

LANGUAGE AND MYSTICISM

In this regard, another common objection is that mystical or contemplative experiences, because they cannot be put into plain language, or into any language for that matter, are therefore not epistemologically grounded, are not “real knowledge.” But this simply bypasses the problem of what linguistically situated knowledge means in the first place.

Saussure, as I mentioned earlier, maintained that all linguistic signs have two components, the signifier and the signified, often represented as S/S. The *signifier* is the written or spoken symbol or sound, the *material component* of the sign (such as the physical ink forms written on this page, or the physical air vibrations as you speak). The *signified* is what comes to your mind when you see or hear the signifier.

Thus, I physically write the word *dog* on this page—that is the signifier.

You read the word, and you understand that I mean something like a furry animal with four legs that goes wuff-wuff—that is the signified, that is what comes to your mind. A *sign* is a combination of these two components, and these two components are, of course, the Right-Hand dimension of the sign (the physical exterior) and the Left-Hand dimension of the sign (the interior awareness or meaning).

And both of those are distinguished from the actual *referent*, or whatever it is that the sign is “pointing” to, whether interior or exterior. Thus, the signifier is the word *dog*, the referent is the real dog, and the signified is what comes to your mind when you read or hear the signifier *dog*. Saussure’s genius was to point out that the *signified* is not merely or simply the same as the *referent*, because “what comes to mind” depends on a whole host of factors other than the real dog, and this is what makes linguistic reality so fascinating.

Saussure’s point—and this is what actually ignited the whole movement of structuralism—is that the sign cannot be understood as an isolated entity, because in and by itself *the sign is meaningless* (which is why different words can represent the same thing in different languages, and why “meaning” is never a simple matter of a word pointing to a thing, because how could different words represent the same thing?). Rather, signs must be understood as part of a holarchy of differences integrated into meaningful structures. Both the signifiers and the signifieds exist as holons, or whole/parts in a chain of whole/parts, and, as Saussure made clear, it is their *relational standing* that *confers meaning* on each (language is a meaningful system of meaningless elements: *as always*, the regime or structure of the superholon confers meaning on the subholons, meaning which the subholons do not and cannot possess on their own).

In other words, the signifiers and the signifieds exist as a structure of contexts within contexts within contexts, and meaning itself is *context-bound*. Meaning is found not in the word but in the context: the bark of a dog is not the same as the bark of a tree, and the difference is not in the word, because the word *bark* is the same in both phrases—it is the relational context that determines its meaning: the *entire structure* of language is involved in the meaning of each and every term—this was Saussure’s great insight.

And this, as usual, contributed to a split between Right- and Left-Hand theorists. The Right-Hand theorists, or the pure structuralists, wanted to study only the *exterior structure of the system of signifiers* in language

and in culture (an approach which in turn gave way to the poststructuralists, who wanted to free the signifier from any grounding at all—as in Foucault’s archaeology or Derrida’s grammatology—and see it as free-floating or sliding, and anchored only by power or prejudice: meaning is indeed context-dependent, but contexts are boundless, and thus meaning is arbitrarily *imposed* by power or prejudice—the so-called “poststructural revolution” of “free-floating signifiers”).

The Left-Hand theorists wanted to study the contexts within contexts of *interior meaning*, the *signifieds* that can only be *interpreted*, not seen, and interpreted only in a context of background cultural practices (the hermeneuticists, from Heidegger to Kuhn and Taylor and aspects of Wittgenstein).

But both the hermeneutical Left-Hand path and the structuralist Right-Hand path agreed that signs can only be understood contextually (whether in the context of shared cultural practices that provide the foreknowledge or background or context for common interpretation, or in the context of shared nonindividual linguistic structures. I argued in chapter 4 that both of these approaches are equally important—they represent the interior and the exterior of the linguistic holon—and indeed even Foucault came to this understanding).¹²

All of which relates to mysticism in this way: the word *dog* has a shared meaning to you and to me because that sign exists in a shared linguistic structure and a shared cultural background of social and interpretive practices. But what if you had never seen a real dog? What then?

I could of course describe one to you, but the word will be meaningless unless there are some points of shared experience that will allow you to “call up” in your mind the same *signified* that I mean with the *signifier* “dog.” (Substitute the word *Buddha-nature* for *dog* and you can see the importance of this line of thought for mystical experience, which we will explore in a minute.) The hermeneuticists are quite right in that regard: the same linguistic structures that you and I share are *not enough*, in themselves, to give you the proper signified. You and I have to share a *common lived experience* in order to assume identical signification.

Further, the actual experience of seeing a dog is not itself a *merely* linguistic experience. The signifier, the word *dog*, is not the actual dog, not the actual referent. Obviously, the total experience of the real dog cannot itself be put into words, put into signifiers. But the fact that the real dog can’t be fully captured in words does not mean that the real dog

doesn't exist or isn't real. It means only that the signifier has sense only if you and I have had a similar experience, a common shared lifeworld experience, and then I will know what you mean when you say, "That dog scared me."

In short, no direct experience can be fully captured in words.¹³ Sex can't be put into words; you've either had the experience or you haven't, and no amount of poetry will take its place. Sunsets, eating cake, listening to Bach, riding a bike, getting drunk and throwing up—believe me, none of those are captured in words.

And thus, so what if spiritual experiences can't be captured in words either? They are no more and no less handicapped in this regard than any other experience. If I say "dog" and you've had the experience, you know exactly what I mean. If a Zen master says "Emptiness," and you've had that experience, you will know exactly what is meant. If you haven't had the experience "dog" or the experience "Emptiness," merely adding more and more words will never, under any circumstances, convey it.

Thus, if we are going to level that charge at mysticism, then we must level it at dogginess and sunsetness and every other experience that happens to come our way. (This is really the cheapest of the cheap shots fired at mysticism.)

Conversely, words do just fine as signifiers for experience, whether mundane or spiritual, if we both, you and I, have had similar experiences in a context of shared background practices. Zen masters talk about Emptiness all the time! And they know exactly what they mean by the words, and the words are *perfectly adequate* to convey what they mean, *if you have had the experience (for what they mean can only be disclosed in the shared praxis of zazen, or meditation practice).*

Go one step further. If I say to a conop child, "It is as if I were elsewhere," the child might nod her head as if she actually understood all the meanings of that statement. The conop child already possesses the shared linguistic structure (and grammar) to decipher the words. But, as we have seen, since the conop child cannot fully grasp the implications of as-if statements, she doesn't really understand what is *signified* by my statement. Once the higher structure of formop emerges, however, this will usher the child into a *worldspace* where "as-if" is not just a signifier but a *signified* that has an existing *referent* in that formop worldspace: not just a word, but a direct understanding that more or less spontaneously

jumps to mind whenever we hear or see the word, and which refers to a genuinely existing entity in the rational worldspace.

In other words, *all* signs exist in a continuum of *developmental referents* and *developmental signifieds*. The *referent* of a sign is not just lying around in “the” world waiting for any and all to simply look at it; the referent exists *only* in a *worldspace* that is itself *only* disclosed in the process of development, and the *signified* exists only in the *interior perception* of those who have developed to that worldspace (which structures the background interpretive meaning that allows the signified to emerge). *No amount of experience* by the conop child will ever show her the meaning of an “as-if” dog, because the as-if dog does not exist *anywhere* in the conop worldspace; it *exists* only in the formop worldspace, and thus it is a referent that demands a developmental signified to even be perceived in the first place.

To take it a point at a time: the *signifiers* of signs (such as the words on this page) are always physical, they are always material components, in which no meaning resides at all (Saussure’s point); and because the signifiers are physical, even my dog can see them (and, of course, sees no meaning in them; or rather, sees them from a sensorimotor level, as something to eat, perhaps). That is because the actual *referent* of a sign exists only in a *worldspace* (sensorimotor, magical, mythical, mental, etc.) that is itself disclosed only at a particular level of depth (preop, conop, formop, etc.). And in the same way, the corresponding *signified* of the sign exists only in the *interior perception* of those who have developed the *requisite depth*. (All of this occurs in a context of cultural and social practices, or an intersubjective community of the same-depthed.)¹⁴

Both the conop child and my dog can see the physical words “as-if”; neither of them can understand the phrase. The empirical markings are meaningless. The child and the dog do not possess the developmental signified, and thus they cannot see the actual referent.

Several examples of referents and worldspaces: rocks exist in the sensorimotor worldspace; animistic clouds exist in the magic worldspace; Santa Claus exists in the mythic worldspace; the square root of a negative one exists in the rational worldspace; archetypes exist in the subtle worldspace, and so on—not as pre-given objects, but as the product of all four quadrants. And thus, in order to understand the referents represented by those signifiers (from “rocks” to “archetypes”) one must possess the requisite depth through one’s own interior development (so that those

signifiers can evoke the appropriate signified: when you read “the square root of a negative one,” you know what that means, what that signifies, but only if you have developed to formop).

Just so, the words *Buddha-nature* and *Godhead* and *Spirit* and *Dharmakaya* are signifiers whose *referents* exist only in the transpersonal or *spiritual workspace*, and they therefore require, for their understanding, a *developmental signified*, an appropriately developed interior or Left-Hand dimension corresponding with the exterior word, or else they remain only words, like the unseen dog, this unseen Spirit. And without the developmental signified, words will capture neither the dog nor the Spirit.

And note: I can run around until I find a dog and show you the dog, because we both exist in the sensorimotor workspace and there is no developmental reason why you can't spot a dog. Or, in the other example, there is no reason you can't understand an as-if dog, whose referent exists in the rational workspace. We *already* share that workspace. We have *already transformed* to that level of depth: an entire and shared world of referents are therefore lying around for us to apprehend (because we have *already* created the workspace or the opening in which they can manifest).

But I can't run around and find Buddha and show you that, unless you have developed the requisite cognitions that will allow you to resonate with the *signifier* whose *referent* exists only in the spiritual workspace and whose *signified* exists only in the consciousness of those who have awakened to that space.