Chapter IX
Of the Imperfection of Words

1. Words are used for recording and communicating our thoughts. From what has been said in the foregoing chapters, it is easy to perceive what imperfection there is in language, and how the very nature of words makes it almost unavoidable for many of them to be doubtful and uncertain in their significations. To examine the perfection or imperfection of words, it is necessary first to consider their use and end: for as they are more or less fitted to attain that, so they are more or less perfect. We have, in the former part of this discourse often, upon occasion, mentioned a double use of words. First, One for the recording of our own thoughts. Secondly, The other for the communicating of our thoughts to others.

2. Any words will serve for recording. As to the first of these, for the recording our own thoughts for the help of our own memories, whereby, as it were, we talk to ourselves, any words will serve the turn. For since sounds are voluntary and indifferent signs of any ideas, a man may use what words he pleases to signify his own ideas to himself: and there will be no imperfection in them, if he constantly use the same sign for the same idea: for then he cannot fail of having his meaning understood, wherein consists the right use and perfection of language.

3. Communication by words either for civil or philosophical purposes. Secondly, As to communication by words, that too has a double use. I. Civil. II. Philosophical. First, by their civil use, I mean such a communication of thoughts and ideas by words, as may serve for the upholding common conversation and commerce, about the ordinary affairs and conveniences of civil life, in the societies of men, one amongst another. Secondly, By the philosophical use of words, I mean such a use of them as may serve to convey the precise notions of things, and to express in general propositions certain and undoubted truths, which the mind may rest upon and be satisfied with in its search after true knowledge. These two uses are very distinct; and a great deal less exactness will serve in the one than in the other, as we shall see in what follows.

4. The imperfection of words is the doubtfulness or ambiguity of their signification, which is caused by the sort of ideas they stand for. The chief end of language in communication being to be understood, words serve not well for that end, neither in civil nor philosophical discourse, when any word does not excite in the hearer the same idea which it stands for in the mind of the speaker. Now, since sounds have no natural connexion with our ideas, but have all their signification from the arbitrary imposition of men, the doubtfulness and uncertainty of their signification, which is the imperfection we here are speaking of, has its cause more in the ideas they stand for than in any incapacity there is in one sound more than in another to signify any idea: for in that regard they are all equally perfect. That then which makes doubtfulness and uncertainty in the signification of some more than other words, is the difference of ideas they stand for.

5. Natural causes of their imperfection, especially in those that stand for mixed modes, and for our ideas of substances. Words having naturally no signification, the idea which
each stands for must be learned and retained, by those who would exchange thoughts, and hold intelligible discourse with others, in any language. But this is the hardest to be done where, First, The ideas they stand for are very complex, and made up of a great number of ideas put together. Secondly, Where the ideas they stand for have no certain connexion in nature; and so no settled standard anywhere in nature existing, to rectify and adjust them by. Thirdly, When the signification of the word is referred to a standard, which standard is not easy to be known. Fourthly, Where the signification of the word and the real essence of the thing are not exactly the same. These are difficulties that attend the signification of several words that are intelligible. Those which are not intelligible at all, such as names standing for any simple ideas which another has not organs or faculties to attain; as the names of colours to a blind man, or sounds to a deaf man, need not here be mentioned. In all these cases we shall find an imperfection in words; which I shall more at large explain, in their particular application to our several sorts of ideas: for if we examine them, we shall find that the names of Mixed Modes are most liable to doubtfulness and imperfection, for the two first of these reasons; and the names of Substances chiefly for the two latter.

6. The names of mixed modes doubtful. First, because the ideas they stand for are so complex. First, The names of mixed modes are, many of them, liable to great uncertainty and obscurity in their signification. Because of that great composition these complex ideas are often made up of. To make words serviceable to the end of communication, it is necessary, as has been said, that they excite in the hearer exactly the same idea they stand for in the mind of the speaker. Without this, men fill one another's heads with noise and sounds; but convey not thereby their thoughts, and lay not before one another their ideas, which is the end of discourse and language. But when a word stands for a very complex idea that is compounded and decompounded, it is not easy for men to form and retain that idea so exactly, as to make the name in common use stand for the same precise idea, without any the least variation. Hence it comes to pass that men's names of very compound ideas, such as for the most part are moral words, have seldom in two different men the same precise signification; since one man's complex idea seldom agrees with another's, and often differs from his own- from that which he had yesterday, or will have to-morrow.

7. Secondly, because they have no standards in nature. Because the names of mixed modes for the most part want standards in nature, whereby men may rectify and adjust their significations, they are very various and doubtful. They are assemblages of ideas put together at the pleasure of the mind, pursuing its own ends of discourse, and suited to its own notions, whereby it designs not to copy anything really existing, but to denominate and rank things as they come to agree with those archetypes or forms it has made. He that first brought the word sham, or wheedle, or banter, in use, put together as he thought fit those ideas he made it stand for; and as it is with any new names of modes that are now brought into any language, so it was with the old ones when they were first made use of. Names, therefore, that stand for collections of ideas which the mind makes at pleasure must needs be of doubtful signification, when such collections are nowhere to be found constantly united in nature, nor any patterns to be shown whereby men may adjust them. What the word murder, or sacrilege, &c., signifies can never be known from
things themselves: there be many of the parts of those complex ideas which are not visible in the action itself; the intention of the mind, or the relation of holy things, which make a part of murder or sacrilege, have no necessary connexion with the outward and visible action of him that commits either: and the pulling the trigger of the gun with which the murder is committed, and is all the action that perhaps is visible, has no natural connexion with those other ideas that make up the complex one named murder. They have their union and combination only from the understanding which unites them under one name: but, uniting them without any rule or pattern, it cannot be but that the signification of the name that stands for such voluntary collections should be often various in the minds of different men, who have scarce any standing rule to regulate themselves and their notions by, in such arbitrary ideas.

8. Common use, or propriety not a sufficient remedy. It is true, common use, that is, the rule of propriety may be supposed here to afford some aid, to settle the signification of language; and it cannot be denied but that in some measure it does. Common use regulates the meaning of words pretty well for common conversation; but nobody having an authority to establish the precise signification of words, nor determine to what ideas any one shall annex them, common use is not sufficient to adjust them to Philosophical Discourses; there being scarce any name of any very complex idea (to say nothing of others) which, in common use, has not a great latitude, and which, keeping within the bounds of propriety, may not be made the sign of far different ideas. Besides, the rule and measure of propriety itself being nowhere established, it is often matter of dispute, whether this or that way of using a word be propriety of speech or no. From all which it is evident, that the names of such kind of very complex ideas are naturally liable to this imperfection, to be of doubtful and uncertain signification; and even in men that have a mind to understand one another, do not always stand for the same idea in speaker and hearer. Though the names glory and gratitude be the same in every man's mouth through a whole country, yet the complex collective idea which every one thinks on or intends by that name, is apparently very different in men using the same language.

Chapter X
Of the Abuse of Words

1. Woeful abuse of words. Besides the imperfection that is naturally in language, and the obscurity and confusion that is so hard to be avoided in the use of words, there are several wilful faults and neglects which men are guilty of in this way of communication, whereby they render these signs less clear and distinct in their signification than naturally they need to be.

2. Words are often employed without any, or without clear ideas. First, In this kind the first and most palpable abuse is, the using of words without clear and distinct ideas; or, which is worse, signs without anything signified. Of these there are two sorts:-

I. Some words introduced without clear ideas annexed to them, even in their first original. One may observe, in all languages, certain words that, if they be examined, will be found in their first original, and their appropriated use, not to stand for any clear and distinct
ideas. These, for the most part, the several sects of philosophy and religion have
introduced. For their authors or promoters, either affecting something singular, and out of
the way of common apprehensions, or to support some strange opinions, or cover some
weakness of their hypothesis, seldom fail to coin new words, and such as, when they
come to be examined, may justly be called insignificant terms. For, having either had no
determinate collection of ideas annexed to them when they were first invented; or at least
such as, if well examined, will be found inconsistent, it is no wonder, if, afterwards, in
the vulgar use of the same party, they remain empty sounds, with little or no signification,
amongst those who think it enough to have them often in their mouths, as the
distinguishing characters of their Church or School, without much troubling their heads
to examine what are the precise ideas they stand for. I shall not need here to heap up
instances; every man's reading and conversation will sufficiently furnish him. Or if he
wants to be better stored, the great mintmasters of this kind of terms, I mean the
Schoolmen and Metaphysicians (under which I think the disputing natural and moral
philosophers of these latter ages may be comprehended) have wherewithal abundantly to
content him.

3. II. Other words, to which ideas were annexed at first, used afterwards without distinct
meanings. Others there be who extend this abuse yet further, who take so little care to lay
by words, which, in their primary notation have scarce any clear and distinct ideas which
they are annexed to, that, by an unpardonable negligence, they familiarly use words
which the propriety of language has affixed to very important ideas, without any distinct
meaning at all. Wisdom, glory, grace, &c., are words frequent enough in every man's
mouth; but if a great many of those who use them should be asked what they mean by
them, they would be at a stand, and not know what to answer: a plain proof, that, though
they have learned those sounds, and have them ready at their tongues ends, yet there are
no determined ideas laid up in their minds, which are to be expressed to others by
them….

34. Seventhly, language is often abused by figurative speech. Since wit and fancy find
easier entertainment in the world than dry truth and real knowledge, figurative speeches
and allusion in language will hardly be admitted as an imperfection or abuse of it. I
confess, in discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and
improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from them can scarce pass for faults. But
yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric,
besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words
elocution hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the
passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats: and
therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and
popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct,
wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be
thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. What and
how various they are, will be superfluous here to take notice; the books of rhetoric which
abound in the world, will instruct those who want to be informed: only I cannot but
observe how little the preservation and improvement of truth and knowledge is the care
and concern of mankind; since the arts of fallacy are endowed and preferred. It is evident
how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and I doubt not but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality, in me to have said thus much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.