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Words and What Is Beyond Words*

I. INTRODUCTION: WORDS, WORDS, WORDS ...

- What do you read, my lord?
- Words, words, words.
- What is the matter, my lord?
- Between who?
- I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.

The famous little exchange between Hamlet and Polonius quoted here intriguingly points to several important issues relevant to our subject matter. First, the things we call words are in themselves just insignificant sounds we make, no matter how articulate, unless they successfully convey our thoughts. Second, although the noises we make are words only if they convey our thoughts, our words are not *about* the thoughts they convey; they are about what those thoughts are about. For example, when say ‘A man is running’ my words convey my thought that a man is running, but they are not about this thought, but about the man this thought is about. Third, although we usually take the relationship between words and thoughts as a given, *which* words convey precisely *what* thoughts *on which occasions* of their use, is not a trifling matter. Indeed, it is not a trifling matter especially if we take into account not only how the same words of the same language can convey different thoughts on different occasions, but also the added complications caused by using different languages for conveying and articulating human thoughts in general. Finally, if words are about what our thoughts are about, then what is truly beyond words is only what is truly beyond human thought; but how can we even think about what is beyond our thoughts? How can we intelligently speak about what is beyond our words; about what we actually do have a word for, *the ineffable*?

* This is a slightly revised version of a talk on the pre-assigned subject I delivered in 2019, “Words and What is Beyond Words”, at *Tikkun Olam* (“Fixing the World”): *Current Challenges of Universities of Faith in a Secular World, A Catholic-Jewish Colloquium*, Bar-Ilan University, Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, Israel, November 19, 2019. A video clip of the talk and the ensuing discussion is available here: < https://youtu.be/S_saMtNjshQ >.

In this little introduction to our discussion, I will try to address our topic in a somewhat more systematic fashion than the previous questions may suggest. The framework for this discussion should be what we usually refer to as Aristotle's "semantic triangle", describing the relationships between words, thoughts and things, the things in question being the objects of our thoughts conveyed by our words. It is also clear, however, that our individual words can have the function of conveying our thoughts only insofar as they are the building blocks of a human language. So, we need to expand our investigations from the single words of a language and their relations to our thoughts and their objects, to the relationships between human languages, human thoughts, and the possible objects of human thoughts in general.

Now words can constitute a language only if they can enter into combinations to form complex phrases to express complex thoughts resulting from the combination of the concepts expressed by single words. But not just any old combination of simple words can result in a meaningful complex phrase that properly expresses a complex human thought; after all, a mere list of words does not constitute a phrase: hence there is the need for a grammar or syntax for any human language, which describes the rules of proper construction.

On the side of their *syntax*, one important feature of all human languages, whether natural or artificial, is their *generativity*: their syntactical rules generate a potential infinity of well-formed phrases out of a finite vocabulary. But of course, in order for us to be able to make sense of all these potentially infinite phrases, we should be able to construct their meaning based on the known meanings of their components. Thus, on the side of their *semantics*, all human languages, whether natural or artificial, have another important feature, namely, *compositionality*, which is the semantic rule that the meaning of a complex phrase is a function of the meanings of its components. But in natural human languages, actually *used* as the medium of human thought and communication, the situation is not so simple. For these *natural* languages, in contrast to the artificial languages of logic, math and computing, twist and bend the clear-cut rules of syntax and semantics in their *pragmatics*, endowing them with a further feature, which I might call their "*malleability*". It is this *pragmatic malleability* that allows us to use our words in all sorts of secondary roles in relation to their primary meanings, as when we use them self-referentially (in contrast to their ordinary reference), or metaphorically or analogically (in contrast to their ordinary meanings), or when we use set phrases non-compositionally (such as "man's best friend" or "rosy-fingered dawn"), say, for rhetorical, comical, satirical, poetic or other stylistic effect.

So, given all this variety of words and languages and their uses in their relations to our thoughts and what we are thinking about, I suggest that in the subsequent reflections let us try to systematize our emerging questions in relation to the framework provided by the above-described triad of features of human

languages in trying to grasp what we *can* reach with our words and thoughts, so that eventually we can at least *point toward* what lies beyond their reach.

I propose, therefore, the following topics for discussion:

- (1) What are the best practices of linguistic interpretation? I will distinguish “literalism” and “Humpty-Dumptyism” as possible bad extremes, and “intentionalism” as “the golden mean,” trying to get to the *intended meaning* of some linguistic expression under interpretation.
- (2) In keeping with that targeted mean: How do we get from words to the thoughts we intend to express by them? Is there a common medium of human thought, a shared natural system of human mental representation, a common Mental Language, only differently expressed in different human languages? I will again distinguish three possible attitudes concerning the issue: conceptual “imperialism” vs. “tribalism” as two bad extremes, and “naturalism” as the desirable “golden mean,” relying on the idea that all humans have the same natural capacity to acquire the concepts of each other, even if not actually sharing all their concepts all the time. It is this idea that can help us see a way to build bridges between apparently isolated conceptual schemes, whether they appear to be isolated synchronically (say, those of an Amazonian Indian and a British banker) or diachronically (say, those of a contemporary atheist, e.g., Peter Singer, and a medieval saint, e.g., St. Anselm of Canterbury; most notably, Singer has written: “The notion that human life is sacred just because it is human life is medieval” – as if that should end all discussion!).
- (3) How do we get to the limits of thought? How can we know that there is something we cannot know? How can we stretch our concepts to somehow “reach beyond themselves?”
- (4) Finally, how can we talk intelligently about what we manage somehow to reach conceptually, yet cannot comprehend, and hence cannot properly express in words? What are the improper, yet still legitimate uses of our words when we talk about *the ineffable*?

II. HUMAN LANGUAGES AND THEIR HERMENEUTICS

One thing that obviously distinguishes human languages is their different vocabularies (see ‘man’, ‘homo’, ‘anthropos’). Yet, as anyone who knows several languages is aware, that is not the only, or even the most important difference. Different languages have very different ways of constructing well-formed phrases to convey complex thoughts: some use copulas, others do not, some use inflections, others use prepositions, some use grammatical genders, others do not, some use several tenses, others just three times, etc., etc. And on top of these obvious syntactical differences, there are also the further semantic and

pragmatic differences; the primitive vocabularies of different languages cannot be brought into a one-to-one correspondence: what one word expresses in one language, even in its fixed, primary meaning, can only be expressed by several words in another, and vice versa (see e.g. ‘serendipity’ in Hungarian; you would have to explain it in terms of its nominal definition: ‘the faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for’). And even the same words with the same meanings would have to be translated by different words in different contexts, not to mention the above-mentioned cases illustrating the phenomenon of *pragmatic malleability* of all these phrases in their actual use.

And there is nothing surprising in this. After all, since human languages are the product of human institution and convention, and they evolve as primarily prompted by the pragmatic needs of efficient communication, and not as driven by logical or philosophical theorizing, there is an enormous amount of flexibility in how written or spoken languages are related to human thoughts they are supposed to express and articulate in their own ways.

But this obvious truth about languages and their uses clearly poses what might be called “the hermeneutical challenge”: how do we gather from all this variety of expressions what is commonly meant by them, the common thought identifiable as such even across different languages? If we put the question in this way, we can at once eliminate two bad extremes in our hermeneutical practice: “literalism” and “Humpty-Dumptyism.”

The *literalist* would say that the only legitimate way of interpreting any phrase is in terms of its commonly set primary meaning, and any speaker or listener who tries to interpret it in any other way is simply making a gross error, revealing their linguistic incompetence. Now, obviously, poets and orators who *instituted* new uses for old words or even introduced new words into a language would duly protest this attitude.¹

But this phenomenon of linguistic creativity, based on the fact that language is a human institution, should not be taken to give license to the “anything-goes” attitude of “Humpty-Dumptyism,” which is obviously named after the caricaturistically extreme materialization of it in Lewis Carroll’s character. (“‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’”)

Clearly, what we are usually shooting for as our “golden mean” between these two bad extremes is what may be referred to as “intentionalism,” trying to get the *intended* meaning of a phrase, based on the ordinary, primary meanings of its components, as possibly modified by context, or broader, possibly extra-linguistic, situational, or even general, cultural factors. (A good example of

¹ Shakespeare alone is credited with having introduced hundreds of new words into the English language, most of them by transforming old ones into new ones with new meanings.

< <https://www.litcharts.com/blog/shakespeare/words-shakespeare-invented/> >

this is ‘sorry’ in Australian [expression of feeling guilty] and ‘Sorry’ [expression of sympathy in grieving] in aboriginal English.) In short, “intentionalism,” as *I mean it in this context*, is the name of the hermeneutic attitude and practice of our best efforts to get from our words to the thoughts they are meant to convey. But this description of the hermeneutic task immediately gives rise to an even bigger problem: just *how* do we get from words to thoughts? How do we identify the precise mental contents supposedly conveyed by our words? Is there a common conceptual idiom behind all spoken and written languages merely differently expressed and articulated by each? Do all human beings of all cultures have the same concepts merely differently identified in different languages? And if not, how is cross-linguistic and cross-cultural understanding ever possible, if at all?

III. HUMAN LANGUAGES AND ‘MENTALESE’

Well, to deal with this question we should first of all clarify what it would even mean for all human beings to have the same Mentalese working (or just lurking?) in their minds behind their different spoken and written languages. Indeed, we should clarify this issue especially in view of the popular modern misconception concerning Mentalese, namely, that it is something “ideal,” without any of the logical shortcomings of ordinary spoken languages (such as equivocations, ambiguities, vagueness, etc.), and which therefore is also uniform, being the same for all humans, who only express it differently in their different conventional, spoken and written languages. However, if the sameness of Mentalese for all humans should mean that every human mind has the same set of concepts at all times, then a number of implausible consequences would follow.

First, individually, the same human person would have to have the same set of concepts from birth to death, whereas it seems clear that an adult has concepts a child does not.

Second, interpersonally, if all persons had the same concepts at all times, then one person could not acquire a concept from another, which should put us, *qua* teachers out of business at once.

Third, historically, in possession of the same concepts at all times, all humans should have all the same *a priori* sciences at all times; there could be no history of mathematics or logic, which we know there is.

Finally, cross-culturally, for under the simplistic uniformity assumption, translation, and generally cross-cultural understanding would merely be a business of relabelling our otherwise shared concepts lurking behind their culturally different conventional expressions, which is again clearly not the case.

So, what is the point of insisting that mental language is the same for all, while there is more than enough evidence for grave conceptual diversities among different individuals or even the same individuals in different time periods under

different circumstances in different linguistic communities, having different experiential and cultural backgrounds? Well, conceptual diversity is obviously a great hindrance to understanding: if we don't have the same concepts, we cannot have the same thoughts, which means we are doomed to talking past each other all the time (an all too common experience in today's social discourse).

So, there is an obvious problem here, which can be, and has been, approached in at least three typically different ways, based on three radically different attitudes.

The "imperialistic" attitude would be based on the assumption that there really are no genuine conceptual diversities, or at least there should not be any, among equally rational human beings. Accordingly, one with this attitude presumes to know (a) what the primitive vocabulary of the uniform human mental language is (what kinds of simple concepts a human mind can possibly form), and (b) what the "syntax" of mental language is (what the possible rules of construction that allow the formation of [semantically] complex concepts out of simple ones are). This presumption is quite unjustified and is often coupled with an arrogant attitude that earns it the "imperialistic" title. For arrogant representatives of this view often use their presumption as a criterion of meaningfulness or intelligibility: they take whatever that is not expressible in terms of their theory to be simply meaningless or unintelligible (see e.g. the arrogant use of Fregean logic to "eliminate metaphysics" through the "logical analysis of language" by early logical positivists, or "the received view" on quantification theory quite famously described by George Boolos as such, or Anthony Kenny's use of the same in criticizing Aquinas, etc.; Boolos 1984. 430–431; Klima 2004. 567–580).

By contrast, the "tribalistic" attitude takes Mentalese to be just as variable as conventional languages are; indeed, in its extreme forms it would claim that, as a consequence, cross-cultural understanding (involving rational argument) is quite impossible, whether synchronically or diachronically, for the equally rational speakers of radically different languages in fact live in "different worlds" articulated, indeed, *constituted* by their radically different ontologies inherent in their different conceptual schemes or paradigms.² Originally driven by the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the idea is still palpable in all sorts of social, cultural and moral relativisms.

Finally, the "naturalistic" attitude is what I take to be the Aristotelian golden mean between these two bad extremes. It does not presume to know *a priori* what simple concepts a human mind is capable of forming under what circumstances, so it does not pretend to know what simple concepts any and every human mind must contain. To be sure, there probably *are* some minimum requirements for the elementary functioning of human rationality. But in principle even

² See e.g. < <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/supplement2.html> > or the tons of ink spilled over the issue of "the incommensurability of paradigms."

those do not have to be the same for all; just think of the equivalent variants of propositional logic: one containing two primitive truth functions, negation and conjunction (call it “Notandian”), and yet another containing only the Sheffer- (“not-both” or NAND)-function (call it “Nandian”). Still, one with this attitude does not claim that human beings are locked into their narrow-minded tribal “universes” rendering cross-cultural rational argument among them impossible (given sufficient distance and isolation in space and/or time). After all, all humans, on account of being human, have essentially the same natural capacities for concept formation, so a child born among the Notandians is just as capable of forming in his mind the Sheffer-function as another child born among the Nandians. Indeed, on top of this, with sufficient patience, benevolence and care, the Notandians and the Nandians may be able to realize that their primitives are not only humanly conceivable and learnable as primitives, but they are also inter-definable, so despite appearances to the contrary, they do not even disagree, but merely articulate provably equivalent thoughts in terms of different primitive conceptual vocabularies.

Of course, things are not always as neat and tidy as in the case of our two hypothetical tribes (provided all they do is checking the validity of their natural deductions in their respective systems). But then again, there are at least certain fragments of our different languages, encoding different “mentalities,” especially the well-regulated, “disciplined” parts of scientific and mathematical and logical theories, which quite plausibly lend themselves to the sort of “easy reconstruction” that our tribes could afford. (Think for instance of the very different, yet provably equivalent, expressions of the axiom of choice in axiomatic set theory.) In other cases, the acquisition of different mentalities is a much trickier, but still not humanly impossible business. After all, all humans *qua* humans have *the same natural capacities for concept-formation*, even if they actually don’t all have the same concepts, but with patience, good-will and care they *can work out their common concepts*, leading to common understanding.

However, one even trickier feature of all human minds is their finitude, and yet their ability to reach beyond their limits. Or, to put it less figuratively, we all have the ability to think about and hence to talk about what we nevertheless have to realize is unthinkable and inexpressible by us, namely, the divine.

IV. GETTING TO THE LIMITS OF ALL HUMAN THOUGHT

Clearly the very formulation of the problem is already paradoxical: after all, in this very formulation we are actually thinking and talking about what we in the same breath claim to be unthinkable and inexpressible. How come? How did we get here? Perhaps, we can get some help from some of those who got us in this predicament in the first place, by working out this concept of a transcendental

divinity. Here is, for example, Augustine of Hippo. In his *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I. Chap. 7, he describes what “all men understand by the term ‘God’” as follows:

For when the one supreme God of gods is thought of, even by those who believe that there are other gods, and who call them by that name, and worship them as gods, their thought takes the form of an endeavour to reach the conception of a nature, than which nothing more excellent or more exalted exists. And since men are moved by different kinds of pleasures, partly by those which pertain to the bodily senses, partly by those which pertain to the intellect and soul, those of them who are in bondage to sense think that either the heavens, or what appears to be most brilliant in the heavens, or the universe itself, is God of gods: or if they try to get beyond the universe, they picture to themselves something of dazzling brightness, and think of it vaguely as infinite, or of the most beautiful form conceivable; or they represent it in the form of the human body, if they think that superior to all others. Or if they think that there is no one God supreme above the rest, but that there are many or even innumerable gods of equal rank, still these too they conceive as possessed of shape and form, according to what each man thinks the pattern of excellence. Those, on the other hand, who endeavour by an effort of the intelligence to reach a conception of God, place Him above all visible and bodily natures, and even above all intelligent and spiritual natures that are subject to change. All, however, strive emulously to exalt the excellence of God: nor could any one be found to believe that any being to whom there exists a superior is God. And so, all concur in believing that God is that which excels in dignity all other objects.³

Augustine’s point is most aptly summarized by the famous Anselmian formula: God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. Based on this formula, the famous “ontological argument” can be teased out more explicitly from his *Proslogion* in the following way:

³ “Deum omnes intellegunt, quo nihil melius. Nam cum ille unus cogitatur deorum Deus, ab his etiam qui alios et suspicantur et vocant et colunt deos sive in caelo sive in terra, ita cogitatur ut aliquid quo nihil sit melius atque sublimius illa cogitatio conetur attingere. Sane quoniam diversis moventur bonis, partim eis quae ad corporis sensum, partim eis quae ad animi intellegentiam pertinent, illi qui dediti sunt corporis sensibus, aut ipsum caelum aut quod in caelo fulgentissimum vident, aut ipsum mundum Deum deorum esse arbitrantur. Aut, si extra mundum ire contendunt, aliquid lucidum imaginantur idque vel infinitum vel ea forma quae optima videtur, inani suspicione constituunt, aut humani corporis figuram cogitant, si eam ceteris anteponunt. Quod si unum Deum deorum esse non putant et potius multos aut innumerabiles aequalis ordinis deos, etiam eos tamen prout cuique aliquid corporis videtur excellere, ita figuratos animo tenent. Illi autem qui per intellegentiam pergunt videre quod Deus est, omnibus eum naturis visibilibus et corporalibus, intellegibilibus vero et spiritalibus, omnibus mutabilibus praeferunt. Omnes tamen certatim pro excellentia Dei dimicant, nec quisquam inveniri potest qui hoc Deum credat esse quo est aliquid melius. Itaque omnes hoc Deum esse consentiunt quod ceteris rebus omnibus anteponunt.” Translated by the Rev. Professor J. F. Shaw; see Augustine 1887. 524.

- (1) God is d: *that than which nothing greater can be thought* [nominal definition of ‘God’]
- (2) d is in the understanding (i.e., d can be thought) [self-evident]
- (3) d is not in reality [the Fool’s assumption]
- (4) If something is in the understanding and not in reality, then something greater than it can be thought (namely, something that is in reality) [self-evident, based on the meaning of “greater”]
- (5) Something greater than d can be thought, i.e., something greater than that than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought [1, 2, 3, 4, by UI, CON, MP, SI]

What this argument soundly proves is that whoever is thinking of something as that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot deny its existence on pain of self-contradiction. But then, an atheist would never think of anything as such, for when he refers to God, he simply *parasitically* rides his reference on the believer’s concept without ever sharing it: he thinks of something of which he knows *the believer thinks as* that than which nothing greater can be thought, but he, thinking that it is just a figment of the believer’s mind, thinks it is nothing (i.e., not any single thing). (For more on this issue, see Klima 2000. 69–88; Klima 2003. 131–134; Klima 2008. 53–77.) This is why he needs to be persuaded in the first place to think of something *non-parasitically, as that than which nothing greater can be thought*; hence the need for *a posteriori* arguments starting from phenomena that are better known to us all regardless of our philosophical or religious predilections (such as the existence of motion, causation, generation and corruption, degrees of perfection, goal-directedness, or our own existence). But assuming we are the fools trying to get a spiritual guidance for our lives, once we have gone through this arduous process and persuaded ourselves that there is nothing crazy about genuinely thinking of something as that than which nothing greater can be thought, and so we can see that in the end that Anselm was right, and it only took us a while to genuinely acquire his concept and use it as our own, he gives us a further twist to the plot. He shows us that what we have struggled to genuinely think of as something that satisfies his formula, we cannot really and genuinely think of. As he says:

Therefore, Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if You are not this same being something greater than You could be thought – which cannot be. (Anselm of Canterbury 1998. 96.)

So, having gone through all the trouble to somehow, so to speak, “grab the foot of God,” He slips out of our mental grasp into “a transcendental fog.” Well, what now?

V. GOING BEYOND WORDS, I.E., BEYOND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

Actually, in the very description of the scenario we are facing, when I talked about “God’s foot slipping out from our mental grasp into a transcendental fog,” I already started doing the only thing we can do in this scenario: start speaking in metaphors, analogies, using all sorts of improper, yet not illegitimate forms of speech. In this remark, *both* characteristics of the forms of speech mentioned are meant to be equally weighty: *improper*, but not *illegitimate*. Let me try to explain.

First, no ordinary words in their proper meaning can properly capture with their content the divine essence. Our ordinary words are subordinated to concepts we abstract from creatures, all of whose essences are only a participation in the intensive infinity of divine essence. Therefore, even with the words coined directly to refer to the divinity, such as ‘God,’ ‘Creator,’ we are only mentally pointing toward Him, without ever grasping his essence. How can that be? Again, we can only use a metaphor, this time coming from Descartes: we can touch the bark of a huge oak tree, even if we cannot embrace it.

In the second place, however, just because we can use our words *only* in some improper senses to describe the divine, it doesn’t mean that just anything goes when talking about the divine. If we can use a term in some improper sense, then it has to have some proper sense, for we call the improper sense “improper” only as opposed to what we take to be “proper”. But just because the term has to have some proper sense, it does not follow that the term has *only one* proper sense. It would be ridiculous, for example, to try to rule out the several verbal senses of the word ‘bat’ as improper (as in talking about batting an eye or the batting average of a baseball player), on the grounds that the proper sense of the word is that in which we use it to talk about certain flying mammals. So, of course, the same term may have several, equally legitimate and proper uses and senses in the same language, provided that the term in question is equivocal, or when at least it is not purely univocal. And, equally obviously, what establishes any of these uses and senses as proper and acceptable is the existence of the well-established common usage of that term in that sense, an existing linguistic tradition that in better dictionaries is also supported by citations of authoritative texts clearly illustrating, or even explicitly establishing, the sense in question.

Thus, although it is clearly within my power to use any word in any odd, idiosyncratic way I wish, I can only do so at the risk of disqualifying myself as a competent speaker of the language, at least with regard to some proper usage of the term in question. Of course, this is not to say that I cannot legitimately use a term in some improper way, say, for the sake of humour, irony, poetic expression, etc. But these “secondary language games” presuppose my competence in the “primary language game” of understanding and being able

to use the term in its proper sense or senses in the first place. Thus, to “participate in the game” of speaking the language, I first must be able to align my usage with an existing linguistic tradition, which then of course I can also influence in my own ways, if I manage to establish some authority concerning some uses of some terms.

The philosophically relevant lesson of these (rather trivial) points seems to be the following. In the first place, although (nay, *because*) linguistic usage is conventional, it cannot be entirely arbitrary. One can only qualify as a competent user of a language by aligning one’s usage with an established linguistic tradition, based on some commonly accepted authoritative usage. In the second place, joining a linguistic community as a competent speaker consists precisely in conforming to the authoritative usage of that community. However, even within the same language as well as across different languages, there are various linguistic communities with various standards for usage based on various types of authorities, and, even within what may be identified as one and the same community concerning the usage of certain parts of their language or languages, modifications (indeed, schisms) may develop over time. Therefore, rational conversation even within the same language and within the same linguistic community is inevitably exposed to the contingencies of this dynamic of emerging and falling linguistic authorities and correspondingly changing meaning and usage, not to mention the complications on the interface of different languages, religions and cultures. To be sure, in view of the foregoing, this is nothing to despair about. One only has to be constantly aware of, and reflect on, this dynamic, in order to keep rational discourse across the board possible.

So, what should be our guiding light, in this rational discourse? In one word: *rationality*, which is *love* or *goodwill* on its active side, on the part of the will, and *understanding* on its receptive, theoretical side, on the part of the intellect.

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