

**THE NATURE OF CONVENTION:
SIGNIFICATION FROM SOCRATES TO SAUSSURE**

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Philosophers and theologians have always been enchanted by the mysterious relation between signs and the things they signify, between words and their referents. While theologians have sometimes desired to stay out of such debates, the modern dominance of analytic philosophy, the maddening array of hermeneutical approaches facing biblical scholars, and the popularity of deconstructionism on college campuses, have forced culturally aware theologians to take up these issues once again. What contributions can Christian theologians and philosophers make to current debates about semiotics and the nature of language? What light, if any, can the Scriptures shed on these complex issues? Is there something approximating a biblical philosophy of language, and if so, is it basically the logocentrism that Derrida has critiqued? Obviously, we can hardly even begin to answer these questions in this short essay. This paper will simply focus on the issue of signification and, after surveying the history of Western intellectual debate on the topic, suggest what a 'Christian' approach to the problem might look like and briefly sketch out its apologetic cash value.

As with so many intellectual issues, the major views of language that would come to predominate in the modern and postmodern worlds were already anticipated in Socratic

dialogue.¹ In the *Cratylus*, Hermogenes, Socrates, and the title figure take up the question of whether or not we can speak truly. Hermogenes, a Sophist, argues that words have only conventional meanings. There is no necessary connection between the sign and thing signified. Cratylus, on the other hand, takes an all-or-nothing position. A name must either be a perfect expression of what is named or it is no name at all. Names are either fixed by nature or we cannot say anything true. Socrates attempts to take a mediating position that language is both natural and conventional. Names may be human conventions, but humans name things according to their natures. Words, in some way, imitate the world, whether etymologically or phonemically. Just as objects in the world are dim copies of the ideal realm, so words are shadowy reflections resembling the things they name.

With the collapse of the world of Greco-Roman antiquity and the rise of Christianity, the church inherited this Platonic legacy. Augustine was the first churchman to work out a “Christian semiotics.” It was natural that Christians would eventually turn their attention to matters of language since the Bible presented creation as a series of divine speech acts and since the high point of the Biblical narrative occurred when “the Word became flesh.” Augustine replaced Plato’s *Republic* with *The City of God* and the realm of forms with the mind of God, but Platonist influences are easy to see throughout Augustine’s thought. Following Plato, Augustine focused on the word as the unit of meaning, viewed meaning as a function of referent, and believed the sign to be inferior to the thing signified. However, Augustine also more readily accepted the conventional

¹ On the history of Western semiotics and contemporary debates over the nature of language, see Kevin Vanhoozer’s excellent work *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). See especially 16ff, 30ff, 61ff, 103ff, 110ff, and 201ff.

nature of signifiers and put a great deal of emphasis on intentionality. Words are instrumental in nature; their “use” is to serve as a means to an end because meaning ultimately resides in that which is signified and in the mind of the one doing the signifying.²

Augustine sought to steer a careful course between the idolatry of language and the repudiation of language.³ Later Christian thinkers would nuance his thought in important ways. Particularly, in the high medieval period, the grid of the Christian metanarrative (creation-fall-redemption) was applied to language theory. Augustine had already noticed that words could be misused if not governed by charity but later Christian thinkers saw this misuse of language as not merely something potential, but as a continual actuality in the human situation. Augustine’s theory of language was shot through with ethical concerns, mainly of a normative nature, but later Christian scholars took a more historical-descriptive approach: God gave to Adam a perfect language at creation, but this language was corrupted by the fall and now needed God’s healing grace. Thus, our current language reflects the grandeur of our original condition in Eden, but also the misery of our fallen state, as typified in the Babel incident. Hope for the restoration of language is found in the miracle of Pentecost.⁴

² See *On Christian Doctrine*. Of course, for Augustine, the ultimate thing signified as well as the ultimate signifier is the triune God. Language exists for the sake of communication, and communication for the sake of the enjoyment of God.

³ This is not to say Augustine’s semiology was always successful. For a critique of some key tension points in Augustine, see Peter J. Leithart, “Conjugating the Rites,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 34 (1999): 136-147.

⁴ Michael Edwards is helpful here:

Such, if the Bible is correct (and my reading of it accurate), is the language we inherit, and such also, I believe, the language that we encounter in actual experience. We do have a sense of language in an Edenic condition of efficacy and plenitude, at one with the world and ourselves, fulfilling our desires as speakers and writers, and doing so with ease. We recognize it at times as a quite prodigious power. On the other hand, we also know, perhaps more clearly in our century than ever before, that language has been subjected, like the human and non-human world to which it belongs, to ‘vanity’ and ‘corruption.’ The Edenic harmonies being lost, our access to it – as to everything else – is troubled, and our

Thus, medieval (and many later) Christians reluctantly accepted the conventional nature of our language as a result of the fall. As Milton put it, Adam had “rightly named” the animals before the fall, but now, in the words of Eliot,

Words strain,
Crash and sometimes break under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

Despite the crippling effect of original sin on our language, Christian philosophers (in tandem with the Platonists) fought hard to keep the sign and the thing signified together. But it was not to last. As the church was undergoing schism in the sixteenth century, a deeper, more important schism was taking place in philosophy. The Colloquy at Marburg, a meeting between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, marked the turning point:

[A]ccording to Indian scholar J. P. Singh Uberoi, Marburg not only splintered the Reformation, but began the splintering of the modern mind. In particular, Zwingli’s insistence that the Eucharistic presence was merely symbolic is the source of the “dualism or double monism” that Uberoi says is characteristic of the modern worldview: “Spirit, word and sign had finally parted company at Marburg in 1529; and myth or ritual . . . was no longer literally *and* symbolically real

engagement with it a form of exilic labor. It no longer meets the world inwardly, and in our mouths and under our hands it falls short of evidence and necessity. Languages even die, through disappearing from use, and they half-die by altering, and so alienate us from their, and our own, pasts . . .

If the world is no longer (as we can imagine it to have been) a coherence of expressive signs, to be read as Adam read it, so we lack the expressive language by which to perform the reading. And while words and world disjoin, it is equally true that, obscurely, they are mixed with one another. Since they combined, in biblical terms, through Adam’s naming, and since they suffered the Fall in common, the world is indeed a single text, but a corrupt one. Having borne the stamp of Adam, it now bears the stamp of fallen Adam, that is, of ourselves. It is only legible in part, and part of what we read in it is our own fallen condition.

We arrive after generations of shady complicity between language and the world, to find ourselves in an inextricable yet incongruous texture of words, self, things. The incongruity of language, however, is precisely our chance. The flaw between word and object, the flaws within words (the aptness of sound and sense, for example), and the complex obscurities of meaning, impel the imagination . . .

It is this possibility of re-naming [that is our opportunity] . . . [L]anguage, by hints of its own renewal, adumbrates no less the renewal of reality, of ourselves, of the disrupted harmonies. As it witnesses to Edenic creation, and to the Fall, so it witnesses to re-creation.

Here too the Bible gives the lead, in the narrating of Pentecost. Pentecost is the third term in the biblical dialectic of language, after the greatness of Adam’s tongue and the wretchedness of the serpent’s tongue, and of Babel. . . For if the Spirit comes at Pentecost as a beginning and a pledge of the future transformation of the world, his sign is the miraculous transformation, very pointedly, of the apostles’ speech.

Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 11-12.

and true . . . Zwingli was the chief architect of the new schism and . . . Europe and the world followed Zwingli in the event. Zwingli, the reformer of Zurich, was in his system of thought the first philosopher of the modern world.”

The “dissociation of sensibility” initiated at Marburg continues to bear philosophical fruit. . . George Steiner has recently argued that the period from 1870 to 1930 marked a decisive turning point in the history of Western thought. During those decades Western intellectuals broke what Steiner calls the “covenant between the word and the world.” They came to doubt the ability of linguistic symbols to describe reality, a doubt that Steiner sees at the heart of the deconstruction project. Again, this is simply Zwingli in linguistic disguise.⁵

Once the radical Protestants broke the bond between the *sacramental* sign and the thing signified, a similar break between the *linguistic* sign and the thing signified was sure to follow.⁶ Enter Saussure.

The linguistic philosophy of Saussure had three basic tenets: First, he insisted on the arbitrary, positivistic nature of signs. Signs are social constructs.⁷ Second, language is a closed system, detached from the world. Meaning, therefore, is differential, not referential. Meaning within the system is generated by *differences*, i. e., signs mean what they mean simply by how they differ from one another. Words do not have meaning in relation to an external world, but, like pieces on a chess board, receive their meaning by

⁵ Peter J. Leithart, “Marburg and Modernity,” *First Things* 19 (January 1992): 8-9. Leithart recognizes that Zwingli was not really the first to split apart the sign and thing signified. As early as the eleventh century, sacramental theologians were separating, and even opposing, symbol and reality. The rise of nominalism, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, largely due to Ockham, also played a role in this development. (See Richard Weaver’s classic, *Ideas Have Consequences*.) Still, Uberoi’s pinpointing of Zwingli as the pivotal figure in the rise of modern sign theory, and Leithart’s endorsement of this thesis, seems largely correct, even if somewhat simplistic and overstated. Zwingli crystallized the emerging nominalistic view and his followers disseminated it into Western culture in a broad fashion.

⁶ What right do we have to make this transition from Zwingli’s view of cultic symbols to language? After all, symbols such as sacraments are clearly not arbitrary in the way linguistic signs might be. Certainly symbols and linguistic signs are different in various respects, yet they are also related. Christian theologians since Augustine have been fond of speaking of the sacraments as “visible words;” that is, sacramental symbols and linguistic signs have been seen as analogous to one another. With this background, it makes sense that one’s sacramental theology would spill over into one’s philosophy of language.

⁷ The “arbitrary nature of the sign,” Saussure says, “dominates all the linguistics of language; its consequences are numberless.” See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, (London: Owen, 1960), 68.

their place in the overall system of language.⁸ Third, Saussure distinguished between concrete speech acts, called *parole*, and the linguistic system as an abstract whole, called *langue*. *Langue* makes *parole* possible; that is, the system of speech is prior to our employment of particular pieces of the language.

Saussure's conventionalism obviously gives him some ties with Augustine, but the differences between the two are more important. Both are concerned with "the life of signs within society,"⁹ that is, how signs serve communication within a human community. Saussure's view of *langue* as a public, intersubjective system squares nicely with Augustine's rhetorical and pedagogical concerns in *On Christian Doctrine*. But more importantly, Saussure, unlike Augustine, no longer has a stable point of reference outside the system of language to ensure the truthfulness of our speech.

As with many great thinkers, Saussure lacked the foresight to understand where his philosophy would lead. Presumably, Saussure never would have accepted the radicalized view of language now advocated by Derrida and the deconstructionists. But, as the deconstructionists point out, once one embraces conventionalism and meaning as a function of differences, language is cut loose from the world and there is no consistent stopping point short of grammatology. Without any grounding in an extra-linguistic reality, an anti-metaphysical view of language is bound to follow. There is no final way of containing all the differences in a closed system, so meaning never finds a firm resting

⁸ "Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others." Saussure, 114.

⁹ Introduction to Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Generale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1916; reprint, Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1967). Cited in David Lyle Jeffery, *People of the Book*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 81.

place. Rather, we are left with the endless displacement of one sign by another. In short, Derrida's transformation of Saussurean semiotics into grammatology¹⁰ was no great feat.

When the sign and thing signified have fallen apart, how can they be brought back together? How can this divorced couple remarry and live happily ever after? Repairing the breach in contemporary linguistics is not an easy task. In order for this mending to happen, several key lessons must be learned from post-Zwinglian language philosophy.¹¹

First, it should be noted that the separation of word and referent led to an undue privileging of language. This, ironically, led to skepticism about language. Plato and Augustine believed signs to be important, but inferior, to the things they signified. This is because signs are always pointing beyond themselves, beyond the language, and not merely to other linguistic signs. Language is not its own system, independent of the world, but part of a much larger system that includes not only language but all of reality. Plato and Augustine knew that words could serve as bearers of truth, but not *all* knowledge could be language mediated.¹² We must once again learn to distinguish language and thought. Language is one door into reality, but not the only one.¹³

Second, progress may be made if Augustinian conventionalism is tempered with a Wittgensteinian notion of nature. Yes, signs are, at least for the most part, conventions of human cultures; they are socially embedded in a communal matrix. But these cultures themselves are not arbitrary and detached from the world. Culture is (obviously) not a

¹⁰ Grammatology, used here roughly synonymous with deconstruction, is Derrida's term for the attempt to undo the logocentrism of Western culture.

¹¹ By "post-Zwinglian language philosophy," I have in mind a Zwinglian view of sacramental symbols applied to linguistic signs.

¹² Platonists argue we have direct access to a realm of truths, namely the forms, that do not require linguistic mediation. Augustinians might argue *some* of our knowledge is word mediated, since "the Word [i. e., the mediator] was made flesh" (John 1:14), but knowledge can also be image mediated since Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

private, Cartesian phenomenon, so language cannot be. Our various “forms of life” which produce our “language games” are very much products of nature. According to Wittgenstein,

there is certain collaboration between our nature and the nature of things... Things do not reveal their properties to us as if we were totally passive recipients, with no contribution of our own to make. Nor are we absolutely free to impose whatever grid we like upon the raw data of sensation. The color and number systems belong in the realm of that interplay of nature and culture ‘which is the natural history of human beings’ (*PI* 415).¹⁴

Perhaps we can have our cake and eat it too. Perhaps Socrates was right: language has *both* conventional *and* natural dimensions. Perhaps language as a whole belongs to the complex interaction of nature and culture. At the very least, nature might serve as a limiting concept, providing a certain range out of which convention may not stray.¹⁵

Thus, in some sense, signs are *natural conventions*, as well as *conventions of nature*.

Third, those who have reason for confidence in language must also be utter realists about the limits of language. Take the Augustinian position as an illustration.¹⁶ If the Christian metanarrative is accepted, proto-grammatology, such as that found in Nietzsche and Saussure, as well as grammatology itself, must be rejected. But grammatology may still serve an important function: it shows us, in graphic terms, the

¹³ Hence, Christianity is not, strictly speaking, logocentric.

¹⁴ Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 102, 104. Kerr is quoting from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

¹⁵ This nature-convention enmeshing would, on the one hand, explain the conventional fluidity of linguistic signs (i. e., why different languages use different signifiers to refer to the same objects), but, on the other hand, would also allow us to explain the relative ease with which we can translate from one language to another. The particular signs of a language are largely conventional. Yet, as Chomsky suggested, humans have an in-built *langue* of sorts – a linguistic, grammatical apparatus – that is “natural.” We are pre-programmed to be language users. The source of this innate grammatico-linguistic equipment might be variously explained, depending on one’s other philosophical commitments. Augustinians, for example, would root this “natural” linguistic ability in the fact that humans are created in God’s image and God is the original speaker/grammarians.

¹⁶ I choose the Augustinian position to illustrate, rather than the Socratic, because Augustine’s position is somewhat more developed. The *Cratylus* actually ends with a measure of despair over a final solution to

effects of the fall on human language. What is needed, then, is grammatology in reverse if language is to be redeemed. Instead of *deconstructing* language, we must *reconstruct* it. If Nietzsche's lament in *Twilight of the Idols*, "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar," is taken seriously, there is still hope. Yes, the Augustinian does still believe in God, *and that is why he has such confidence in grammar*. If Derrida is right that the "metaphysics of absence" means we can never reach any final resting point in interpretation, then the Augustinian must insist all the more strongly on a "metaphysics of presence." *The final resting point for predication and interpretation must be the presence of God in and behind our language*. Only then can we get more of Pentecost and less of Babel. The dead end of deconstruction can then serve as a new beginning for bringing healing and renewal to our language, a task in which Christians ought to take the lead.¹⁷

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the problem of meaning. Socrates wants to ground meaning in his theory of forms, but it is not entirely clear that even he thinks this is possible.

¹⁷ May I dare suggest that such a project would best be undertaken in coordination with a rethinking and reworking of Protestant sacramental theology? After all, if our historical survey is accurate, it was the novel sacramental views of Zwingli that led to the prying apart of sign and thing signified in language. Protestant suspicion of signs – turning the sacraments into "naked symbols" -- was complicit in the rise of deconstruction. A denial of the real presence in the sacrament led to a denial of real presence in language. Retracing our steps will mean recovering what sacramentalists sometimes called the "sacramental union," that is, the union of the sign and the thing signified in a singular package.