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## The Ideas as Copies of our Impressions or Metaphors of the Reality: Dialogue Among David Hume, Locke and Nietzsche\*

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### Abstract

This article is about David Hume's ideas regarding conception in a dialogue with Locke's notion of language, in order to make a contrast with Nietzsche's proposal about language in *"On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense"*. This is a risky way to focus a reflection, but hopefully it is going to find some additional ideas about the language world and the real world.

**Key Words:** Reality, Hume, language, Locke, Nietzsche.

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## Las ideas como copias de nuestras impresiones o metáforas de la realidad: diálogo entre David Hume, Locke y Nietzsche

### Resumen

Este artículo trata las ideas de David Hume sobre la concepción de un diálogo con la noción de lenguaje de Locke, a fin de hacer un contraste con la propuesta de Nietzsche sobre el lenguaje en su texto "Sobre verdad y mentira en sentido extramoral". Esta es una manera riesgosa para enfocar la reflexión, pero que va a encontrar algunas ideas adicionales sobre el mundo del lenguaje y el mundo real.

**Palabras clave:** Realidad, Hume, lenguaje, Locke, Nietzsche.

## Les idées comme copies de nos impressions ou métaphores de la réalité: dialogue entre David Hume, Locke et Nietzsche

### Résumé

Ce texte traite de la conception des idées de David Hume, en dialogue avec la notion du langage de Locke, afin de les mettre en contraste avec la proposition de Nietzsche à propos du langage dans *"Vérité et mensonge au sens extra-moral"*. C'est là une manière risquée de centrer une réflexion, mais, avec un peu de chance, cela permettra de trouver quelques idées-complémentaires sur le monde du langage et le monde réel.

**Mots-clés:** Réalité, Hume, langage, Locke, Nietzsche.

## David Hume and John Locke: a modern conception of the language and the idea

It's important to start defining what is an idea in Hume's conception, it is a fact that Locke was born before Hume, the complementary ideas are independent of the chronological issue: here we want to work on Hume's thought about the *ideas* looking for some ground to work the language problem set out by Locke. In this way, for Hume "all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones" (Hume, 2000, p.13), so there are some real things that we copy as part of our understanding that we can use but without being so lively as it was first thing. Hume says that

Everyone will readily allow that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination. These faculties may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses; but they never can entirely reach the force and vivacity of the original sentiment (Hume, 2000, p.11).

That shows how for the Scottish philosopher the perceptions role and the empiric world is going to be fundamental, all that we know is going to be a consequence of the feelings or sensations we had previously, so there are dissimilar ways to generate new ideas by the interconnection among them in three different modes that he *calls Resemblance, contiguity cause and effect and contrast*. Each one of the ones above are used for Hume for saying that the ideas are not going to be innate, because all that we can find are copies of the sensations or impressions, that occurs because the only thing that is original is the perception for the reason that they are not copies of another original one:

admitting these terms, impressions and ideas, in the sense above explained, and understanding by innate, what is original or copied from no precedent perception, then may we assert that

all our impressions are innate, and our ideas not innate (Hume, 2000, p.17).

So that makes clear that there are not innate ideas, all of them come from our impressions, and we generate “mental processes” in which we generate new ones by

all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience (Hume, 2000, p.13).

In this order of ideas, the Scottish philosopher is going to give another particular division between ideas according to its structure: Matter of facts and relation of ideas. The first one is all about the cause and effect relation that needs of the sensorial world to make something true i.e. if somebody found a broken window at home and a rock inside, that means that perhaps someone threw that against the window. The second one is about ideas that don't need to be shown in the natural world, Hume applies to the Mathematics, specifically to the geometry showing how an equation doesn't need a consequence in the sensorial world to be true i.e.  $2+2=4$ . That could be called a tautological truth.

Perhaps till here we don't have a clear idea about the language, but there are important things about the way ideas work in our mind and the perceptions world that are going to be important when we talk about the natural world and the language world, even when it seems that there is something that Hume doesn't take into account, that is the language as a part of the universe where the ideas are built, he makes an important difference between the perceptions and the ideas as a copies of those.

From here we are going to establish the relation between the name expressed in the idea through the language and the nominal essence as a part of the sensitive world. For Locke, those things are joined together, that means that there is not possible whether a name that has not an essence or an essence that has not a name. It's necessary start from the idea that

the language was born just because the “Man fitted to form articulate sounds”(Locke, 2004, Book 3:1.1) but that conception is not enough for defining a social convention and its complex world. The man started to assign some significations to each word, according to the things he considered as useful or close to the reality. But Locke is going to say that

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 (Locke, 2004: Book 3: 1. 3).

So, for the English philosopher, at the end “Words ultimately derived from such as signify sensible ideas” (Locke, 2004, Book 3:1.5), as the ideas are resultant from the sensations for Hume, but the first one is going to explore deeper in the language as the possibility for sharing ideas within the rigid conventions that work arbitrarily<sup>1</sup>. Such structure is going to be full of different senses according to the “actors” in the language act, the ideas that are going to be transmitted and the language itself and its proper laws. Perhaps the more persistent idea about the words for Locke is that “Words are sensible signs, necessary for communication of ideas” (Locke, 2004, Book 3: 2.1). But it is not just as simple as that, behind that is the signification, subjective and representatively problem in the language. The communication process uses the signs but those are signs that are common to everyone, even if one man feels free for making his own, that is going to express nothing at all to the others, because of its lack of sense. It’s because of that, that the men established conventions

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

<sup>1</sup> Their signification perfectly arbitrary, not the consequence of a natural connexion. Locke Book 3 Chapter 2 paragraph 8.

sensible perceptions, or of the inward operations of their minds about them (Locke, 2004, Book 3: 1.5).

To describe the language as a tool for sharing ideas could be simple, but the comprehension of that act is not an easy process at all, even when we can discover how

necessary (is) 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" (Locke, 2004, Book 3: 2.1).

The action between the sign and the idea is not so close as it seems, if we wanted to have an ideal language it should include one expression for each idea and matter of fact, nevertheless we now that "it is beyond the power of human capacity to frame and retain distinct ideas of all the particular things we meet with" (Locke, 2004, Book 3: 3.1) so, because of that the language makes general concepts to describe different things. Most of those are abstract, that generates that an idea could be ambivalent, having several meanings using the same sign. Maybe is because of that Locke makes clear that each abstract idea is as well a distinct essence.

Each distinct abstract idea is a distinct essence. Nor will any one wonder that I say these essences, or abstract ideas (which are the measures of name, and the boundaries of species) are the workmanship of the understanding, who considers that at least the complex ones are often, in several men, different collections of simple ideas; and therefore that is covetousness to one man, which is not so to another (Locke, 2004, Book 3: 3. 3).

Even so, the English philosopher insists in the permanent connection the name and its essence, as part of the arbitrary mode that is part of the language construction, for him is very important to clarify that is not possible any other kind of relation, because it would be against the essence and the language convention:



Between the nominal essence and the name there is so near a connexion, that the name of any sort of things cannot be attributed to any particular being but what has this essence, whereby it answers that abstract idea whereof that name is the sign (Locke, 2004, Book 3: 3. 16).

Here are two common thoughts between the philosophers approached we want to take into account: 1. Ideas start in the sensorial world, and all the ideas and its significations have, at first, a deep connection with the natural (sensorial) world. 2. Ideas can be created by the first impressions by the mental processes that occur in the men mind that creates complex modes like the language itself.

## **Nietzsche: the language as a metaphor of the reality in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense***

The intention of having Nietzsche ideas here is simple, his proposal goes forward and makes hyperbole about the thoughts the philosophers studied here wanted. The German philosopher is more drastic in the way he manages the ideas showing that the language is not a real representation of the essences found in the natural world. For him all what we have in language are Metaphors, and even worse, those metaphors are point of view from the humankind: "Rather, it is human, and only its possessor and begetter take it so solemnly-as though the world's axis turned within it"(Nietzsche). So the human prepotency is not a good start for the language and its truth presumptions.

In this way, Nietzsche goes against the Locke's idea of the correspondence between the concept or the word itself and the essence. According to the German philosopher all that we have in our language is a false idea or an artificial one<sup>2</sup> about the world. Nothing could be represented absolutely in our mind, if we believe in some words as an expression of the world we know, it is because we accepted the false concepts made up by other

2 We believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities (Nietzsche).

people that did it before and has done. One of the things that generated the agreements about the language was the social life of the people thing that carried the man to generate a peace treaty.

This peace treaty brings in its wake something which appears to be the first step toward acquiring that puzzling truth drive: to wit, that which shall count as “truth” from now on is established. That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth (Nietzsche).

But all those conventions have an extra problem, when

a word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases—which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal (Nietzsche).

This inequality had been discovered already by Locke when he said that the man can’t have a word for each thing in the world, that would be too much for supporting with a limited language, conventions and knowledge about them. All those limitations take the thoughts to the reflection about the truth. If we can’t find a real equivalent between the language and the things essences, there is not truth at all or not in the human constructions made on the language. Nietzsche is going to ask himself:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions- they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins (Nietzsche).

So, from Nietzsche we haven't access to the truth through the language, all what we consider like that is just an illusion that is universally accepted by humankind but without any essential value.

## Are there some ideas in touch with the different proposals?

The philosophers we deal with here, have a common starting point that is the experience; so all the things we talk about are part of that, whether as a metaphor, an essence of the language or the copy of our impressions. Nevertheless the way that idea is going to be tackled by the philosophers is very different. For Hume the ideas are going to be copied from the natural world that can be kept in mind, but it is not going to have the same vivid experience as it was when it was first perceived. In this way Nietzsche is close to this conception but goes ahead when he put the entire language problem into question, by asking about the real correspondence between the names and the essences, therefore the language is not going to express anything real at all. These empiric and hyperbolic conceptions touch themselves when they describe the language as an absolutely different thing from the object it is referring, so in a risky way we can make equivalent the concept of the idea in Hume with the conception of the language as metaphors in Nietzsche, without saying that those are equal. Its closeness is in the way they understand the distance between the human mind and its representations (whether ideas or language) and the reality.

Those notions are different from Locke who links the reality with the language as one has the essence and another the sign for representing that. Those signs are artificial, but are still in touch with the real thing that generated that, even when the sign can represent a lot of different objects, there is a natural connection among them. For him there are not two different worlds joined together, just one that is represented in the human mind, but the problem is present in the way the words are used without knowing their significance. This conception has its basis in that all the essences are non-corruptible.

## Two different worlds: the world of the language and the world of the reality trying to be joined together by men

Here is a conclusion to be extracted from the ideas above. The humankind has three worlds he tries to join together: 1. Natural one, where the essences are found, 2. Language as an artificial one created by men in order to identify and know it or govern over it and 3. The subjective, that is made up of the different conceptions among the humankind. However we are going to work upon two of them: Natural world and Language.

To deal with that let us start with the paradox "at the door", even so it's not the intention of these final lines to try to connect them in a hypothetic idea. Instead we want to show how the modernity opens this path to philosophers like Nietzsche who is going to use the concepts found within the language and the ideas as copies of the perceptions for showing that there are two worlds that are not going to be connected by a natural way, just because the concepts made by man are part of his power will and the arrogance added to the knowledge. Here it is not going to finish, Nietzsche (without making philosophy of the language) opens a new way that is going to be tackled by other ones like Wittgenstein and the analytic philosophers.

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