

## The very idea of design: what God couldn't do

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**Abstract:** This paper argues for the proposition that there is fundamental incoherence in the idea of a divine designer. Such a being would have to have intentions and thoughts prior to designing and making a world. But it is a necessary truth that thought – of the complex and articulated kind necessary for the design of a cosmos – presupposes possession of language. It is further necessarily true that language is impossible, save for beings who inhabit a public world containing other linguistic subjects. The divine designer would be the impossible exemplar of the private language, whose incoherence was demonstrated by Wittgenstein. Objections to this line of argument are noted and rebutted.

*Even God can't whisper in His own ear.*

*Isaak Babel*

Some things even a god could not do. Even an omnipotent deity has its limitations. A god could not design a triangle with other than three sides or a perfect circle with a radius greater than its circumference. An all-powerful god could not create another being more powerful than herself.

Of course, the impossibilities above do not really impose limits on anybody's abilities. For, in reality, there can be no such things as triangles with other than three sides or perfect circles with radii greater than their circumferences. The very ideas are incoherent. Since these expressions cannot possibly refer to anything, there are no such things that a god or anyone else either could, or could not, make.

In the same vein, though, God could not have created the heavens and the earth. Surprisingly, perhaps, God could not have intelligibly said, 'Let there be light'. God could not have intentionally formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. God could not have done any of these things, either – not if God is conceived as a being who, prior to the supposed act of world-making, was the only thing in existence.

God as such, therefore, could not have seen that His handiwork was *good*. He could not have possessed the concept. He could not have understood the meaning of the word. Not in an ancient Semitic tribal language. Not in modern English. Not in a divine and solipsistic language of God-ese. As a matter of fact, before they were invented, God could not have spoken any language at all. No individual – human, Martian, dolphin, or divine – could possibly, all alone and all by itself, come to master a language. And without language, thought itself is impossible. And without thought, there is no such thing as intention. And without intention, there can be no creation. No creation except for a purposeless or accidental sort: a spontaneous emanation, a stumble, a sneeze perhaps. Which is to say, an *unintended* sort. Forget about the argument from design. God could not even have enjoyed a quiet game of Solitaire.

Just as with the tango: for talking, for thinking, for intending – and therefore for creating – it takes two. On His own, God could not have done it. In three or four short steps, here's proof.

### **Aristotle's statue**

Step 1 can be summed up with the slogan, 'No creation without ideation'. The idea is simple and commonplace, and has been around for a long time. Although this point verges on the platitudinous, it is nonetheless an important one.

Aristotle, who wrote a good deal about how things come to be and how things come to be what they are, proposed four interrelated reasons or explanations. These are his four 'causes': formal, material, efficient, and final. To illustrate his new idea, Aristotle used, among others, the example of a sculptor creating a statue.<sup>1</sup> The formal cause, the one that most concerns us here, is a statue – that is, its essential, archetypal pattern. The material cause, given in terms of the substance of which the sculpture is formed, is simply marble. The efficient cause is the sculptor. The final cause, the purpose or end for which something 'strives' according to its nature, is in this case, decoration, or perhaps beauty.

An explanation of being and becoming in terms of Aristotle's efficient cause is the closest thing to our contemporary idea of causation – that is, of a force that acts on something to make or change it. But in the context of this paper's argument, the most pertinent of the four is the formal cause. By this, Aristotle means the idea – what he calls the *paradigm*. Interestingly, this he identifies with 'a statement of its essence'. The association with a *statement* here underscores the connection to what we find it natural to think of as a concept, or of conceptualizing. Unlike with Plato, this paradigm is not a metaphysical entity (immaterial, timeless, unchanging, and invisible to the eyes) wholly independent of the human mind. In the example of the sculpture, Aristotle observes that, first, there must be the idea of something the artist wants to make. It is this idea that

guides the artist in his or her act of creation. Note that the idea need not be completely detailed or absolutely precise: an artist might have no more in mind when he or she begins than the thought, 'I am going to carve a sculpture'. But the artist – the creator – has to have in mind at least this much. However minimal, however imprecise, the artist must have in advance *some* idea of what she is going to create.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, what results is merely a matter of chance or accident.

Of course, some things do come about unintentionally. Some things we bring about against our will even. Cases of accidental or chance creations are commonplace. A waiter accidentally drops a stack of dishes and thereby creates a mess. A painter trips and spills a bucket of paint and creates a modern masterpiece. A scientist absentmindedly leaves a radioactive substance on a sensitive plate and the first X-ray image is created. Most traditional accounts of a divine act of creation, however, are *not* of the chance or accidental sort. The Creator is supposed to have known what He was doing. The world is supposed to have come to be just as He consciously designed. Both sorts of creation are philosophically and theologically rich, but the intentional is the one addressed here.

So, with a nod to Aristotle, the upshot here is that an intentional act of creation – of anything, by anyone – entails some prior thought of the thing to be created. It is built into the very idea, one could say. To put it another way: the idea of intentional creation is dependent upon the idea of there being a thought. It is crucial to realize that the connection between the two is a *defining* one. It does not just happen to be this way. It is a conceptual matter, not an empirical one. That is to say, there simply is no such thing as the one without the other: no such thing as intention without thought, or thinking. This is especially true when we consider an intention to be a *conscious* one. Just as, literally speaking, there is no such thing as a triangle with other than three sides. We can put these words together into a grammatically and syntactically acceptable string; but no one can actually conceive of such a figure. Similarly, no one – not God, not a mortal human or chimpanzee – can have a conscious intention to do X without having the thought of 'X'. Therefore, insofar as we are speaking about intentional creation, there is no creation without ideation.

### **Wittgenstein's dog**

Step 2 in the argument will likely seem more contentious. It can be summed up with the slogan, 'No talk, no thought'. That is to say, without language (i.e. talk), thought itself is not possible. By 'thought' I mean to include ideas and concepts. Mere 'pictures in the mind', on the other hand, are not thoughts. Generally speaking, mental images, as such, are by themselves not *about* anything. They do not, on their own, involve any conventional or standardized relation to things 'outside' themselves. Yet such a convention – one which, furthermore, must be known to all who grasp the language – is necessary for *any*

sign, symbol, or signifier to be broadly termed 'linguistic'. There can surely be pictorial or imagistic languages. It is just that they must encompass the requisite 'word-world relation'.

The term 'thought' also applies to such things as the contents of beliefs, hopes, doubts, and the like. The contents are *what* someone believes, hopes, or doubts: for instance, the belief *that Smith is about to fall off his roof*. This claim – that thinking requires language – may need to be modified or diluted somewhat. For now, risking vagueness, I will simply put it this way: certain thoughts, thoughts, that is, of a high degree of complexity or sophistication, are quite impossible – logically inconceivable – without there being a language in which they are actually framed. I will try to make this clear, with the use of some examples, a little further along in this section.

The philosopher, Norman Malcolm, once remarked that when one observes a dog chase a cat up a tree then run around the trunk, barking and jumping and looking up into the branches, the perfectly natural thing to say is that the dog believes the cat is up in that tree.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, we often say this kind of thing about our dogs and cats, and about many other non-human animals besides. And we don't ordinarily think of our dogs and cats, or of most of the other creatures, as possessing a language. So my claim above, that thought requires language, would appear to be false. Undoubtedly, the notion of belief – of a conscious belief, at any rate – is closely tied to the notion of thought.<sup>4</sup> And yet, there may be a difference between what we ordinarily *say* on such occasions and what we, strictly speaking, *mean*. Saying that the dog believes the cat is up the tree, although unexceptional, is not the same as saying that the dog entertains a particular thought in its head – not even a thought in Canine. The dog's behaviour is such that we find it natural to speak in terms of a belief; but this is not the same as saying of the dog that it is actually and literally thinking something to itself.

On the other hand, perhaps it is correct to attribute to other non-linguistic creatures (including pre-linguistic human infants) *some* kinds of simple thoughts, or 'proto-thoughts'. No matter. For I should think it sufficiently obvious that, because of its complexities of biology, chemistry, and laws of physics, designing the universe would require thoughts of a significantly 'higher order'. Statements of physical laws – laws of motion, for example – entail more complex concepts, expressed by conditional statements: (necessarily) for every A and every B, if A occurs, then B will occur. Even more complex are law-like *counterfactual* conditionals: (necessarily) if A *had* occurred, then B *would have* occurred. And this does not even begin to touch on complex mathematical relationships, involving such concepts as mass and energy, force, particles and waves, fields and vectors, infinity, and the like.

It probably ought to go without saying that some such relationships are part of the 'fabric' of our universe. And in order to formulate such complex concepts and

relationships (whether before or after the fact, as it were), correspondingly complex thoughts are required. But such complex, or higher-order, thoughts cannot be achieved – cannot even be framed, that is – without a structured pattern of signs or symbols in which to frame them. It is not merely that language is the ‘vehicle’ of such thoughts – as if these thoughts could possibly exist either in or outside the vehicle, so to speak. Rather, such thoughts (ideas, concepts, propositions, the contents of beliefs) simply are the product of particular arrangements of meaningful linguistic signs. These are what, in natural languages, we call words and sentences. Just try this as an experiment: try to think the *thought* expressed as ‘ $E=MC^2$ ’ without the *words* ‘energy’, ‘is equivalent to’, ‘mass’, ‘multiplied by’, ‘the speed of light’, and ‘squared’ (or their equivalent in a language other than English).

I do not believe Ludwig Wittgenstein ever owned a dog. But he put his finger on the spot when he wrote, ‘A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow? – And *what* can he not do here?’<sup>5</sup> Some thoughts, about supernatural deities and the genesis of the cosmos, for instance, are incapable of formulation except in a language. Wittgenstein correctly observed that one cannot take seriously the testimony of a deaf mute to the effect that she had such thoughts before she had learnt language.<sup>6</sup> There are thoughts that only a language-user can have, as well as ‘thoughts’ that some animals can share. In the same way that a dog can believe a cat is up a particular tree, it can believe its master is at the door. But a dog cannot believe that its master will come the day after tomorrow, or, counterfactually, that *if* its master *had* come an hour sooner it *would have* been more pleased. It cannot have such thoughts because it has not mastered a complex language in which alone such beliefs are expressed. The same holds for human infants, as well. Until they learn these kinds of *expressions*, they simply do not, and cannot, have these thoughts. The point is perfectly generalizable. It is not restricted to dogs and people.

But someone might object: ‘Even supposing that complex thoughts require a language, are we justified in saying that the *divine* thoughts involved in creation were complex?’ The answer to this is ‘Yes’. Divine or mere mortal, the complexity of an intention must mirror the complexity of the intended situation, and the thought and the intention come hand in hand.

Donald Davidson has argued persuasively that marks, or sounds, or what have you cannot even be identified as belonging to a *language* unless one can translate them into another language (such as one’s own).<sup>7</sup> This means that one can’t even sensibly *suppose* something to be a language without being able to make real sense of it being translatable into another language. (This does *not* mean, however, that every delicate shade of meaning with respect to an expression in one language will, in every other language, find an exact duplicate; what is required is for the ‘core ingredients’ of meaning, especially those associated with truth and falsity, and with speech-acts such as assertions, questions, commands, and the

like to be in principle *interpretable*.) Therefore, *if* divine agents employ a language, then that language must be translatable, i.e. interpretable by speakers of human languages. Then, if such thoughts translate as complex ones in English say, then, however disguised their superficial or surface form in the language of the divines, the thoughts themselves likewise must be understood to be complex. If a thought of God's translates into English as 'E=MC<sup>2</sup>', then if that proposition is a complex one in English, it follows that it is a complex one in the divine language, too, and vice versa – even if the way of marking this in either language makes use of a single (or simple) sign only.

Another response to the objection follows a related line. Language is structured. That is to say, the sentences of a language are structured. It makes some difference whether one says 'George W. Bush ousted Saddam Hussein', or 'Saddam Hussein ousted George W. Bush'. The same elements, structured differently, yield entirely different propositions. This is true not only for individual words but for other core semantic ingredients as well, such as verbal mood and intonation: 'War is inevitable' versus 'War is inevitable?', or 'Tony Blair is not Bush's puppet' versus 'Tony Blair, be not Bush's puppet!' (an imperative – a plea perhaps – along the lines of 'Make it be true that Tony Blair is not Bush's puppet!').

The same holds true of *thoughts*, whose contents are identified with the meanings of corresponding sentences, utterances, or propositions. The structure of any one thought perfectly mirrors the structure of its linguistic expression. Among other things, then, structure both allows for and entails a host of logical relations among a corpus of propositions. From the complex proposition 'The serpent speaks with a forked tongue' can be derived the simple proposition, 'The serpent speaks'. From the conjunction 'Adam is a man and Eve is a woman' follows logically the conjunct 'Adam is a man'. It follows that for God to have such thoughts – and rational, logical abilities – then God's language and God's thoughts must likewise entail others. But this is possible if and only if the divine language is structured. That is, if and only if it is capable of *complexity*.

Consider, finally, this possible objection: 'We should distinguish between the cause of mental life from what is constitutive of it. It may turn out that we could not have developed complex thought without language, but possessing a language may not be part of what it is to have a mental life of a certain degree of complexity.' The second horn of this dilemma has already been shown to be untenable. The ability to form intentions is a necessary requirement for having a mental life of 'a certain degree of complexity'. That is, it is minimally necessary for any conscious creator to *have* intentions. That having been established, the main line of argument in this section has also already demonstrated that these intentions must themselves be capable of complexity. But, again, this can be so if and only if the conscious, intentional creator possesses a linguistic ability, one which, moreover, is capable of a corresponding complexity.

The first horn of the objection, the causal reading of step 2, proceeds as follows: 'This may just be true in cases where mental states have a physical realization, or where mental systems have evolved from non-mental ones. It tells us nothing about non-physical, non-evolved beings.' To this I make the following observations: first, the idea of a mental state totally devoid of, or totally unconnected to, any 'physical realization' whatsoever is incomprehensible and flies in the face of all plausible theories of mind since the time of Descartes. No contemporary philosophies of mind – whether functionalist, materialist (type-, token-, or eliminative-), or property dualist (epiphenomenalist, or interactionist) – allow room for such putative mental states, processes, or activities. The idea is simply incoherent. Second, I offer the following rejoinder: If it is true that step 2 'tells us nothing about [the mental states of] non-physical, non-evolved beings', this is as it should be. For nothing *can* be said. And besides, no theologian can possibly offer any *justifiable* explanation of the workings – the mechanisms – of the mind of such a Being as imagined. The burden of proof, it must be stressed, is on the objector. And this burden cannot possibly be met.

### **Dummett's tango**

Step 3 of the argument is supported by a convergence of views from at least three sources and can be summed up with the slogan, 'It takes two to talk'. The basic point here is that language is intrinsically a *social* phenomenon. Using language is a form of group behaviour. It is also, of course, essentially a means of communication. And communication, except in a derivative and secondary fashion, necessarily involves an *audience*. Where there is a speaker, there is a hearer. Second, as a matter of definition, the ability to speak a language is an *acquired* ability. *A priori*, an infant devoid of memories and experience cannot emerge from the womb with a mastery of its mother tongue. Neither can a competent adult speaker of English, with no prior experience of it, simply launch into the language of a Kalahari bushman. Perhaps the words could come out of her mouth by magic; even so, she could not be said to *understand* them. The English speaker could not know even what it was that she was supposed to try to do. An individual can speak to herself. An individual can make up her own language, certainly. But only *after*, and as a result of, having already learned some other language – only *after* acquiring some idea of language *per se*. Third, it is not possible, it is incoherent, for any being – human or divine – to speak a language so *private* that only he, she, or it can understand it.

The convergent strands which each in its own way points to this feature of language come from philosophers of language, Paul Grice, Michael Dummett, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. First, another platitude: a language is not a language without representational signs. In other words, all languages must contain

recognizable signs which their speakers can use to signify things in the world – things such as people, places, objects, events, relations, and ideas. These signs, as I am calling them, need not resemble our familiar spoken or written words. Chess pieces or chairs or patterns of neural firings would work just as well. (A wonderful example of this, I am told, is found among the Quipa of the Inca, who construct ‘wheels’ of strings with knots tied in them in various configurations to signify various things.) What distinguishes mere scribbles from words and sentences is that words and sentences, but not scribbles, possess *meaning*. Notoriously, this has proved to be one of the most difficult concepts to explain philosophically; nevertheless, with respect to understanding language, ‘meaning’ is the most fundamental concept. Whether we employ as key terms such expressions as ‘refer to’, ‘signify’, ‘stand for’, or ‘stand in for’, at its most basic, meaning involves what is commonly called a ‘word–world relation’. If we set up a system of correlating different chairs, for instance, to different things in the world – this chair refers to Adam, this chair refers to Eve, this chair signifies the act or relation of loving – then we can say things in our chair-language translatable as ‘Adam loves Eve’ and ‘Eve loves Adam’.

The key to unlocking language lies with meaning. One influential theory of meaning first articulated by Paul Grice views the primary focus as falling on what has come to be known as *speaker-meaning*, rather than on the ideas of word-meaning or sentence-meaning.<sup>8</sup> Rather than ask after the meaning of a word or the meaning of a sentence (or utterance), Grice asks, ‘What, in the most general of terms, does a speaker mean by using a particular word, or combination of words?’ On such a view, meaning is equated with intending. Grice gives his account of meaning in terms of what speakers (standardly) *intend* by uttering, or writing various strings of sounds or signs. According to him, therefore, our general concept of meaning is to be explained in terms of a formula that makes explicit a speaker’s intention in using a particular form of words. The formula, a reflexive one, is roughly as follows:

A speaker S means ‘M’ by his utterance U, if and only if S intends his audience A to believe that M, and furthermore intends that A form this belief by recognizing S’s intention that A believe M.<sup>9</sup>

Many philosophers of language nowadays, perhaps the majority (including myself), reject Grice’s theory of meaning on the grounds that in giving priority to speaker-meaning he puts the cart before the horse. Objectors hold that a speaker S cannot legitimately intend her audience to form the requisite beliefs, to recognize her intentions, without their knowing in advance what her words – her utterances – mean. Quite the reverse: it is precisely on the basis of knowing the meaning of her utterance that a hearer can reliably determine, can read off, S’s intentions and beliefs. If her audience does not already know what S’s words mean (in S’s language), then S’s speech is no more than babble. And no audience

can reliably grasp a speaker's intentions and beliefs from babble. The meanings of words and sentences are given in advance, as it were, and have (logical) priority over what particular speakers intend by using them on particular occasions.

But even if, as I believe, Grice's theory of meaning is flawed, it nevertheless contains an important insight for understanding the nature of language as a form of communication. It is this: no explanation of language is complete that does not recognize the intrinsic role of an *audience*. Communication has a social character. It *must* have. Meaning itself, then, is also a social matter, a community affair. Alice is right to criticize Humpty Dumpty for saying that whenever he uses a word, it can mean whatever he wants it to.<sup>10</sup> Words cannot work this way. Communication would be rendered impossible. Assuming that communication does actually take place between speakers and hearers, then, meaning must be standard between them. Among a community of competent speakers, necessarily, meaning is something shared and known by all.

Dummett arrives at the same place by a somewhat different route. Dummett's recognition of the social character of language can be gleaned from, among other things, his insight that the ability to speak a language – the ability to understand meaning – is intrinsically an acquired ability.<sup>11</sup> We acquire our ability to speak from others. Dummett correctly observes that some abilities (at least to a minimal if not a modest degree) are in-born or innate; for others this does not even make sense. Can you stay afloat in water? 'I don't know', you may reply, 'I've never tried'. This response makes sense. You know what it is to stay afloat in water, you have some concept of it. And it might be possible for you to do it, even though you have never attempted it before. You can try. Conceivably, you might succeed, however poorly. But the same response does not even make sense for a question such as, 'Can you speak the language of Kalahari bushmen?' If you do not already know this language, if you cannot even identify it when it is spoken in your presence, you can have no idea of what it is that you are supposed to do. You cannot even begin to try.<sup>12</sup>

So where, then, *does* one get the idea of language, *per se*? It can come only from sufficient exposure to a real living language, that others write and speak. This does not result in an infinite regress or a chicken-or-egg kind of paradox about the origins of language. It does not require there to have been a first speaker who got the ball rolling. Rather, language originated as a result of the natural evolution of more 'primitive' forms of communicative behaviours – as these arose within a social setting. Different languages arose out of different forms of increasingly complex social interactions. Each language arose not with a single individual, but among groups of individuals acting in concert.

But, 'couldn't God have coined His own language?', one naturally wants to say. A language that did not require anybody else? Not if Grice and Dummett are right about the intrinsically social character of language. And not if Wittgenstein is right about the impossibility – the incoherence – of a private language.

What is a private language?<sup>13</sup> A private language is a language that is supposedly so private that no-one except the individual speaker or thinker can possibly know what its words refer to. The speaker could not teach it to another, even if she wanted to. It is in principle incapable of being shared. Many people, many philosophers included, have thought that such words as ‘pain’ or ‘toothache’ are like this – that they refer to a speaker’s private experience, to something that no-one else can possibly observe or feel. No-one else can have *my* toothache, *this* toothache, one wants to say. It is mine alone. I cannot even show it to you. It would seem to follow, then, that whenever I use the word ‘toothache’ I must be referring to something that only I can know – to my private sensation. Thus, if the meaning of the word ‘toothache’ as I use it is a matter of a private reference, it would follow that only I can know what I mean by it on any particular occasion. For your part, from my behaviour you might *guess* that what I’m calling a toothache is *similar* to what you call a toothache. But, of course, you would have no way of knowing this for certain. You have no way of getting inside my head to observe what exactly it is that I am referring to.

There are two things to take note of, right off the bat. First, on such a construal of a private language, the words, however idiosyncratic, for ‘outer’, or publicly observable items, would *not* be private. You might use a new and strange expression for some observable thing, an expression that is unique to you. Still, it would be easy enough for you to teach this expression to others, or for others simply to pick up on your use of this expression and so come to understand it for themselves. This amounts to nothing more than an *idiolect*. An idiolect is an idiosyncratic use of language that others can in principle come to understand (and make allowance for).

Hence, it would seem that a private language is necessarily limited to so-called private experiences, to things that no one else can see or feel but you. But consider what this would mean for a creator god: even if such a private language were coherent and, moreover, practically possible, God-ese would be limited to references to God’s ‘inner’ world – to His private sensations. His creation, therefore, if such it could be called, would be comprised of nothing but His own thoughts and sensations. The whole of creation would exist only in His head. This idea, strange as it may sound, is not new to philosophy. Matter itself, George Berkeley reasoned in the early eighteenth century, is merely an idea in the mind of God. Naturally, this view runs counter to what most of us uncritically believe. But so much, then, for our material world. It could be that the entire universe, from the smallest atomic particle to the largest galaxy, is nothing but a whirl of mental images with no connection to an ‘outside reality’. A dream in the mind of God.

The second thing to note about the idea of a private language is this: using words of a private language would render communication impossible. If my use of ‘toothache’ really worked in the way I described above, no one else could possibly understand what I mean when I say, ‘I have an awful toothache right

now'. For all you could know, I might be saying what *you* would mean by saying, 'I have an awful stomach ache right now', or 'I have an awful sadness right now'. Therefore, if, as we ordinarily believe, communication involving such expressions really does take place between us, the meaning of such expressions cannot be a private affair.

A staunch defender of divine design might initially be willing to tolerate these two conditions. For it ought to be sufficiently clear by now that *if* God could have spoken a language before anything else came into existence, then this language would have to have been a private one. God could not have taught it to anybody else, because, for one thing, there was nobody else around to teach it to. Neither could God have coined words for other objects, since there weren't any objects yet to which His signs could refer.

But however cast-iron one's stomach for the idealism of Bishop Berkeley, the fact is that not even God could have had a private language. He could not even have spoken to Himself. Aside from the considerations of Grice and Dummett, an even deeper reason undermines the possibility. It renders the idea of a private language incoherent as the idea of a triangle with other than three sides. For it turns out that God could not possibly know what His own intended signs mean. That is to say, they could not function in any way like words. They could not be the building blocks of thoughts.

Suppose God intended to use a sign to refer to a particular sensation of His.<sup>14</sup> When He experiences this sensation He says, or writes, the expression 'S'. S is supposed to refer to the sensation – that's what its meaning is supposed to consist in. So God wants to say or write this expression on each occasion that He experiences the sensation, or even whenever He simply thinks of it. He inwardly points to the sensation, as it were – He directs his attention on it – and gives it a name: 'This is S'. (Like Wittgenstein, I am ignoring the question as to how and where He got the words 'this' and 'is', as well as the question as to how and where He got the fundamental ideas of names and naming.) The problem, according to Wittgenstein, is that God's initial baptism of this sign, S, has *not* conferred any meaning on it. An initial ostensive definition cannot by itself do this. It cannot tell one, once and for all, how the sign is to be used on other occasions. It fails to tell us whether or not a future sensation is *the very same* one. It has not specified exactly what is to count as a case of S on any other occasion.

One thing that can be said with certainty about language – about the meaning of any particular expression in a language – is that it must be used *correctly*. Words for things must be used the same way, not only by different speakers, but also by the same speaker on different occasions. Humpty Dumpty cannot use the word 'toothache' to refer to a pain originating in his tooth on one occasion, to refer to the Queen of Hearts on another, or to refer to a nice, knock-down argument on another. The meaning of an expression, generally speaking, must be standard. And it must remain stable. This is not to say that expressions never

change in meaning. On the contrary, we know that, over time, words often acquire new or broader associations – or shed some. But when this happens, a word gets a new sense. If the original is still in circulation, we might then recognize two senses (whether quite distinct or closely related). Yet for any word, new or old, to become established, each must, on pain of nonsense, be used by speakers of that language consistently and with constancy.

Wittgenstein's most fundamental point is this: an individual speaker has no means of knowing whether she is using the word correctly on any later occasion. She has no way of determining that she is using the private expression S in the same way. For nothing she has done in her initial baptism of the expression has told her what *the same* is. This pseudo-naming procedure, simple and basic and innocuous as it seems, has not provided the individual with any knowledge of sameness. It has established no criteria for when something is to count as S.

Here it is crucial to understand that this issue does not hinge on a scepticism about memory. The problem is not that the individual might forget how to use the expression correctly. We can suppose that God's memory is perfect. The difficulty lies with the fact that there simply is nothing to remember about the meaning of S, because this mark has not been given a meaning. S referred to *that*, one might imagine God saying to Himself, OK, but what about *this*? Is *this* (sensation) the same as *that*? The same – *in what way*? Simply labelling the initial sensation S provides not even a clue as to *what else* is to be given the same label. It fails to tell us whether another subsequent sensation is the very same sensation. A private ostensive definition does not, and cannot, tell one how to use the proposed expression on future occasions. As Wittgenstein points out, one doesn't even have a concept of 'sameness' here. And so, without a concept of 'sameness' one cannot know whether one is using the expression in the same way. More accurately, the very idea (of knowing this) is incoherent. There simply is nothing to be known or not-known. Nothing yet counts as 'the same'. Hence, there can be no sense to the idea of using the expression *correctly*. Nothing counts as either correct or incorrect.

But even if we assume that which I think is not possible – that the individual, that God – already possesses a concept of sameness, it would still be the case that He could not know if He were actually using the expression in the same way on different occasions. God might *believe* He is using the expression correctly. But there would, in fact, be no difference between His *seeming* (to Himself) to use it correctly and His *actually* using it correctly. And Wittgenstein is surely right to suggest that, without this distinction, an expression has no meaning. Not only would it be impossible for someone else to understand you, you couldn't even talk or think to yourself. This is because you have not yet provided the conditions or associations for the *correct* use of your proposed expression.

One of the key points of Wittgenstein's private-language discussion is that for a criterion of correctness to become established, a criterion of sameness (of use

and meaning) must be established. And for the necessary distinction between 'correct' and 'seemingly correct' other speakers are required. There must be other speakers – of the same language – to observe whether or not one is using an expression correctly. Competency requires that each speaker employ the language's expressions with constancy, according to the standard established.

One cannot, by private means, establish the standard for the correct use of any expression – especially for words such as 'pain' and 'toothache'. Although the temptation may be great to think that such words refer to something that only the speaker can know, the correct use of such expressions is entirely dependent upon conditions that are open to public view – particularly on outward behaviour. Call this a dogma of empiricism, if you like. But the fact remains: we learn the correct use of such expressions from others, and it is only because others can on any occasion correct our usage that these expressions acquire a meaning for us. A private language, therefore, commensensical as it might at first appear, is actually an incoherent notion. No such thing is possible. This logic applies to human agents. It applies to chimpanzees. There's simply no way around it: this logic applies to any and all supernatural beings.

Neither can it be overcome by appeal to 'multiple-aspect' conceptions of the divine. Whether or not it is a coherent notion, the Trinity, for example, does not comprise a potential linguistic community. If, as in 'classical' Christian theology, God is conceived as being 'Three-in-One', He nevertheless remains a *unitary* Being, an individual agent. In short, if the putative 'Three' are *not* distinct, individual *agents* – do *not* possess distinct minds, distinct thoughts, distinct sensations – then the social practice of correcting others' linguistic usage cannot be established among them.

For God to constitute a linguistic community, God would have to have, or be comprised of, more than one distinct consciousness. The idea of a distinct consciousness is not merely a matter of numerical identity. It requires that some things be present to one consciousness that are not present to another. This is just to say that the idea here of 'agency' depends upon the possession of mental states (beliefs, desires, emotions, *et al.*) that another does *not* possess, identically and always at the very same time; it also means that one agent cannot have direct access to the mental states of another. To be sure, the nature of these states *can* be communicated or shared, via language for example, but crucially, they *need not* be. Our consciousnesses, yours and mine, are distinct just because you can't always experience, and you can't always know, what's going on inside my head.

Suppose, then, for the sake of argument, that different 'centres of consciousness' are contained in one Being. The question is: does this one Being have access to, knowledge of, or direct experience of, each and all of the things present to the different centres on different occasions? If the answer is 'Yes', then I claim that there is really only one *agent* here, and so, no possibility of a linguistic community. If the answer is 'No', then these imagined centres do constitute

distinct consciousnesses, and are therefore to be regarded as distinct beings, or more aptly, agents. These might indeed be thought capable of linguistic communion – if it weren't for a well-known historical theological dilemma. For one, this three-agent picture is incompatible with any meaningful conception of divine *perfection*. And second, such a notion of diverse consciousnesses is incompatible with the notion that each person of the Trinity is *homo-ousious*, i.e. 'of *one* substance with the Father' or 'of *one* being with the Father' (my emphases).

As to the first, a perfect being cannot lack, cannot fail to be cognizant of, and cannot fail to have direct access to, something present to (the mind of) another. God, on this picture, or God the Father, say, would necessarily lack some knowledge, and would therefore as a distinct 'centre' fail to be both omnipresent and omniscient. Taken together, the sum of their knowledge and abilities might be considered perfect; but thus conceiving of 'God' as designating three distinct persons or agents (however perfect or imperfect each might be) amounts to the view known as *tritheism*. And, one trouble with *tritheism* is that, Mormons aside, by theologians in the Nicene stream the belief in and worship of three distinct gods has long been condemned as a heresy.

If, on the other hand, the putatively distinct agents of this Godhead do not and cannot form distinct intentions, then unity is preserved, but at the cost of linguistic communion. Furthermore, given Leibniz's thesis of the identity of indiscernibles, this kind of unitarian view seems to collapse into *patripassionism*. For whatever is true (or false) of one agent must be true (or false) of the others as well: each formed man from the dust of the ground, each led the Israelites out of Egypt and gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, each conceived a son through a virgin, each was born of the Virgin Mary, each descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove (Jesus descended upon himself), each suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, each rose again on the third day. The idea that not only the Son, but also God the Father, suffered and was crucified on the cross, or *patripassionism*, has also universally been condemned as a heresy. The three persons of the Trinity are necessarily treated as different agents. But then, to be able to communicate with each other in language, they could not also intelligibly be conceived as one and the same.

If one now wants to object that God is so far beyond human comprehension that we simply cannot apply our concepts to Him, then it follows that we cannot predicate any concept of 'creation' to Him, either. On the other hand, when someone does voice a claim – about God or anything else – language is necessarily involved. The upshot, then, is that we can use our words to mean only what they do, in fact, mean. Either we must zip our lips tight and say nothing, or where something can be said, our words must preserve the worldly and conceptual associations with which they have been endowed by us. Among other things, this means that they have to be consistent and coherent. As it happens, however, some strings of words, while they may look perfectly ordinary as far as grammar

or syntax go, are simply incoherent. Strictly and literally, they are nonsense. ‘Colourless green ideas sleep furiously’, devised by Noam Chomsky, is a favourite example among linguists. Such, too, is the idea of a language that one individual alone can speak.

### **In the beginning**

The basic claim of each of the three steps above is not original to me. What seems to have escaped notice, however, is the way these claims are related to each other, and especially to the final claim, the premise of step 4. The steps of this argument need not be arranged in the order in which I have presented them. The fourth and final step of the argument, for instance, could just as well be placed first. This is simply the claim that before anything else came into existence God was, indeed, alone.

So, beginning with this, the final piece of the puzzle, lining up the four main steps (with a couple of additional modifications) yields the following argument:

- (1) Without thought, one cannot intentionally create anything.
  - (1a) Without higher-order thoughts, one cannot intentionally create higher-order things.
  - (1b) The idea of the physical universe is a higher-order idea.
- (2) Without language, one cannot have higher-order thoughts.
- (3) Without others, one cannot have a language.
- (4) Before the physical universe existed, God was alone and without others.
- (5) Therefore (by steps 3 and 4), God could not have had a language. Thus (by steps 2, 3, and 4), God could not have had any higher-order thoughts. And so, ultimately (by steps 1, 2, 3, and 4), God could not have intentionally created the physical universe.

QED.<sup>15</sup>

### **Notes**

1. See his *Physics*, Book II, 194b (ch. 3, line 27). Concerning his fourth, ateleological, cause, at 197a of Book II, Aristotle makes the further observation: ‘purpose implies intelligent reflection’.
2. Naturally, this does not preclude the creation of something in stages. Nor does it preclude the possibility of an idea changing as a work progresses, as the creation unfolds. These possibilities do not weigh against the basic claim here. New ideas will precede (intentional) creative changes in the work.
3. N. Malcolm ‘Thoughtless brutes’, presidential address delivered before the 69th Annual Eastern Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Boston, 28 December 1972, 13–14.
4. Indeed, *belief* might be classed as just one species of a more general notion of *thought*.
5. See L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), Part 2, 174.
6. *Ibid.*, Part 1, §342.
7. See D. Davidson ‘Thought and talk’, in *idem Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 155–170.

8. See H. P. Grice 'Meaning', *Philosophical Review*, 66 (1957), 377–388.
9. *Ibid.*, 383–384.
10. From Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass* (New York NY: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1971), 80–81:
 

‘ – and that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents –’

‘Certainly’, said Alice.

‘And only *one* for birthday presents you know. There’s glory for you!’

‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”’, Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t know – till I tell you. I meant “there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!”’

‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument”’, Alice objected.

‘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’.

‘The question is’, said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things’.

‘The question is’, said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all’.
11. See M. A. E. Dummett ‘What do I know when I know a language?’, lecture given at the centenary celebrations of Stockholm University, 24 May 1978; in *idem*, *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 94–105.
12. Dummett uses the example of Spanish in *ibid.*, 94. Here he recounts one of his favourite jokes: ‘A character in one of the novels of the English humorist, P. G. Wodehouse, asked whether she can speak Spanish, replies, “I don’t know: I’ve never tried”.’
13. In what follows, I try to summarize faithfully Wittgenstein’s line of discussion in *Philosophical Investigations*, 1, §§243–358.
14. Here I am following Wittgenstein’s ‘diarist’ example in *ibid.*, particularly §258 and §§259–270.
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