Class 15 - March 8
Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
Book III (AW 377-386)

I. Meanings of Words

Our final topic in studying Locke concerns language.
Locke believes that words stand for ideas in our minds.
This claim is controversial, though, because we ordinarily take many words to stand for objects outside of our minds.
We normally take 'this table' to refer to the table, not to my idea of the table.
Locke holds what we can call a representational theory of mind on which ideas are like pictures in the mind.
Terms stand for ideas, which somehow correspond to objects like chairs, people, or even circles.

Here is an argument for Locke's claim, drawn from the first two chapters of Book III, which are not reprinted in Ariew and Watkins.

LL
LL1. Society depends on our ability to communicate our ideas, so words must be able to stand for ideas.
LL2. Since my ideas precede my communication, words must refer to my ideas before they could refer to anything else.
LL3. If words refer both to my ideas and to something else (e.g. your idea, or an external object), then they would be ambiguous.
LL4. But, words are not ordinarily ambiguous.
LL5. So, words ordinarily do not stand for something other than my ideas.
LLC. So, words stand for my ideas.

Locke claims that while names refer to our own ideas, we just suppose them to refer to other people's ideas, or for external objects.

> [It is] perverting the use of words, and bring[ing] unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds (§III.II.5).

While particular terms correspond to simple ideas, there are too many particular things for them all to have particular names.
So we have to use general terms.

1. Human capacity is limited (III.IIII.2, AW 377a).
2. You don't have names for my ideas and I don't have names for yours (III.IIII.3, AW 377a-b).
3. Science depends on generality (III.IIII.4, AW 377b).

Thus, we use both particular names, for particular ideas when it is useful.
And we use general terms for communication and for science.

II. General Terms and Abstract Ideas

General terms are the foundation not only for empirical science, but for formal sciences like mathematics and logic that motivated (in part) the rationalists to posit innate ideas.
We get knowledge of mathematical objects, which we do not experience, by a process of abstraction.
We see doughnuts and frisbees, for examples, and focus only on their common shape to arrive at the idea of a circle.
We leave out other properties, form an abstract idea, and coin a general term to stand for it.

Abstraction is required in other areas, as well.
We experience extended things, but not extension itself.
Any ideas of extension, size, or shape must arise from abstraction.

Let us consider this process of abstraction in a bit more detail.
We start with our sense experiences, of several chairs, for example.
We notice that they have common properties: backs, seats, legs.
We give a name to whatever has these common properties.
This name, ‘chair’, is abstract, in the sense that it doesn’t refer to a particular chair.
Instead, it is a general term which applies to any chair.
The same process yields ‘table’.

We can consider the commonalities among tables and chairs, and sofas and desks.
This yields an even more general term, ‘furniture’.
We have abstracted again.

The same process which yields ‘chair’ gives us other terms like ‘house’ and ‘apartment building’.
We can abstract again to get ‘domicile’.
Similarly, we arrive at names like ‘animal’, and ‘person’.
All of the objects we have considered are extended.
We can abstract again, and arrive at a term, ‘extension’.
Similarly, we get the terms ‘motion’ and ‘substance’.

Ideas of bodies and motion are the foundations of physical science.
A scientist uses ‘motion’, for example, when he asserts ‘$v = \Delta s/\Delta t$’, that velocity is equal to the change in displacement over time.
The laws of physical science include unavoidable uses of general terms.

Lastly, we can abstract to the term, ‘physical object’.
A progression of abstraction leads us from particular terms for individual sensations to general terms for bodies.

In sum, we have a term ‘bodies’.
The term stands for an abstract idea, ‘bodies’.
An idea is a representation of an external object.
The term ‘bodies’, which we have constructed to stand for an abstract idea, refers to bodies, which are physical objects.

To account for mathematics, we abstract as well, from frisbees and pizzas to circles, and from collections of objects to numbers.

Both the use of general terms and our ability to remember the distinct parts of a proof are essential to mathematics.

> If...the perception that the same *ideas* will eternally have the same habitudes and relations is not a sufficient ground of knowledge, there could be no knowledge of general propositions in mathematics, for no mathematical demonstration would be any other than particular (IV.I.9, AW 388b).

The abstract generality of mathematical claims supports their certainty.
We abstract the triangularity of triangular-shaped drawings from their specific properties: the chalk, the slight curve in one side, the location on the board.
We ignore some properties and focus on others, like the triangularity.
General terms, and the abstract ideas to which they refer, apply to particular objects, but only to certain aspects of those objects.

> [A general] *idea* [of man] is made, not by any new addition, but only...by leaving out the shape, and some other properties signified by the name *man*, and retaining only a body, with life, sense, and spontaneous motion, comprehended under the name *animal* (III.IIII.8, AW 378a).

When we leave out the particular elements of our ideas and focus only on the mathematical elements, we can attain perfect generality.
This generality yields the certainty of mathematics, since mathematical claims are only about our abstract ideas, and not about the external world.

> [The mathematician] is certain all his knowledge concerning such *ideas* is real knowledge, because intending things no further than they agree with his *ideas*, he is sure what he knows concerning those figures, when they have barely an *ideal existence* in his mind, will hold true of them also when they have real existence in matter, his consideration being barely of those figures which are the same, wherever or however they exist (IV.IV.6, AW 404b).

Furthermore, ethical ideas are, like mathematical ones, based on abstractions and thus liable to certainty, as I noted earlier.

> For certainty being but the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our *ideas*; and demonstration nothing but the perception of such agreement, by the intervention of other *ideas* or mediums, our moral *ideas*, as well as mathematical, being archetypes themselves, and so adequate and complete *ideas*; all the agreement or disagreement which we shall find in them will produce real knowledge, as well as in mathematical figures (IV.IV.7, AW 404b).

III. Nominalism

'Nominalism' is the claim that some words are merely names and do not denote real objects or properties.
We are all nominalists about fictional objects, like the Easter Bunny.
Some people are nominalists about numbers.
Locke is a nominalist about color and other secondary properties.

Locke is also a nominalist about the referents of abstract ideas.
General terms refer to abstract ideas, but abstract ideas are not real.

> Universality does not belong to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence, even those words and *ideas* which in their signification are general. When therefore we quit particulars, the generals that rest are only creatures of our own making, their general nature being nothing but the capacity they are put into by the understanding of signifying or representing many particulars. For the signification they have is nothing but a relation that, by the mind of man, is added to them (III.IIII.11, AW 379a).

Similarly, Locke does not have much to say, positively, about essences.
Since we do not have sense experience of the essence of an object, there is little to be said.
Mainly, he says that the essence of a thing is that which makes it what it is.

> The real internal, but generally, in substances, unknown constitution of things on which their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their *essence* (III.III.15, AW 380a).

To arrive at an idea of essence, we must generalize from particular sensation, and form an abstract idea.
But, strictly speaking, essences, being abstract ideas, are not real, either.

> That which is *essential* belongs to it as a condition, by which it is of this or that sort; but take away the consideration of its being ranked under the name of some abstract *idea*, and then there is nothing necessary to it, nothing inseparable from it (III.VI.6, AW 383b).

Again, Locke is a nominalist about essences.

Still, for all his nominalism, we are not supposed to think that Locke denigrates mathematical or moral knowledge.

> All the discourses of the mathematicians about the squaring of a circle, conic sections, or any other part of mathematics, *do not concern* the *existence* of any of those figures, but their demonstrations, which depend on their *ideas*, are the same, whether there is any square or circle existing in the world or not. In the same manner the truth and certainty of *moral* discourses abstract from the lives of men and the existence of those virtues in the world of which they treat (IV.IV.8, AW 405a).

In contrast, our knowledge of the external world, the causes of our sensations and the laws that govern physical interactions, contains deep mysteries, inexplicable absent something like a rationalist's principle of sufficient reason.

> I think not only that it becomes the modesty of philosophy not to pronounce magisterially where we want that evidence that can produce knowledge, but also that it is of use to us to discern how far our knowledge does reach, for the state we are at present in, not being that of vision, we must in many things content ourselves with faith and probability (IV.III.6, AW 394a).