

Divine Language

Abstract: This chapter is an initial survey of some philosophical questions about divine language. Could God be a language producer and language user? Could there be a divine private language? Could there be a divine language of thought? The answer to these questions that I shall tentatively defend are, respectively: Yes, No and No. (Because I use some technical terms from recent philosophy of language, there is an appendix to this chapter in which I explain my use of those terms.)

Keywords: Divine Attributes, God, Language of Thought, Private Language, Productivity, Semantic Primes, Systematicity, Theism

Some Jews maintain that the Hebrew language was invented by God and taught by God to the original human users of that language. Some Jews and Christians maintain that the language that God used in creating the natural realm was invented by God. Some Jews and Christians maintain that the language in which God spoke to Adam prior to the fall was invented by God and given to Adam by God.

Some Jews and Christians maintain that, although Adam invented the Hebrew language, God used the Hebrew language to communicate with historically significant users of that language, such as Moses and Abraham. Some Muslims maintain that, although God did not invent the Arabic language, God used the Arabic language, through the angel Gabriel, to reveal the Quran to Muhammad.

Some Hindus maintain that Vedic Sanskrit, the language of liturgy, is the language of the gods. Some Hindus claim that the Vedas are impersonal, authorless revelations of sacred sounds and texts heard by meditating sages. While it is not clear how to understand this, perhaps we are meant to think that there is divine language in the absence of any divine producer of that language.

Some Sikhs maintain that the first Guru—Guru Nanak—was a ‘mouthpiece’ for God. It is not clear how we are to think of the languages involved in this conception of the origin of the Sikh scriptures. Most plausibly, God is taken to have communicated with Guru Nanak in the (largely) Punjabi language of the *Dasam Granth*.

These views about divine language raise various philosophical questions. In this chapter, I propose to make a survey of some of the questions that arise if we take seriously the idea that God is a language producer and language user. In the coming discussion, I shall assume that a *divine language* might be a language invented by God, or a language used exclusively by God, or a language used by God in communication with other users of that language.

1. Divine Linguistic Competence

We may assume, given that God is omnipotent and omniscient, that there is no problem of principle that arises in connection with the use of a language by God to communicate with other users of that language. Given that God is omnipotent and omniscient, God is perfectly

competent in the use of every possible language in every possible circumstance. On the one hand, God knows everything there is to know about the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of every possible language at every possible stage in its development. On the other hand, God knows everything there is to know about every possible communicative context. If there is an antecedent fact of the matter about how anyone addressed in any particular possible communicative context will interpret God's words in that context, then God knows how anyone addressed in any particular possible communicative context will interpret God's words in that context. And if there is no antecedent fact of the matter about how anyone addressed in any particular possible communicative context will interpret God's words in that context, God has complete knowledge of how anyone addressed in any particular possible communicative context *might* interpret God's words in that context. (Perhaps, if there is no antecedent fact of the matter how anyone addressed in any particular possible communicative context will interpret God's words in that context, God will have complete knowledge of the *chance* that someone addressed in some particular communicative content will interpret God's words in a particular way in that context.)

We may further assume, given that God is omnipotent and omniscient, that there is no problem of principle that arises in connection with the invention of a language by God, at least in the case where God invents the language for the use of created language users. Given the points noted in the previous paragraph, it might seem plausible that, if God wishes, God will be able to match language using populations to languages that are best calculated to suit their linguistic needs. And, even if it turns out that there are always many different languages that would serve equally well to meet the linguistic needs of given populations, it surely seems plausible that, if God wishes, God can match language using populations to languages that suffice to meet the linguistic needs of those populations.

The interesting questions about divine language concern languages that are invented by God solely for God's own use, or that are used exclusively by God even though they are not invented by God.

Suppose that we take seriously the idea that God's act of creation proceeded as described in, for example, *Genesis* 1:3. 'And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.' In order for God to say 'Let there be light', there must be some language in which God says this. What is the provenance of this language?

One thought is that God invents the language in which God says 'Let there be light'. On this line of thought, God has made a private language, and is able to use that private language in order to make things happen: there is light simply because God says, in God's private language 'Let there be light'.

Another thought is that the language adverted to in *Genesis* 1:3 is God's language of thought. If we take this line, then we suppose that what happens is that, in God's language of thought, God has the thought 'Let there be light', and that suffices to bring it about that there is light.

Of course, there are many theists who do not take seriously the idea that God's act of creation proceeded as described in *Genesis* 1:3. But this is merely an illustrative example. Among those theists who do not take seriously the idea that God's act of creation proceeded as described in *Genesis* 1:3, there are those who suppose that there is a divine language that is used exclusively by God. The question that we are about to take up is whether those theists should suppose that there is a divine language that is used exclusively by God.

2. Divine Private Language

The idea that God has made a private language—and that God is able to use this private language in order to make things happen—is likely to be met with at least the following two questions. First: Is it so much as possible that God makes a private language? Second: Even if it is possible that God make a private language, is there any reason to think that God would make a private language? In particular, is there any reason to think that God has ‘needs’ that can be satisfied by the making of a private language?

In *Philosophical Investigations*, §243, Wittgenstein defines a private language as one in which the references of words are known only to the single speaker of the language. While Wittgenstein has in mind, in particular, that the words refer to the immediate private sensations of the speaker, the idea is more general: the words in a private language are taken to be necessarily comprehensible only to the speaker because that which defines its vocabulary is necessarily inaccessible to others.

Consider the scenario described in *Genesis* 1:3. It might be supposed that the language that God uses employs vocabulary that is necessarily inaccessible to others.

First, it might be supposed that any language that God uses prior to creation is necessarily inaccessible to others since, necessarily, prior to creation, there is no one other than God. To this, it can be replied that, while it is true that there cannot be someone else prior to creation who understands the divine language that God employs in creating, it is perfectly possible for there to be someone posterior to creation who understands that language. The mere fact that God exists alone prior to creation does not create an in principle objection to the possibility that there is someone else who understands, posterior to creation, the language that God used prior to creation.

Second, it might be supposed that any language that God uses prior to creation is necessarily inaccessible to others since not even God can make it the case that there are others who so much as understand the reasons that God has for acting as God does. The point here is one about the *otherness* of God. If, as many theists suppose, there is an unbridgeable gulf between creator and creatures, and if, in particular, there is an unbridgeable gulf between the understanding of God and the understanding of creatures, then it seems plausible, as a matter of principle, that the meaning of the vocabulary in the language of God is necessarily inaccessible to others.

This second consideration seems to me to make it plausible that, if there is a divine language, then it is necessarily inaccessible to others. Perhaps, though, some might think to reply that Christians may avail themselves of the doctrine of the Trinity in order to avoid this conclusion. Speaking somewhat loosely—or perhaps fancifully—if each of the members of the Trinity speaks the divine language, then it is not true that any of them speaks a language that is necessarily inaccessible to others. Among the hard questions here is whether we should suppose that the members of the Trinity are ‘others’ to one another in a sense that will support the idea that the divine language is not a private language. If it is orthodoxy that there is just one divine will that underwrites divine action, then it seems to me that it cannot be orthodoxy to claim that the members of the Trinity communicate with one another using

divine language. But if that is correct then, in the relevant sense, the divine language is, indeed, a private language.

While the interpretation of ‘the private language argument’ in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* remains hotly contested, it seems relatively uncontroversial to say that Wittgenstein argues either for the view that language is *essentially* social or for the view that language is at least *potentially* social. If there is good reason to suppose that language is either essentially social or potentially social, then there is good reason to suppose that there cannot be a divine language of the kind that we have been discussing. For, as we have just seen, it is plausible that, by the lights of orthodoxy, the divine language would be neither essentially or potentially social.

Even if we suppose that Wittgenstein raises serious difficulties for the idea that human beings can make private languages, we might wonder whether those difficulties will carry over to the case of God and divine language. Wittgenstein’s arguments seem to be centrally concerned with difficulties involved in what we might call *mental ostensive definition*: establishing persisting connections between signs and contents of current cognitions. Theists might doubt that it is appropriate to suppose that God has ‘current cognitions’; and, even if they allow that God does have ‘current cognitions’, they might suppose that there are no difficulties here for a being that is both omniscient and omnipotent. However, if God does not have ‘current cognitions’, then it is hard to see how God can come to make a divine language, since it is hard to see what else could suffice to establish the meanings of the vocabulary of the divine language. And if God does have ‘current cognitions’, then, at the very least, we need some further assessment of Wittgenstein’s arguments: it is, after all, not to be expected that an omnipotent and omniscient being can do what is genuinely impossible.

It is beyond the scope of the present article to further pursue the question whether there is an argument in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* that can be used to make a plausible case for the claim that not even God could make a private language. It seems to me that this question is really of what we might properly call ‘purely academic interest’. For it seems to me that, even if God *could* make a private language, God would have no reason to make a private language, and so *would not* make a private language.

Suppose that God does have the capacity to establish persisting connections between signs and contents of divine cognitions. Given that God is necessarily omnipotent and necessarily omniscient, the establishment of persisting connections between signs and contents of divine cognitions cannot enable God to have cognitions that God did not have prior to the establishment of those persisting connections between signs and contents of divine cognitions. More generally: given that God is necessarily omniscient, there is no epistemic or cognitive benefit that God can gain by establishing persisting connections between signs and contents of divine cognition. Since God is necessarily perfect, God would not bother to do anything that it is pointless for God to do. So: God would not make a divine language grounded in the establishment of persisting connections between signs and contents of divine cognitions.

There are points in the preceding argument where I appeal to what I claim to be ‘orthodox’ opinions. I do not deny that it is possible for theists to have ‘unorthodox’ opinions. So it should not be thought that the above is meant to be a rigorous argument for the claim that it is matter of purely academic interest whether God could make a private language and, in any case, God would not make a divine language grounded in the establishment of persisting

connections between signs and contents of divine cognitions. The most that I wish to claim is that I expect that many theists currently active in philosophy of religion will find the claims that I have advanced attractive, if not compelling.

3. Divine Language of Thought

Some may suppose that, even if it is granted that God would not *make* a divine language, it remains open that there *is* a divine language. In particular, it might be supposed, there is nothing in the preceding considerations that rules out the existence of a divine language of thought. Fodor (1975)—following a tradition that goes back at least to Augustine—claims that thinking is essentially linguistic: thinking occurs in a mental language. If it is necessarily the case that thinking occurs in a mental language, and if God thinks, then God’s thinking occurs in a divine mental language: the divine language of thought.

There is much in Christian tradition that supports the claim that God thinks. While it would perhaps be a mistake to suppose that our thought is anything more than loosely analogous to God’s thought, the various meanings associated with ‘Logos’—*ground, opinion, expectation, word, plea, speech, account, reason, proportion, discourse*, and so forth—directly support the claim that, in identifying God with Logos, Christian tradition expressed a commitment to the idea that God thinks. Moreover, support among contemporary Christian philosophers for certain kinds of arguments for the existence of God—e.g. the arguments from *intentionality, numbers, and sets* in Walls and Dougherty (2018)—is clearly predicated on the idea that God thinks. The intentionality of God’s thoughts cannot be the primitive form of intentionality if God does not have thoughts. Numbers cannot be ideas in the mind of God if God does not have thoughts. Sets cannot be products of God’s thinking things together if God does not have thoughts. Finally, there are—admittedly controversial—ways of understanding *Imago Dei* which rely on the claim that God thinks: what allegedly distinguishes human beings from other creatures, and makes it the case that, unlike other creatures, human beings are in God’s image, is that human beings are able to have rational, self-reflective thoughts.

Given that God thinks, the remaining assumption that we need to investigate is whether it is necessarily the case that thinking occurs in a mental language. We have already seen that some philosophers suppose that it is impossible that there are mental languages, since such languages would be necessarily private. Fodor himself argued both that there are no good arguments against private languages and that, even if there were good arguments against private languages, they would not apply to mental languages. However, it is not clear that Fodor successfully prosecutes either part of this case.

Fodor argues that considerations about productivity and systematicity strongly support the claim that thinking occurs in a mental language. It is not clear that considerations about productivity carry over to the case of divine thought; it is not clear that there is any distinction between competence and performance to be drawn in connection with God’s thought. (I take it for granted that it is impossible for God to have thoughts that are ungrammatical according to the grammar of God’s language of thought.) However, there is at least some *prima facie* plausibility to the thought that considerations about systematicity carry over to the case of divine thought. It is plausible that any thought—including God’s thought—is systematic; and it is plausible that systematicity of thought would be explained by the systematicity of the language of thought, if there is a language of thought.

However, what remains to be considered is whether the systematicity of thought is best explained by the systematicity of the language of thought, and, in particular, whether the systematicity of divine thought is best explained in terms of the systematicity of the divine language of thought. In the general case, there are alternative proposals: for example, Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson (1996) and Camp (2007) have both supported the idea that the systematicity of thought might be better explained by its map-like rather than its language-like features. Given that we have already acknowledged that divine thought might be rather different from human thought, even if it turns out that human thought requires a human language of thought, it seems open to us to suppose that divine thought requires only a divine map of thought. To the extent that the case for a divine language of thought rests on systematicity, it is not clear that we have any reason to prefer the hypothesis of a divine language of thought to the hypothesis of a divine map of thought. (There is a separate debate about whether natural languages *are* systematic—see, e.g. Pullum and Scholz (2007). I ignore this debate for the purposes of the current discussion. If natural languages are not systematic, then there is no support at all for the language of thought hypothesis in considerations about systematicity.)

The idea that divine thought is more ‘map-like’ than ‘language-like’ is not without precedent. Alston (1986: 288ff.) argues that there are historical defences—provided by Aquinas and Bradley—of the view that God’s knowledge is not propositional (‘language-like’). Whether or not there is more to divine thought than divine knowledge, we might suppose that the primary consideration to which Alston appeals—the absence in God of the kinds of limitations that require our knowledge to be divided into propositional ‘parcels’—extends to the case of divine thought. On the other hand, we might suppose that there is just one complete *true* proposition that is the object of God’s knowledge; on that additional assumption, it seems that considerations about division into propositional ‘parcels’ are completely beside the point. Despite Alston’s valiant effort to separate the claims that Aquinas and Bradley make about the non-propositional nature of God’s knowledge from their more controversial metaphysical views, there are grounds for thinking that you need something like commitment to Aquinas’ *divine simplicity* or Bradley’s *higher immediacy* in order to justify the claim that God’s thought is non-propositional. While I do not expect theists to be of one mind on this matter, I do expect that many theists will prefer the hypothesis of a divine map of thought to the hypothesis of a divine language of thought.

Suppose that we *do* think that there is a divine language of thought. In that case, it seems, we are thinking that, in the order of explanation, the language of thought is prior to divine thoughts. This is puzzling. Consider God prior to creation of anything else. The only thing that exists is God. God has the capacity for thought. This capacity is dependent upon the divine language of thought. Since the divine language of thought is a language, it has the usual elements of a language: lexicon, grammar, and so forth. But what is the source of the meaning of the elements in the lexicon of the divine language of thought? Given the fundamental role that God’s thought is meant to play in the creation of everything else, it seems problematic to suppose that meaning is conferred on the elements in the lexicon of the divine language of thought prior to the creation of anything else.

It is not an accident that contemporary language of thought hypotheses—in the work of Chomsky, Fodor, and their followers—take it for granted that human language of thought has an evolutionary history. One of the main reasons for supposing that there is a language of thought is that we can appeal to the language of thought to explain human first-language

acquisition. But this explanatory advantage vanishes if the language of thought must itself be acquired. However, if the language of thought is innate, then the only plausible explanation is one that appeals to our evolutionary history: our language of thought has been hardwired into us over the long haul of human evolution.

But, of course, there is nothing that corresponds to evolutionary history in the case of God. It cannot be the case, for example, that God's language of thought is forged in some prior evolutionary period. Since it seems that there is no explanation that could be given of the meanings of the terms in the lexicon of the divine language of thought, it seems that there is very good reason to suppose that there is no divine language of thought. Perhaps it might be objected that, for example, the bootstrapping account of the origins of divine concepts in Leftow (2012) can fill this explanatory gap. But it seems that any such account requires some *semantic primes* (see Wierzbicka (1996); and yet it also seems that there is no plausible source for semantic primes in a divine language of thought. (A referee suggests that, perhaps, meaning is conferred on the elements of the lexicon in the divine language of thought by God's knowledge of the possibilities that he can create. I think this suggestion is incoherent. If there is a divine language of thought, then God's knowledge is framed in that language; but then it is hopelessly circular to suppose that God's knowledge confers meaning on the elements in the lexicon of that language.)

The conclusion that I am tempted to draw is that theists should reject the idea that there is a divine language of thought. Given considerations about the otherness of God, it is reasonable for theists to suppose that there is *some* sense in which God thinks and has thoughts. However, given the limited literal content we can ascribe to this claim, it is hard to see good reason for theists to embrace the further claim that there is some sense in which there is a divine language of thought.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have given preliminary consideration to questions about whether God is a language producer and language user. I have argued: first, that—setting other considerations aside—there is nothing particularly problematic about the idea that God produces and uses natural languages; second, that theists should reject the idea that God has a private divine language; and third, that theists should reject the idea that God has a language of thought. I regard the arguments that I have given in the chapter as preliminary and provisional; I will not be surprised if they meet with strenuous opposition.

Perhaps I should note in closing that there is nothing in the arguments that I have given that tells against the traditional claims that I mentioned in my introductory remarks. We do not need to suppose that there is a divine language of thought in order to further suppose that particular human languages were invented by God and transmitted to human beings at some point in the past. Of course, naturalists will suppose that there are more theoretically satisfying naturalistic accounts of the origins of those languages; but that point is not relevant to the arguments that I have been advancing in this chapter.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Andrea Vestrucci and two referees from *Sophia* for constructive advice on the initial draft of this chapter.

Conflicts of Interest: I declare that I have no conflicts of interest.

Appendix

In this chapter, I make use of some terminology from philosophy of language that may not be familiar to all readers. I include a brief account of this terminology here.

1. *Competence:* Language users' linguistic competence is their grasp of rules of grammar: their knowledge of their language enables them to recognise grammatical errors. By contrast, linguistic performance refers to actual uses of language that, for human language users, often devolves into ungrammaticality because of, for example, inattention, mid-sentence changes of mind, bilingual interaction effects, limitations of memory, and the like.

2. *Productivity:* To say that language is productive is to say that it offers us an unlimited ability to engage in novel communication. Given a lexicon with just a few thousand useful items, we have an unlimited supply of sentences that we can use and understand.

3. *Systematicity:* Roughly, a language is systematic if, whenever it can be identified that a sentence is grammatical, it can be simultaneously identified that any variant of that sentence in which there is substitution of constituents belonging to the same grammatical category is also grammatical. Example: When I recognise that 'John loves Mary' is grammatical, I also recognise that 'Mary loves John' is grammatical.

4. *Language of Thought:* The language of thought hypothesis is that thought takes place in a mental language, that is, in a system of mental representation that has syntactic structure. The best known exposition and defence of this hypothesis is in Fodor (1975).

5. *Map of Thought:* The map of thought hypothesis is that thought takes place in a system of mental representation that, rather than having syntactic structure, has the kind of structure that is displayed in maps. Maps are similar to languages in their employment of discrete recurring constituents with arbitrary semantics that are combined according to systematic rules. But maps are unlike languages in their employment of spatial isomorphism as the underlying framework for the combination of constituents.

6. *Semantic Primes:* Semantic primes—or semantic primitives—are simple elements in the lexicon that are not defined in terms of other elements in the lexicon. According to the current version of the theory developed by Wierzbicka and her co-workers, there are 65 semantic primes in terms of which the meanings of all other words can be explained.

References

- Alston, W. (1986) 'Does God have Beliefs?' *Religious Studies* 22: 287-306
Braddon-Mitchell, D. and Jackson, F. (1996) *The Philosophy of Mind and Cognition* Oxford: Blackwell
Camp, E. (2007) 'Thinking with Maps' *Philosophical Perspectives* 21: 145-82

- Fodor, J. (1975) *The Language of Thought* Cambridge: MIT Press
- Leftow, B. (2012) *God and Necessity* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Pullum, G. and Scholz, B. (2007) 'Systematicity and Natural Language Syntax' *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 7: 375-402
- Rescorla, M. (2019) 'The Language of Thought Hypothesis' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/language-thought/>
- Walls, L. and Dougherty, T. (eds.) (2018) *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wierzbicka, A. (1996) *Semantics: Primes and Universals* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*, fourth edition, translated by E. Anscombe, P. Hacker, and J. Schulte, Oxford: Blackwell
- Wrisley, G. (2019) 'Private Language' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/private-language/>