

# The Principles of Human Knowledge

George Berkeley

Copyright © Jonathan Bennett

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

First launched: July 2004

Last amended: November 2007

## **Contents**

|                         |           |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>     | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Sections 1–50</b>    | <b>11</b> |
| <b>Sections 51–99</b>   | <b>25</b> |
| <b>Sections 100–156</b> | <b>39</b> |

## Introduction

**1 intro.** Philosophy is just the study of wisdom and truth, so one might reasonably expect that those who have spent most time and care on it would enjoy a greater calm and serenity of mind, know things more clearly and certainly, and be less disturbed with doubts and difficulties than other men. But what we find is quite different, namely that the illiterate majority of people, who walk the high road of plain common sense and are governed by the dictates of nature, are mostly comfortable and undisturbed. To them nothing that is familiar appears hard to explain or to understand. They don't complain of any lack of certainty in their senses, and are in no danger of becoming sceptics. But as soon as we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a higher principle—i.e. to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things—a thousand doubts spring up in our minds concerning things that we previously seemed to understand fully. We encounter many prejudices and errors of the senses; and when we try to correct these by reason, we are gradually drawn into crude paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies that multiply and grow on us as our thoughts progress; until finally, having wandered through many intricate mazes, we find ourselves back where we started or—which is worse—we sit down in a forlorn scepticism.

**2 intro.** The cause of this is thought to be the obscurity of things or the natural weakness and imperfection of our understandings. It is said that our faculties are few in number and are designed by nature merely to promote survival and comfort, not to penetrate into the inward essence and constitution of things. Besides, (they say), it isn't surprising that the *finite* mind of man runs into absurdities and contradictions—ones from which it can't possibly escape—when it tackles things that involve *infinity*, because it is of

the nature of the infinite not to be comprehended by anything that is finite.

**3 intro.** But when we lay the blame for our paradoxes and difficulties on our faculties rather than on our wrong use of them, perhaps we are letting ourselves down too lightly. It is hard to believe that right deductions from true principles should ever lead to conclusions that can't be maintained or made consistent. We should believe that God has been more generous with men than to give them a strong desire for knowledge that he has placed out of their reach. That wouldn't square with the kindly ways in which Providence, having given creatures various desires, usually supplies them the means—if used properly—to satisfy them. I'm inclined to think that most if not all of the difficulties that have in the past puzzled and deceived philosophers and blocked the way to knowledge are entirely of our own making. We have first raised a dust, and then we complain that we can't see.

**4 intro.** My purpose therefore is to try to discover what the underlying sources are of all that doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions, into which the various sects of philosophy have fallen—and indeed fallen so badly that the wisest men have thought our ignorance to be incurable, thinking that it comes from the natural dullness and limitedness of our faculties. Surely it is well worth the trouble to make a strict enquiry into the first principles of human knowledge, to sift and examine them on all sides; especially since there may be some grounds to suspect that the obstacles and difficulties that block and confuse the mind in its search for truth don't spring from any darkness and intricacy in the objects, or any natural defect in the understanding, but come rather from false principles that have been insisted on and might have been avoided.

**5 intro.** When I consider how many great and extraordinary men have already tried to do this, my own attempt seems difficult and discouraging. But I have some hope of success, because the largest views aren't always the clearest, and he who is shortsighted will have to bring the object nearer to him, and may by looking closely at the fine details notice things that have escaped far better eyes.

**6 intro.** You will understand the rest of this work more easily if I begin by discussing the nature of language and how it can be misused. I need especially to attend to a doctrine that seems to have played a large part in making people's theories complex and confusing, and to have caused endless errors and difficulties in most branches of knowledge. I am referring to the theory that the mind has a power of forming *abstract* ideas or notions of things. Anyone who knows anything about the writings and disputes of philosophers must realize that a great part of them is spent on abstract ideas, which are thought to be especially the object of the sciences of logic and metaphysics, and of all learning of the supposedly most abstracted and elevated kind. In all of these studies, almost every discussion assumes that there are abstract ideas in the mind, and that it is quite familiar with them.

**7 intro.** Everyone agrees that the qualities of things never really exist in isolation from one another; rather, they are mixed and blended together, several in the same object. But, we are told by the supporters of 'abstract ideas', the mind can consider each quality on its own, abstracted from the others with which it is united in the object, and in that way the mind forms abstract ideas. For example, your eyesight presents you with an object that is extended, coloured, and moving; and your mind resolves this mixed or compound idea into its simple, constituent parts, and views each in iso-

lation from the rest; which is how it forms the abstract ideas of *extension*, of *colour*, and of *motion*. It isn't possible for colour or motion to exist without extension: but according to these 'abstract idea' theorists the mind can by abstraction form the idea of colour without extension, and of motion without either colour or extension.

**8 intro.** [This section continues to expound the theory of abstract ideas, in preparation for an attack on it.] Again, the mind observes that the extended things that we perceive by sense, although they vary in size, shape and so on, also all have something in common; and it singles out and isolates the common element, thereby forming a highly abstract idea of *extension*. This is neither line, surface, nor solid, and it has no particular shape or size; it is an idea entirely separated out from all these features that distinguish extended things from one another. Similarly the mind can leave out all the differences amongst the colours that are seen, retaining only what is common to them all; and in this way it makes an idea of *colour*, which is not red, blue, white or any other specific colour. Again, by considering motion on its own—separated out not only from the body that moves but also from how it moves, in what direction and how fast—the mind forms an abstract idea of *motion*, which is equally applicable to all particular movements that we can perceive through our senses—the movement of a beckoning finger and the movement of Venus around the sun.

**9 intro.** [The exposition of the theory of abstract ideas continues, becoming increasingly sarcastic in tone.] The kind of mental separation through which the mind forms abstract ideas of qualities taken singly also enables it to achieve abstract ideas of more complex items each of which includes a number of qualities that exist together in a single object. For example, having observed that Peter, James, and John have certain features

of shape etc. in common, the mind forms a complex idea that leaves out whatever differentiates these men from one another or from other men, and retains only what is common to all; and in this way it makes an abstract idea that applies equally to all men, excluding any details that might tie it down to any one man in particular. This (they say) is how we come to have the abstract idea of *man* (or of *humanity* or *human nature*, if you like). This idea includes colour, because every man has some colour; but then it can be neither white, nor black, nor any particular colour, because there is no one colour that all men have. The idea also includes height ·because every man has some height or other·, but it is neither tall nor short nor middling, but something abstracted from all these ·because there is no one height that all men have·. Similarly for all the rest. Furthermore, many sorts of creatures correspond in some ways but not all to the complex idea of *man*; and the mind, leaving out the features that are special to men and retaining only the ones that are shared by all the living creatures, forms the idea of *animal*. This abstracts not only from all particular men, but also all birds, beasts, fishes, and insects. The constituent parts of the abstract idea of animal are *body*, *life*, *sense*, and *spontaneous motion* [= ‘the ability to move without being pushed or pulled’]. By ‘body’ is meant body without any particular shape or size, because no one shape or size is common to all animals. The idea doesn’t include any specific kind of covering—hair or feathers or scales, etc.—but nor does it specify bare skin; for various animals differ in respect of whether they have hair, feathers, scales, or bare skin, so that all those differences must be left out of the abstract idea of *animal*. For the same reason, the spontaneous motion must not be walking, flying or creeping; but it is a motion all the same. What kind of motion it can be isn’t easy to conceive.

**10 intro.** Whether others have this amazing ability to form abstract ideas, they will know better than I. Speaking for myself: I find that I do indeed have a capacity for imagining—representing to myself the ideas of particular things that I have perceived—and of splitting those ideas up and re-assembling them in various ways. I can imagine a man with two heads, or the upper parts of a man joined to the body of a horse. I can consider the hand, the eye, the nose, each by itself abstracted or separated from the rest of the body. But then whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and colour. Similarly, any idea that I form of a man must be of a specific kind of man: he must be white or black or brown, straight or crooked, tall or short or middling. Try as I may, I can’t get into my mind the abstract idea of *man* that is described in the preceding section. And I find it equally impossible to form an abstract idea of *motion* that leaves out the thing that moves and is neither swift nor slow, curved nor straight. The same holds for absolutely all abstract ideas. I freely admit that I can perform ‘abstraction’ in a certain sense, namely: when several parts or qualities are united in an object, I can have the thought of one of them separated from the others *if it could really exist apart from them*. But I deny that I can perform ‘abstraction’ in the standard meaning of that word, which covers two kinds of mental performance: **(1)** conceiving abstractly and in isolation a quality that couldn’t exist in isolation ·as we are said to do with colour and motion·; and **(2)** forming a general notion by abstracting from particulars in the way I have described, ·as we are said to do with man and animal·. There is reason to think that most people are like me in this respect. The majority of people, who are simple and illiterate, never claim to have abstract notions. Such notions are described ·by those who believe in them· as difficult to form; it takes hard work, we are told, to make an abstract idea. So we can

reasonably conclude that if there are any abstract ideas they are all in the minds of learned people.

**11 intro.** Let us see what can be said in defence of this theory of abstract ideas. What attracts philosophers to a view that seems so remote from common sense? A rightly admired philosopher who died not long ago certainly helped to make the doctrine popular when he suggested that the biggest intellectual difference between man and beast is that men can form abstract ideas while beasts cannot. [Berkeley's *Principles* was published in 1710; John Locke, to whom Berkeley is referring here, had died in 1704. In their time 'brute' and 'beast' were standard terms for non-human animals.] He wrote

What perfectly distinguishes men from brutes is that men have general ideas, this being something that the brutes aren't equipped to do. Clearly, we don't see in them the faintest trace of the use of general signs to stand for universal ideas; so we can reasonably suppose that they lack the ability to abstract, i.e. to make general ideas, since they have no use of words or any other general signs. (Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II.xi.10)

A little later he wrote:

So we are entitled to conclude that this is what marks off the species of brutes from men. It creates a clear gap between them, which eventually broadens out to a great width. If the brutes have any ideas at all rather than being mere machines (as some people think they are), we can't deny that they have a certain degree of reason. That some of them sometimes *reason* seems to me as obvious as that they *sense* things; but when they reason, it is only with particular ideas, just as they receive them from their senses. Even the highest of the brutes are confined within those narrow limits, I believe, and have no capacity to widen their

intellectual range through any kind of abstraction. (II.xi.11)

I readily agree with this author that brutes have no capacity for abstraction. But if that's our criterion for whether something is a brute, I am afraid that many who are accepted as men should be counted among the brutes! We have no evidence that brutes have abstract general ideas, the author said, because we don't observe them using words or other general signs. He was assuming that one can't use words unless one has general ideas; which implies that men who use language *can* abstract or make their ideas general. That the author was thinking along these lines can be seen in how he answered his own question: 'Since all things that exist are only particulars, how do we come by general terms?' His answer was, 'Words become general by being made the signs of general ideas' (III.iii.6). But I maintain, on the contrary, that it seems that a word becomes general by being made the sign not of *one abstract* general idea but of *many particular* ideas, any one of which it may suggest to the mind. Consider for example the propositions *A thing's change of motion is proportional to the force that is exerted on it*, and *Whatever is extended can be divided*. These axioms are to be understood as holding for motion and extension in general; but that doesn't imply that they suggest to my thoughts

- an idea of motion without a body moved, and with no determinate direction or velocity,

or that I must conceive

- an abstract general idea of extension, which is not line or surface or solid, not large or small, not black or white or red or of any other determinate colour.

All that is needed is that the first axiom is true for *every* motion that I consider, whether it be swift or slow, perpendicular or horizontal or oblique, and in whatever object; and that the second axiom holds for *every* specific extension,

whether line or surface or solid, and whether of this or that size or shape.

**12 intro.** We shall be better placed to understand what makes a word a general term if we first understand how ideas become general. (I emphasize that I don't deny that there are general ideas—only that there are *abstract* general ideas. In the passages I have quoted, every mention of general ideas carries the assumption that they are formed by abstraction in the manner described in 7 and 9 above.) If we want to speak meaningfully and not say things that we can't make sense of, I think we shall agree to the following. An idea, which considered in itself is particular, becomes general in its meaning by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort as itself. Suppose for example that a geometrician, proving the validity of a procedure for cutting a line in two equal parts, draws a black line one inch long. As used in this geometrical proof, this particular line is general in its significance because it is used to represent all particular lines, so that what is proved regarding it is proved to hold for all lines. And just as that particular *line* becomes general by being used as a sign, so the *word* 'line'—which in itself is particular—is used as a sign with a general meaning. The line is general because it is the sign not of an abstract or general line but of all particular straight lines that could exist, and the word is general for the same reason—namely that it stands equally well for each and every particular line.

**13 intro.** To give you a still clearer view of what abstract ideas are supposed to be like, and of how we are supposed to need them, I shall quote one more passage from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

For children and others whose minds have not yet been put to work much, abstract ideas aren't as easy to

form as particular ones are. If adults find them easy, that is only because they have had so much practice. For when we reflect carefully and in detail on them, we'll find that general ideas are mental fictions or contrivances that are quite difficult to construct; we don't come by them as easily as we might think. The general idea of a *triangle*, for example, though it isn't one of the most abstract, comprehensive, and difficult ideas, can't be formed without hard work and skill. For that idea must be neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect that cannot exist, an idea in which parts of several different and inconsistent ideas are put together. It is true that because of our imperfect human condition, the mind needs such ideas for two of its main purposes—communication, and the growth of knowledge—so it moves as fast as it can to get them. Still, there is reason to suspect that such ideas indicate how imperfect we are. Anyway, what I have said is enough to show that the ideas that come earliest and most easily to the mind aren't abstract and general ones, and that our earliest knowledge doesn't involve them. (IV.vii.9)

If anyone thinks he can form in his mind an idea of a triangle such as the one described in that passage, I shan't waste my time trying to argue him out of it. I merely ask you, the reader, to find out for sure whether you have such an idea. This can't be very difficult. What is easier than for you to look a little into your own thoughts and discover whether you *do* or *can* have an idea that fits the description we have been given of the general idea of a triangle—'neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once'?

**14 intro.** Much is said by Locke about how difficult abstract ideas are—about the care and skill that is needed in forming them. And everyone agrees that it takes hard mental work to free our thoughts from particular objects and raise them to the level of theorizing that involves abstract ideas. It would seem to follow that the forming of abstract ideas is too difficult to be necessary for communication, which is so easy and familiar for all sorts of people. But, we are told by Locke, replying to this point, that if adults find abstract ideas easy to form, that's only because they have become good at it through long practice. Well, I would like to know *when* it is that people are busy overcoming that difficulty and equipping themselves with what they need for communication! It can't be when they are grown up, for by then they can communicate, so that it seems the difficulty is behind them; so it has to be something they do in their childhood. But surely the labour of forming abstract notions—with so many to be formed, and each of them so difficult—is too hard a task for that tender age. Who could believe that a couple of children cannot chatter about sugar-plums and toys until they have first tacked together numberless inconsistencies and so formed abstract general ideas in their minds, attaching them to every common name they make use of?

**15 intro.** Abstract ideas are no more needed, in my opinion, for the growth of knowledge than they are for communication. I entirely agree with the widespread belief that all knowledge and demonstration concerns universal notions; but I can't see that those are formed by abstraction. The only kind of universality that I can grasp doesn't belong to anything's *intrinsic* nature; a thing's universality consists how it *relates* to the particulars that it signifies or represents. That is how things, names, or notions that are intrinsically particular are made to be universal through their relation to the many particulars that they represent. When I prove

a proposition about triangles, for instance, I am of course employing the universal idea of a *triangle*; but that doesn't involve me in thinking of a triangle that is neither equilateral nor scalenon nor equicrural! All it means is that the particular triangle I have in mind, no matter what kind of triangle it may be, is 'universal' in the sense that it equally stands for and represents all triangles whatsoever. All this seems to be straightforward and free of difficulties.

**16 intro.** You may want to make this objection:

How can we know any proposition to be true of all particular triangles unless we first see it demonstrated of the abstract idea of a triangle that fits all the particular ones? Just because a property can be demonstrated to belong to some one particular triangle, it doesn't follow that it equally belongs to any other triangle that differs in some way from the first one. For example, having demonstrated of an *isosceles right-angled triangle* that *its three angles are equal to two right ones*, I can't conclude from this that the same holds for *all other triangles* that don't have a right angle and two equal sides. If we are to be certain that this proposition is universally true, it seems, we must either •prove it of every particular triangle (which is impossible) or •prove it once and for all of the abstract idea of a triangle, in which all the particulars are involved and by which they are all equally represented.

To this I answer that although the idea I have in view while I make the demonstration may be (for instance) that of an isosceles right-angled triangle whose sides are of a determinate length, I can still be certain that it applies also to all other triangles, no matter what their sort or size. I can be sure of this because neither the right angle nor the equality of sides nor length of the sides has any role in the demonstration. It is true that the diagram I have in view in the

proof· includes all these details, but **they aren't mentioned in the proof** of the proposition. It isn't said that the three angles are equal to two right ones *because one of them is a right angle, or because the sides that form it are of the same length*. This shows that the demonstration could have held good even if the right angle had been oblique and the sides unequal. That is why I conclude that the proposition holds for all triangles, having •demonstrated it ·in a certain way· to hold for a particular right-angled isosceles triangle—not because I •demonstrated it to hold for the abstract idea of a triangle! I don't deny that a man can *abstract*, in that he can consider a figure merely as triangular without attending to the particular qualities of the angles or relations of the sides. But that doesn't show that he can form an abstract general inconsistent idea of a triangle. Similarly, because all that is *perceived* is not *considered*, we may think about Peter considered as a man, or considered as an animal, without framing the abstract idea of *man* or of *animal*.

**17 intro.** It would be an endless and a useless task to trace the scholastic philosophers [that is, mediaeval followers of Aristotle], those great masters of abstraction, through all the tangling labyrinths of error and dispute that their doctrine of *abstract natures and notions* seems to have led them into. What bickerings and controversies have arisen about those matters, and [Berkeley adds sarcastically] what great good they have brought to mankind, are well enough known these days, and I needn't go on about them. It would have been better if the bad effects of that doctrine ·of abstract natures and notions· had been confined to the people who most openly adhered to it. ·But the bad effects have spread further·. When men consider

- that the advancement of knowledge has been pursued with great care, hard work, and high abilities, and yet most branches of knowledge remain full of dark-

- ness and uncertainty, and of disputes that seem likely never to end; and •that even propositions thought to be supported by the most clear and compelling demonstrations contain paradoxes that are utterly at variance with the understandings of men; and •that only a small portion of them brings any real benefit to mankind other than as an innocent diversion and amusement;

the consideration of all this is apt to make people depressed, and to give them a complete contempt for all study. Perhaps this will cease when we have a view of the false principles that people have accepted, of which I think the one that has had the widest influence over the thoughts of enquiring and theory-building men is the doctrine of abstract general ideas.

**18 intro.** This prevailing view about abstract ideas seems to me to have its roots in language. There is some evidence for this in what is openly said by the ablest supporters of abstract ideas, who acknowledge that they are made for the purpose of *naming*; from which it clearly follows that if there had been no such thing as speech or universal signs, abstraction would never have been thought of. (See *Essay* III.vi.39 and elsewhere.) So let us examine how words have helped to give rise to the mistaken view that there are abstract ideas. ·They have contributed to it through two mistakes about language, which I shall now discuss·. **(1)** People assume that every name does or should have just one precise and settled signification. This encourages them to believe in abstract, determinate ideas, each serving as the true and only immediate signification of some general name, and to think further that a general name comes to signify this or that particular thing through the mediation of these abstract ideas—for example, •the general name 'pebble' stands for •my abstract idea of *pebble*, which in a certain way fits •the pebble I hold in my hand; and that's how the general name

comes to apply to the particular pebble. [Here, as in Locke's writings, a 'general name' is just a general word, such as 'pebble', 'daffodil' and 'triangle'. 'Signification' could often be replaced by 'meaning', but not always.] Whereas really no general name has a single precise and definite signification; each general name can equally well signify a great number of particular ideas. All of this clearly follows from what I have already said; reflect on it a little and you'll agree. Here is a possible objection:

When a name has a definition, that ties it down to one determinate signification. For example, 'triangle' is defined as 'plane surface bounded by three straight lines'; and that definition confines the word 'triangle' to standing for one certain idea and no other.

To this I reply that that definition of 'triangle' doesn't say whether the surface is large or small, black or white, nor whether the sides are long or short, equal or unequal, nor what angles they form. Each of these can vary greatly; so there is no one settled idea to which the signification of the word 'triangle' is confined. It is one thing to make a name always obey the same definition, and another to make it always stand for the same idea: one is necessary, the other useless and impracticable.

**19 intro. (2)** Words helped in another way to produce the doctrine of abstract ideas, namely through the widespread opinion that language is for the communicating of our ideas and for nothing else, and that every significant name stands for an idea. People who think this, and who can see the obvious fact that some names that are regarded as significant don't have particular specific ideas corresponding to them, conclude that such names must stand for abstract notions. Now, nobody will deny that many names that are in use amongst thoughtful people don't always put determinate particular ideas into the minds of listeners. And even when a name does stand for ideas, it doesn't have to arouse them in

the listener's mind every time it is used, even in the strictest reasonings. That is because in reading and conversation names are mostly used as letters are in algebra: each letter stands for a particular number, but you can conduct a proof accurately without at each step having each letter bring to mind the particular number it is meant to stand for.

**20 intro.** Besides, the communicating of ideas through words isn't the chief and only end of language, as people commonly think. Speech has other purposes as well: raising emotions, influencing behaviour, changing mental attitudes. The communication of ideas is often subservient to these other purposes, and sometimes it doesn't take place at all because the purposes can be achieved without it. I urge you to reflect on your own experience. When you are hearing or reading a discourse, doesn't it often happen that emotions of fear, love, hatred, admiration, disdain, and so on arise immediately in your mind when you see or hear certain words, without any ideas intervening between the words and the emotion? It may well be that those words did originally evoke ideas that produced those sorts of emotions; but I think you will find that, once the language has become familiar, hearing the sounds or seeing the words is often followed by those emotions immediately, entirely leaving out the ideas that used to be a link in the chain. For example, can't we be influenced by the promise of 'a good thing' without having an idea of what it is? Again, isn't a threat of 'danger' enough to make us afraid, even if we don't think of any particular evil that is likely to befall us or even form an idea of danger in the abstract? If you reflect a little on your own situation in the light of what I have said, I think you'll find it obvious that general names are often used, in a perfectly proper way, without the speaker's intending them as marks of ideas in his own mind that he wants to arouse in the mind of the hearer. Even proper names, it seems, aren't

always spoken with the intention of bringing into hearers' minds the ideas of those individuals who are named. For example, when a schoolman [= 'follower of Aristotle'] tells me 'Aristotle has said it', I understand him merely to be trying to incline me to accept his opinion with the deference and submission that custom has linked with the name 'Aristotle', and my idea of Aristotle doesn't come into it. Countless examples of this kind could be given, but why should I go on about things that I'm sure are abundantly illustrated in your own experience?

**21 intro.** I think I have •shown the impossibility of abstract ideas. I have •considered what has been said on their behalf by their ablest supporters, and have •tried to show they are of no use for the purposes for which they are thought to be necessary. And, lastly, I have •traced them to their source, which appears to be language. It can't be denied that words are extremely useful: they make it possible for all the knowledge that has been gained by the enquiries of men at many times and in all nations to be pulled together and surveyed by a single person. But at the same time it must be admitted that most branches of knowledge have been made enormously much darker and more difficult by the misuse of words and turns of phrase. Therefore, since words are so apt to influence our thoughts, when I want to consider any ideas I shall try to take them bare and naked, keeping out of my thoughts—as much as I can—the names that those ideas have been given through long and constant use. From this I expect to get the following •three• advantages:-

**22 intro.** •First, I shall be sure to keep clear of all purely verbal controversies—those *weeds* whose springing up, in almost all branches of knowledge, has been a principal hindrance to the growth of true and sound knowledge. •Secondly, this seems to be a sure way to extricate myself

from that fine and delicate net of abstract ideas, which has so miserably perplexed and entangled the minds of men (with this special feature: the more sharp-witted and exploratory any man's mind is, the more completely he is likely to be trapped and held by the net!). •Thirdly, so long as I confine my thoughts to my own ideas with the words peeled off, I don't see how I can easily be mistaken. The objects that I consider are all ones that I clearly and adequately know: I can't fall into error by thinking I have an idea that I really don't have, or by imagining that two of my own ideas are alike (or that they are unlike) when really they are not. To observe how my ideas agree or disagree, and to see which ideas are included in any compound idea and which are not, all I need is to pay attention to what happens in my own understanding.

**23 intro.** But I can't get all these advantages unless I free myself entirely from the deception of words. I hardly dare promise myself *that*, because the union between words and ideas began early and has been strengthened by many years of habit •in thought and speech•, making it very difficult to dissolve. This difficulty seems to have been very much increased by the doctrine of abstraction. For so long as men thought their words have abstract ideas tied to them, it isn't surprising that they used words *in place of* ideas: they found that they couldn't set aside the word and retain the abstract idea in the mind, because abstract ideas are perfectly inconceivable. That is the principal cause for the fact that men who have emphatically recommended to others that in their meditations they should lay aside all use of words and instead contemplate their bare ideas have failed to do this themselves. Recently many people have become aware of the absurd opinions and meaningless disputes that grow out of the misuse of words. And they had given good advice about how to remedy these troubles—namely that

we should attend not to the *words that signify ideas* but rather to the *ideas themselves*. But however good this advice that they have given others may be, they obviously couldn't properly follow it themselves so long as they thought that

- the only immediate use of words was to signify ideas, and
- that the immediate signification of every general name was a determinate, abstract idea.

**24 intro.** But when you know that these are mistakes, you can more easily prevent your thoughts from being influenced by words. Someone who knows that he has only *particular* ideas won't waste his time trying to conceive the abstract idea that goes with any name. And someone who knows that names don't always stand for ideas will spare himself the labour of looking for ideas where there are none to be had. So it is desirable that everyone should try as hard as he can to obtain a clear view of the ideas he wants to consider, separating from them all the clothing and clutter of words that so greatly blind our judgment and scatter our attention. In vain do we extend our view into the heavens, and presumably into the entrails of the earth; in vain do

we consult the writings of learned men, and trace the dark footsteps of antiquity; we need only draw aside the curtain of words, to behold the fairest tree of knowledge, whose fruit, namely, our 'bare naked ideas', is excellent and lies within reach of our hand.

**25 intro.** Unless we take care to clear the first principles of knowledge from being burdened and deluded by words, we can reason from them for ever without achieving anything; we can draw consequences from consequences and be never the wiser. The further we go, the more deeply and irrecoverably we shall be lost and entangled in difficulties and mistakes. To anyone who plans to read the following pages, therefore, I say: Make my words the occasion of your own thinking, and try to have the same sequence of thoughts in reading that I had in writing. This will make it easy for you to discover the truth or falsity of what I say. You will run no risk of being deceived by my words, and I don't see how you can be led into an error by considering your own naked, undisguised ideas.