From John Locke (1632-1704), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689/1690)

Note from E.B.: To give you a sense of what this book is about, here’s its general table of contents:

BOOK I. NEITHER PRINCIPLES NOR IDEAS ARE INNATE.

BOOK II. OF IDEAS.

BOOK III: OF WORDS

BOOK IV. OF KNOWLEDGE AND PROBABILITY.

All we’ll be reading in this course is the introduction, Chapter I (“Of words or language in general”), and sections 1-13 of Chapter II (“Of the signification of words”) from Book III (“Of words”).

Throughout *An Essay Concerning Human* Understanding, Locke constantly uses the word “idea.” Here’s his definition of the word, taken from his introduction to the book:

8. What Idea stands for.

Before I proceed on to what I have thought on the subject of human understanding, I must here in the entrance beg pardon of my reader for the frequent use of **the word IDEA**, which he will find in the following treatise. It being that term which, I think, **serves best to stand for** **whatsoever is the OBJECT of the understanding when a man thinks**, I have used it to express whatever is meant by PHANTASM, NOTION, SPECIES, or WHATEVER IT IS WHICH THE MIND CAN BE EMPLOYED ABOUT IN THINKING; and I could not avoid frequently using it. I presume it will be easily granted me, that there are such IDEAS in men’s minds: everyone is conscious of them in himself; and men’s words and actions will satisfy him that they are in others.

[…]

CHAPTER I. OF WORDS OR LANGUAGE IN GENERAL.

1. Man fitted to form articulated Sounds.

God, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with

an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of

his own kind, but furnished him also with language, which was to be

the great instrument and common tie of society. Man, therefore, had by

nature his organs so fashioned, as to be fit to frame articulate sounds,

which we call words. But this was not enough to produce language; for

parrots, and several other birds, will be taught to make articulate

sounds distinct enough, which yet by no means are capable of language.

2. [Human beings are fitted] to use these [articulated] sounds as Signs of Ideas.

Besides articulate sounds, therefore, it was further necessary that he

should be able to use these sounds as signs of internal conceptions; and

to make them stand as marks for the ideas within his own mind, whereby

they might be made known to others, and the thoughts of men's minds be

conveyed from one to another.

3. [Human beings are fitted] to make [these articulated sounds] general Signs.

But neither was this sufficient to make words so useful as they ought to

be. It is not enough for the perfection of language, that sounds can

be made signs of ideas, unless those signs can be so made use of as to

comprehend several particular things: for the multiplication of words

would have perplexed their use, had every particular thing need of

a distinct name to be signified by. [To remedy this inconvenience,

language had yet a further improvement in the use of GENERAL TERMS,

whereby one word was made to mark a multitude of particular existences:

which advantageous use of sounds was obtained only by the difference of

the ideas they were made signs of: those names becoming general, which

are made to stand for GENERAL IDEAS, and those remaining particular,

where the IDEAS they are used for are PARTICULAR.]

4. [Human beings are fitted] to make [these articulated sounds] signify the absence of positive Ideas.

Besides these names which stand for ideas, there be other words which

men make use of, not to signify any idea, but the want or absence of

some ideas, simple or complex, or all ideas together; such as are NIHIL

in Latin, and in English, IGNORANCE and BARRENNESS. All which negative

or privative words cannot be said properly to belong to, or signify no

ideas: for then they would be perfectly insignificant sounds; but they

relate to positive ideas, and signify their absence.

5. Words ultimately derived from such as signify sensible Ideas.

It may also lead us a little towards the original of all our notions and

knowledge, if we remark how great a dependence our words have on common

sensible ideas; and how those which are made use of to stand for actions

and notions quite removed from sense, have their rise from thence, and

from obvious sensible ideas are transferred to more abstruse

significations, and made to stand for ideas that come not under the

cognizance of our senses; v.g. to IMAGINE, APPREHEND, COMPREHEND,

ADHERE, CONCEIVE, INSTIL, DISGUST, DISTURBANCE, TRANQUILLITY, &c., are

all words taken from the operations of sensible things, and applied to

certain modes of thinking. SPIRIT, in its primary signification, is

breath; ANGEL, a messenger: and I doubt not but, if we could trace them

to their sources, we should find, in all languages, the names which

stand for things that fall not under our senses to have had their first

rise from sensible ideas. By which we may give some kind of guess what

kind of notions they were, and whence derived, which filled their minds

who were the first beginners of languages, and how nature, even in the

naming of things, unawares suggested to men the originals and principles

of all their knowledge: whilst, to give names that might make known to

others any operations they felt in themselves, or any other ideas that

came not under their senses, they were fain to borrow words from

ordinary known ideas of sensation, by that means to make others the more

easily to conceive those operations they experimented in themselves,

which made no outward sensible appearances; and then, when they had got

known and agreed names to signify those internal operations of their own

minds, they were sufficiently furnished to make known by words all their

other ideas; since they could consist of nothing but either of outward

sensible perceptions, or of the inward operations of their minds about

them; we having, as has been proved, no ideas at all, but what

originally come either from sensible objects without, or what we feel

within ourselves, from the inward workings of our own spirits, of which

we are conscious to ourselves within.

6. Distribution of subjects to be treated of.

But to understand better the use and force of Language, as subservient

to instruction and knowledge, it will be convenient to consider:

First, TO WHAT IT IS THAT NAMES, IN THE USE OF LANGUAGE, ARE IMMEDIATELY

APPLIED.

Secondly, Since all (except proper) names are general, and so stand not

particularly for this or that single thing, but for sorts and ranks of

things, it will be necessary to consider, in the next place, what the

sorts and kinds, or, if you rather like the Latin names, WHAT THE

SPECIES AND GENERA OF THINGS ARE, WHEREIN THEY CONSIST, AND HOW THEY

COME TO BE MADE. These being (as they ought) well looked into, we shall

the better come to find the right use of words; the natural advantages

and defects of language; and the remedies that ought to be used,

to avoid the inconveniences of obscurity or uncertainty in the

signification of words: without which it is impossible to discourse with

any clearness or order concerning knowledge: which, being conversant

about propositions, and those most commonly universal ones, has greater

connexion with words than perhaps is suspected. These considerations,

therefore, shall be the matter of the following chapters.

CHAPTER II. OF THE SIGNIFICATION OF WORDS.

1. Words are sensible Signs, necessary for Communication of Ideas.

Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which

others as well as himself might receive profit and delight; yet they are

all within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of

themselves be made to appear. The comfort and advantage of society not

being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary

that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those

invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known

to others. For this purpose nothing was so fit, either for plenty or

quickness, as those articulate sounds, which with so much ease and

variety he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how WORDS,

which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made

use of by men as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connexion

that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas,

for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a

voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark

of such an idea. The use, then, of words, is to be sensible marks of

ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate

signification.

2. Words, in their immediate Signification, are the sensible Signs of

his Ideas who uses them.

The use men have of these marks being either to record their own

thoughts, for the assistance of their own memory; or, as it were, to

bring out their ideas, and lay them before the view of others: words,

in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but THE

IDEAS IN THE MIND OF HIM THAT USES THEM, how imperfectly soever or

carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are

supposed to represent. When a man speaks to another, it is that he may

be understood: and the end of speech is, that those sounds, as marks,

may make known his ideas to the hearer. That then which words are the

marks of are the ideas of the speaker: nor can any one apply them as

marks, immediately, to anything else but the ideas that he himself hath:

for this would be to make them signs of his own conceptions, and yet

apply them to other ideas; which would be to make them signs and not

signs of his ideas at the same time; and so in effect to have no

signification at all. Words being voluntary signs, they cannot be

voluntary signs imposed by him on things he knows not. That would be to

make them signs of nothing, sounds without signification. A man

cannot make his words the signs either of qualities in things, or of

conceptions in the mind of another, whereof he has none in his own. Till

he has some ideas of his own, he cannot suppose them to correspond with

the conceptions of another man; nor can he use any signs for them: for

thus they would be the signs of he knows not what, which is in truth to

be the signs of nothing. But when he represents to himself other men's

ideas by some of his own, if he consent to give them the same names that

other men do, it is still to his own ideas; to ideas that he has, and

not to ideas that he has not.

3. Examples of [how words, in their immediate signification, are the sensible signs of the ideas of the human being who uses them].

This is so necessary in the use of language, that in this respect the

knowing and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned, use the words

they speak (with any meaning) all alike. They, in every man's mouth,

stand for the ideas he has, and which he would express by them. A child

having taken notice of nothing in the metal he hears called GOLD, but

the bright shining yellow colour, he applies the word gold only to his

own idea of that colour, and nothing else; and therefore calls the same

colour in a peacock's tail gold. Another that hath better observed, adds

to shining yellow great weight: and then the sound gold, when he uses

it, stands for a complex idea of a shining yellow and a very weighty

substance. Another adds to those qualities fusibility: and then the word

gold signifies to him a body, bright, yellow, fusible, and very heavy.

Another adds malleability. Each of these uses equally the word gold,

when they have occasion to express the idea which they have applied it

to: but it is evident that each can apply it only to his own idea; nor

can he make it stand as a sign of such a complex idea as he has not.

4. Words are often secretly referred, First to the Ideas supposed to be

in other men's minds.

But though words, as they are used by men, can properly and immediately

signify nothing but the ideas that are in the mind of the speaker; yet

they in their thoughts give them a secret reference to two other things.

First, THEY SUPPOSE THEIR WORDS TO BE MARKS OF THE IDEAS IN THE MINDS

ALSO OF OTHER MEN, WITH WHOM THEY COMMUNICATE; for else they should talk

in vain, and could not be understood, if the sounds they applied to one

idea were such as by the hearer were applied to another, which is to

speak two languages. But in this men stand not usually to examine,

whether the idea they, and those they discourse with have in their

minds be the same: but think it enough that they use the word, as they

imagine, in the common acceptation of that language; in which they

suppose that the idea they make it a sign of is precisely the same to

which the understanding men of that country apply that name.

5. [Words are often secretly referred,] secondly, to the Reality of Things.

Secondly, Because men would not be thought to talk barely of their own

imagination, but of things as really they are; therefore they often

suppose the WORDS TO STAND ALSO FOR THE REALITY OF THINGS. But this

relating more particularly to substances and their names, as perhaps

the former does to simple ideas and modes, we shall speak of these two

different ways of applying words more at large, when we come to treat of

the names of mixed modes and substances in particular: though give me

leave here to say, that it is a perverting the use of words, and brings

unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever

we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own

minds.

6. Words by Use readily excite Ideas of their objects.

Concerning words, also, it is further to be considered:

First, that they being immediately the signs of men's ideas, and by that

means the instruments whereby men communicate their conceptions, and

express to one another those thoughts and imaginations they have within

their own breasts; there comes, by constant use, to be such a connexion

between certain sounds and the ideas they stand for, that the names

heard, almost as readily excite certain ideas as if the objects

themselves, which are apt to produce them, did actually affect the

senses. Which is manifestly so in all obvious sensible qualities, and in

all substances that frequently and familiarly occur to us.

7. Words are often used without Signification, and Why.

Secondly, That though the proper and immediate signification of words

are ideas in the mind of the speaker, yet, because by familiar use from

our cradles, we come to learn certain articulate sounds very perfectly,

and have them readily on our tongues, and always at hand in our

memories, but yet are not always careful to examine or settle their

significations perfectly; it often happens that men, even when they

would apply themselves to an attentive consideration, do set their

thoughts more on words than things. Nay, because words are many of them

learned before the ideas are known for which they stand: therefore some,

not only children but men, speak several words no otherwise than parrots

do, only because they have learned them, and have been accustomed to

those sounds. But so far as words are of use and signification, so far

is there a constant connexion between the sound and the idea, and a

designation that the one stands for the other; without which application

of them, they are nothing but so much insignificant noise.

8. [The] Signification [of words is] perfectly arbitrary, not the consequence of a natural connexion.

Words, by long and familiar use, as has been said, come to excite in men

certain ideas so constantly and readily, that they are apt to suppose

a natural connexion between them. But that they signify only men's

peculiar ideas, and that BY A PERFECT ARBITRARY IMPOSITION, is evident,

in that they often fail to excite in others (even that use the same

language) the same ideas we take them to be signs of: and every man has

so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases,

that no one hath the power to make others have the same ideas in their

minds that he has, when they use the same words that he does. And

therefore the great Augustus himself, in the possession of that power

which ruled the world, acknowledged he could not make a new Latin word:

which was as much as to say, that he could not arbitrarily appoint what

idea any sound should be a sign of, in the mouths and common language of

his subjects. It is true, common use, by a tacit consent, appropriates

certain sounds to certain ideas in all languages, which so far limits

the signification of that sound, that unless a man applies it to the

same idea, he does not speak properly: and let me add, that unless a

man's words excite the same ideas in the hearer which he makes them

stand for in speaking, he does not speak intelligibly. But whatever be

the consequence of any man's using of words differently, either from

their general meaning, or the particular sense of the person to whom

he addresses them; this is certain, their signification, in his use of

them, is limited to his ideas, and they can be signs of nothing else.

CHAPTER III.

OF GENERAL TERMS.

1. The greatest Part of Words are general terms.

All things that exist being particulars, it may perhaps be thought

reasonable that words, which ought to be conformed to things, should

be so too,--I mean in their signification: but yet we find quite the

contrary. The far greatest part of words that make all languages are

general terms: which has not been the effect of neglect or chance, but

of reason and necessity.

2. That every particular Thing should have a Name for itself is

impossible.

First, It is impossible that every particular thing should have a

distinct peculiar name. For, the signification and use of words

depending on that connexion which the mind makes between its ideas and

the sounds it uses as signs of them, it is necessary, in the application

of names to things, that the mind should have distinct ideas of the

things, and retain also the particular name that belongs to every one,

with its peculiar appropriation to that idea. But it is beyond the

power of human capacity to frame and retain distinct ideas of all the

particular things we meet with: every bird and beast men saw; every tree

and plant that affected the senses, could not find a place in the

most capacious understanding. If it be looked on as an instance of a

prodigious memory, that some generals have been able to call every

soldier in their army by his proper name, we may easily find a reason

why men have never attempted to give names to each sheep in their flock,

or crow that flies over their heads; much less to call every leaf of

plants, or grain of sand that came in their way, by a peculiar name.

3. If it were possible [that every particular thing should have a name for itself, this] would be useless.

Secondly, If it were possible, it would yet be useless; because it would

not serve to the chief end of language. Men would in vain heap up names

of particular things, that would not serve them to communicate their

thoughts. Men learn names, and use them in talk with others, only that

they may be understood: which is then only done when, by use or consent,

the sound I make by the organs of speech, excites in another man's mind

who hears it, the idea I apply it to in mine, when I speak it. This

cannot be done by names applied to particular things; whereof I alone

having the ideas in my mind, the names of them could not be significant

or intelligible to another, who was not acquainted with all those very

particular things which had fallen under my notice.

4. A distinct name for every particular thing not fitted for enlargement

of knowledge.

Thirdly, But yet, granting this also feasible, (which I think is not,)

yet a distinct name for every particular thing would not be of any

great use for the improvement of knowledge: which, though founded in

particular things, enlarges itself by general views; to which things

reduced into sorts, under general names, are properly subservient.

These, with the names belonging to them, come within some compass, and

do not multiply every moment, beyond what either the mind can contain,

or use requires. And therefore, in these, men have for the most part

stopped: but yet not so as to hinder themselves from distinguishing

particular things by appropriated names, where convenience demands it.

And therefore in their own species, which they have most to do with, and

wherein they have often occasion to mention particular persons, they

make use of proper names; and there distinct individuals have distinct

denominations.

5. What things have proper Names, and why.

Besides persons, countries also, cities, rivers, mountains, and other

the like distinctions of lace have usually found peculiar names, and

that for the same reason; they being such as men have often as occasion

to mark particularly, and, as it were, set before others in their

discourses with them. And I doubt not but, if we had reason to mention

particular horses as often as as have reason to mention particular men,

we should have proper names for the one, as familiar as for the other,

and Bucephalus would be a word as much in use as Alexander. And

therefore we see that, amongst jockeys, horses have their proper names

to be known and distinguished by, as commonly as their servants:

because, amongst them, there is often occasion to mention this or that

particular horse when he is out of sight.

6. How general Words are made.

The next thing to be considered is,--How general words come to be made.

For, since all things that exist are only particulars, how come we by

general terms; or where find we those general natures they are supposed

to stand for? Words become general by being made the signs of

general ideas: and ideas become general, by separating from them the

circumstances of time and place, and any other ideas that may determine

them to this or that particular existence. By this way of abstraction

they are made capable of representing more individuals than one; each of

which having in it a conformity to that abstract idea, is (as we call

it) of that sort.

7. [How general words are made is] shown by the way we enlarge our complex ideas from infancy.

But, to deduce this a little more distinctly, it will not perhaps be

amiss to trace our notions and names from their beginning, and observe

by what degrees we proceed, and by what steps we enlarge our ideas from

our first infancy. There is nothing more evident, than that the ideas of

the persons children converse with (to instance in them alone) are, like

the persons themselves, only particular. The ideas of the nurse and the

mother are well framed in their minds; and, like pictures of them there,

represent only those individuals. The names they first gave to them are

confined to these individuals; and the names of NURSE and MAMMA, the

child uses, determine themselves to those persons. Afterwards, when time

and a larger acquaintance have made them observe that there are a great

many other things in the world, that in some common agreements of shape,

and several other qualities, resemble their father and mother, and those

persons they have been used to, they frame an idea, which they find

those many particulars do partake in; and to that they give, with

others, the name MAN, for example. And thus they come to have a general

name, and a general idea. Wherein they make nothing new; but only leave

out of the complex idea they had of Peter and James, Mary and Jane, that

which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all.

8. And [how general Words are made is shown by the way we] further enlarge our complex ideas [beyond infancy], by still leaving out properties contained in them.

By the same way that they come by the general name and idea of MAN, they

easily advance to more general names and notions. For, observing that

several things that differ from their idea of man, and cannot therefore

be comprehended out under that name, have yet certain qualities wherein

they agree with man, by retaining only those qualities, and uniting them

into one idea, they have again another and more general idea; to which

having given a name they make a term of a more comprehensive extension:

which new idea is made, not by any new addition, but only as before, 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.

9. General natures are nothing but abstract and partial ideas of more

complex ones.

That this is the way whereby men first formed general ideas, and general

names to them, I think is so evident, that there needs no other proof

of it but the considering of a man's self, or others, and the ordinary

proceedings of their minds in knowledge. And he that thinks GENERAL

NATURES or NOTIONS are anything else but such abstract and partial ideas

of more complex ones, taken at first from particular existences, will, I

fear, be at a loss where to find them. For let any one effect, and then

tell me, wherein does his idea of MAN differ from that of PETER and

PAUL, or his idea of HORSE from that of BUCEPHALUS, but in the leaving

out something that is peculiar to each individual, and retaining so much

of those particular complex ideas of several particular existences as

they are found to agree in? Of the complex ideas signified by the names

MAN and HORSE, leaving out but those particulars wherein they differ,

and retaining only those wherein they agree, and of those making a new

distinct complex idea, and giving the name ANIMAL to it, one has a more

general term, that comprehends with man several other creatures. Leave

out of the idea of ANIMAL, sense and spontaneous motion, and the

remaining complex idea, made up of the remaining simple ones of body,

life, and nourishment, becomes a more general one, under the more

comprehensive term, VIVENS [Latin for “living”]. And, not to dwell longer upon this particular, so evident in itself; by the same way the mind proceeds to BODY, SUBSTANCE, and at last to BEING, THING, and such universal terms, which stand for any of our ideas whatsoever. To conclude: this whole

mystery of genera and species, which make such a noise in the schools,

and are with justice so little regarded out of them, is nothing else but

ABSTRACT IDEAS, more or less comprehensive, with names annexed to them.

In all which this is constant and unvariable, That every more general

term stands for such an idea, and is but a part of any of those

contained under it.

[Note: “the schools” means philosophy in medieval times, i.e., in the middle ages. Locke hates this kind of philosophy, and wants to overturn it.]

10. Why the Genus is ordinarily made Use of in Definitions.

[Note: In this section, Locke refers to the traditional, medieval, way to define terms. One does this by specifying the “genus” and the “specific difference” of the term. For example, the genus of “sedan” is “car,” and the specific difference is “having four doors.” Thus the definition of “sedan” is “car having four doors.” “Sedan” designates a *species* of this *genus* designated by “car.” And the definition of “coupe” would be “car having two doors,” the definition of “mammal” would be “animal with fur,” etc., etc.]

This may show us the reason why, in the defining of words, which is

nothing but declaring their signification, we make use of the GENUS, or

next general word that comprehends it. Which is not out of necessity,

but only to save the labour of enumerating the several simple ideas

which the next general word or GENUS stands for; or, perhaps, sometimes

the shame of not being able to do it. But though defining by GENUS and

DIFFERENTIA (I crave leave to use these terms of art, though originally

Latin, since they most properly suit those notions they are applied to),

I say, though defining by the GENUS be the shortest way, yet I think it

may be doubted whether it be the best. This I am sure, it is not the

only, and so not absolutely necessary. For, definition being nothing but

making another understand by words what idea the term defined stands

for, a definition is best made by enumerating those simple ideas that

are combined in the signification of the term defined: and if, instead

of such an enumeration, men have accustomed themselves to use the

next general term, it has not been out of necessity, or for greater

clearness, but for quickness and dispatch sake. For I think that, to one

who desired to know what idea the word MAN stood for; if it should be

said, that man was a solid extended substance, having life, sense,

spontaneous motion, and the faculty of reasoning, I doubt not but thse

meaning of the term man would be as well understood, and the idea it

stands for be at least as clearly made known, as when it is defined

to be a rational animal: which, by the several definitions of ANIMAL,

VIVENS [Latin for “living”], and CORPUS [Latin for “body”], resolves itself into those enumerated ideas. I have, in explaining the term MAN, followed here the ordinary definition of the schools; which, though perhaps not the most, exact, yet serves well enough to my present purpose. And one may, in this instance, see what gave occasion to the rule, that a definition must consist of GENUS and DIFFERENTIA; and it suffices to show us the little necessity there is of such a rule, or advantage in the strict observing of it. For, definitions, as has been said, being only the explaining of one word by several others, so that the meaning or idea it stands for may be certainly known; languages are not always so made according to the rules of logic, that every term can have its signification exactly and clearly expressed by two others. Experience sufficiently satisfies us to the contrary; or else those who have made this rule have done ill, that they have given us so few definitions conformable to it. But of definitions more in the next chapter.

11. General and Universal are [Creations] of the Understanding, and belong not to the Real Existence of things.

To return to general words: it is plain, by what has been said, that

GENERAL and UNIVERSAL belong not to the real existence of things; but

are the inventions and creatures of the understanding, made by it for

its own use, and concern only signs, whether words or ideas. Words are

general, as has been said, when used for signs of general ideas, and so

are applicable indifferently to many particular things; and ideas are

general when they are set up as the representatives of many particular

things: but universality belongs not 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.

12. Abstract Ideas are the Essences of Genera and Species.

[Note: “Genera” is the plural of “genus.”]

The next thing therefore to be considered is, What kind of signification

it is that general words have. For, as it is evident that they do not

signify barely one particular thing; for then they would not be general

terms, but proper names, so, on the other side, it is as evident they do

not signify a plurality; for MAN and MEN would then signify the same;

and the distinction of numbers (as the grammarians call them) would be

superfluous and useless. That then which general words signify is a SORT

of things; and each of them does that, by being a sign of an abstract

idea in the mind; to which idea, as things existing are found to agree,

so they come to be ranked under that name, or, which is all one, be of

that sort. Whereby it is evident that the ESSENCES of the sorts, or, if

the Latin word pleases better, SPECIES of things, are nothing else but

these abstract ideas. For the having the essence of any species, being

that which makes anything to be of that species; and the conformity to

the idea to which the name is annexed being that which gives a right to

that name; the having the essence, and the having that conformity, must

needs be the same thing: since to be of any species, and to have a right

to the name of that species, is all one. As, for example, to be a MAN,

or of the SPECIES man, and to have right to the NAME man, is the same

thing. Again, to be a man, or of the species man, and have the ESSENCE

of a man, is the same thing. Now, since nothing can be a man, or have a

right to the name man, but what has a conformity to the abstract idea

the name man stands for, nor anything be a man, or have a right to the

species man, but what has the essence of that species; it follows, that

the abstract idea for which the name stands, and the essence of the

species, is one and the same. From whence it is easy to observe, that

the essences of the sorts of things, and, consequently, the sorting of

things, is the workmanship of the understanding that abstracts and makes

those general ideas.

13. [Abstract Ideas] are the Workmanship of the Understanding, but have their Foundation in the Similitude of Things.

I would not here be thought to forget, much less to deny, that Nature,

in the production of things, makes several of them alike: there is

nothing more obvious, especially in the races of animals, and all things

propagated by seed. But yet I think we may say, THE SORTING OF THEM

UNDER NAMES IS THE WORKMANSHIP OF THE UNDERSTANDING, TAKING OCCASION,

FROM THE SIMILITUDE IT OBSERVES AMONGST THEM, TO MAKE ABSTRACT GENERAL

IDEAS, and set them up in the mind, with names annexed to them, as

patterns or forms, (for, in that sense, the word FORM has a very proper

signification,) to which as particular things existing are found to

agree, so they come to be of that species, have that denomination, or

are put into that CLASSIS. For when we say this is a man, that a horse;

this justice, that cruelty; this a watch, that a jack; what do we else

but rank things under different specific names, as agreeing to those

abstract ideas, of which we have made those names the signs? And what

are the essences of those species set out and marked by names, but those

abstract ideas in the mind; which are, as it were, the bonds between

particular things that exist, and the names they are to be ranked under?

And when general names have any connexion with particular beings, these

abstract ideas are the medium that unites them: so that the essences of

species, as distinguished and denominated by us, neither are nor can

be anything but those precise abstract ideas we have in our minds. And

therefore the supposed real essences of substances, if different from

our abstract ideas, cannot be the essences of the species WE rank

things into. For two species may be one, as rationally as two different

essences be the essence of one species: and I demand what are the

alterations [which] may, or may not be made in a HORSE or LEAD, without

making either of them to be of another species? In determining the

species of things by OUR abstract ideas, this is easy to resolve: but if

any one will regulate himself herein by supposed REAL essences, he will

I suppose, be at a loss: and he will never be able to know when anything

precisely ceases to be of the species of a HORSE or LEAD.