



---

## WORDS AND MEANINGS

**Mortimer Adler**

1 of 2

**1**

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

When a baby learns to speak and later to read, or when we learn a foreign language, marks and sounds (let us use the word "notations" to cover both) that were at first meaningless become meaningful. A meaningful notation is a word. Notations can be meaningless, but there are no meaningless words.

Another fact with which we are all acquainted is that most words have multiple meanings. One and the same word can have a wide variety of meanings. In addition, in the course of time, a word can lose one meaning and gain another—a new meaning.

A dictionary is the reference book we use when we wish to ascertain the various meanings of a particular word. The great dictionaries often give us the history of that word—the meanings it once had, but no longer; the new meanings it has recently acquired.

All of this is familiar to all of us. But we seldom stop to ask how that which at first was a meaningless notation acquired the meaning that turned it into a meaningful word— a unit in the vocabulary of a particular language, something to be found in the dictionary of that language. Where did the meaning or meanings acquired by that meaningless notation come from to turn it into a word?

Looking up the word in the dictionary does not answer that question. What you find when you look up a word is a set of other words that purport to state its meaning or meanings. If in that set of words there are one or two the meanings of which you do not know, you can, of course, look them up. What you will find again is another set of words that state their meanings, and either you will understand the meanings of all these words, or you will have to repeat the process of looking them up. If you knew the meanings of all the words in the dictionary, you would, of course, never resort to using it. But even if you did, the dictionary could not help you to find out how any one of the words it contains acquired meaning in the first place.

Let me be sure this is understood. Consider the person who refers to a dictionary to learn the meaning of the notation that was at first glance a strange “word” or just a notation for him and so not yet a word at all. This procedure, while adequate for some notations, cannot be adequate for all. If the person’s only approach to or means of learning a foreign language were a dictionary of that language, and one which used that language exclusively, he could not learn the meaning of any of its words. Only on the condition that he already knows or can somehow learn the meanings of a certain number of the words without the use of the dictionary, can the dictionary become useful as a way of learning the meanings of still other words in that language.

For a child to get to the point at which he can move effectively within the circle of a dictionary, some meaningless notations must have become meaningful words for him—and *became so without*

*the help of a dictionary.* The dictionary, therefore, cannot be the answer to the question of how meaningless marks or sounds become meaningful words.

This is not to dismiss the usefulness of dictionaries. We often learn the meaning of a word that is new and strange by being told in other words that we do understand what that word means. Thus, for example, when a growing child hears the word “kindergarten” for the first time, and asks what it means, he may be quite satisfied with the answer “It is a place where children go to play with one another and to learn.”

If the words in the answer are intelligible to the child, the child is able to add a new word to his vocabulary. A notation that was meaningless to him has become a word by means of a verbal description of the object signified. The answer to the child’s question is like a dictionary definition—a verbal description of the object signified by the word in question. Such descriptions can be reinforced by what are called ostensive definitions—pointing to the object or word.

This, however, does not suffice as a solution to the problem of how meaningless notations become meaningful words for us. It holds for some words, but it cannot hold for all. We do learn the meaning of some words in our vocabularies by understanding the verbal descriptions of the objects they signify. But if we tried to apply that solution to all words, we would be going around in an endless circle that would defeat our search for a solution to the problem.

In what other way than by verbal descriptions can meaningless notations acquire meaning and become words? The answer is by direct acquaintance with the object that the meaningless notation is used to signify.

The simplest example of this is to be found in our learning the meaning of proper names. Whether or not we remember what we were taught in grammar school about the distinction between proper and common names, all of us know the difference between “George Washington” and “man” as names. The first names a unique, singular person—a one and only. The second names a distinct kind of living organism, a kind that includes only certain living organisms and excludes others. Words that name unique, singular objects are proper names; words that name kinds or classes of objects are common names.

I chose “George Washington” as an example of a proper name to make the point that we can learn the meaning of some proper names only by verbal descriptions. None of us has ever been or can be introduced to George Washington. We can have no direct acquaintance with him. We know what his proper name means by being told that it signifies the first President of the United States.

The situation is quite different with other proper names—the names of all the persons in our own families or persons we have been introduced to in the course of our experience. The verbal introduction may be as brief as “Let me introduce you to John Smithers.” But it accompanies your direct acquaintance with the object named. That is how “John Smithers” becomes for you the proper name of the person to whom you have been introduced.

So far, so good. But how do meaningless notations become significant *common*, as contrasted with *proper*, names by direct acquaintance rather than by means of verbal descriptions? Very much in the same way. The baby is told that the animal in his playroom is a dog or a doggie. This may be repeated a number of times. Soon the baby, pointing at the animal, utters “dog” or “doggie” or something that sounds like that. A significant common name has been added to the baby’s vocabulary.

This will have to be confirmed by another step of learning. The baby may, on another occasion, find itself in the presence of another small animal, this time a cat, and call it a doggie. The error of designation must be corrected. Not all small animals are dogs. When the word “cat” has been added to the baby’s vocabulary as a common name that signifies an object quite distinct from dog—both objects with which the baby has been directly acquainted—the two words not only have meaning for the child, but different meanings.

Have we solved the problem now? Not quite. For in the course of the child’s growth, with his education in school and college, and with all the learning that he acquires through a wide variety of experiences, his vocabulary of common names will be greatly expanded. Those same two objects that, in the nursery, he called cat and dog, he will be able to use other common names for, such as “feline,” “canine,” “Persian” and “poodle,” “mammal,” and “quadruped,” “vertebrate,” “domesticated animal,” “pet,” “living organism,” and so on.

If we say that all of these common names acquired their significance through our direct acquaintance with the objects named, we

should be sorely puzzled by the question of how the very same object of acquaintance can produce this extraordinary variety of results. If a meaningless notion gets meaning and becomes a word for us by being imposed on an object with which we are directly acquainted, how can one and the same object with which we are directly acquainted give quite distinct meanings to all the common names we use to refer to it?

The problem is further complicated by the fact that not all of the common names we use refer to objects that we perceive through our senses, such as cats and dogs. Not all signify perceptual objects with which we can have direct acquaintance.

What about such common names as “liberty,” “equality,” “justice,” or “electron, neutron, positron, or “inflation,” “credit,” “tax shelter,” or “mind,” “spirit,” “thought”? None of these is a perceptual object with which we can have direct acquaintance. How in these cases did what must have been at first meaningless notations get meaning and become useful words for us?

Is the answer that here all meanings were acquired by verbal description? That answer we have already seen to be unsatisfactory because it sends us around in an endless circle.

Is the answer that here, too, we have direct acquaintance with the objects named, but acquaintance in other ways than through perception, memory, and imagination that ultimately rests on the use of our senses? If so, what is the nature of that direct acquaintance and what is the character of the objects named, with which we are acquainted by means other than the action of our senses leading to perception, imagination, and memory?

We are now confronted with a problem that modern philosophers have failed to solve because of a number of philosophical mistakes that they have made. Two of the three mistakes that I will report in this chapter and shall try to correct are consequences of the mistakes discussed in the two preceding chapters: one the mistake of treating our ideas—our perceptions, memories, imaginations, and conceptions or thoughts—as objects of which we are directly aware or conscious; the other the mistake of reducing all our cognitive powers to that of our senses and failing to distinguish between the senses and the intellect as quite distinct, though interdependent, ways of apprehending objects.

But before I turn to a consideration of the modern failure to solve the problem of how meaningless notations become words through

acquiring meaning, I must call attention to one further point that should be familiar to all of us when we consider words and meanings.

A meaningful word, a notation with significance, is a sign. A sign functions by presenting to the mind for its attention an object other than itself. Thus, when I utter the word “dog,” you not only hear the word itself, but hearing the word serves to bring before your mind the object thus named.

Not all signs function in this way, especially signs that are not words. We say that clouds signify rain; that smoke signifies fire; that the ringing of the dinner bell signifies the meal is ready. Such signs, unlike words, are signals, whereas words are usually used not as signals, but as designators—signs that refer to the objects they name.

Words can, of course, function as signals as well as signs. “Fire” cried out in a crowded theatre not only designates the object thus named, but also signifies an imminent danger that calls for action. So, too, the word “dinner” shouted from the farmhouse steps to workers in the field functions exactly like the ringing of the dinner bell.

With one slight exception that need not concern us here, all signs are either signals or designators or both at different times when used with different intentions.

What is common to the signs we have so far considered, which are either signals or designators or both, is that they are themselves objects of which we are perceptually aware as well as instruments that function to bring to mind the objects they signify. Let us, then, call all such signals and designators instrumental signs. Their whole being does not consist in signifying. They have perceptible existence in themselves apart from signifying, but they are also instruments for functioning in that way.

The distinction between signs that are only and always signals and signs that are designators whether or not they are also signals will have a direct bearing, as we shall see, on one difference between the human use of signs and the use of signs by other animals. Another difference will turn upon the one way in which animals acquire signs that are designators and the two ways that this happens in the case of human beings.

We will return to this matter in a later section of this chapter, but first, and most important, is the consideration of the problem we have posed about words in human vocabularies that function as signs that are designators. As we shall find, the solution of that problem will involve the discovery of another kind of designative sign, one the whole existence of which consists in signifying.

Like other signs, signs of this special kind present to the mind objects other than themselves. But unlike other signs, they themselves are entities of which we have no awareness whatsoever. They are thus radically distinct from the kind of signs we have called instrumental signs. Let us call them pure or formal signs.

The philosophical mistake to which we now turn consists in the neglect of pure or formal signs in the attempt to explain how meaningless notations get their designative significance and become words in the vocabularies of ordinary human languages.

## 2

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), divided into four books, John Locke devotes the whole of the third book to words and their meanings. Having initially, in the very opening pages of the *Essay*, made the mistake of regarding ideas as the objects that we directly apprehend, or of which we are immediately conscious, he could not avoid a crucial mistake in his effort to explain how words get their meanings.

He was correct in thinking that meaningless notations become meaningful words by our voluntarily imposing them on objects as the names of objects that we apprehend. This, as we have seen, holds for some words, but not for all—only for those the meaning of which for us depends upon our acquaintance with the object named, not for those the meaning of which for us depends upon verbal descriptions of the kind we find in dictionaries.

Locke neglected to observe this distinction between meanings acquired by direct acquaintance and meanings acquired by verbal description. Nevertheless, he was correct in thinking that our voluntary imposition of a meaningless notation upon an object apprehended is the way in which at least some words must acquire their meaning.

His mistake consisted in thinking that ideas are the objects to which *all* meaningful words directly refer and to nothing else. To say this is to say that when an individual uses words referentially,

he is always and only referring to his own ideas and nothing else. “It is perverting the use of words,” Locke wrote, “and brings unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them [words] stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds.”

Locke explicitly denied that individuals can use words to refer to the ideas in the minds of others. He even more firmly denied that individuals can use words to signify the things that exist in reality, their qualities or other attributes, or the events that occur in the world in which they live. We do not have and cannot have any direct awareness of such things. The only objects that we directly apprehend are our own ideas.

While being explicit and firm on these two points, Locke nevertheless realized that this account of how words get meaning and have referential significance completely defeats the purpose that makes language so important in human life—communication. The ideas each individual has in his or her own mind exist in a domain that is completely private. How can two individuals talk to one another about their ideas, if the words each of them uses refer only to his or her own ideas? Even more perplexing is the fact that two individuals cannot talk to one another about the things or events that really exist or occur in the world in which they both live.

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

The simple truth of the matter is that Locke cannot satisfactorily explain the use of language for the purpose of communication about the real world in which all of us live. The effort he makes to do so involves him in a contradiction as self-defeating as the embarrassment he cannot escape in positing the existence of the physical things that, acting on our senses, are the original causes of the ideas that arise in our minds; for, according to his own tenets, he has no way of apprehending such physical things and no basis for a belief in their existence.

Locke’s efforts to explain what for him should be inexplicable involves a second step in his account of the significance of words. Our ideas being representations of the things that exist in reality,



they themselves signify the things they represent. Our ideas, in other words, are signs that refer to things, things we ourselves cannot directly apprehend. That being so (though there is no way of explaining how it is so), Locke's second step permits him to say that words, directly signifying our own ideas, indirectly refer to the real things that our ideas signify. Hence we can use words to talk to one another not about our own ideas, but about the real world in which we live.

### 3

If, as was argued in Chapter 1, the ideas in our minds are not that which we directly apprehend but rather that by which we apprehend whatever we do apprehend, all of Locke's contradictions and embarrassments can be avoided. The objects to which we give names and to which we refer when we use the words that signify them are the objects that we directly apprehend by our ideas, not the ideas by which we apprehend them. This, as we shall presently see, holds true just as much for the intelligible objects of conceptual thought as it does for the sensible objects of perception, memory, and imagination.

Earlier in this chapter, I called attention to the distinction between instrumental signs and formal signs. Instrumental signs—such as clouds signifying rain or the word “cloud” designating certain visible formations in the sky above—are themselves objects we apprehend as much as are the objects that these signs refer to. But a formal sign is never an object we apprehend. Its whole existence or being consists in the function it performs as a sign, referring to something we do apprehend, something it serves to bring before our minds. It is, as it were, self-effacing in its performance of this function.

The basic truth here, the one that corrects Locke's mistake and provides us with a satisfactory explanation of the meaning of words, is that the ideas in our minds are formal signs. Another way of saying this is that our ideas, as the signs of the objects they enable us to apprehend, are meanings.

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

The referential meanings that some of our words acquire when meaningless notations take on referential significance derive from their being voluntarily imposed on objects with which we have direct acquaintance. Those objects are the objects meant, signified, referred to, intended, brought before our minds, by the ideas that are their formal signs.

Locke would have us directly apprehend these formal signs (which are completely inapprehensible) and through them indirectly apprehend the things of reality (their representation of which is inexplicable). Accordingly, he mistakenly maintained that our words directly signify our ideas as their object, and through our ideas indirectly signify the things of reality they represent.

The correction of this philosophical error consists in seeing that our ideas are the formal signs we can never apprehend. They enable us to apprehend all the objects we do apprehend. Those words that do not acquire meaning by verbal descriptions of the objects named acquire it by our direct acquaintance with objects that our ideas enable us to apprehend. These are also the objects that our ideas, functioning as formal signs, refer to.

Furthermore, because the words we use have referential meaning as instrumental signs through association with the ideas that function as formal signs, we can use words not only to refer to the objects that we directly apprehend by means of our ideas, but also to arouse those associated ideas in the minds of others so that they have the same objects before their minds. It is in this way that we communicate with one another about objects that are public in the sense that they are objects apprehended by and so are common to two or more individuals.

This is of such great importance for us to understand that it deserves a more detailed exposition, first, with regard to the sensible objects we apprehend by perception, memory, or imagination; and second, with regard to the intelligible objects of conceptual thought. That exposition will be found in the next two sections.

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

---

**THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE**  
published weekly for its members by the  
**CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS**  
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor  
Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.