

The Central Problem that Plagues Restoration Comedy

by courtesy of Prof. Richard Kroll

After Montaigne pointed out in the late sixteenth century that we don't necessarily know as much as we think we do and that the best approach to knowledge was Sextus Empiricus' idea of suspending judgment, Europeans were left to consider how we can have and use any knowledge at all.

One answer, preferred by Englishmen, that most practical of people, was to say that we can know things for all practical purposes by using the processes of inference; and thus, we get the rise of early modern empiricism. Admitting, for example, that we can't know what's going on in another person's mind doesn't mean that we can't try to figure it out: there are some probable, though not certain, clues, in what he or she does or in how he or she fails to control body language.

Sextus Empiricus proposed two kinds of signs: the "indicative" and the "commemorative"; they work like this:

Seen/known/measurable

smoke
scar

Unseen/unknown/unmeasurable

fire (commemorative)
wound (indicative)

The Restoration argued that some kinds of signs were better at referring to what they claimed to refer to than others. Thus:

Observed, but not necessarily indicative

clothes; face; cosmetics;
physiognomy

words (cf. Hobbes, Locke)

unknown/unobserved

the inner personality (especially as applied to women; note--emergence of actresses, the kinds of fashion)

thought; ideas ("the affections of the mind")

Observed, but probably indicative

movements of large, visible
bodies (e.g. in physics)

instinctive movements of the
face; gestures

hieroglyphs; picture-writing
pictures; emblems

Unknown/unobserved

atoms ("sub-microscopic particles")

intentions; feelings; reactions

mental representations of perceived objects