

Philosophy 355: Contemporary Philosophy
Fall 2008
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9am - 10:15am

Hamilton College
Russell Marcus
rmarcus1@hamilton.edu

John Locke, on the inverted spectrum
from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.XXXII.15

Though one man's idea of blue should be different from another's. Neither would it carry any imputation of falsehood to our simple ideas, if by the different structure of our organs it were so ordered, that the same object should produce in several men's minds different ideas at the same time; v.g. if the idea that a violet produced in one man's mind by his eyes were the same that a marigold produced in another man's, and vice versa. For, since this could never be known, because one man's mind could not pass into another man's body, to perceive what appearances were produced by those organs; neither the ideas hereby, nor the names, would be at all confounded, or any falsehood be in either. For all things that had the texture of a violet, producing constantly the idea that he called blue, and those which had the texture of a marigold, producing constantly the idea which he as constantly called yellow, whatever those appearances were in his mind; he would be able as regularly to distinguish things for his use by those appearances, and understand and signify those distinctions marked by the name blue and yellow, as if the appearances or ideas in his mind received from those two flowers were exactly the same with the ideas in other men's minds. I am nevertheless very apt to think that the sensible ideas produced by any object in different men's minds, are most commonly very near and undiscernibly alike. For which opinion, I think, there might be many reasons offered: but that being besides my present business, I shall not trouble my reader with them; but only mind him, that the contrary supposition, if it could be proved, is of little use, either for the improvement of our knowledge, or conveniency of life, and so we need not trouble ourselves to examine it.