

Walter Benjamin on the divine origins of language

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Abstract: Hence language does not confine itself to empirical objects because it serves the purpose of revelation and was first breathed by God into man to express the immaterial, the inexpressible and the unexpressed. Language is thus immaterial and refers to the mental linguistic being of things- their mental concepts rather than to an external object or referent. Language is thus immaterial and purely mental and serves the function of revelation- to disclose to man the divine nature of objects and their divine meaning. God breathed language into man that he might experience revelation and an insight into the divine linguistic being of things which God himself named in order for men to experience through the word and the Bible which is for man revelation of higher truths through language whose purpose is revelation and disclosure of higher truths and God's ways.

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What does language communicate? It communicates the mental being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself as

language and not through language. Languages therefore have no speaker. If this means someone who communicates through these languages. Mental being communicates itself in, not through a language, which means it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being. Mental is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication. What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity. Language therefore communicates the particular linguistic being of things, but for their mental being only insofar as this is directly included in their linguistic being, insofar as it is capable of being communicated. (Benjamin 1978: 317-18)

Benjamin thus considers the communication of language as the naming of the mental being that corresponds to it but it does not correspond to any outward linguistic being. Mental being is named in rather than through language. This means that the lingual naming of an object refers us to its mental being or concept rather than the referential naming of an outward object. Thus language is revelation of the essential concept of mental being of an object to us and refers us inward to this object rather

than outward to the object. It therefore refers us to the revelation of the linguistic being of the object as its concept brought about through its naming rather than an external object.

Naming, in the realm of language has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high being meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself. Naming is that by which nothing beyond is communicated and in which language itself communicates itself absolutely. In naming the mental entity that communicates itself is language. Where mental being in its communication only there is the name and only the name is there. Name as the heritage of human language therefore vouches for the fact that language as such is the mental being of man, alone among all mental entities, communicable without residue. On this is founded the difference between human language and the language of things. But because the mental being of man is language he cannot communicate by it but only in it. The quintessence of this intensive totality of language as the mental being of man is naming. Man is the namer, by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks. All nature, insofar as it communicates itself communicates itself in language and so finally in man. Hence he is the lord of nature and can give names to things. Only through the linguistic being of things can he gain knowledge of them from within himself- in name. God's creation is completed when things receive their names from man.(Benjamin 1978: 318-19)

Benjamin thus describes language as a metaphysical entity which has divine origins

from the bible. Naming completes the act of creation in which God has assigned man the authority to name things and thus bring out their linguistic being through language. Thus man communicates not through language but in it- names refer to a divine metaphysical concept rather than an external physical object. Revelation is thus completed through the process of naming. Man gains access to the divine nature of objects through naming them, thus completing the divine process

of creation by naming and thus gaining authority over objects by creating the conceptual linguistic blocks of language which language is made up of. Language thus refers to itself in a chain of concepts rather than serve as a referent to an external object. In this way language is divine and a series of divine metaphysical entities through the concept rather than the referents to an object.

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however is language itself. The answer to the question 'What does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicates itself. The language of this lamp, for example does not communicate this lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language lamp the lamp of communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: the linguistic being of all things is their language.(Benjamin 1978: 316)

Language does not thus refer us to a thing in itself or an external referent, an object the



lamp but communicates the linguistic being of the lamp which is its mental concept. The act of naming refers us internally to this linguistic being and mental concept rather than an external referent or object. This is what Benjamin means when he states that we communicate in rather than through language. Language refers to itself in an infinite series of referents or mental concepts and Derrida has spoken of this as the fact that there is nothing outside the text, language refers to itself in an infinite series of supplements and concepts rather than to an external referent or object.

For the metaphysics of language the equation of mental with linguistic being, which knows only gradual difference, produces a graduation of all mental being in degrees. This graduation, which takes place within mental being itself can no longer be embraced by any higher category so leads to the graduation of all being both mental and linguistic, by degrees of existence or being such as was already familiar to scholasticism with regard to mental being, However the equation of mental with linguistic being is of great metaphysical moment to linguistic theory because it leads to the concept that has again and again as if of its own accord elevated itself to the center of linguistic philosophy and constituted its most intimate connection with the philosophy of religion. This is the concept of revelation. (Benjamin, 1978: 320)

Language is thus internally referential but has concerns with a greater metaphysical purpose. This is the concept of revelation. The act of naming brings the divine nature of an object to light because the ultimate act

of naming was first conferred by God and the act of naming completes the divine revelation of the linguistic being of an object. The purpose of language is thus revelation- to unconceal their divine nature and purpose within a name.

Within all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed. On considering this conflict one sees, in the perspective of the inexpressible, at the same time the last mental entity. Now it is clear that in the equation of mental and linguistic being the notion of an inverse proportionality between the two is disputed. For the latter thesis runs: the deeper ie the more existent and real to the mind the more it is inexpressible and unexpressed whereas it is consistent with the equation proposed above to make the relation between mind and language thoroughly unambiguous, so that the expression that is linguistically most existent (ie the most fixed) is linguistically the most rounded and definitive; in a word the most expressed is at the same time the purely mental. Exactly this however is meant by the concept of revelation, of it takes inviolability of the word as the only and sufficient condition and characteristic of the divinity of mental being that expressed in it. The highest mental region of religion is (in the concept of revelation) at the same time the only one that does not know the inexpressible. For it is addressed in name and expresses itself in revelation. In this however notice is given that only the highest mental being, as it appears in religion, rests solely on man and the language in him,



whereas all art, not excluding poetry, does not rest on the ultimate essence of language mind but on language mind confined to things, even if in consummate beauty. "Language the mother of reason and revelation, its alpha and omega" (Benjamin 1978: 320-21)

The highest region of language, religion thus expressed itself in revelation and beings to light that which is inexpressible and unexpressed, all the more confirming that language has metaphysical and divine objects and thus not refer to an external referent which is necessarily empirical for the realm of religion refers us to the arena of the transcendental and unseen where language takes the purpose of revelation and communicating the inexpressible and unexpressed as well as unseen and that which lies beyond the senses and beyond the world of the empirical. The highest faculty of language is thus revelation and communicating to men the linguistic being of that which is inexpressible and unexpressed through revelation because language itself is of a divine origin.

Language itself is not perfectly expressed in things themselves. This proposition has a double meaning in its metaphorical and literal senses: the language of things are imperfect, and they are dumb. Things are dined the pure formal principle of language – sound. They can only communicate to one another through a more or less material community. This community is immediate

and infinite, like every linguistic communication is magical (for there is also a magic of matter.) The incomparable feature of human language is thus its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound. The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language. (Benjamin 1978:321)

Hence language does not confine itself to empirical objects because it serves the purpose of revelation and was first breathed by God into man to express the immaterial, the inexpressible and the unexpressed. Language is thus immaterial and refers to the mental linguistic being of things- their mental concepts rather than to an external object or referent. Language is thus immaterial and purely mental and serves the function of revelation- to disclose to man the divine nature of objects and their divine meaning. God breathed language into man that he might experience revelation and an insight into the divine linguistic being of things which God himself named in order for men to experience through the word and the Bible which is for man revelation of higher truths through language whose purpose is revelation and disclosure of higher truths and God's ways.

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