of everything that is white, and in the same sense. On this account, if one should say, that the whiteness of this sheet is the whiteness of another sheet, every man perceives this to be absurd; but when he says both sheets are white, this is true and perfectly understood. The conception of whiteness implies no existence; it would remain the same, though everything in the universe that is white were annihilated.

It appears therefore, that the general names of qualities, as well as of other attributes, are applicable to many individuals in the same sense, which cannot be if there be not general conceptions signified by such names.

If it should be asked, how early, or at what period of life, men begin to form general conceptions? I answer, As soon as a child can say, with understanding, that he has two brothers or two sisters; as soon as he can use the plural number, he must have general conceptions; for no individual can have a plural number.

As there are not two individuals in nature that agree in everything, so there are very few that do not agree in some things. We take pleasure from very early years in observing such agreements. One great branch of what we call *wit*, which when innocent, gives pleasure to every good natured man, consists in discovering unexpected agreements in things. The author of HUDIBRAS could discern a property common to the morning and a boiled lobster, that both turn from black to red.

SWIFT could see something common to wit and an old cheese.¹⁵ Such unexpected agreements may show wit; but there are innumerable agreements of things which cannot escape the notice of the lowest understanding; such as agreements in colour, magnitude, figure, features, time, place, age, and so forth. These agreements are the foundation of so many common attributes, which are found in the rudest languages.

The ancient Philosophers called these universals, or predicables and endeavoured to reduce them to five classes; to wit, genus, species, specific difference, properties, and accidents. Perhaps there may be more classes of universals or attributes, for enumerations, so very general, are seldom complete; but every attribute, common to several individuals, may be expressed by a general term, which is the sign of a general conception.

How prone men are to form general conceptions we may see from the use of metaphor, and of the other figures of speech grounded on similitude. Similitude is nothing else than an agreement of the objects compared in one or more attributes; and if there be no attributes common to both, there can be no similitude.

The similitudes and analogies between the various objects that nature presents to us are infinite and inexhaustible. They not only please, when displayed by the poet or wit in works of taste, but they are highly useful in the ordinary communication of our thoughts and sentiments by language. In the rude languages of barbarous nations, similitudes and analogies supply the want of proper words to express men's sentiments, so much, that in such languages there is hardly a sentence without a metaphor; and if we examine the most copious and polished languages, we shall find that a great proportion of the words and phrases which are accounted the most proper, may be said to be the progeny of metaphor.

As foreigners, who settle in a nation as their home, come at last to be incorporated, and lose the denomination of foreigners, so words and phrases, at first borrowed and figurative, by long use become denizens in the language, and lose the denomination of figures of speech. When we speak of the extent of knowledge, the steadiness of virtue, the tenderness of affection, the perspicuity of expression, no man conceives these to be metaphorical expressions; they are as proper as any in the language: Yet it appears upon the very face of them, that they must have been metaphorical in those who used them first; and that it is by use and prescription that they have lost the denomination of figurative, and acquired a right to be considered as proper words. This observation will be found to extend to a great part, perhaps the greatest part, of the words of the most perfect languages. Sometimes the name of an individual is given to a general conception, and thereby the individual in a manner generalised. As when the Jew Shylock, in SHAKESPEARE, says, A Daniel come to judgment; yea, a Daniel!¹⁶ In this speech, a Daniel is an attribute, or an universal.

¹⁵[Samuel Butler, *Hudibras* (1663–1680), ed. J. Wilders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), Part 2, canto 2, lines 31–2, p. 128; Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), ed. H. Davis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), Sect. E, Introduction, p. 40.]

¹⁶[Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1, line 439.]

The character of Daniel, as a man of singular wisdom, is abstracted from his person, and considered as capable of being attributed to other persons.

Upon the whole, these two operations of abstracting and generalising appear common to all men that have understanding. The practice of them is, and must be, familiar to every man that uses language; but it is one thing to practice them, and another to explain how they are performed; as it is one thing to see, another to explain how we see. The first is the province of all men, and is the natural and easy operation of the faculties which God has given us. The second is the province of Philosophers, and though a matter of no great difficulty in itself, has been much perplexed by the ambiguity of words and still more by the hypotheses of Philosophers.

Thus when I consider a billiard ball, its colour is one attribute, which I signify by calling it white; its figure is another, which is signified by calling it spherical; the firm cohesion of its parts is signified by calling it hard; its recoiling, when it strikes a hard body, is signified by its being called elastic; its origin, as being part of the tooth of an elephant, is signified by calling it ivory; and its use by calling it a billiard ball.

The words, by which each of those attributes is signified, have one distinct meaning, and in this meaning are applicable to many individuals. They signify not any individual thing, but attributes common to many individuals; nor is it beyond the capacity of a child to understand them perfectly, and to apply them properly to every individual in which they are found.

As it is by analysing a complex object into its several attributes that we acquire our simplest abstract conceptions, it may be proper to compare this analysis with that which a chemist makes of a compounded body into the ingredients which enter into its composition; for although there be such an analogy between these two operations, that we give to both the name of analysis or resolution, there is at the same time so great a dissimilitude in some respects, that we may be led into error, by applying to one what belongs to the other.

It is obvious, that the chemical analysis is an operation of the hand upon matter, by various material instruments. The analysis we are now explaining is purely an operation of the understanding, which requires no material instrument, nor produces any change upon any external thing; we shall therefore call it the intellectual or mental analysis.

In the chemical analysis, the compound body itself is the subject analysed. A subject so imperfectly known, that it may be compounded of various ingredients, when to our senses it appears perfectly simple, and even when we are able to analyse it into the different ingredients of which it is composed, we know not how or why the combination of those ingredients produces such a body.

Thus pure sea salt is a body, to appearance, as simple as any in nature. Every the least particle of it, discernible by our senses is perfectly similar to every other particle in all its qualities. The nicest taste, the quickest eye, can discern no mark of its being made up of different ingredients; yet, by the chemical art, it can be analysed into an acid and an alkali, and can be again produced by the combination of those two ingredients. But how this combination produces sea salt no man has been able to discover. The ingredients are both as unlike the compound as any bodies we

know. No man could have guessed before the thing was known that sea salt is compounded of those two ingredients; no man could have guessed, that the union of those two ingredients should produce such a compound as sea salt. Such in many cases are the phenomena of the chemical analysis of a compound body.

If we consider the intellectual analysis of an object, it is evident that nothing of this kind can happen; because the thing analysed is not an external object imperfectly known; it is a conception of the mind itself. And to suppose that there can be anything in a conception that is not conceived is a contradiction.

The reason of observing this difference between those two kinds of analysis is, that some philosophers, in order to support their systems, have maintained, that a complex idea may have the appearance of the most perfect simplicity, and retain no similitude of any of the simple ideas of which it is compounded; just as a white colour may appear perfectly simple, and retain no similitude to any of the seven primary colours of which it is compounded; or as a chemical composition may appear perfectly simple, and retain no similitude to any of the ingredients.

From which those philosophers have drawn this important conclusion, that a cluster of the ideas of sense, properly combined, may make the idea of a mind; and that all the ideas, which Mr LOCKE calls ideas of reflection, are only compositions of the ideas which we have by our five senses. From this the transition is easy, that if a proper composition of the ideas of matter may make the idea of a mind, then a proper composition of matter itself may make a mind, and that man is only a piece of matter curiously formed.

In this curious system, the whole fabric rests upon this foundation, that a complex idea, which is made up of various simple ideas may appear to be perfectly simple, and to have no marks of composition, because a compound body may appear to our senses to be perfectly simple.

Upon this fundamental proposition of this system I beg leave to make two remarks.

1. Supposing it to be true, it affirms only what *may be*. We are indeed in most cases very imperfect judges of what may be. But this we know, that were we ever so certain that a thing may be, this is no good reason for believing that it really is. A *may be* is a mere hypothesis, which may furnish matter of investigation, but is not entitled to the least degree of belief. The transition from what may be to what really is, is familiar and easy to those who have a predilection for a hypothesis; but to a man who seeks truth without prejudice or prepossession, it is a very wide and difficult step, and he will never pass from the one to the other, without evidence not only that the thing may be, but that it really is.

2. As far as I am able to judge, this, which it is said may be, cannot be. That a complex idea should be made up of simple ideas; so that to a ripe understanding reflecting upon that idea, there should be no appearance of composition, nothing similar to the simple ideas of which it is compounded, seems to me to involve a contradiction. The idea is a conception of the mind. If anything more than this is meant by the idea, I know not what it is; and I wish both to know what it is, and to have proof of its existence. Now that there should be anything in the conception of an object which is not conceived, appears to me as manifest a contradiction, as that

there should be an existence, which does not exist, or that a thing should be conceived, and not conceived at the same time.

But, say these philosophers, a white colour is produced by the composition of the primary colours, and yet has no resemblance to any of them. I grant it. But what can be inferred from this with regard to the composition of ideas? To bring this argument home to the point, they must say, that because a white colour is compounded of the primary colours, therefore the idea of a white colour is compounded of the ideas of the primary colours. This reasoning, if it was admitted, would lead to innumerable absurdities. An opaque fluid may be compounded of two or more pellucid fluids. Hence we might infer with equal force, that the idea of an opaque fluid may be compounded of the idea of two or more pellucid fluids.

Nature's way of compounding bodies, and our way of compounding ideas, are so different in many respects, that we cannot reason from the one to the other, unless it can be found that ideas are combined by fermentations and elective attractions, and may be analysed in a furnace by the force of fire and of menstruums. Until this discovery be made, we must hold those to be simple ideas, which upon the most attentive reflection, have no appearance of composition; and those only to be the ingredients of complex ideas, which by attentive reflection, can be perceived to be contained in them.

If the idea of mind, and its operations, may be compounded of the ideas of matter and its qualities, why may not the idea of matter be compounded of the ideas of mind? There is the same evidence for the last *may be* as for the first. And why may not the idea of sound be compounded of the ideas of colour; or the idea of colour of those of sound? Why may not the idea of wisdom be compounded of ideas of folly; or the idea of truth of ideas of absurdity? But we leave these mysterious *maybes* to them that have faith to receive them.

Essay 5, Chapter 5: Observations concerning the Names given to our General Notions

Having now explained, as well as I am able, those operations of the mind by which we analyse the objects which Nature presents to our observation, into their simple attributes, giving a general name to each, and by which we combine any number of such attributes into one whole, and give a general name to that combination, I shall offer some observations relating to our general notions, whether simple or complex.

I apprehend that the names given to them by modern philosophers have contributed to darken our speculations about them, and to render them difficult and abstruse.

We call them general notions, conceptions, ideas. The words notion and conception, in their proper and most common sense, signify the act or operation of the mind in conceiving an object. In a figurative sense, they are sometimes put for the object conceived. And I think they are rarely, if ever, used in this figurative sense, except when we speak of what we call general notions or general conceptions. The word idea, as it is used in modern times, has the same ambiguity.

Now, it is only in the last of these senses, and not in the first, that we can be said to have general notions or conceptions. The generality is in the object conceived,

and not in the act of the mind by which it is conceived. Every act of the mind is an individual act, which does or did exist. But we have power to conceive things which neither do nor ever did exist. We have power to conceive attributes without regard to their existence. The conception of such an attribute is a real and individual act of the mind; but the attribute conceived is common to many individuals that do or may exist. We are too apt to confound an object of conception with the conception of that object. But the danger of doing this must be much greater when the object of conception is called a conception.

The Peripatetics gave to such objects of conception the names of universals, and of predicables. Those names had no ambiguity, and I think were much more fit to express what was meant by them than the names we use.

It is for this reason that I have so often used the word attribute, which has the same meaning with predicable. And for the same reason, I have thought it necessary repeatedly to warn the reader, that when, in compliance with custom, I speak of general notions or general conceptions, I always mean things conceived, and not the act of the mind in conceiving them.

The Pythagoreans and Platonists gave the name of *ideas* to such general objects of conception, and to nothing else. As we borrowed the word *idea* from them, so that it is now familiar in all the languages of Europe, I think it would have been happy if we had also borrowed their meaning, and had used it only to signify what they meant by it. I apprehend we want an unambiguous word to distinguish things barely conceived from things that exist. If the word *idea* was used for this purpose only, it would be restored to its original meaning, and supply that want.

We may surely agree with the Platonists in the meaning of the word *idea*, without adopting their theory concerning ideas. We need not believe, with them, that ideas are eternal and self-existent, and that they have a more real existence than the things we see and feel.

They were led to give existence to ideas, from the common prejudice that everything which is an object of conception must really exist; and having once given existence to ideas, the rest of their mysterious system about ideas followed of course; for things merely conceived, have neither beginning nor end, time nor place; they are subject to no change; they are the patterns and exemplars according to which the Deity made everything that he made; for the work must be conceived by the artificer before it is made.

These are undeniable attributes of the ideas of PLATO, and if we add to them that of real existence, we have the whole mysterious system of Platonic ideas. Take away the attribute of existence, and suppose them not to be things that exist, but things that are barely conceived, and all the mystery is removed; all that remains is level to the human understanding.

The word *essence* came to be much used among the schoolmen, and what the Platonists called the idea of a species, they called its essence. The word *essentia* is said to have been made by CICERO; but even his authority could not give it currency, until long after his time. It came at last to be used, and the schoolmen fell into much the same opinions concerning essences, as the Platonists held concerning ideas. The essences of things were held to be uncreated, eternal, and immutable.

Mr LOCKE distinguishes two kinds of essence, the real and the nominal. By the real essence he means the constitution of an individual, which makes it to be what it is. This essence must begin and end with the individual to which it belongs. It is not therefore a Platonic idea. But what Mr LOCKE calls the nominal essence is the constitution of a species, or that which makes an individual to be of such a species; and this is nothing but that combination of attributes which is signified by the name of the species, and which we conceive without regard to existence.

The essence of a species therefore is what the Platonists called the idea of the species.

If the word *idea* be restricted to the meaning which it bore among the Platonists and Pythagoreans, many things which Mr LOCKE has said with regard to ideas will be just and true, and others will not.

It will be true, that most words (indeed all general words) are the signs of ideas; but proper names are not; they signify individual things, and not ideas. It will be true not only that there are general and abstract ideas, but that all ideas are general and abstract. It will be so far from the truth, that all our simple ideas are got immediately, either from sensation, or from consciousness; that no simple idea is got by either, without the cooperation of other powers. The objects of sense, of memory, and of consciousness, are not ideas but individuals; they must be analysed by the understanding into their simple ingredients, before we can have simple ideas; and those simple ideas must be again combined by the understanding, in distinct parcels with names annexed, in order to give us complex ideas: It will be probable not only that brutes have no abstract ideas, but that they have no ideas at all.

I shall only add, that the learned author of the origin and progress of language, and perhaps his learned friend Mr HARRIS, are the only modern authors I have met with, who restrict the word *idea* to this meaning.¹⁷ Their acquaintance with ancient philosophy led them to this. What pity is it that a word, which in ancient philosophy had a distinct meaning, and which, if kept to that meaning, would have been a real acquisition to our language, should be used by the moderns in so vague and ambiguous a manner, that it is more apt to perplex and darken our speculations, than to convey useful knowledge.

From all that has been said about abstract and general conceptions, I think we may draw the following conclusions concerning them.

First, That it is by abstraction that the mind is furnished with all its most simple, and most distinct notions. The simplest objects of sense appear both complex and indistinct, until by abstraction they are analysed into their more simple elements; and the same may be said of the objects of memory and of consciousness.

Secondly, Our most distinct complex notions are those that are formed by compounding the simple notions got by abstraction.

Thirdly, Without the powers of abstracting and generalising, it would be impossible to reduce things into any order and method, dividing them into genera and species.

¹⁷[James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, *Ancient Metaphysics: Or The Science of Universals*, 6 vols (Edinburgh, 1779–1799), vol. 1, ch. 1; James Harris, *Hermes*, Book 3, ch. 4.]

Fourthly, Without those powers there could be no definition; for definition can only be applied to universals, and no individual can be defined.

Fifthly, Without abstract and general notions there can neither be reasoning nor language.

Sixthly, As brute animals show no signs of being able to distinguish the various attributes of the same subject; of being able to class thing into genera and species; to define, to reason, or to communicate their thoughts by artificial signs, as men do; I must think with Mr LOCKE that they have not the powers of abstracting and generalising; and that in this particular, Nature has made a specific difference between them and the human species.