

Absolutist Knowledge and Hermeneutic Faith: Hobbes and Milton on the Problem of Fallen Language

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Abstract: I compare the conceptions of metaphor within the works of Hobbes and Milton. Fearing its rhetorically protean capacity, Hobbes condemns metaphor as a “cause of absurdity” insufficient for the advance of science and civil order, while Milton embraces metaphor as a redeemed mode of post-lapsarian language. By reconciling the problem of reference, metaphor, in Milton’s conception, enables post-lapsarian faith, from which follows the civil and epistemological order that Hobbes claims can only be established by the sovereign. Building on Timothy Rosendale’s discussion of Milton’s Reformed faith as a personal process of reading and interpretation, I explore the function of metaphor and interpretation in Milton’s Reformed conception of faith in light of how they shape both his politics and theology.

Because language is the fundamental instrument of thought, a comparison of thinkers’ philosophies of language can fruitfully expound their broader differences. This is the analytic method I intend to use in a comparison of Thomas Hobbes and John Milton. The result of this comparison is a new insight into the crucial role poetry plays in Milton’s conception of religious and political life. I argue that Milton’s position on poetry within his philosophy of language offers a republican alternative to the Hobbesian political thesis given the condition of humanity after the Fall.

Milton and Hobbes’s broader differences are diametrical: the former a republican and advocate of regicide, the latter a royalist and advocate of absolutism. For Hobbes, the

insufficiencies of language inherited from the Fall make absolutism a necessary means of dispelling sociopolitical and epistemological anarchy. By contrast, Milton believed poetry (metaphoric and figurative language) to be a sufficient remedy to the Fall's corruption of Edenic language. The most obvious example of this is Christ, who accommodates fallen humanity's conception of the inconceivable divine. Similarly, poetic language (scripture and divinely inspired poetry) figures the divine beyond its literal meaning. Figuration or metaphor enact meanings that transcend the literal and profane meanings of post-lapsarian language. This ability to figure beyond the literal makes access, through "shadowy types," to the divine, and hence faith, possible after the Fall (*Paradise Lost* 12.303). In *Paradise Lost* (1667), Milton articulates this process most fully with the Protoevangelium. The hermeneutic process in which Adam engages with the Protoevangelium prefigures the role of divine text (including Scripture and divinely inspired poetry such as Milton's) and its interpretation in post-lapsarian history. As for politics, unlike Hobbes, Milton sees private faith as inextricably bound with the public functioning of society (good people precede good institutions), so sociopolitical order also follows from the faith made possible by metaphor's redemption of language.

Naming and Essence: The Cratylist Dimension

This essay traces Milton and Hobbes's theological and political differences back to one central question, posed, though not exclusively, in Plato's *Cratylus*: are words conventional or natural? The eponymous Cratylus posits the latter: a given word contains the essence of its referent and is bestowed by a divine name-giver who knows this essence when giving the name. Here, the parallels with Adam's naming sequence in Genesis and *Paradise Lost* are evident. The Edenic language is a Cratylist language, where there is a natural relation between name and the referent's essence (see below). The contrary view is that names are assigned arbitrarily and upheld only by conventional use. This is the view en-

dorsed by Hermogenes, Plato's Socrates to some extent, and the majority of reference theories from Hobbes and John Locke up to Ferdinand de Saussure.¹ The popularity of the anti-Cratylist position is unsurprising: if Cratylus is right, we would have to concede that there is something "tree"-like about a physical tree. One is hard-pressed to try to delineate what about the word "tree" resembles the physical plant. Thus, by *reductio ad absurdum*, Cratylus is wrong. But Charles Taylor, drawing from the cognitive linguistic work on conceptual metaphor from George Lakoff and Michael Johnson, steps to Cratylus's defence. Language does not merely "picture the world," as anti-Cratylist philosophies from Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1921) and beyond suppose. Language enhances our understanding and creates new dimensions of awareness (Taylor 136). Words or phrases that do so have some *essential* relationship with their referents.²

Edenic and Hobbesian Languages

For Hobbes, humans use language to "register thoughts, recall them when they are past, and also declare them on to another for mutual utility and conversation" (*iv.2*). Language organizes, recalls, and communicates thought. *Scientia*, by which I mean the set of all true propositions, is acquired through the proper ordering of words that proceed from true definitions. "A man that seeketh precise *truth* had need to remember what every name he uses stands for, and to place it accordingly, or else he will find himself entangled in words; as a bird in lime twigs, the more he struggles the more belimed" (*iv.12*, Hobbes's italics). From this, the necessity of proper definitions should be evident. "Reckoning"

¹ See Plato 385d, 440ff.; Hobbes *iv*; Locke 3.2.1 Saussure 73.

² E.g., we speak of being "in love, (or pain, or fear, etc.)," a spatial metaphor for a feeling (an idiomatic metaphor that is not universal across all languages). The words in this case are not a literal description of the state of affairs being described, nor can a literalization of feelings articulate the same aspects that the metaphor articulates (157-8). Metaphor expands the articulacy of the language, allowing language to refer to things that it otherwise could not.

proceeds from the establishment of definitions, but “errors of definitions multiply themselves accordingly as the reckoning proceeds, and lead men into absurdities, which at last they see, but cannot avoid without reckoning anew from the beginning” (Hobbes *iv.13*). If false, definitions provide the foundation that leads to a wholly false *scientia* with the semblance of truth. Thus, geometry “is the only science that it hath pleased God hitherto to bestow on mankind,” because only geometry begins with its definitions and continues by deduction without recourse to experience outside of these foundational definitions. *Scientia* is easily construed, and people therefore easily “belimed,” simply by an alteration of the definitions on which the rest of *scientia* is founded.

In order for truth to stand under this epistemology, definitions must be rigid. If names correspond naturally, as for Cratylus, then the foundation of truth is firm, for it is a simple matter to identify when a word is used without reference to its essential referent. This may have been the case in Eden (Hobbes is vague on this matter), but it is certainly not the case after the Fall and after Babel: the Edenic language, “gotten, and augmented by *Adam* and his posterity, was again lost at the tower of Babel” (Hobbes *iv.3*). After this Biblical history, Hobbes makes a seemingly abrupt transition to the uses and, more importantly, abuses of speech. The connection to the biblical history, of course, is that the abuses are only possible (by means of false definitions) if naming is arbitrary, detached from the essential connection between word and referent that God teaches Adam. In the absence of an Edenic language in which the name and the referent’s essence coincide, the arbitrarily determined definitions are bestowed and upheld by the sovereign. Hobbes thus moves arbitrariness of naming towards his larger political philosophy.

Milton is unambiguous: the Edenic language was Cratylist. That the Edenic language is natural rather than conventional has biblical precedent: “out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the Man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature,

that was its name" (*NRSV*, Gen. 2.19). The account of Adam's naming in *Paradise Lost* embellishes the Cratylist nature of Adam's names. As Adam recounts to Raphael,

Each bird and beast behold!
Approaching two and two, these cowering low
With blandishment, each bird stooped on his wing.
I named them as they passed and understood
Their nature: with such knowledge God endued
My sudden apprehension. (8.348–54)

The crucial addition to Milton's account is "with such knowledge God endued." Adam's names are based on inherent and natural properties of their referents, and the knowledge of these properties comes from God. The biblical "that was its name" could mean that the name is predetermined by God and assigned by Adam correctly (this is the reading that Milton embellishes), or it could mean simply that the name Adam assigns is authorized *ex post facto* (which would be naming by convention). Milton's account is adamant on the former reading, and his *Tetrachordon* (1645) is even clearer: "Adam who had the wisdom giv'n him to know all creatures, and to name them according to their properties, no doubt but had the gift to discern perfectly" (602).³

Yet, if Adam's names are natural, why does God assign Adam the task of naming the animals in the first place? God says, "I bring them to receive / *From thee* their names" (*Paradise Lost* 8.343–44). If names contain the essence of the named, then God could simply present Adam with the names alongside the animals, for those names would preexist Adam's act of naming. Does the fact that God leaves the naming to Adam suggest that the names are at least somewhat conventional? My response to this is that, although the relationship between name and knowledge would remain unchanged were God to simply present the animals alongside their names, Adam's act of naming is an expression of dominion. The animals "pay [Adam] fealty / With low subjection" (8.343–45). This is why God leaves this gesture to

³ See also *Christian Doctrine*: "[Adam] could not have given names to the animals in that extempore way, without very great intelligence" (324). Such knowledge would be unnecessary if the relationship between name and named was not essential.

Adam. Furthermore, the learning-by-discovery approach seems to accord with God's pedagogy.

In the Edenic language, there is no threat of the perversion of knowledge through false definitions. This is why Eve interprets Satan's ability to speak as proof of his acquisition of knowledge (Leonard). The narrator is sure to remind us in parentheses of the limitation of Eve's perspective: "[Satan's] persuasive words impregn'd / with reason (to her seeming) and with truth" (*Paradise Lost* 9.737–38). Having only experienced a language in which word and referent seamlessly coincide, how could she think otherwise? For pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve, language *is* knowledge. However, as John Leonard rightly points out, Satan's language in the temptation scene is not the Edenic one, and "the corrupting of innocence begins with a corrupting of language" (143).

With the corruption of language that follows or in some part causes the Fall, Adam and Eve's dialogue in *Paradise Lost* begins to resemble the language described by Hobbes (iv.4). Eve conceives of her capacity for deception (*Paradise Lost* 816–20); they both, but Adam especially, discover the capacity to use language to insult or injure their interlocutor;⁴ and the isomorphic unity of the language also seems to disintegrate with the Fall. In Adam's first words after eating the fruit, he self-consciously puns on the word "sapience,"

⁴ Admittedly, there are traces of what I have characterized as exclusive post-lapsarian discourse in their pre-lapsarian spat (205–375). E.g., Adam's "fervent" reply: "O woman!" (342) or the "some unkindness" to which Eve responds (270). I will add that the discord arises only out of their conflicting positions, not out of a direct intent to insult. The latter is full-blown after the Fall, when, for example, we have Adam "first incensed" (1162).

I also wonder, in the spirit of Fish's reading, to what extent the marital spat between Adam and Eve is perverted by our post-lapsarian conception of discourse. In the example of Eve's "some unkindness" that I gave above, Eve only responds "*as one* who loves and some unkindness meets," not one who *has met* unkindness (*Paradise Lost* 9.271). The unkindness is only metaphorical, one only post-lapsarian readers can understand—the narrator's shrewd appeal to our jaded presumptions regarding marital discourse.

meaning both good taste and knowledge: “Elegant of sapience no small part / Since to each meaning savor we apply” (9.1018–19). Such perversions of language open the gate to deception, manipulation of truth, ambiguity, and injury—far from the instrument for untainted knowledge, communion with Eve, and dominion over the animals for which God first introduced it to Adam.

Language and Society

On the fundamentality of language for society, Hobbes writes, “without [language], there had been amongst men, neither commonwealth, nor society, nor contract, nor peace, no more than amongst lions, bears and wolves” (iv,1). And Milton knows as well as Hobbes does that language is the foundation of society. Immediately after acquiring his language, Adam experiences and describes his loneliness, which is none other than the need for society: “Of fellowship I speak / Such as I seek” (*Paradise Lost* 8.387). This need for society is augmented by the fact that his language capacity allows him to recognize difference: his difference from the other animals, and his difference from them by the fact that he does not have a companion.

fit to participate
All rational delight wherein the brute
Cannot be human consort. They rejoice
Each with their kind, lion with lioness,
So fitly them in pairs thou hast combined.
Much less can bird with beast or fish with fowl
So well *converse*, nor with the ox the ape,
Worse then can Man with beast, and least of all!
(8.390–97)

Here, the dominion-establishing capacity of language that I mentioned earlier finds full realization. The recognition of difference is the recognition of hierarchy. The same is true of Adam’s subordinating difference from God: after naming the animals he cries out,

O by what name (for Thou above all these,
Above mankind or aught than mankind higher,

Surpassest far my naming) how may I
Adore thee. (8.356–58)

Just as names allow Adam to recognize his hierarchical difference from the other animals, so they allow him to recognize his absolute difference from God, who surpasses the hierarchy-establishing names altogether.⁵ With this recognition of (hierarchical) difference comes the need for companionship and the possibility of society.

Language is fundamental for Hobbes because it allows for the contracts and institutions that make his radical political vision possible. The conventionality of names is central to the *Leviathan's* political thesis. If names are assigned arbitrarily and followed only by convention, then those names can be altered or distorted. This distortion of definitions, which generates the distortion of knowledge, must be mitigated by an all-powerful sovereign. How will Milton avoid this conclusion in his post-lapsarian vision, when the Edenic language of stable referents is lost? The answer, I claim, is the figurative, poetic capacity of language.

Figuration: The Cratylist Compromise and the Hermeneutic Dimension of Post-Lapsarian Faith

As Timothy Rosendale demonstrates, individualized acts of interpretation are essential to Milton's Reformed theology. By contrast, Hobbes believes that "a vast faith, such as Milton's, in interpretation as a conduit to truth was anathema and precisely the cause of the civil war and revolution"

⁵ As Timothy Rosendale eloquently points out, the only sign for this absolute difference, which surpasses the limitations of Adam's lowly taxonomy, is the tree of knowledge. "The Tree symbolizes what cannot be symbolized; it expresses what cannot be expressed; it means what cannot be interpreted. It symbolizes not knowledge, but the impossibility of a particular knowledge, the inscrutable fact that God cannot be truly and fully comprehended by humans, even before the Fall. It is, at once, both the ultimate sign and the ultimate anti-sign: though it (like the Reformed sacrament) demands to be understood as a mechanism of signification, its very unreadability, the inaccessibility of its referent, signifies the crucial determinative fact of human-divine relations. This single arbitrary boundary signifies the absolute difference and ineffability of God" (Rosendale 156).

(Rosendale 162).⁶ This fundamental difference plays out in Hobbes's and Milton's opposing stances on metaphor. For Milton, figuration and metaphor (which necessitate interpretation) accommodate access to the divine, direct access to which is lost with the Fall. Unlike Hobbes, for whom an absolute sovereign is the logical and necessary response to the circumstances of the post-lapsarian world,⁷ Milton conceives of poetic language as a means of faith and *a fortiori* salvation from political tyranny.

For both Milton and Hobbes, the Fall includes the fall or corruption of its language and hence the loss of language's name-essence connection. Without the natural fixing of definitions by essence of referent, Hobbes holds the imposition of an all-powerful sovereign to be the only force capable of barring epistemological anarchy. In "The Figuring Dimension of Language," Taylor argues that Hobbes, along with a large portion of modern philosophy, overlooks the figuring dimension in his account of language. Hobbes lists "metaphor" as one of the four central abuses of language (iv.4) and later lists "metaphors, tropes, and other rhetorical figures" as one of the "causes of absurdity":

For though it be lawful to say (for example) in common speech *the way goeth, or leadeth hither or thither*, the proverb says this or that (whereas ways cannot go, nor proverbs speak), yet in reckoning and seeking of truth such speeches are not to be admitted. (v.14)

Taylor holds this view to be naive. Not only does metaphor expand our expressive capacity, but it is also an indispensable aspect of language as a whole: figuration "makes it

⁶ It should be noted that Rosendale ultimately wants to blur the contrast and argue that because Hobbes's philosophy concerns only the public action and not the private subject, the *Leviathan* "becomes an argument, not only for absolute collective sovereignty and uniformity, but also for a strikingly advanced and Reformed tolerance of individual belief." However, I find this commonality that Rosendale draws somewhat needless because Hobbes held that personal belief should bear no relevance to public conduct. "A person is the same that an actor is, both on stage and in common conversation" (xvi.3).

⁷ However, Hobbes's political thesis is not in itself the necessary conclusion of an anti-Cratylian philosophy of language. Locke also takes an anti-Cratylian position, but he arrives at a paradigmatically liberal political thesis.

possible to intuit and then articulate for the first time what [that figuration] discovers for us" (146). This is possible because there is some natural, not conventional, relationship between the words (figures) and their referents. This may not be the total naturalization of language learned by Adam or supposed by Cratylus, but it shows that language certainly has an inexorable Cratylist dimension.

Rather than seeing the corruption of language and the Fall that ensues as necessitating absolute rule, as Hobbes does, Milton wholeheartedly embraces (as the form he chose for his theodicy suggests) the figurative or poetic capacity of language. When Eve, in Hobbesian spirit, suggests they find communal accord around a common greatest evil "joining, / As joined in injuries, one enmity," Adam reminds her of the Protoevangelium uttered by the Son in the garden (*Paradise Lost* 10.1028–35). Adam reminds Eve that there still is a *summum bonum*, something Hobbes rejects (xx.1), but in the post-lapsarian world, the *summum bonum* can only be accessed through interpretation, for it is presented "through a glass, darkly," in figured rather than literal form (KJV, 1 Cor. 13.12). With the Edenic language lost, the Cratylist dimension of language, though compromised, emerges through figuration.⁸

That figuration is God's way of redeeming post-lapsarian humanity (or accommodating its understanding) in the Christian story finds fullest expression in Christ himself. As John C. Ulreich convincingly argues, central to Milton's theology of accommodation is the interpretation that Christ's incarnation "is both a metaphor and a theory of metaphor" (130). The making of the Word into flesh is the *figuring* of the word as flesh (John 1.14). Jesus is figuration, and he speaks in figuration. His interlocutors demand of him, "if you are the Messiah, tell us plainly" (NRSV John 10.25). But literal speech, plain speaking, is no way to communicate the divine after the Fall.

⁸ A caveat: figuration is also important in Eden. Raphael's lesson from books 5–8 proceeds by "lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" (*Paradise Lost* 5.573). However, after the fall such figuration is necessary for any connection to the divine.

Instead, the word of the divine is communicated to us through figure, metaphor, enigma. The Protoevangelium (Gen 3:15; first introduced in *Paradise Lost* by the Son at 10.179–81) signals this shift in the relationship between humans and God after the Fall. Adam’s interpretation of the enigmatic phrase serves as a kind of litmus test for his reconciliation across the final books of *Paradise Lost*. Like Hobbes, Satan is blind to the salvific capacity of non-literal language. As a result, he offers a literalist reading of the Protoevangelium:

I am to bruise his heel;
His Seed (when is not set) shall bruise my head.
A world who would not purchase with a bruise
Or much more grievous pain? (10.499–502)

Satan’s literal reading strips the phrase of its power—a mere bruise is harmless. Michael teaches Adam to avoid this kind of literalism: when Adam asks Michael what stroke will cause the bruise, Michael responds, “Dream not of their flight/ As of a duel or the local wounds” (12.386–87). Such “local wounds” are the petty injuries that Satan dismisses. Figuration deals not with the local part, the individual referent of the vehicle (in this case the bruise), but with the global whole, the totality of meanings and associations on a divine scale. This latter kind of meaning is only understood through a process of renewed interpretation, and involves the hermeneutic process that Michael teaches to Adam. Adam rethinks the Protoevangelium three times (10.1030–35, 11.155–56, 12.233–35) before Michael finally presents a totalizing vision to accommodate his understanding of the enigma’s meaning (12.427–25). Adam’s understanding of grace cannot be grasped directly, for such communication with God is lost with the Fall. Rather, such an understanding involves communication through figuration and interpretation, faith’s compromise within the plight of post-lapsarian language.

The Protoevangelium is the precursor to all divinely inspired text—the laws, which Michael says should be read typologically (*Paradise Lost* 12.230–35), Christ’s enigmatic parables, and *Paradise Lost* itself. For Milton, the

post-lapsarian relationship with God is achieved through critical reading and interpretation. Such interpretation presupposes the divinely inspired text's figurative (i.e., non-literal) meaning. Poetry, Milton's chosen form for his theodicy, is therefore an indispensable instrument for faith in the post-lapsarian world.

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