

2020 - Issue One

Words and Wonder

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John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* (New York: Perennial, 2003).

John McWhorter's bestselling *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* amounts to a literary bait-and-switch, albeit one of a pleasant and highly informative kind.

At first, the book presents itself as a faithful undertaking of the mission suggested by its title and subtitle. McWhorter in his introduction promises the reader that he will tell “a fascinating story” concerning how “one original language has developed into six thousand.” But a mere three pages later, the author hints that he has in fact another mission in mind: namely, conveying to the reader a sense of how the diversity of languages is akin to the diversity displayed by nature itself:

Stephen Jay Gould has told us that evolution is geared not toward progressive “fitness” but toward simply filling available ecological niches. Bacteria, toads, wallabies, and orangutans do not fall on a cline of increasing closeness to God; all four are equally well suited in leading the lives they lead. In the same way, language evolution is not geared toward improvement. Instead, languages change like the lava clump in a lava lamp: always different but at no point differentiable in any qualitative sense from the earlier stage.

Hence, McWhorter says, “the process” by which languages change “is better termed *transformation* than *evolution*” (emphasis in original).

This is an interesting claim, not least because McWhorter brings God into it.

The Christian, or at least the Thomist, can lay aside the assertion, carried over from Gould, that orangutans are no closer to God than bacteria. It is true in the sense that each pursues its natural purpose equally well; however, it is not strictly true, as those creatures that come closer to having reason—or that assist creatures that do have reason (that is, human persons)—fall higher on the scale of nobility (see *Summa theologiae* I, q. 65, a. 2).

With that part of McWhorter's claim having been dismissed, what remains is his implication that the diversity of languages is analogous to the diversity that we see in nature. This is recognizable to the Thomist as a linguistic application of Aquinas's explanation for “the distinction and multitude of things”: “Goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever” (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 47, a. 1).

Moreover, Aquinas (and indeed the whole of Jewish and Christian tradition) holds in common with certain secular academics such as McWhorter that diversity in nature is in fact *good* and *beautiful*—and

this is where McWhorter intends to go with his argument. As *The Power of Babel* progresses, the author shows that languages do not fall so much into neat categories as they do into spectra or (in a word he uses often) “continua” comprised of thousands upon thousands of dialects. Ultimately, “dialects are all there is.”

In fact, despite his tantalizing promise to detail a history that dates to “one original language,” McWhorter does not really intend to divulge the vocabulary of humanity’s Ur-tongue. (Interestingly, he does add an epilogue, “Extra, Extra! The Language of Adam and Eve,” perhaps at the urging of an editor wishing to ensure readers would not feel cheated. But although he hypothesizes about what the grammar of such a language would have resembled, he says it is in fact impossible to deduce any vocabulary words that the earliest humans might have used.)

What McWhorter really wants is to give his readers a sense of language as a mirror of the cosmos itself, so they might respond to its goodness and beauty as we would respond to the goodness and beauty of nature. In other words, the author seeks to effect a kind of linguistic re-enchantment.

I can understand why McWhorter would not foreground his desire to give readers a sense of awe for the world of linguistics. To those who market books, a call for linguistic re-enchantment must sound numbingly abstract and nebulous compared with a potential solution to a mystery that dates back to the dawn of human civilization.

Yet the author’s agenda of amazement should strike a powerful chord with *Humanum*’s readership—at least those willing to excuse his highly conversational tone, which is littered with references to turn-of-the-millennium network TV. It resonates not only with Aquinas’s teachings on the goodness of creation but also with Joseph Ratzinger’s teachings in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* concerning liturgy and *logos*.

For Ratzinger, the word (*logos*) of the liturgy is the worshiper’s point of contact with the eternal Word (*Logos*) that gives meaning to the cosmos (see Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 151). By this means, “the theme of creation is embedded in Christian prayer.” Whether or not McWhorter is acquainted with Ratzinger’s thought, the author’s insights concerning how a single language developed into a spectrum—with its subliminal echo of Plotinus’s notion of the One and the many—suggest that the human *logos* is a *cosmos* unto itself. From there, it is a small step for some budding theologian to dissertate on how, in worship, the continuum of goodness that is the *cosmos* of human *logos* enters into dialogue (*dia-logos*, as Ratzinger would say) with the *Logos* who created the continuum of goodness that is the *cosmos* of nature.

In the last chapter of *The Power of Babel*, McWhorter finally shows his cards: “Throughout this book I have hoped to usher the reader into the very awareness animating linguists that human speech is a truly wondrous thing in itself.” It is to his credit that he convinces the reader that knowing Adam and Eve’s exact words is not nearly as exciting as pursuing the extraordinarily diverse cosmos of language itself to the ends of the earth.

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