I + Thou = Dialogue

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Throughout the ages mystics of various religions have felt that they have a problem in speaking about the experience of the divine. They have repeatedly stressed that what they experienced was beyond words; but they have nothing but words with which to communicate their ultimate truths. Religious thinkers of a more sober sort have struggled with the question of whether transcendent reality can be adequately expressed in human language; whether you are talking about a Catholic like Thomas Aquinas, a Jew like Moses ben Maimon, or an Advaita Vedantin like Shankara. Shankara's co-religionist Suresvara says that words cannot directly denote Brahman, the ultimate reality.1 Shankara even went so far as to say that language is the instrument of ignorance. Both agree that it is impossible to use language directly to designate reality; ultimate reality still more so.2 Shankara and Suresvara both maintain that the highest knowledge is a direct intuition without words; this finds its ultimate expression in the famous Upanishadic saying that Brahman is not this, not this (netineti).

In fact 20 th century philosophy has a problem anyway with how language works. Simon Blackburn suggests that philosophy of language is an attempt to achieve some understanding of a triangle of elements: speakers, language and the world.3 (Where do listeners come in the triangle, I wonder?) The task of the philosopher is to obtain some stable conception of these three and their relationships. How do speakers relate to language, and how does language relate to the world? Blackburn says there is a tension between the fact that we feel our words connect intimately to the object referred to, and yet that we know there is no intrinsic connection between the sound 'cat' and the furry animal on my lap. It could as easily be called something else. Philosophers call this the 'problem of reference'. How do words 'refer' to things; how do words attach onto things in the world, so that we can talk about them?

As far as philosophical narcissism is concerned, thinkers who get themselves tied up about Descartes' cogito find that if there is a problem with making myself the object of my own thought, the same problems attend on making myself the object of my own speech. ' It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak.'4 'Is what speaks in my place, then, another I?'5

This problem is felt to be even worse when you are not talking about things in the world. Many theories of language rest on the commonsense assumption that we can demonstrate a word's meaning by pointing to the thing we are talking about; and the meaning of a word is found in the object to which it refers. But what if you are trying to talk about something that is not an object in the world? Anything supposedly 'transcendent' cannot be talked about. If words mean something by virtue of the objects to which we point, then words about 'God' and similar religious insights or entities cannot mean anything; for we cannot point to a God in our world. So religious utterances cannot make sense. There is nothing there for them to be referring to.

Thus 'the problem of reference' has provoked the greatest anxiety and energy in twentieth-century philosophy of religion. What do religious words refer to, if anything? What gives meaning to these words that name what you cannot display?

This does rest on a central assumption. And that is, that language is about picturing the world, or representing states of affairs in the world. It assumes an idea of language that says its job is all about making a picture of the world with words, hopefully an accurate picture. The majority of english-speaking philosophers probably do think that. But there are other ways of thinking about language. One is to see

language not so much as describing something, as doing something. For example, when I take marriage vows, I am not describing my relationship to a man. I am creating it.

Another way is to see language as having a symbolising function. A symbol doesn't so much stand for something as stand in for something, it makes present something that is absent. In the same way, words don'tdescribe things. If I say, 'Elephant', it doesn't tell you anything about one. But if I keep talking about elephants, in some sense there are elephants here in this room. We can discuss them, make decisions about them (say, conservation policies) that can have real effects on their lives, all without them being physically here.

Tonight I want to make some suggestions about what view of language is most suited to inter-faith experience, as I have already done with the notions of truth, knowledge, and self and other.

When I was writing a chapter on language for my most recent book, I attended some training seminars for language therapy for small children with language disorders. The seminars on language focused entirely on the question of communication as what language is all about. The problem of 'Reference' didn't seem to bother language therapists in the slightest! What does communication presuppose, what does communication consist in, what facilitates it? I could not think of philosophers of language who put this issue at the top of their agenda, or saw the challenges that exist in communicating about religion with someone else as 'the problem of religious language'. But why not? (Philosophical narcissism? No need to?)

So I suggest first of all that we restore the primacy of 'communication' over 'representation' to our reflection on language.

The sort of thinkers who emphasise the 'I-Thou' kind of thing also insist on the importance of language. They assert an inextricable relation between dialogue, as the need for the Other and for language, and correct philosophical and theological reflection. The role that language plays in intersubjectivity is central: how else is a relationship between 'I and Thou' shown, except in dialogue?

Language forms the starting-point and the context for Ebner's thought about the relatedness of human existence. For Ebner, it is in and through language that human beings are human. 'The person is a person only through language.'6 This finds expression in the fact that the human being is a speaking being, that it has language. Further to this, the relationship of dialogue is the ground through which and in which you and I first come to be, and to enjoy 'the twosomeness of life ... which we have to thank for our being.'7 I need the Other in order to exist; indeed, I am only real in and through this dialogue. One might say for Ebner it is not 'I think, therefore I am', but 'I speak, therefore I am' or even 'I speak, therefore I become'. Every sentence, even the word itself is essentially an expression of the I-Thou relationship;8 put alternatively, interpersonal relationships ground all usage of words and gives all thought its substance and reality.9

'That all Being is grace – that all grace is of Being in the Word – that humanity lives from the Word – that everything that is, is through the Word...' 10

As with last week, I want to extend this thinking beyond the cosy 'I-Thou' relationship to the wider community. I want to emphasise that we cannot reflect on religious language without reference to a community, and the traditions a community creates. The Rigveda speaks of language 'as grain is sifted through the sieve and becomes clear of cockle' over time. This is accomplished through the tradition, 'after many labours and efforts', 'for the benefit of all the initiated—so that they could communicate by this language, so enriched and ennobled, in their gatherings'. 11 I can give you an example of the practical impact of this insight. In the Executive Committee of the World Congress of Faiths, we had a discussion at our last meeting about the thorny question of faith schools. Our Vice Chair, Rabbi Jacqueline Tabick, had an interesting point to make. While concerned herself about the potential divisiveness of faith schools, she pointed out that when your religion is dependent on a language, it is not enough to simply have your children get together with your faith community once a week. We all know what it takes to learn a language — preferably immersion, but if not that, then lessons several times a week are essential, especially for children. So if education in your religious tradition and community requires language learning, this has implications for what it means for children to learn about their culture and tradition.

One of my favourite passages on this subject comes from Jacques Lacan:

A creature needs some reference to the beyond of language, to a pact, to a commitment which constitutes him, strictly speaking, as an Other, a reference included in the … system of interhuman symbols. No love

can be functionally realisable in the human community, save by means of a specific pact, which ... is at one and the same time within language and outside of it. That is what we call the function of the sacred....12

Language is a kind of ‘pact’ – a commitment not just to another individual, but to a society, a tradition, a culture. It takes you into a symbolic world. It is this pact that converts ‘The Other’ into ‘another human being’: the move from an abstract philosophical problem called ‘The Other’ to a real person you need to talk to only comes through language. But it is also, as this quotation from Lacan shows, this dialogue that allows us to become an Other to someone else. No love can be realised without this commitment, which happens in language but also transcends it.

If you make shifts like these in your philosophy of language, you need to take another look at the various phenomena of language. Let’s take metaphor as an example.

There is a view of metaphor commonly held today, in which metaphor languished under the ancient Greeks, insufficiently appreciated. They just saw it as a mere figure of speech, and they used it only for something called ‘rhetoric’, which is another word for the misuse of philosophy to get your way by fair means or foul. But according to this story we twentieth-century people rightly see metaphor as cognitive. It is a model for how we learn, understand, and think. Metaphor unites the known and the unknown; by using a metaphor of something familiar, you can communicate something less familiar. And, it is said, all knowledge proceeds like this: by assimilating something we don’t know into something that is familiar.

But this story of our recognition of its greater dignity as ‘cognitive’ has a clear set of presuppositions lying behind it. The idea that having an epistemic function is the highest compliment that you can pay to a figure of speech may actually rest on modern Western prejudices. One such assumption is that the primary task of philosophy is to describe material reality, and the primary task of language is to service thought by representing it accurately. But I have already said that I am suspicious about the idea that the main task of language is ‘representation’, and that I want to recover the importance of communication. To think a view of metaphor as the way our mind works is superior to seeing it as a ‘mere figure of speech’ privileges epistemology over communication, interpersonal interaction, social change and transformation.13

However, if we think that communicating with others is a higher priority than simply describing states of affairs, then we might see that metaphor as a device of so-called rhetoric is more powerful than if is viewed as a mode of private thought. The pact of language commits us to engagement with our community to conflict; to the need for change for persuasion in the resolution of conflict and the maintenance of solidarity. Metaphor is only important as a way of representing the world if we are trying to convince people of the rightness or wrongness of something; to persuade them to adopt our analysis; to inspire them towards a certain course of action. Why else should we spend our time ‘representing the world’—what for?

I’ve mentioned metaphor; I would like to propose for your consideration another kind of figurative language: metonymy. Metonymy is a kind of displacement. It is the device in which one word stands in for, or replaces, another; almost like a euphemism. One says ‘Today, Downing Street announced’ and one doesn’t mean that the road talks, but it refers the British government’s spokesperson.

Metonymy seems almost designed for religious language. What it achieves is this: you can make clear what you are referring to, without any claim that in doing so you are accurately describing it. Metonymy makes it possible to refer to the immaterial because it stands in for what is missing; it can cope with the absence of what it names because its function is to replace, or even displace. But even better: since it names without describing, it can refer to that which transcends all speech. If you think the word ‘God’ describes something, you are thrown into all the familiar problems of religious language and the impossibility of effing the ineffable. But if the word ‘God’ is metonymy; if it simply stands in for what is not and cannot be captured in speech, those problems do not arise in the same way.

I want to introduce another notion, less familiar. This is a device in Hawaiian poetics called ‘kaona’. A koana is a hidden meaning. In Hawaiian poetry, most songs and poems contain more than one meaning; if a song has only one meaning, it is a feeble-minded thing. There is the manifest meaning, the most obvious; but there is also a ‘kaona’ or hidden meaning; or perhaps two or even three. This allows Hawaiians to talk about a number of things at once, and to discuss intimately something that isn’t even mentioned. For example, there is a nineteenth century song called He’eia: ‘There at He’eia we go surfing on the waves… surfing on the crest, coming back on the diagonal wave….’ A text on these chants comments rather discreetly: ‘This is a song for King Kalakaua and is not about surfing as we know it.’

Once Hawaii was invaded by a different culture which was somewhat hostile and critical of its more relaxed attitudes to certain aspects of life, a kind of inter-cultural or inter-lingual metonymy could take place. The original multiple meanings of poems and songs can be hidden behind a single translation which gives the most discreet interpretation of the chant in English. Or it can be completely hidden behind the lack of a translation. So when certain things are forbidden and cannot be said, they can still find expression. As Hawaiian old timer and scholar Mary Kawena Pukui explained to a white audience: 'when all the Hawaiians in the audience start giggling, you know there's a kaona.'

For example, a Hawaiian prince, Lele-io-Hoku, wrote a love song in the Hawaiian language which enthusiastically describes making love in the sea (It begins: 'we two in the spray, oh joy two together, embracing tightly in the coolness.') In my childhood it was sung at tourist shows in hotels. But it was always sung in the original Hawaiian, never translated or sung in English. This passionate and graphic lovesong was described to the tourists as 'The Hawaiian War Chant'. Virile scantily clad young Hawaiian men would run in and do a made-up, warrior-like dance. The people from Iowa loved it. (So did the locals, in a different way.) As a small child, I was even taught a hula for it.

These devices, then, allow you to express the inexpressible. Metonymy stands in for what is absent. Kaona allows you to talk on at least two levels at once. These two levels are not unrelated to one another, but do not reduce to one another. One could then, for example, have a discourse solely about human experience, which makes perfect sense in its own terms, without needing another explanation — just as a song can make perfect sense as a song about surfing. And at the same time, there can be a kaona of religious meaning that quietly runs alongside it, as 'He'eia' simultaneously was all about the king's love affair, perfectly understandable to those who understand. So metonymy and kaona are ways of saying the unsayable. But isn't that what language about the divine is all about?

I want finally to turn to a theory of meaning from Indian logicians and semanticians. They too had interesting debates about theories of meaning and reference; and the Nyaya and Vaisheshika logicians had some interesting notions about how the meaning of words is established. Some of the discussions on meaning and reference, particularly in the Bhatta Mimamsaka and Prabhakara Mimamsaka schools, has a strangely familiar air to those familiar with 20 th century linguistic philosophy.

But I want briefly to allude to Mandana Misra's discussion in theBrahmasiddhi of what words 'aim at'.14 For the Sanskrit word for 'meaning' is 'artha', which is literally 'target'.

Mandana considers all the different things words can 'aim at'. But he – unlike someone like the young A. J. Ayer or the young Wittgenstein – decides words don't simply 'aim at' the things they represent. That, he opines, is inadequate for describing what many words in fact do. It took Wittgenstein quite some time to get to that insight. At the same time, he asserts that words must aim at their individual objects or meanings; for otherwise they would depend entirely on the intentions of the speaker.15Words meanwhile cannot merely aim at a union with other words in a sentence, nor can they aim at what you are being urged to do in speech, the injunction, which makes up such a large part of religious texts.

Consequently, words must 'aim at' a number of levels: things to which they refer, actions or purposes which they convey, and connections of meaning that arise from their relationship with other words. The Hawaiians with their appreciation for multiple meaning and kaona would have happily agreed that all speech aims at a number of different levels at once.

What happens if we embrace the notion of meaning as a 'target'?

If language 'aims at' something, words don't sit permanently attached to their objects. Language does not possess meaning, so much as aspire to it.

If meaning is a target, rather than a label, it allows us to affirm an important self-contradiction for the theologian: that language both successfully alludes to God, while failing utterly to represent God.

When speaking of the transcendent, what flies towards Mandana's target is Zeno's arrow. It heads towards its target unerringly, thus clearly indicating where it lies; but never reaches it. Language reveals yet fails to master.

But it means too that meaning is not a given, something we can thoughtlessly assume. Rather, it is seen as an achievement when it strikes its target. This humbler, less certain stance is an appropriate one for a view of language seen principally as communication, not representation. But to speak of meaning as a target brings out the venture of language as communication, the risk. One can never be certain in advance of success. Language then is not a question of representing accurately, but communicating skilfully.

This view of meaning fits well with the Hawaiian kaona as described by Kawena Pukui and the giggling audience she describes. When your community laughs, meaning has reached its target. Meaning is not found in the thing, nor in the use of the speaker; meaning is found in the understanding of the community, and reception into the tradition.

There is one more thing that we can learn from the centuries of reflection on the philosophy of language undertaken by the Indian philosophers. What is striking is what they see as the central purpose for religious language: enlightenment and liberation.

As I said earlier, both Shankara and his successor Sureshvara are pessimistic about the ability of language to create knowledge and describe ultimate reality. Shankara even goes so far as to say that the Upanishads are ultimately false because language is an instrument of ignorance. Both thinkers, however, are adamant that language is indispensable in attaining enlightenment. We can still be liberated by something that is false; as Shankara says, one can die of fright by seeing a false snake. Sureshvara asserts that although words cannot directly denote Brahman, they can help to dispel ignorance, just as someone can be woken from sleep by words even if she doesn't understand their meaning.16 How can we be liberated by words that cannot denote Brahman adequately? I don't know; but perhaps it rests on a conviction that representing Brahman accurately is not the point of the words. The point of the words is to communicate a paradoxical wisdom that leads someone to enlightenment.

In linguistics in the twentieth century there has been a debate about how far language shapes our perceptions of the world. In what is often known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it is argued that we only perceive the world through the filter of our language. Edward Sapir wrote: 'Human beings do not live in the objective world alone… but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language …. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group…. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached...' 17

Much ink has flowed on these suggestions amongst academics interested in language. I want to take this off into a different tangent, however, and point out how religious mythology depicts the world literally as created by language.

In the Jewish and Christian creation account, the world is created by language; by the word. 'God said: "Let it be", and it came into being'. Hamann, in his re-working of the biblical creation myth, suggests identification between the world and speech which smoothes away the difficulties in their relationship:

Every phenomenon of nature was a word, – the sign, symbol and pledge of a new, mysterious, inexpress ible but all the more intimate union, participation and community of divine energies and ideas. Everything the human being heard from the beginning, saw with its eyes, looked upon and touched with its hands was a living word; for God was the word.18

Indian traditions also join the cosmos and language or speech: 'indeed, it was proclaimed that Transcendent Speech is the Universe; both of them shape knowledge of Reality as itself,…as it is.'19

But what follows above all from the ideas I have been suggesting in these six lectures is that language can create a shared world. Dialogue between persons, between faiths, is not only to learn about each other. It is not only to learn about ourselves. It is not only to establish a relationship between I and You. It is ultimately because the creating an ongoing conversation, we begin to create a new world, a world that belongs to all of us.

But in that world, the divine is nowhere to be found—and everywhere present. And language about the divine can only avoid the traditional problems of religious language by recognising that speaking about the inexpressible and making present the absent is precisely what language isfor. It is for a God like Moses' God in Exodus, that always goes on before you and is never captured in your speech. It is the God of whom the Sufi mystic Rumi wrote, when describing what some have said of God:

'They said, "He is not to be found, we have sought Him long."

Something which is not to be found—that is my desire.'

References

1 Taittiriyopanishadbhasyavartikka , p. 9. See Karl Potter (ed.),Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Advaita Vedanta up to Shankara and His Pupils (Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 525.

2 Ibid., p. 54.

3 See Simon Blackburn, Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language (Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 3-5.

4 Jacques Lacan, 'The Agency of the Letter', in Écrits: A Selection(Routledge, 1997), p. 165

5 Ibid., p. 171

6 Ebner, Werke, III, p. 11.

7 Ebner, Ill, 729.

8 Ebner, II, 243, 274.

9 Ebner, I, 115.

10 [II, 301].

11 Rigveda R.V., X.71.2.

12 Seminar I, p. 174.

13 As Blumenberg points out, it was so important that Plato named the decisive phase of mythical cosmogony in Timaeus as the rhetorical act of persuasion. The power of persuasion was a quality of reality itself, extended into the arts and methods of rhetoric. Hans Blumenberg,Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie, op. cit., pp. 8f.

14 Mandana Misri, Brahmasiddhi, particularly at I.26.

15 But what happens when there is no speaker, and there are simply texts without authors? Mandana thought of that idea too.

16 Taittiriyopanisadbhasyavartikka

17 (Sapir 1958 [1929], p. 69)

18 Hamann, 'The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross', N III, 32:21-28; Griffith-Dickson, Johann Georg Hamann, op. cit., p. 468.

19 Zilberman, The Birth of Meaning in Hindu Thought, op. cit., p. 76.