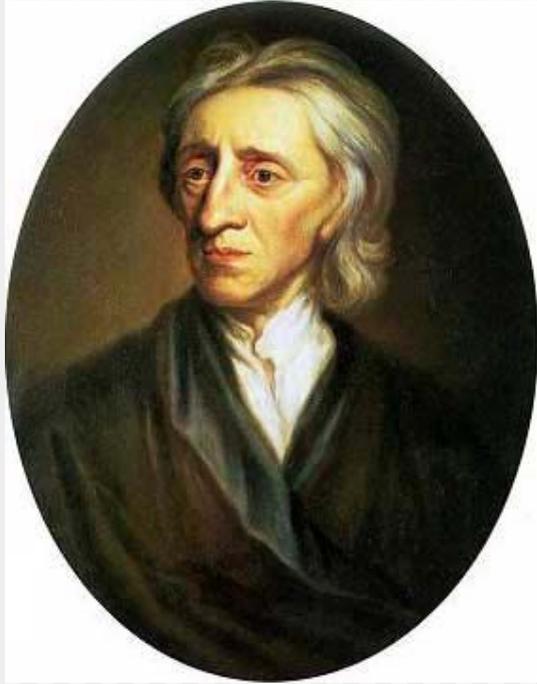


# *Locke on Abstract Ideas*

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By Anna Flores and Kina Viola



# Locke's Empiricism

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- Empiricists' rejection of innate ideas calls for an explanation of how we can acquire knowledge.
- Locke's motivation: one must explain the concepts that were thought to be innate, such as mathematics.

How can account for our knowledge of math using only Locke's two "tools" of sensation and reflection? ex. circles

- We can only understand this figure through a subset of reflection, **abstraction**. The name we give to this abstract idea, the circle, is a **general term**.
- Therefore, it seems that like mathematics, all ideas that were thought to be innate are rooted in the study of abstract ideas and general terms.

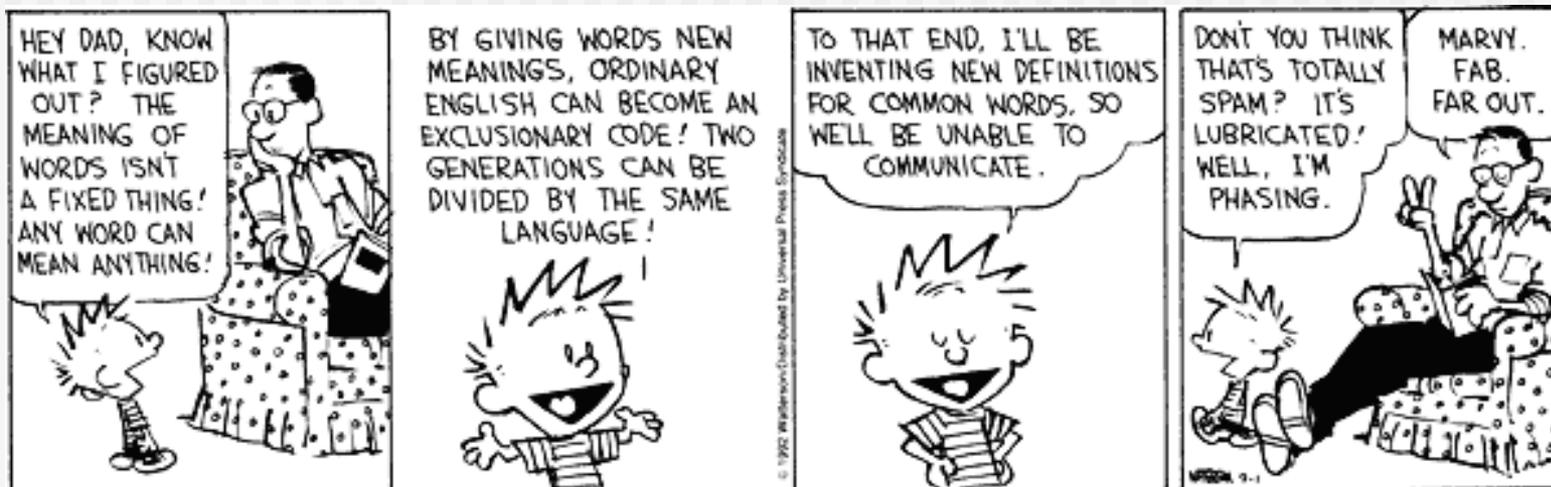
# General Terms

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- Words/terms stand for ideas, which correspond to objects.
- Particular terms: Specific terms for individuals that correspond with simple ideas. Ex. Names (Kina, Anna, KJ)
- General terms: terms applied commonly to refer to many particulars
- Locke's **nominalism** in regards to abstract ideas:  
“Universality does not belong to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence, even those words and *ideas* which in their signification are general,” (AW, 379).
- Locke argues that *all things are particular terms* though the *majority of language is composed of general terms*.

Why and how could this be?

# Why do we form abstract ideas?



- Simply too many particulars:

“...it is beyond the power of human capacity to frame and retain distinct *ideas* of all the particular things we meet with,” (AW, 377).

- Useless for human communication

  - Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, example of colors

- Foundation of the sciences: general terms are necessary to describe mathematical objects, etc. which we cannot experience

# How do we form abstract ideas?

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- How do we create these general terms if all things are particulars? Ex. Locke's example of child development
- Abstraction is a mental process that involves
  - the separation of an idea from time & place
  - the “leaving out” of particular differences and focusing on similarities

Ex. “Of the complex ideas signified by the names *man* and *horse*, leaving out but those particulars in which they differ, and retaining only those in which 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,” (AW, 378).

# Abstract Ideas and Sorts

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- Every word/particular idea has an ability to conform to an abstract idea.
- We can visualize these abstractions as “...the bonds between particular things that exist and the names they are to be ranked under,” (AW, 380).
- In forming an abstract idea, we categorize things into “sorts,” or distinct groups.  
ex. A dog is a **sort** of animal.
- Essence of each sort is an abstract idea.  
ex. The term “dog” is an abstract idea.

# Against Essences

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- “The real internal, but generally, in substances, unknown constitution of things on which their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their *essence*,” (AW 380).
- Rationalists like Descartes would argue that the idea of essences is innate in us, yet, similar to the case of mathematical objects, we cannot experience the real essences of *anything*.
- Therefore essences only exist as **abstract, general ideas** that we form through our observations of the world

# How and by whom are essences made?

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- Since essences are abstract ideas, they are made by the mind, not nature: humans come to the idea of an essences through abstraction according to similitudes in found in nature.
  - Therefore, cannot be innate.

If essences are not “real,” why study, then, the essence or properties of mathematical shapes?

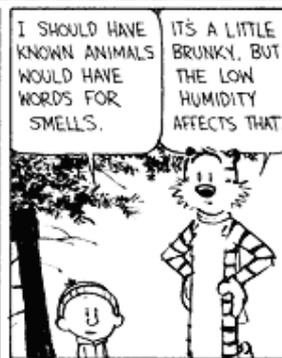
- The abstract, general terms themselves may not exist, but the processes surrounding them are crucial in understanding mathematics, since mathematics is not innate.

# Criticisms of Locke

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- What about connecting or demonstrative words like “or,” “and,” or “the?”  
What about verbs?
- Garrett Thompson: “...according to many contemporary theories of language, the basic units of meaning are sentences rather than words, because only with sentences (and not individual words) can we say anything. We should therefore treat sentence meaning as primary and seek to explain how the meaning of words contributes to the meaning of sentences. Sentences are not mere combinations of words, because sentences have structure” (Hauptli, 1).

How would Locke respond to this idea of context?



# Discussion Questions



(Calvin & Hobbes strip) Why do we name some sensations, and not others?

Descartes would say that certain words do have definite meanings, or are 'semantic facts' (bachelors are unmarried men). Does this counteract Locke's opinion of language? Who do you agree with?

Locke holds that abstraction is the key to communication — but is it not possible to abstract differently? How can we account for cognitive differences?

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