



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

FEATURE ARTICLE

Issue One / 2020

My Easter Tree: Speech, Humanity, World

PETER J. LEITHART

We have an Easter tree in our backyard. It's a persimmon that drops fruity treats for the deer and coyotes who, late in the summer, wander into the yard from the forest that skirts our property. Last year, a lightning bolt struck the tree and left a black gash in the trunk and one long branch dangling like a withered arm. As the other trees budded this spring, the persimmon stubbornly retained its winter gray. I gave up hope for recovery after my youngest daughter told me lightning is so hot that it instantly boils off all moisture in any tree it strikes. Then, early in April, as we approached the strangest Holy Week in my lifetime, tufts of green appeared in the topmost branches. As I look from the deck on the afternoon of Holy Saturday 2020, scattered leaves are visible on roughly half of the branches. Our persimmon tree seemed to die, then it rose again, and in late summer it will yield fruit for the deer and coyotes to snack on. It's our Easter tree.

What should we make of this sequence of events? Not merely the tree, the lightning strike, the remarkable recovery of a tree thought dead. What do we make of us—my family and me—as we observe this sequence of events? At a minimum, we must say this: Whether by a process of untold millennia of evolution or by a special design six thousand years ago or some other means, there exists in the universe a being that observes trees and lightning and the coming of spring, and represents these under metaphorical description (the tree as “wounded,” leaves as “birth,” the whole sequence as a kind of resurrection); that links these events to a long-told story of a tree, a tomb, a large stone, and food; and that then records these events and these metaphors in visible signs for readers of a journal. There exists in the universe a being capable not only of “bare perception” but of speech, symbol, story, and allegorization.

To suggest such beings do *not* exist, that these capacities are mere illusions, isn't a serious proposal. One might say this capacity is a gift of natural selection, though the evolutionary advantage would be difficult to make out. Other species, after all, make do without stories or online journals. To say our capacity for linguistic representation is but a slight improvement on the symbol-making of higher mammals is highly implausible. As Derek Bickerton has argued, humans may not be unique in making and understanding signs, but our sign-making is of a different order. We do not, perhaps cannot, entirely know what goes on in the brains of

other creatures, but we can be confident there are no others who write poetry, use maps, make rules and punish rule-breakers, imagine worlds and pass on their imaginings to others.[1] If other creatures like this existed, we would have noticed by now.

Some may object that I have conflated a cluster of distantly related phenomena. For many linguists, “language” names an “instinct” innate to human beings, just as web-making is instinctive to spiders. Language is unique to humans but this “poses no more of a paradox than a trunk unique to modern elephants,” writes Steven Pinker.^[2] “Instinct” is the wrong word, though. As Vyvyan Evans has put it, an instinct “has to emerge without training. A fledging spider doesn’t need to see a master at work in order to ‘get’ web-spinning: spiders just *do* spin webs when they are ready, no instruction required.”[3] In responding to Pinker, Bickerton notes the elephant’s trunk is “a hyperdevelopment of the nose and adjacent parts of the face,” but Pinker doesn’t say “what ingredients went into the making of language.” And besides, Bickerton adds, it’s downright “weird” to compare a complex practice like human language to a body part.[4]

The notion of language as instinct is allied to the reductive, often mechanistic, view that language exists to “translate” thoughts, originally expressed in what Pinker calls “mentalese,” into messages that can be transferred from brain to brain.[5] The communicative power of language is wonderful, but it doesn’t exhaust the various uses to which language is put, as Pinker’s own examples prove. He constructs sentence trees to analyze examples of unintentionally ambiguous headlines and ads like “Child’s Stool Great for Use in Garden” and “We will sell gasoline to anyone in a glass container.” His analysis is grammatically illuminating, but misses a more notable point: There exists in the universe a being with the capacity to communicate ambiguously and *laugh* at the ambiguity. Pinker is a witty writer, but when he pulls out his sentence trees, he turns humorless. He doesn’t ponder the possibility that some people write such sentences deliberately, *for fun*. When did we last discover a spider spinning crazily useless webs for the amusement of other spiders?

Moreover, the notion of language-as-message-passing-instinct misses the continuity between everyday language that we use at home, at the store, at work, on the subway, on the one hand, and “higher” uses of language like metaphor, story-telling, allegorization, on the other. Walker Percy pointed out that metaphor-making isn’t an exotic misuse of literal language but is the heart of linguistic practice.[6] Speech and writing are *inherently* metaphor-making. “That,” I say, pointing out the window toward our Easter tree, “is an Eastern bluebird.” As literal a statement as one can imagine, and yet there’s a concealed metaphor in the assertion. The sound “Eastern bluebird” is *not* identical to the feathered, bipedal, flying thing I see lighting on a branch. I have substituted sound for thing, referring to something in the world outside by identifying it with articulated noises. Technically, the trope I’ve used is metaphor, saying one thing (the actual bird) “is” another (the sound of the words). If metaphor is an error, it’s the error that founds language.

Christian theology has particular reasons to endorse a conception of human nature that prioritizes language. Suppose for a moment we’re innocent of the centuries of debate concerning the “image and likeness of God” and can read Genesis 1 with a degree of innocence. After twenty-six verses, we come to the declaration that God created man, male and female, after his image and likeness. We will be inclined to ask, as a way of teasing out what is meant by “God’s likeness”: What is God like? And our main answer will be: He is a speaker, who makes by speaking. We will then be inclined to conclude that a being made “in the image and likeness of God” is a language animal.

The anthropologically-focused creation account of Genesis 2 elaborates this. God places Adam

in the garden and speaks to him; the relation between the Creator and *this* creature, at least, is mediated by language. Adam himself speaks in naming the animals. This is probably not merely a matter of assigning arbitrary sonic labels to things; much more likely, Adam's names express the character of the thing named. After all, the first thing we hear Adam say is spoken to the woman. It's a kind of naming, but hardly an arbitrary label. In a poetic flourish, Adam declares her relation to him (bone of bone, flesh of flesh), and the name "woman" (*'ishshah*) states her origin with a wordplay on his own name, *'ish*, which is a *new*, self-unveiling name Adam assigns himself in the presence of the one who corresponds to him.

Since we're *not* innocent of centuries of debate concerning the image of God, the claim that humans are "no more than" language animals might strike us as reductive. Surely the human difference has something to do with reason, morality, spirituality. But that objection underestimates what is entailed by existence in the linguistic register. Language isn't merely a distinctively human response to external stimuli, nor merely a bare capacity to express "mentalese" in sound or visual markings. As Charles Taylor and Rowan Williams have argued in different ways, speech is a bodily and social reality, and thus a key expression of our existence as social and animal. The capacity for speech is the capacity for self-reflection, for shared attention and exploration, for tradition-formation, for accountability, for meaningful silence, for truth and falsehood, for worship.

Taylor argues, for instance, that language inducts us into a new dimension of experience, a "new space" that is bigger than the lived world of non-linguistic creatures.[7] Words live within a web of language, which has been spoken before we began to speak. Our "present experience is accompanied invariably by the sense that it was preceded by a personal and social history; that it will be followed by a future." [8] Language arises from and fosters communion, as it enables shared attention. As it gives us the capacity to see *as*, to see under a description, language gives us a capacity for making value judgments, not merely to recoil at a threat but to *reckon it* a threat. Moral judgment depends on seeing-as, as does legal judgment, which means that saying "man is a language animal" verges toward the moral conceptions of the image of God. Without the linguistic dimension, the capacity to "see as," we'd have no "mentalese" to translate.

But we need to take a further step. One might agree with everything I've said and still conclude that my Easter tree merely exemplifies the human capacity for fantasy, for projecting my own desire, say, to recover supple youth, onto an unsuspecting persimmon tree. *I* am the wounded tree, and I piece together and vest with meaning a sequence of incidents in nature. Human fantasies range from my small-scale tree to massive corporate projections like the Bible and Christian dogma. Even that deflating explanation, however, raises intriguing questions about humanity, for it means that there is in the universe a being who fantasizes in this way. If we're convinced naturalists, then it's even more astonishing that *matter* has somehow gained the power to imagine Creators, crosses, and empty tombs, and to see such miracles instantiated in a persimmon tree. In that sheer factual sense at least, matter speaks.

But is that deflation ultimately satisfying? Or should we instead say that the tree, the gash, the lightning, the spring leaves *invite* interpretation. If I had a more botanical turn of mind, my interpretation would take a different form, no doubt, but it wouldn't change the fundamental point, which is that nature *presents* itself so as to provoke interpretation and investigation, and that there is an uncanny *fit* between the way nature presents itself and the linguistic and interpretive capacities human beings alone possess. Nature seems to give itself to us in symbolic form. It seems almost to speak.

Faces certainly speak. What is physically only a wrinkle of skin around the nose or a down-

turn of the mouth expresses disgust or sadness. We *read* the physiognomy. We read *things*. Heidegger calls our attention to the way things co-disclose the world that surrounds them. A simple jug, in Taylor's words, "is redolent of the human activities of which it is a part, of the pouring of wine at the common table" or "an actual ritual of pouring a libation." [9] A "material object" isn't some passive, inert something awaiting intelligent description. Objects are picked out *as objects* by beings with intelligence, and so become shared objects of investigation and intention.

We don't project intelligence onto the world. The world is intelligible because *things* are intelligent. Even my persimmon tree exhibits a kind of intelligence. Animals forage and plants "explore their local environments in a bid to procure food." Intelligence implies choice, and one might say that plants learn and choose analogously "by changing information flow via chemical communication." [10] Likewise, genes aren't bits of matter but a "shorthand symbol for a pattern of recurring elements" that becomes a pattern only when decoded by a partner that "recognizes" the code. In sum, "The material universe appears as an essentially *symbolic* complex," as "an exchange of 'messages,' a universe of coherent process and temporal stability, of form and motion, an intelligible universe." It is, Rowan Williams says, "no accident that the vocabulary of the natural sciences, not least biology, is littered with linguistic metaphors." [11] That isn't projection. The world is language-like, and our knowledge of it arises from attention that is analogous to reading. The situation is *not*: We language animals confront inert, insignificant matter, and impose our terms on it. Rather: We language animals encounter the world as a forest of symbols, stutter to express what we read in nature, and watch and listen for nature to speak back.

I verge again toward theology, as I am wont to do. Theologically, as Williams says, "each situation is a 'word' from God," and the world "a system of reasonable and coherent communications reflecting the infinite diversity of ways in which the one divine Word . . . can be reflected and participated." [12] In Genesis, creation takes form and is furnished by God's speech, and the Bible indicates that creation echoes the speech of the Creator: Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night brings forth knowledge (Psalm 19). For the Bible, as Johann Georg Hamann put it, human language is always translation of prior divine speech. [13] I discover and tell a story of my persimmon tree because the tree, the lightning, the gash, the sprouting leaves first spoke to me. When I speak, the speech of God lives within by representation in a new form because, before I spoke, the Creator spoke to the creature through the creature. [14]

Peter J. Leithart is President of the Theopolis Institute, a Christian think tank in Birmingham, Alabama, and serves as Church Teacher at Trinity Presbyterian Church. He is author of many books, most recently The Ten Commandments (Lexham, 2020). He and his wife Noel have ten children and (as of today) thirteen grandchildren.

[1] Bickerton, *Adam's Tongue: How Humans Made Language, How Language Made Humans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

[2] This is the analogy proposed by Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 5.

[3] Evans, "The Evidence Is In: There Is No Language Instinct," *Aeon*. More fully, see Evans, *The Language Myth: Why Language Is Not An Instinct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[4] Bickerton, *Adam's Tongue*, 21. Pinker is following Chomsky here, who decries the divergence between treatments of physical and mental development. "No one," he writes,

“would take seriously a proposal that the human organism learns through experience to have arms rather than wings, or that the basic structure of particular organs results from accidental experience.” Yet the “development of personality, behavior patterns, and cognitive structures in higher organisms” is explained by appeal to “social environment.” Why not “study the acquisition of a cognitive structure such as language more or less as we study some complex bodily organ?” (Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* [1975] in *On Language* [London: New Press, 1998], 9).

[5] Pinker, *Language Instinct*, ch. 3.

[6] Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, And What One Has To Do With The Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

[7] Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), 12.

[8] *Ibid.*, 22.

[9] *Ibid.*, 95–6.

[10] Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 164.

[11] Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 101–3.

[12] *Ibid.*, 121.

[13] Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce* in Kenneth Haynes, ed., *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64: “To speak is to translate—from an angelic language into a human language.”

[14] Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce*, 65.

