

AGAINST INEFFABILITY

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Abstract. It is a commonplace assumption that there are realities and types of experience words are just not able to handle. I find the recourse to ineffability to be an evasive tactic and argue that there is inherently nothing beyond words and that this fact has ethical implications. I offer three theoretical considerations in support of my claim. The first two deal with the infinite nature of language itself, as understood first in Chomsky and then Derrida. The third deals with the linguistically structured nature of human experience. Expanding on Heidegger, I then draw some ethical implications from language's inexhaustibility.

It is a commonplace assumption that language has its limits, that there are realities and types of experience words are just not able to handle. I want to take issue with this assumption and argue that there is inherently nothing that is beyond words and that this fact about language has ethical implications.

It is in the area of religion that words have most often been found wanting. William James argues that "personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness" and that the clearest mark of mystical consciousness is its ineffability.

The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. (James 1961, pp. 299-300)

The religious person normally claims god to be a reality beyond anything that words can capture and faith a kind of experience deeper than language can describe.

But it is not just in the area of religion that people make claims of ineffability. It is frequently the recourse of anyone trying to describe realities

outside the norm, outside the ordinary scope of human experience. “Words fail to describe” for example “the natural thrill and sheer spectacle of the 450-foot bridge high above Capilano River.” (Privilege 2009, p. 1) Likewise, “there are no words that can describe what is going on in Darfur every day – the killings, the rapes, the burning of villages.” (Cox 2007, p. B15) And finally, a lover in the throes of separation croons: “I need you now, more than words can say.” (Curci & DeMarchi 1990) These few examples give some indication of just how widespread the belief in ineffability is, and how many things are believed to fit under its umbrella.

I owe my first doubts about ineffability to my freshman composition teacher. Whenever a student would innocently proclaim some experience or emotion to be beyond words, Fr. Christopher would be on that cliché like a heat seeking missile. “Don’t blame language,” he would mock, “for defects which are entirely your own.” As my own red-faced embarrassment attested, he was right, at least in my case. Certainly the words I found to express my sorrow at the funeral of a friend were clumsy and far from what I felt, but Roethke’s “Elegy for Jane” had never seemed inadequate to me, nor Auden’s “Funeral Blues,” nor Thomas’s “Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.” I had struggled with my own poetry enough to realize that “There are no words” was most often a way of avoiding the work of finding them, or evading the truth that I did not have the talent to create them.

I. THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

When the inadequacy of words is bemoaned, it is usually some form of a representational theory of language that is being assumed. When, for example, parents confront a tragedy like the death of a child, and tearfully claim that words cannot express how they feel, they are assuming that language does a pretty good job of conveying their normal, day-to-day feelings, but cannot adequately perform that function in their present sorrow because it is too complex, nuanced and deep. In other words, language can represent most ordinary things quite well, but fails with certain extraordinary things.

In arguing against ineffability I am going to share in the common assumption that language is representational. However, I will not be assuming that representation is the only function of language, or even its primary one, but only that it is an important, meaningful and distinctive one.

There are, of course, many ways in which one thing can be said to represent another. A map outlining an earthen land mass can be said to “represent” the USA. The Stars and Stripes unfurled atop a flag pole “represents” the USA in quite another sense. And, in yet one more sense, the Secretary of State “represents” the USA at a treaty negotiation. In what sense am I assuming language to be representational?

I do not believe there is any kind of immediate, one-to-one relationship between words and things. Language is not a picture of reality, even in the logically abstract manner Wittgenstein tried to argue it was in the *Tractatus*. Words are much trickier than pictures in the way they connect to the world and therein lies their representational power.

Wittgenstein’s mistake is worth dwelling on here because the *Tractatus* is one of philosophy’s most famous advocates for ineffability, for there being realities beyond language. For Wittgenstein, the most important things in life, things like beauty and goodness, are the very things language cannot touch. Therefore, he concludes the *Tractatus* with a Zen like endorsement of wordless contemplation: “Of what we cannot speak we must be silent.” (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 49) The rest of the *Tractatus*, everything that leads up to that famous final sentence, is summarized by a corresponding sentence in the Preface: “What can be said at all can be said clearly.” (Wittgenstein 1998, p. xxxi) The problem with this is that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein restricts what can be said to derivatives of simple signs which denotatively “mean” objects in the world. So, he believes that if we have spoken logically and carefully, “there is one and only one complete analysis of a sentence.” (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 7) But, as the later Wittgenstein came to see, “simple sentences” end up being constructed not out of words in their living concrete usage, but out of words as abstract logical symbols. No living, breathing sentence, including the final one in the *Tractatus* itself, can be correlated with the world in the way the *Tractatus* envisioned it should be, at least not without draining it of meaning.

But refusing to tether words to a one-to-one picturing of reality is not to set them totally adrift from it either. The model I want to use for the way in which language represents reality is the way in which dance “represents” music. George Balanchine famously described his choreography as an attempt to get the audience to “see the music.” (Croce 2009, p. 37) Obviously, he did not mean to imply any simplistic, one-to-one correspondence between bodily movements and musical sounds. Nonetheless, something about the rhythmic interweaving of sounds can be matched (represented) by the interweaving patterns that moving bodies make for sight. I think language represents reality in a similar way.

Does it make sense to say that there are musics beyond dance? Beyond being illuminated by dance or even perfectly satisfied by it? I doubt it. But is that not exactly what people are saying when they claim to have experiences beyond words? In what follows, I want to argue that the powers we readily concede to language in representing ordinary life, apply equally well to life's rare and dramatic moments. Just as there is no music that cannot be perfectly satisfied by a dance, so too, there are words perfect for every moment.

This can be affirmed, I think, without implying that any sentence, or collection of them, exhausts the moment's possibilities, or is its moment's definitive truth. There is obviously no one "true" way to dance a given piece of music. The number of ways is limited only by a choreographer's creativity. In 1941, Balanchine choreographed Stravinsky's "Violin Concerto" in a dance he called "Balustrade." Stravinsky described it as "perfectly complementary to and coordinated with the dialogues of the music." (Stravinsky 1963, p. 80) In 1972, Balanchine choreographed the exact same music quite differently as "Stravinsky's Violin Concerto." Two very different dances can give sight to the same music. Yet, this does not imply that any haphazard way of moving the body would count as dancing to the music. There are clearly dances that obscure the music or miss its mark entirely. The same holds for a wording's representation of reality.

I now want to offer three theoretical considerations in support of my claim that everything can be verbally represented, that nothing is inherently ineffable. The first two have to do with the infinite nature of language itself, the third with the nature of human experience. I then want to draw some ethical implications from the fact of language's inexhaustibility.

II. THE INFINITY OF LANGUAGE

Language is infinite in at least two ways. The first is that advocated by the linguist Noam Chomsky. He has argued that "discrete infinity" is one of the most fundamental characteristics of human language and, indeed, the one that clearly distinguishes it from the forms of communication used by other animals.

[T]he most elementary property of the language faculty is the property of discrete infinity; you have six-word sentences, seven-word sentences, but you don't have six-and-a-half-word sentences. Furthermore, there is no limit; you can have ten-word sentences, twenty-word sentences and so on indefinitely. That is the property of discrete infinity. This property is virtually unknown in

the biological world. There are plenty of continuous systems, plenty of finite systems but try to find a system of discrete infinity. The only other one that anybody knows is the arithmetic capacity, which could well be some offshoot of the language faculty. (Chomsky 2001, pp. 51-52)

To Chomsky, language is a system comprised of a finite number of elements (i.e., words) along with grammatical rules for combining them in an infinite number of meaningful ways. Chomsky argues that essential to the syntactical rules of human language is the element of recursion, that is, the ability to embed similar combinations within each other in a hierarchical order. For example, consider the following verse from a traditional childhood song: "I know an old lady who swallowed a dog, to catch the cat, to catch the bird, to catch the spider – that wiggled and jiggled and tickled inside her." Certainly, part of the song's delight is the way in which even children get caught up in the playful infinity of its recursive possibilities. The only way to stop the song is to have one of the old lady's larger meals (usually a horse, of course) arbitrarily kill her off. Because of recursion, human language is a completely open-ended system. Its syntactical rules are such that they can generate from a finite number of word units an infinite number of meanings. This ability of language clearly gives it, as Chomsky *et al* insist, a "limitless expressive power, captured by the notion of discrete infinity." (Hauser 2002, p. 1576)

I simply want to take Chomsky's point about the nature of language and apply it to the question of its scope. If language has "discrete infinity," then it has "limitless expressive power," which means that, in theory, nothing can be outside its purview. If our words are not matching the experience we want to express, the problem must be ours and not that of words themselves.

In this regard, it is interesting to compare the discrete infinity of language with that of numbers. We do not normally speak of there being quantities beyond numbers, beyond what numbers can handle. Although we do use the term "innumerable" in relation to quantities, it is not really comparable to the meaning of "ineffable" in relation to language. When we say, for example, that the stars in the heavens are innumerable, we do not mean that numbers are inapplicable to the quantity of stars, or that numbers are not the kinds of things appropriate to quantities of stars, or even that there are not numbers big enough for that quantity. Rather, we mean that the task of determining what the number actually is, is outside the abilities of the one doing the counting. In other words, with the discrete infinity of numbers, there is no limitation inherent in the system itself, but only in the resources of its users. Should not the same be said of the infinity of language?

Of course, language is not itself a machine that automatically generates satisfactory representations. The tool may be infinite, but the user usually is not. The criterion for determining the right number is pretty straightforward, but not so the right language. Determining the right number is a matter of rote, whereas the right language usually involves some measure of creativity. When are our words the right ones? What exactly is it that we can expect of a verbal representation? Obviously, we do not expect words to be identical with what they represent. We do not expect the word “salt” to flavor our meat, for example, or appear in crystalline form. But if someone says the meat is too salty, and their words are worth their salt, we expect to know what the meat will taste like. There is, however, no easy formula for what rightness looks like in language. Proust can be said to have needed the entirety of *In Search of Lost Time* to catch the precise taste of that tea in which he had dipped a morsel of Madeline cake! Yet, Basho needed only seventeen syllables to catch his monk’s quiet morning sip of that same beverage.

When we come face-to-face with the unsettling powers of nature or a searing personal tragedy, our own deficiencies as language users can be painfully evident. But in assessing the capabilities of language itself, it seems important to look at the best creative practices of humanity as a whole and not our own personal resources. How often has some poet taken an agony we thought to be beyond words and put it in all its nuanced form before us? How often have we said of some story: “Yes, that’s it; that’s exactly what I was feeling.” In a similar vein, those who once thought their personal catastrophe inexpressible sometimes find in trauma support groups the right words to make healing possible. To be fair to the possibilities of words, it is important to acknowledge not just those psychological moments when we felt frustrated by them, but also those moments in art or life when they seemed right on the money. Such psychological moments are not, in and of themselves, arguments for the infinity of language’s power, but they can provide an emotional balance to our experience of its limitations.

A second way in which language is infinite is presented by the philosopher, Jacques Derrida. While he would not deny Chomsky’s claim that language can generate an infinity of possible sentences, he finds infinity in a different aspect of language.

For Derrida, meaning is not a fixed property of individual words (signifiers). Instead, it is a relational property that depends upon the context in which a signifier functions and its interplay with other signifiers in the

system. Since the number of contexts is infinite, the number of meanings is too.

Every sign, linguistic or non linguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. (Derrida 1982, p. 320)

Derrida's point can be exemplified by both the simplest elements of a language and the vastness of its literature. The letters in any word, for example, have meaning only in the context of other letters. Thus, if one starts with the letter "o", its meanings change as its relationships to other letters change: "to," "of," "ton," "off," "tone" and so on. The meaning is not determined until the relations are. (Derrida 1981, pp. 129-130) This is equally true, of course, with the relations between words in a sentence. What the word "break" means in a sentence like "John went to Florida for his break" is made clear only in the context of the other words. So, a different collection of words, for example, "John's break will take months to heal," yields a different meaning for the same word. But, of course, this contextual coloring is also true of sentences in a paragraph, paragraphs in a novel, novels in an *oeuvre*, *oeuvres* in an era and so on. "Traces" (Derrida 1974, p. 65) of every word's past (and future) contexts are hovering around any given usage. Like Heraclitus' river, you cannot step into the same word twice. Each word is a portal on an infinity of traces.

Let me use another example: the word "duck." We tend to think that a word's meaning is anchored in the word itself and that a dictionary can provide us with this basic information. Even if the word has more than one meaning, if it is a noun or a verb, this can be handled by the dictionary as well. Derrida argues, however, that any actual meaning, any meaning actually communicated, will depend on the context (time, place and audience) in which it occurs. Where the word is physically placed, for example, whether it is on a stairway or a cage or a menu, obviously affects its meaning. Imagine the word placed under a feather in a museum or on a taxidermist's price list. Even a minimal amount of creativity or concrete everyday usage can generate contexts that would endlessly stretch the meanings beyond those suggested by the dictionary.

If the nuances of a simple word like "duck" stretch out endlessly, imagine the rich scope of an historically complex word like "Jesus." What started as the name of an historical figure has become a rich mythological sym-

bol surrounded by hundreds of flavoring stories. What was once a prayer can now be a cry of sexual ecstasy or petty anger. The reach of words is as inexhaustible as the contexts in which they can be placed.

Unlike Chomsky, Derrida does not view the infinity of language as a mere potency, but as something already present in any actual use of language. Classical theory tended to see language as a kind of mirror held up to reality. But the mirror always seemed to fail because there were nuances of the reality that the words did not capture. In Derrida's hands, however, this failure becomes a strength. It is precisely because language cannot "totalize" anything, that its meanings become infinite.

Totalization can be judged impossible in the classical style: one then refers to the empirical endeavor of a subject or of a finite discourse in a vain and breathless quest of an infinite richness which it can never master. There is too much, more than one can say. But nontotalization can also be determined in another way: not from the standpoint of the concept of finitude as assigning us to an empirical view, but from the standpoint of the concept of *freeplay*. If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization. This field is in fact that of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble. (Derrida 1993, p. 236)

In other words, there is no way to close off, to stop or be satisfied with, (to "totalize") the meaning of a word. This inability leaves some language users frustrated because there are always experiences that they can not precisely nail down with words, experiences that seem "more than words can say." Yet, Derrida argues, if we can just renounce such fixating attempts at totalization and instead let words play freely with their contexts, we will find an infinity in the midst of every finite sentence. In other words, if we avoid a single restrictive meaning to the words before us, they might very well include the "more" that we want them to say.

Let me use a metaphor from Yeats to illustrate the kind of infinity Derrida is talking about. In his poem, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," Yeats focuses on the chaos caused by the Anglo-Irish War. Since the horrors of war are often claimed to be beyond words, his efforts are revealing.

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;
The night can sweat with terror as before
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,

And planned to bring the world under a rule,
 Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.
 (Yeats 1962, p. 109)

The brutal events that Yeats recounts (a drunken soldiery, an innocent victim, the failure of a legal system) are not unique to 1919; they would be present in any war and multiplied many times over. Numerous as well would be the intellectual efforts to make sense of human history ("piece our thoughts into philosophy") and to establish a universally fair legal system ("bring the world under a rule"). Because we humans see our violence as perpetrated in the service of ideals and values, we imagine it to have a nobility far beyond anything that animals could muster. Yet, for all our aspirations and sophisticated weaponry, Yeats finds our violence to rise no higher than that of "weasels fighting in a hole." This judgment by metaphor is delivered with a contempt that is especially chilling. It is also, I want to argue, especially "right" for the way war banalizes brutality, "right" for what war reveals about human nature, "right" for the ultimately venal character of military ambition. But this rightness holds only as long as we avoid locking the image into one specific meaning, only as long as we do not "totalize" it, but let it hang loose and play with its traces and contexts. Notice how richly the single sneaky word "weasel" resonates in this regard. Metaphors are not like mirrors fixating reality, but like dances performed to its music

By using as my example a metaphor from a master wordsmith like Yeats, I do not mean to imply that the right words are found only in the mouths of great poets. Slang and popular culture can be equally "right." A metaphor like "pissed off," for example, seems a perfect image for a particular kind of frustrated anger. Nor do I want to imply that creative metaphor is the only way to speak a deep emotion rightly. Sometimes a simple account in a poignant context can be achingly adequate to the hurt of a tragic situation. Words can be right in many ways.

As has been noted, there is a longstanding tradition that finds in the infinity of god the paradigm instance of a reality beyond words. In arguing for the infinity of language, Chomsky and Derrida seem to turn this tradition on its head by giving language itself a property usually reserved for divinity. Perhaps, however, their strategy is not as revolutionary as it at first seems. At the beginning of his gospel, John clearly and forcefully identifies god with language: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) Such an identity, taken seriously, should make even a religious person wary about any quick conclusions regarding the limitations of language.

III. THE LINGUISTIC NATURE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

When people claim that there are experiences beyond words, they are usually utilizing a receptive model of perception and experience. They imagine that the person without language sees the same world, the same tree in a field, for example, that the person with language sees. They imagine that the only difference is that the person with language has the value-added ability to give names to the tree and the field. Names enable her to convey information about the tree and the field to others without actually having them in front of her. It is on the basis of this model of language that they then go on to claim that humans sometimes receive experiences which have no words adequate to them.

Michel Foucault is one of several thinkers who argue against this purely receptive model of experience. In "The Discourse on Language," he cautions that

we should not imagine that the world presents us with a legible face, leaving us merely to decipher it; it does not work hand in glove with what we already know; there is no prediscursive fate disposing the world in our favor. We must conceive discourse as a violence that we do to things, or, at all events, as a practice we impose upon them. (Foucault 1972, p. 229)

We might think, for example, that racial diversity would be present in any neutral observation of the human species, that the world "presents us with" a certain number of clearly discernable ("legible") racial types and that these types pre-exist any verbal schema for their organization. But Foucauldian histories ("genealogies") of the concept of race demonstrate that the opposite is true. (McWhorter 2004, pp. 38-62) The experience of race seems to be more a result of the schema than a cause of it. In other words, we see humanity as black and white only if we are wearing racial glasses, only if we are embedded in a language that utilizes racial categories. Furthermore, these categories evolve not from some neutral reception of the world, but as an exercise of power which one social group uses to validate its dominance over others. Thus, Enlightenment Europeans "invent" the concept of race as a way of justifying their enslavement of other humans at the very time they are proclaiming the dignity of every human being in their own political systems. Humans do not first have experiences and then find appropriate words to describe them; rather, they only have experiences insofar as they are already given shape by words. For Foucault, the very concept of a nonlinguistic or "prediscursive" experience is deeply problematic.

Foucault is willing to agree with Chomsky and Derrida that, in the abstract, there are “infinite resources available for the creation of discourse.” (Foucault 1972, p. 224) However, in practice, these resources “are nonetheless principles of constraint and it is probably impossible to appreciate their positive, multiplicatory role without first taking into consideration their restrictive, constraining role.” (Foucault 1972, p. 224) Yes, language is a “positive, multiplicatory” revelation of the world, but it is first of all “a violence” that we do to it.

Much of Foucault’s work is an analysis of the concrete and pervasive ways that a given historical discourse creates an experiencing subject who, in turn, proceeds to do violence to reality by constructing experience according to the dictates of that discourse.

For Foucault, the Enlightenment vision of the individual subject as a free and transcendent user of the instrument of language is no longer tenable. Rather, the human subject is constituted and controlled by language (discourse) and the matrices of power inherent in it.

I think Foucault’s work on the constitutive nature of discourse highlights another difficulty with claiming that there are experiences beyond words: human experience itself is inherently linguistic. Once this is understood, it becomes problematic, even contradictory, to talk about experiences to which words do not apply. Words are what make human experience possible. Human experiences come to us linguistically packaged. Since they are made out of words, they can hardly be said to be beyond them.

Some have taken Foucault’s position on the constitutive power of discourse to imply a linguistic determinism which leaves the speaker without any real sense of agency. This begets a despair about the use of language quite opposite to my own ethical intentions and, I think, Foucault’s as well. Insisting on the discursive construction of all experience need not exclude the possibility of creative expression regarding it.

Michel de Certeau’s work is a helpful demonstration of this. While he acknowledges the disciplinary grip that the forms of discourse have on society, he is adept at demonstrating various modes of resistance to this grip, at demonstrating “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong.” (Certeau 1984, p. xvii) This resistance is performed not just by heroic poets, but by ordinary people in the practice of everyday life. They resist not by overthrowing the disciplinary matrices of power altogether, but by utilizing them for their own ends. Language use is his primary model for such resistance.

In the technologically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly

unreadable paths across a space. Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages, . . . the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop. (Certeau 1984, p. xviii)

Certeau's treatment of "Mystic Speech" is an intriguing analysis of such a resistance process. When mystics speak about their experience, Certeau finds a discursive structuring of their experience but also creative strategies for utilizing that structure for their own ends. His prime analysis focuses on a group of sixteenth and seventeenth century texts which were labeled "mystic" and proliferated at the dawn of modernity. Fortunately, many mystics, while proclaiming their experiences to be beyond words, also produced a great quantity of words about them. Certeau's reading of their texts is, I think, supportive of my own claims against ineffability.

He makes clear from the beginning that he is not interested in finding behind the mystic texts "an ineffability that could be twisted to any end, a 'night in which all cats are black.'" (Certeau 1986, p. 82) He notes that both the geographical locations where the texts were produced and the social status of their authors had been "marginalized by progress." (Certeau 1986, p. 84) At the very time when the new discourse of science was displacing longstanding religious structures, those displaced were at work creating an alternative discourse. He argues that the mystics, even while claiming the ineffability of their experience, were far from despairing of language's power regarding it. Quite the contrary: "Mysticism is the anti-Babel. It is the search for a common language after language has been shattered. It is an invention of a 'language of the angels' because that of man has been disseminated." (Certeau 1986, p. 88)

As one example of this invention, Certeau examines "the standard unit of mystic speech," a linguistic device he calls "the cleft unit." (Certeau 1992, p. 144) Examples of this device would be contradictory tropes like "cruel repose," "silent music," "dark light" and "blissful wound." (Ahearne 1995, p. 108) What such phrases do, Certeau claims, is jar the hearer from her naïve faith in the transparency of language, her faith that language directly pictures reality. When this faith is undermined, the reader is forced to look at the signs themselves rather than at what they represent. Since the two represented (signified) realities – cruelty and repose, for example – are incompatible, the reader's attention is directed away from the referents of those words and onto the words themselves. Now, instead of things in the world, the reader sees "wounded words" whose incompatibility creates a kind of "cleft" or emptiness between them. (Certeau 1992, p. 144)

These wounded words, however, do not depict the failure of all language, but only its rigidly designational form. It is in the very midst of exposing that failure that the mystic's meaning happens. "What must be said cannot be said except by a shattering of the word." (Certeau 1992, p. 144) In other words, what the mystic wants to say, gets said, but its meaning happens in the practice of the sentence rather than its designation. In the very act of shattering the old discourse, the speaker is generating an alternative kind of language usage. "An operation is substituted for the Name." (Certeau 1992, p. 150) This operational usage of language does not refer the reader to an object in the world, but envelopes her in a mode of experience. This experience turns out to be the very one the mystic is struggling to convey.

The mystic's meaning is, as it were, resurrected from the wounded words. In this manner, the central mystery at the heart of the Christian experience, the mystery of life pulled from the cleft of death, the mystery of absolute fullness inherent in the hole of absence, is figured and enacted in the linguistic practices of the mystics. As the popularity of their texts in the early modern period makes clear, even though the mystics explicitly denied that words were adequate to their experience of the divine, their "paradoxical games" demonstrated something different. "They did not 'express' an experience because they were themselves that experience." (Certeau 1992, p. 147) Thus, by "*playing* with the mother tongue" (Certeau 1992, p. 147), the wounded words of the mystics proved adequate even to divine experiences.

Foucault and Certeau are right to call attention to the thoroughly discursive nature of human experience. How could human experiences, even mystic ones, be beyond language, when they are made possible by it? In his poem, "Men Made Out of Words," Wallace Stevens artistically echoes this basic theoretical point. (Stephens 1967, pp. 281-282)

Stevens begins his poem by asking us to imagine where we humans would be, what our experience would be like, without words. Like the mystics, Stevens has to "play" with the mother tongue a bit to come up with his answer. Without words we would be, he claims, "Castratos of moon mash." "Castratos" would seem to be the plural of the word "castrato," which means a boy who has been castrated to preserve his singing voice. But Stevens surely knows that the correct plural of castrato is castrati, not castratos. Thus, he starts his answer by breaking the rules of language and using an illicit, "broken" word. Next is his use of the phrase, "moon mash." We understand the two individual words, but their union is odd. Is "moon mash," mash made out of moonlight? Or mash made in moonlight? Or by

moonlight? Perhaps it is some form of moonshine? The two words seem to form some kind of “cleft unit” in Certeau’s sense. Is “moon mash” the song that wordless castrati would sing? Are “castratos” what is left when moon mash, whatever it is, is castrated? The four words leave us with a tantalizing confusion of meanings that conveys rather well, I think, what the experience of wordlessness might be like, managing thereby to prove that even wordlessness itself is not ineffable.

IV. INEFFABILITY AND ETHICS

Of every idle word men speak, they shall give account on the day of judgment.
(Matt. 12:36)

There is something encouraging about seeing poets and mystics “play” with language. Using familiar words in ways we do not expect, they provide concrete proof of language’s infinite range. But my interest in arguing for the inexhaustibility of language is not merely theoretical. Like my old composition teacher, I want to discourage any retreat into the excuse of ineffability. But while his reasons were pedagogical, mine are ethical. I want to argue that human beings not only can articulate any experience, they have a duty to do so, have, as Martin Heidegger puts it, a “call to the word.” (Heidegger 1971, p. 66)

For Heidegger, human experience is as thoroughly linguistic as it is for Foucault. Like Foucault, Heidegger believes there is no such thing as prediscursive human experience. “Only where the word has been found is the thing a thing. Only thus *is* it. Accordingly we must stress as follows: no thing *is* where the word, that is, the name is lacking. The word alone gives being to the thing.” (Heidegger 1971, p. 62) In other words, the realities of the world achieve presence, happen as pieces of a whole, as “things” separated from a whole, only amidst language. This does not mean that a word is some omnipotent *fiat* which “gives being” by making an entity spring into existence from pure nothingness; rather, words “give being” by providing form and meaning where there previously was none. “[L]anguage alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time.” (Heidegger 2001, p. 71).

However, while both Heidegger and Foucault see language as constitutive of human experience and make the history of words a crucial part of their philosophical arguments, their attitude toward words could not be more different. Foucault focuses on the negative and emphasizes the “vio-

lence” with which discourse structures experience. Heidegger, on the other hand, chooses positive, gentler words like “disclosing” (Heidegger 1962, p. 205) and “unconcealing” (Heidegger 1949, p. 306) to describe the activity of language. He emphasizes that language is a revelatory power more than it is a dominating one. While he shares Foucault’s critique of any one-to-one transparency between word and thing, he finds, on a deeper poetic level, enough revelatory power in language to famously describe it as “the house of Being.” (Heidegger 1971, p. 135)

The Being that language “houses,” however, is not a Kantian “thing-in-itself,” nor some mysterious prediscursive entity, but instead “the meaningful presence of that entity within the range of human experience.” (Sheehan 1998, p. 307) The tree that the word “tree” discloses is not the one that falls in the forest when no one is there to hear it, but the one embedded in the history of human interaction with it. In other words, the tree that language discloses is that sturdy green giver of shade, fire, masks and medicine around and under which human life happens. To understand the kind of disclosive work that language does, Heidegger continuously uses poets and poetry as examples. To him, poetry merely intensifies what ordinary language does in the course of its everyday practice. “Language itself is poetry in the essential sense.” (Heidegger 2001, p. 72)

Certainly, one of the things that poetry does is take an obscure object inhabiting the periphery of our experience and give it significance in such a way that it becomes front and center to us for the first time. When we experience a new metaphor, when, for example, Homer describes the sea as “wine dark,” we become aware of a connection between those two liquids (sea and wine) that went unrecognized before. A new color – wine dark – comes to exist in and for our eyes. Even more than this, something about the sea’s intoxicating powers, pleasures and dangers comes to exist in our minds. The effective poet does not manufacture metaphors from thin air, but from the recesses of language and our linguistically constituted experience. Homer’s saying that the sea is wine dark does not, as Foucault would have it, violently make it so, but rather discloses its “so-ness” for our savoring. “For appropriating Saying brings to light all present beings in terms of their properties – it lauds, that is, allows them into their own, their nature.” (Heidegger 1971, p. 135)

Heidegger’s claim then is that all human language discloses reality in a manner similar to that of poetic metaphor. This ability of language makes ethical demands on us. While poetic metaphors are creative, they are not arbitrary. They can be as embarrassingly inept, as they can be gloriously apt. For this reason, Heidegger argues that a certain careful attention,

especially to language itself, is the necessary groundwork for all human speaking.

Mortals speak insofar as they listen. . . . This speaking that listens and accepts is responding. . . . Mortals speak by responding to language in a twofold way, receiving and replying. (Heidegger 1971, pp. 206-207)

In its essence, human language is neither a denotative tagging of predicursive experience, nor an *ex nihilo* construction of it. In language, word and thing, expression and intuition, are equiprimordial; they arise together and are intertwined like music and movement in an improvisational jazz dance. In such a performance, the musicians are as attuned to the dancer as she is to their music. It is precisely their attention to each other that creates, mutually, the work of art. So it is with word and thing. Human speech, if it is to avoid being "idle talk," (Heidegger 1962, p. 211) must involve a level of fundamental attention and responsibility, a very active "letting be" of things. (Heidegger 1949, p. 306)

I want to extend Heidegger's analysis of our ethical responsibilities to language to include a resistance to any and all ineffability claims.

No doubt, human language evolved, just as did the dance of the honey bee, to serve a very practical communicative purpose. No doubt too, the bulk of our daily word count serves pretty much the same purpose as the honey bee's waggle. However, our distinctively human use of words is not as practical communication, but as fundamental poetry, as a creation of a world and its meanings. Stories seem at least as old as the campfires around which they were told. But as humans, we tell our day to those who care about it, not just to provide them with the practical details of our hunt, but the felt tone of its adventure. It is this telling, this saying, that is our distinction.

To become what one is, to be true to one's distinction, is among the oldest of ethical mandates. If poetic words are our distinction, then at no point are we more ourselves than when we are immersed in them. "In order to be who we are, we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language." (Heidegger 1971, p. 134) This means that it is not only our poets who are called to do words' work, but all of us who share in the human distinction.

As humans, we are not self-contained units which could be plopped down in any venue. Rather, as Heidegger famously argued, we are "beings-in-the-world," inextricable from our experiential engagement with it. (Heidegger 1962, pp. 78-90) But the world is as inextricable from us as we are from it. The world and its things depend on us for their presence and,

as we have seen, this can happen only in language. "The word alone gives being to the thing." (Heidegger 1971, p. 62) This dependence should not be taken to mean that, in some Hegelian sense, things are destined for consciousness. Yet, their "appearance" does rise or fall with us; they can perform their existence only on our stage. To use a choreographic analogy one last time: it is not as if music (reality) *must* be danced to, or was made to be danced to; but it does seem to "shine" (Heidegger 1971, p. 47) when it is danced to, to be more translucent and more splendid in that union. Since the world is a correlate of human language, we all carry it on our shoulders (on our tongues) and should, like Atlas, feel its weight. Any responsibility to be ourselves implies a responsibility to the world. This dual obligation is best understood as an obligation to language.

Now, the most basic duty of those who have human language is to use it, and to use it not just to get by, but to let one's experience be, to let it have its shine in the sun. The texture of the world depends on us speaking it. And if the world is to be sustained in all its fullness, it is precisely those experiences not already fixed in cliché, that most need saying. While this duty weighs heavier on those who have special talents or have honed their skills on the heights and history of literature, it remains the duty of all who gather communally around whatever campfires there are in today's digital world. Heidegger himself would probably be suspicious of the avid blogger and find in her a tendency to idle talk, but there is something about her determination to leave nothing unsaid that he could not fail to cherish.

So, I argue, we have a duty to words, a call to language. Any recourse to ineffability is an evasion of that call, a ploy to escape our distinctive task of wording the experiences that move us. The world and its things, the language which brings them to presence, the community which both creates language and is nourished by it, are all owed more. Nothing is ineffable.

CONCLUSION

I would like to bring this reflection to closure with the example of Dante. He was, arguably, the boldest of human wordsmiths. His *Divine Comedy* is, at its heart, a frontal attack on ineffability. Surely, if anything is beyond words, it is the hell of god's justice and the heights of god's heaven. Even Dante himself twice takes refuge in the word "*ineffabile*" as he attempts to describe what he is experiencing in *The Paradiso*. (X, 3; XXVII,7) Nevertheless, he persists in his task of speaking the very things he has called ineffable.

In the final canto of his *Comedy*, in the act of describing how much he has already forgotten of his vision of the universe translucent in the face of god, Dante creates – almost off-handedly – a rather remarkable metaphor:

My memory of that moment is more lost
Than five and twenty centuries make dim that enterprise
when, in wonder, Neptune at the *Argo's* shadow stared.
(Alighieri 2008, p. 915)

What this metaphor is intended to illuminate has long been the subject of debate, (Alighieri 2007, pp. 837-838) but I am going to avoid that issue entirely and, following the lead of Joan Acocella, (Acocella 2007, p. 130) focus only on the image itself, on Neptune's sight of the *Argo's* shadow.

Any understanding of this image must begin with Neptune (Poseidon) himself. He was Zeus' brother, the volatile god not only of the sea, but of earthquakes and horses as well. A rich history of poems, sculpture and temples has been created in efforts to give meaning to this name. Suffice it here to note that Neptune had hopes that his watery environment would one day be inhabited by those god-revering humans who seemed so tied to the solid ground under their feet. (Alighieri 2007, p. 837)

Next we must know something of the *Argo*. To the Greeks, it was a history creating vessel, the first warship capable of handling the high seas. The boat itself was built by Argus under the guidance of Athena. Since it was reputed to have had fifty oars, its sailing was a complex social achievement. It included in its prow, oak from the Oracle at Dordona. This meant that it was a ship with the ability both of speaking and prophesying.

Finally, in order to begin an understanding of Dante's image, some acquaintance with the ship's captain, Jason, is necessary. He was the early Greek hero who assembled the community of men (Argonauts) capable of handling this powerful ship. His journey to obtain the Golden Fleece and claim his rightful place on the throne of Thessaly was "the first important event in the Greek portion of universal history." (Alighieri 2008, p. 838) His accomplishment highlights not just bravery in the face of natural and political dangers, but organizational leadership and creativity as well.

Once some grasp of these three elements is in place, we can begin to imagine that shadowy shaft of shimmering darkness gliding through the liquid blue of Neptune's realm. The "Earth-Shaker" would not only be astonished by the bravery it entailed, but disturbed by its audacity and encouraged by its future. Truly, an epoch-making moment that is now only a dim human memory.

But notice that Dante, like Jason, is boldly encroaching on divine territory – and in that frailest of crafts: words. Granted, his explicit intent is to compare how little he remembers of his vision of god's triunity with how little humanity remembers of its foundational sea voyage, yet – as Acocella suggests (Acocella 2007, p. 131) – there is another comparison obvious in this image and that is between Neptune's amazement at Jason's performance and the Trinity's amazement at Dante's performance. On the one hand, Dante is painfully aware of his own limitations, of the gap between god's inexhaustibility and his own inflexible bones. But on the other hand, he has felt in his own pen the inexhaustibility of his craft and cannot help but wonder what awe Infinity itself feels staring into such a mirror.

Nothing is ineffable.

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