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improper, *adj.*

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This entry has not yet been fully updated (first published 1899).

Pronunciation: /ɪmˈprɒpə(r)/**Etymology:** < *IM-* *prefix*² + *PROPER* *adj., n., and adv.*; after French *impropre...* ([Show More](#))

Not proper; the opposite of proper.

1.

a. Not truly or strictly belonging to the thing under consideration; not in accordance with truth, fact, reason, or rule; abnormal, irregular; incorrect, inaccurate, erroneous, wrong.

Formerly sometimes without implication of blame or censure, e.g. said of a meaning given to a word which is not the 'proper' or literal one, but metaphorical.

- 1531 [implied in: T. ELYOT *Bk. named Gouernour* i. xxv. sig. Miv, Modestie: *whiche worde nat beinge knowen in the englisshe tonge,..they improprely named this vertue descretion. (at IMPROPERLY adv.)*].
- 1552 R. HULOET *Abcedarium Anglico Latinum* Improper, *improprius, abusiuus*.
- 1581 J. MARBECK *Bk. Notes & Common Places* 877 When the Scripture saith, that the Lord God is unchaungeable, it is a proper speach, because he is so of his owne nature..When it sayth: Hee went down to see the Tower of Babel, then it is an improper speach.
- 1649 F. ROBERTS *Clavis Bibliorum* (ed. 2) Introd. to Rdr. iii. 42 To eate Christs flesh—to pluck out our right eye..We cannot read any of these literally and properly..therefore we must seek for a spiritual and improper sense.
- 1651 T. HOBBS *Leviathan* III. xxxiii. 201 Which to have said in the time of Joshua had been improper.

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improper diphthong
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improper: view quick current definition in Oxford Dictionaries (?)

impropre, adj. in Middle English Dictionary

1701 tr. J. Le Clerc *Lives Primitive Fathers* 87 Of which one can only speak in metaphorical and improper Language.

1780 E. BURKE *Speech Bristol previous to Election* 7 It is not lest you should censure me improperly, but lest you should form improper opinions on matters of some moment to you, that I trouble you at all upon the subject.

1870 J. TYNDALL *Lect. Electr.* 14 The conductors were called *non-electrics*, because they could not be so electrified. The division is improper, because if a conductor be insulated it can readily be electrified.

(Hide quotations)

b. Not properly so called; ***improper fraction***: a fraction whose numerator is greater than (or equal to) its denominator, and whose value is therefore greater than (or equal to) unity. (Formerly applied to analogous fractions in Algebra.) ***improper diphthong***: see quot. 1795.

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1552 R. RECORD *Ground of Artes* (rev. ed.) II. sig. Q.vi. An impropfe fraction..that is to say, a fraction in form, which in deed is greater then an vnite.

1629 J. FLETCHER *Faithfull Shepherdesse* (ed. 2) To Rdr., They [shepherds and shepherdesses in a Pastoral] are not to be adorned with any art, but such improper ones as nature is said to bestow, as singing and Poetry.

1690 S. JEAKE *Λογιστικη Λογια* (1696) 44 Improper Fractions have alwayes the Numerator greater than the Denominator.

1795 L. MURRAY *Eng. Gram.* 4 An improper diphthong has but one of the vowels sounded; as, *ea* in eagle, *oa* in boat.

1806 C. HUTTON *Course Math.* (ed. 5) I. 187 To Reduce an Improper Fraction to a Whole or Mixed Quantity.

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2. Not in accordance with the nature of the case or the purpose in view; unsuitable, unfit, inappropriate, ill-adapted.

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- 1570 J. DEE in H. Billingsley tr. Euclid *Elements Geom.* Pref. sig. ciiij, Rather, then, either to want a name, or to haue to base and impropre a name.
- 1601 R. JOHNSON tr. G. Botero *Travellers Breviat* (1603) 90 The Hungarish horse by nature are not improper for war, being couragious, strong.
- 1665 R. BOYLE *Occas. Refl.* iv. xiii. sig. Ff5, A Plain being a very improper place for such a purpose.
- a1719 J. ADDISON *Dialogues Medals* in *Wks.* (1721) I. ii. 462 [The quotation] is not improper to the occasion.
- 1774 C. J. PHIPPS *Voy. N. Pole* 50 As improper to be approached as a rocky lee shore.
- 1800 tr. E. J. B. Bouillon-Lagrange *Man. Course Chem.* I. 56 Hydrogen gas is improper for respiration.

(Hide quotations)

3. Not in accordance with good manners, modesty, or decorum; unbecoming, unseemly; indecorous, indecent.
Also *transf.* of a person.

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- 1739 LD. CHESTERFIELD *Let.* 24 July (1932) (modernized text) II. 367 It would be very improper and indecent, if you were to fly your kite, or play at nine-pins, while you are with Mr. Maittaire.
- 1776 *Trial Maha Rajah Nundocomar for Forgery* 106/2 It would be highly improper that their books should be wantonly subjected to curious and impertinent eyes.
- 1791 H. WALPOLE *Corr.* (1837) III. 438, I am too old to be improper and you are too modest to be impropered to.
- 1849 G. P. R. JAMES *Woodman* ii, It never occurred to her that there was any~thing improper in having them there.
- 1852 J. W. CARLYLE *Lett.* II. 177, I see single women besides myself at Verey's—not improper—governesses, and the like.

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†4. ? Not proper or peculiar to an individual; general, common. *Obs. rare.*

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[Quot. 1629 at sense 1b is taken in this sense in recent Dicts.]

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