Language and Theology in a Postmodern Age

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The scientific mentality that demands warrant for all our beliefs permeates all of modem thinking. Of course, at the base of all those beliefs for which we demand evidence are more fundamental beliefs that are simply acquiesced in because they are part of our culture. They are the things that few of us scrutinize, but they have enormous influence upon the beliefs and doctrines that we do scrupulously think about.

This is especially true in the area of theology where theological doctrines are greatly affected by more fundamental notions of things like good and evil, sin, love, happiness, etc. We spend time debating and developing our theological doctrines but take for granted that we have correct ideas of what is good or evil — that we know what sin or love is — but do we? In fact, the notions most of us have of such things are simply unreflectively acquired through our experience as individuals and members of a language community and culture. My language community and culture taught me to understand such things in certain ways, and then my individual experience moulded my understanding without much reflection. But, although acquired unreflectively, these basic notions which have such an enormous influence upon our theology are philosophically loaded concepts. Although we take them for granted and treat them 'as if' they were somehow God-given, they in fact represent the philosophical views of the culture we were born or educated into.

Even if we believe that we are equipped with some archetypal or innate ideas, those ideas do not constitute the whole of our understanding and a host of other ideas that are culturally and historically relative have an enormous effect upon our understanding. Furthermore, even in regard to ideas which might be thought to be archetypal or innate, there exists enough slack concerning such ideas to allow us a liberty to modify or alter them to the point that they are no longer simply God-given but have been

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greatly influenced by the speculations and conventions of human beings.

Since the time of Kant, we can no longer believe that our mind is a *tabula rasa* that simply records an objective reality. Kant convincingly argued that we bring something to our understanding of the world. Of course, for Kant what we bring is a universal hardware that is shared by all of humanity. Since the 19th century, however, philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Nietzsche, and William James have pointed out that the understanding which moulds our knowledge of the world is not simply a given, universal hardware as it was for Kant but is relative to the perspectives and values of cultures and individuals.

In the 20th century Ludwig Wittgenstein showed us that much of what we thought were metaphysical problems and part of the reality of the external world were really problems of language and traceable to the reality of our culture and language community. Furthermore, the structuralism and poststructuralism of the 20th century have made it apparent that words have their meaning, not because of their reference to things but their reference to concepts, and these concepts do not simply have atomic meanings but take their meaning from their relationship to other concepts. The consequence of this is that my understanding of something like justice is affected by a host of other concepts such as fairness, human nature, God, goodness, history, etc. Since so many of these concepts are philosophically rich, and since they all affect each other, our minds are webs of understanding that are as unique as our fingerprints.

By the second half of the 20th century, Thomas Kuhn made us aware of the fact that our understanding of the world is always based on paradigms or theoretical models that mould our understanding. These theoretical models cannot be objectively chosen the way science objectively deals with evidence in experiments but are chosen because one model is more consistent with other beliefs we hold and is therefore more coherent, or it is chosen because it offers more desirable consequences and is therefore more pragmatic. Aristotle imagined the world was biological while Newton's paradigm was that of a machine. The choice of one paradigm or the other has an enormous effect upon our understanding of reality but the choice can never be objectively based simply on observation since paradigms are in us and not in the world.

Furthermore, there seems to be a good deal of evidence for

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Michel Foucault's claim that the paradigms we often come to inherit from our language communities and cultures were originally selected by the powerful because they served their interest and not because they best represent reality. Political and social paradigms are frequently of this kind even when they do not appear to explicitly endorse a particular political position. Samuel Huntington's recent bestseller, *The Clash of Civilizations* presents a paradigm that seems politically neutral but if one accepts his paradigm concerning the essential conflicts that mark and mould our age as one between civilizations, then one does not accept an alternative paradigm which sees the essential conflict of our age as one between global corporations (with a bottom line of profit) and human individuals (with quality of life as a bottom line). It would certainly be in the interest of global corporations for people to believe that the basic conflict is between civilizations and not between those who have capital and those who do not. So our understanding is also vulnerable to being manipulated by powerful political and social forces.

In considering all this, what we had previously held to be our objective understanding of the world begins to deconstruct. As Derrida explains, the nature of language does not allow our understanding to be a perfect reflection of the phenomena. I believe this is true, but that does not mean, however, that language breaks down and communication becomes impossible. What has broken down is the myth that human beings can get to some objective reality that is unaffected by language and our understanding. What deconstructs is the myth that human language, and so human understanding, is based upon an identity between words and some objective reality. In truth, words always refer to the understanding and can never escape the understanding in order to get to an objective reality. The great revelation of our day is that language, and thus our human understanding which is cast in human language, is not able to give us an objective understanding of the world. Given this fact, how are we to construct theological doctrines when such doctrines are founded upon an understanding which is all-too-human?

The ancients and medievals faced no such difficulty since they held the view that we somehow had direct access to the world and there were not all the filters that we now know exist. To the ancients and medievals, human understanding of the world was, for the most part, direct, common, and universal rather than unique to historical periods, cultures, or individuals perspectives.

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Christians, in particular, seem threatened by the loss of such an ancient view. They reason that if we are not able to get to an ultimate, objective reality, we are not able to know God, since he is the ultimate, objective reality. This, of course, is a mistake. It may have been Plato and Aristotle's ambition to know an ultimate objective reality but it should never have been the Christian's. Indeed, the Christian wishes to know the God behind that reality and the God behind that reality is a person or a subject and not an object. As a person, the Christian God will never be ultimately and objectively known by human beings just as we can never ultimately and objectively know any person. That, however, does not mean that God is unknowable, but that he is knowable in the way that other persons are knowable. Furthermore, our ability to use human language in order to know God is still intact and not threatened by the fact that we can no longer pretend to know objective reality. The reason for this is that when human language is used in order to know another person a precise understanding of the external world is not necessary. When we wish to know another person, what we are after is not objective reality but their unique understanding.

Derrida might have shown us that language is not suited to accurately describe the world as we had traditionally supposed it to be, but that does not prevent Derrida, or anyone else, from communicating their unique conceptual understanding. For the purpose of communicating our unique personal understanding, language is still intact, and in fact better than ever. The reason that it is better than ever is because today we know that our understandings are perspectival, relative, and unique. Thus, we are aware, as never before, that if we want to know another person there is a deeper level to which we must go. In the past this deeper level was not obvious. Since much of our understanding is shared because of language acquisition and education it is easy to assume that we are all encountering the same objective reality. Upon coming in contact with more remote cultures, acquiring a better understanding of the nature of language, and encountering the works of original philosophers, such innocence is lost, and we come to realize that people often have very different conceptual understandings. Such different understandings are able to be communicated, however, as long as we realize how unique our understandings may be and we do not suppose that our common notions are part of another person's understanding.

This is certainly the case when it comes to having God communicate his unique understanding to us. Of course, some of

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what God may wish to communicate to us might be common and resemble ordinary communication which does not require any deep revelation of his unique understanding. Sometimes, however, God does wish to communicate that deeper understanding. When the Scripture says, 'Love your wives, just as Christ loved the church (Eph. *5:25)*', God is trying to communicate something deeper since Christ's love is nothing like what we commonly take love to be. Such Scriptures represent a different level of communication, and today, thanks to our postmodem insights, that level of communication is more accessible than ever. The reason such deep communication is more accessible is because today we better understand that our common linguistic concepts do not reflect an objective reality and are not always universally common. We no longer naively suppose that another person's understanding necessarily replicates our own, and consequently, we are more open to going to that deeper level of which we were previously oblivious.

We enter such deeper and more intimate levels of communication with the kind of healthy skepticism which Socrates attempted to establish at the beginning of the Platonic dialogues. In the dialogues, Socrates maintains that the first step toward knowledge was the admission of one's ignorance. He does so in order to free his interlocutors from their preconceived notions and the belief that they already had correct concepts. Of course, Plato believed that the concepts we were after existed in some ultimate, objective reality. Plato thought that this ultimate reality might be something like what we find in mathematics, and that we might achieve a knowledge of courage or justice that would be like our knowledge of triangles or numbers. We may no longer believe that absolutes of the Platonic kind are achievable by humans, but the same skepticism with which Plato began his inquiries is required if we wish to understand the rich concepts that make up another person's understanding. This is most especially true if the other person whose concepts we wish to understand is the Christian God.

The way to that deeper level of communication is quite simple. After beginning with an understanding that we are naturally estranged from God's conceptual understanding, but that such an estrangement can be overcome in the same way we overcome our estrangement from the personal concepts of any other person, we then need to realize that this gap which separates our understandings will never be bridged with anything like the kind of exactness that modernity sought with its mathematical model. With this in mind, we then begin to make stabs at some of the concepts that make up

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the understanding of the other person (in this case God). Any attempted articulation of these concepts that make up the understanding of the other person (whether divine or human) is better than believing that their concepts must be like our own or those of our culture — any attempt to bridge the gap is better than imagining that there is no gap. In making our stabs at what their concepts might be like, however, we must keep in mind that the concepts we are forming must remain open to revision by the other person or others who know the other person well. They can never be ultimately certain concepts of the kind we naively tried to impose upon reality under modernity. Since the object of our knowledge is a person, such knowledge will never be final or some end point which we achieve but must remain open to revision.

Of course, that is the nature of all knowledge and the scientist will never achieve a final and absolute understanding of nature just as we will never achieve a final and absolute understanding of another person. Knowledge is a quest, and not an achievable end or point of certainty which we might possess, but we need not possess the ends that give our lives direction any more than we need to possess the stars by which we sail our ships.

The concept of knowledge set forth by the founders of modernity was after the model of mathematics and not that of a personal dialogue whose end is intimacy rather than certainty. With the mathematical model, the belief was that knowledge would, in time, be certain, objective, and final. We can no longer maintain that model and are in need of an alternative.

Conclusion

The conventional nature of language and therefore thought has become apparent in the twentieth century. More than anything else, twentieth century notions of language have undermined the projects of modernity and produced our present postmodern condition. This is certainly good news for the Christian, for by destroying modernity's model for knowledge, which was not at all conducive to the personal faith which is Christianity, it opens the way for alternative models which are more conducive to a personal faith. In addition to that, however, our postmodern insight also undermines modern atheism which had its support in the myth of modernity that there were objective laws or principles to which we all had access through reason. If language is relative to culture and language community, and our understanding is cast in language, there can be no meta-narratives that objectively and universally explain the reality of our existence.

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The postmodern insight that the metanarrative was an Enlightenment notion whose time has passed eliminates the support modern atheism found in Darwin, Marx, and Freud.

Certainly biological species may change over time, and they often may change for the reasons Darwin gave, but it was the belief of modernity that such a principle was universal and absolute — a totalizing meta-narrative. But why should species change or remain unchanged because of a single reason or principle? Why not multiple principles or explanations?

Likewise, Marx's class analysis certainly provides a valuable insight, but to believe that this is the Rosetta stone that unlocks the knowledge we have so long sought is to make it into a meta-narrative. It is certainly a valuable insight, but not *the* insight to which all others are subordinated.

Freud too certainly contributed to our understanding of human behaviour by introducing us to the unconscious, but to believe that the unconscious holds the key to all the secrets of human existence is again founded in the mysterious belief in a universal abiding principle which is the key to all understanding.

As these sources of modern atheism are undermined, however, Christianity remains intact. That is because Christianity is not a meta-narrative in spite of all efforts to make it one. Christianity will always be a personal relationship with the risen Christ, and never an explanation of how things are for everyone everywhere. Of course, there are similarities between our personal relationships because we are in relationship with the same person, but those relationships differ as well, due to the fact that we are all different people and at different points in our dialogue. God meets us in our respective understandings, so we all begin in different places. Thus, our initial understanding of God is always that of a tribal god who is largely a product of our own culture and understanding. Through time, dialogue, and a genuine desire to surrender our understanding in order to know his, we do, however, come to encounter and know the God who transcends all culture. This knowledge of God will never be the kind of objective and universal meta-narrative that modernity sought but it does become more and more inter-subjective as we encounter others who are also in a serious dialogue with a God who is faithful to reveal himself to those who humbly seek him.

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