

# LINGUISTIC THEOLOGY: COMPLETING POSTLIBERALISM'S LINGUISTIC TASK

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## *Introduction*

The success of postliberal theology can be attributed to two conceptual advances: Barthian anti-foundationalism, on the one hand, and Thomistic analogical predication, on the other. The contribution of Barthian anti-foundationalism is to be found in the way it dissolves certain theoretical difficulties, while the contribution of Thomistic analogical predication resides in the way it legitimates theological judgment in light of these theoretical difficulties. Yet it must be acknowledged that both developments also benefit from the insights of a linguistic philosophy that dominated British philosophy in the mid-twentieth century. Facing down its own theoretical challenges, linguistic philosophy would come to maturation in an American context that emphasized self-expression, moral perfection, and political life. The task that I have set for myself in the following essay is to reimagine postliberal theology within this context, developing its insights toward new conceptual advances: agreement and separateness, natural conventions, and human possibilities for language. My argument unfolds in five parts: first, I begin with a short exercise in exemplifying the moral work of language; second I restate the role of agreement; third, I contend with postliberalism's detractors, showing why their objections are misplaced or otherwise unfounded; fourth, I highlight the significance of the body in the linguistic turn; and, finally, I show how this reimagining of postliberal theology renews mystery in theology. Let me begin, then, with an exercise that displays language's moral work.

## *1. Language as Moral Work*

The idiom "This is my body" turns up in the following places:

- A. The title of a one-woman play about sex trafficking.
- B. Artistic photographer Marwane Pallas' webpage, which depicts him, variously, holding his genitals, dressed as a soldier, urinating on an image of the sun, naked with a wound on his side, prone behind what looks like human lungs, and so on.

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- C. The survivor testimonial, “this is my body today,” offered by a woman suffering Ulcerative Colitis, an intestinal malady that results in ulcers and open sores on the colon: “During this time, a time of near death, I experienced the most incredible and fierce expressions of love. My husband who had already worried himself to a near mental breakdown was there every second I needed him. My mother traveled from across the country and sat with me all day and night for my last 7 days in the hospital. My friend bathed me when I couldn’t do it myself, and held my hand until my husband got there to rush me into surgery. My best friends came and had hang out parties in my room while I dozed off on painkillers trying to keep up on the conversation. My business partner and dear friend ran our entire business and found time to come hang out at my bedside. I’ll never know how to thank these people enough. Each one of them saved my life.”
- D. The French film *Ceci est mon corps* about the suicide of a gay actor.
- E. A phrase handwritten on individuals photographed for the Facebook page “This is My Body Project,” which describes itself as “an internet sensation urging people young and old, of any gender signification, to accept their bodies the way they are and hold confidence in themselves.”
- F. An online conversation revolving around African-American women and race, highlighting the statistic, “In an average month, 52 women are shot to death by a current or former husband or boyfriend.”
- G. The title of an essay by Suzanne M. Wolfe in the journal *Image*. Wolfe relates the George Herbert poem “Love (III)” — “Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back. . .” — and recounts, among other things, the memory of her disabled grandfather: “At the very end of his life, he became unable to feed himself, and my grandmother became enraged by his inability to swallow and the way the food dribbled down his chin. I would feed him, spoon by careful spoon, and talk of my day and my studies and the books we loved as if words could stanch his humiliation and shame.”
- H. Various pro-life campaigns.
- I. Various pro-choice campaigns.
- J. The title of a University of Cambridge conference billed as “disciplinary perspectives on the human body and experiences of embodiment from the medical and surgical practitioners and scholars in the arts, humanities, and social sciences.”
- K. The first lines of an essay entitled “The Shape of a Mother.” Part of the essay includes this: “I have stretch marks, a tattoo on my arm that I hate, my fingernail polish is chipping, and I probably should have thrown these panties away 2 sizes ago. My boobs don’t hang the way they used to, I have what most people refer to as ‘back fat’, and what is this thigh gap I keep hearing about? . . . This is my body. . . and I love it.”
- Here is another use:
- L. “‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, ‘Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given

for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'"

1. The Council of Trent took this passage to say: "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood."
2. John Wycliffe took it otherwise: "If you say that the flesh and blood of Christ, that is to say, his manhood is made more, or increased, by the ministration of the bread and the wine, then you must consent that the thing that is not God today shall be God tomorrow; yes, and that the thing which is without spirit of life, but grows in the field by its kind, shall be God another time. And if you make the body of the Lord by these words, 'This is My body,' you must yourself be the person of Christ, or else there is a false God."

It is a fact of language that "This is my body" can be made to do all these things. The controls on its meaning are the two or three speakers gathered in its use, which isn't to say that others would or should share in whatever applications they make of the idiom. These speakers may configure new uses of the idiom's respective words toward previously unimagined possibilities for what the idiom does when uttered. For example, canonical innovations that allow "this" wider capture expands the idiom from referring to Jesus' individual body to gathering a multitude of diverse individuals into a single entity. Likewise, inventive uses of the idiom establish anew what the individual words mean. When the Facebook page displays the idiom handwritten on female bodies, some viewers will find themselves confronting new valences for what counts as humanness, personhood, and so on. The creators of the Facebook page may intend Christianity's instituting words, purposefully invoking its symbolic power, or they may use it in ways that unintentionally erase it from memory, their use ruling out of view previous uses. Rediscovering under these semantic conditions Jesus' use of the phrase might make for a whole new Christianity.

We may find this fact unnerving, but it is also the seat of human possibility, including human possibilities for God, or even the possibility of God for humans. After all, the uses of the idiom we deem contrived or confused or cheap or controversial depend on the same facts of language that gives us "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." We are here talking about facts of human language, and they are controlling for all that we can possibly say, even all that we can desire or dream of. These facts of language testify to the metaphysical facts of creaturely life whereby the Word of God, the very one in whom and through whom creatures have their being, comes to inhabit human speech and speak it anew.

Unfortunately, seriousness about language is not something Christians easily admit. Indeed, given how we sometimes conceptualize matters it is not clear whether we would know what it would mean to do so. This is problematic enough but more so considering that interest in language is interest in all that language

gives us, making our troubles expansive given the scope of concern Christian theology obliges.

Taking language seriously involves coming to terms with its facts. Consider that what can be theologically said and meant depends on what can be ordinarily said and meant.<sup>1</sup> A common way of belying this fact comes in something we sometimes say about God, where what is said theologically presses the limits of what can be said at all. We say, “God is a reality about which language cannot adequately speak.” Present here is the idea of establishing the mystery of God on the inadequacy of human language in order to express just how mysterious God is, so mysterious as to confound human capacities for comprehension and description. Yet, the point under consideration, the fact of language, would have us recognize that statements about God function similarly to statements—descriptive or otherwise—about anything. For everything we speak about, including God, we have words, else we would not be able to speak about them, or think them, including their ineffability. No proposal can be claimed about something for which we do not have words.<sup>2</sup> “What we can’t say we can’t say, and we can’t whistle it either,” indeed.<sup>3</sup> It very well may be a tenet of Christian belief that God subsists in some realm beyond human language, and that God existed before there were humans to speak of God. Yet language with all of its stammerings and perfections—which is to say, we with our all our stammerings and perfections—is adequate to the task of saying as much. We might understand life with others, where we speak of and for one another, where we speak *to* one another, as living into this adequacy. We should not in order to protect something about God (say, God’s mystery) disparage something about humanness and its desires (say, God as part of our life in words); to do so, as we will see, is to relinquish both (just as to presume to know overmuch about the world relinquishes the very world available to us). Rightly laying claim to God’s mystery requires of us laying claim to our human life in words. One mirrors the other. One gives the other. As disquieting as such a claim might be, accepting the state of affairs it purports is what being serious about language looks like.<sup>4</sup> It is not a seriousness at which we easily arrive. What is ordinarily said and meant enables what is theologically said and meant.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell begins “Must We Mean What We Say?” by stating, “That what we can ordinarily say and mean may have a direct and deep control over what we can philosophically say and mean is an idea that many philosophers find oppressive,” later saying “ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about.” Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1 and 95. On the distinction between the ordinary and the common place, see Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33 and 44; and Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 154 and 172. Consider also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §129. No recent theologian has advanced these matters better than Herbert McCabe. See his *Law, Love and Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> “It is only in a language that I can mean something by something.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §35.

<sup>3</sup> F. P. Ramsey, “General Propositions in Causality (1929),” in *Foundations of Mathematics* (London: Routledge, reprint 2000), 238. See also Cora Diamond, “We Can’t Whistle It Either: Legend and Reality,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2010): 335–356.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 482.

## 2. Our Complicated Agreements

So what is meant by speech as it ordinarily works, what I called, following Stanley Cavell, its controls? Primarily I mean the interrelation and even internality between words and world that comes to us in our agreements in language, what I am calling our life in words, following the linguistic philosophy, now called ordinary language philosophy, initiated by prominent thinkers mid-century around Cambridge and Oxford (principally Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin but also Gilbert Ryle, Peter Strawson, Elizabeth Anscombe, and their contemporaries) and later renewed by subsequent generations of ordinary language theorists (Dewi Phillips, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, eventually Hillary Putnam, and then scholars like James Conant, Alice Crary, Sandra Laugier, Stephen Mulhall, and others).<sup>5</sup>

Linguistic philosophy begins with Wittgenstein's stated goal of returning words from their metaphysical to their everyday homes and Austin's arguments about use and meaning and their austere shared economy.<sup>6</sup> Let us return to the different instances of "This is my body." Think of these instances as itinerant paths the idiom takes, distinctions its respective utterances allow; each use denotes the biography of the discriminations it makes. In each case, the criteria for application are determined by respective communities of speakers for whom "This is my body" does something. For example, in the exclamatory uses of "This is my body" (seemingly A, E, F, and I) the idiom protests something. Right use will be determined by those gathered around the concept *and* the life the concept gathers, respectively: Example A opposes sexual slavery; E resists cultural pressures regarding gender signification; F connects the likes of A and E to matters of race; and Example I repudiates what it sees as the violating use of H's pro-life advocacy. In each case, the idiom's meaning cannot be abstracted from its utterance as doing something, something like protesting "This is my body!" Seriousness starts with one's willingness both in accepting that the human form of life is constituted thusly and in recognizing that saying humans are linguistic creatures is saying something about the controlling nature of criteria for judgment of an idiom's right use. Coming to terms with language, with its ordinary conditions of possibility, then comes as the willingness not to deny this fact or wish away its conditions, to work against disregarding, minimizing or underestimating, to attend to conditions, to abide all that follows.<sup>7</sup>

Examples B, C, G, and K declare one's identity with one's body, where the declaration has, remarkably, become necessary, the declarative utterance denoting one's claim to oneself. C, G and K presume situations where one feels betrayed by one's body (by illness, time, gravity, and the like) and the recapitulation (say, beyond shame) attempts to recover one's personhood as a body. If the exclamatory instances raise protest against others, these uses resist one's own disembodied tendencies. B does something different, or wants to do something different: absconding tendencies to disembody, it seeks to imagine itself celebrating, though one wonders if bodily celebration here can be achieved apart from the temptation to disembody.

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<sup>5</sup> Consider Cora Diamond's "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98, no. 2 (January 1988): 266. See also Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 39, 45, and 58.

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116; and J. L. Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 16, 32, and 109; and Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 34.

At H and I we find the idiom in conversation about abortion. H's pro-life advocate imagines the unborn projecting consciousness, where the self-possession of the "my" and the reflexivity of the "this" suggest personhood and hence warrant moral consideration. No doubt the conviction can go the other way, the belief in moral warrant projecting an entity capable of "This is my body." Either way the idiom is made to introduce a bodily claim at least equal to that of the mother's own claim, so let us imagine H as a baby uttering, "This is my body." With I, Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion" rejects any suggestion that mother and foetus—like "two tenants in a small house"—possess equal claim: "Women have said again and again, 'This is *my* body!' and they have reason to feel angry, reason to feel that it has been like shouting into the wind."<sup>8</sup> Thomson brings the point home: "if a human being has any just, prior claim to anything at all, he has a just, prior claim to his own body," meaning that the whole discourse of justice as it pertains to rights, if it is to mean anything at all, begins with one's body belonging to oneself: "This is *my* body." Henceforth, let us understand I's use as that of a woman rebuffing pro-life rhetoric. For those who use the idiom the way this woman does, "This is my body" cannot be the conclusion of a moral argument but the premise to moral argument as such.<sup>9</sup> With the baby's and the woman's respective uses then, we have—at least as they are imagined in these cases—competing uses of the idiom in direct contradiction to one another, each mindful of the other, each use offending the sensibilities of the other, anathematizing each other. The facts of language dictate that those using the idiom speak for others who use "This is my body," and given the constellated overlaps (e.g., bodies habituated to either the sacred or the profane), recourse to essence (i.e., "This, now and forever, is what it means") will not save each respective use from offending, countenancing and otherwise confronting others.<sup>10</sup> We converse with one another not only through language but in language.

The baby's and the mother's uses, like all the rest, can operate without acknowledgement of L, Luke's Jesus instituting the Eucharistic meal, but their doing so without any awareness of the religious imagery is hard to imagine. While it's possible that A through K are completely ignorant of the history between L.1 and L.2, which will respectively stand in for Trent's conciliar Catholicism and Wycliffe's strain of Protestantism, one would think that Christ's utterance sits somewhere in the rhetorical universe of each of the other uses. Most likely the respective claims of A through K presume Christian imagery and look to leverage it for its own purposes. Against these uses, Trent's Catholics and Wycliffe's Protestants might complain, "You do not know what you're saying!" but neither can forestall those new applications, just like Luke cannot deem precedence as the only relevant authorizing factor. The Council of Trent might feel compelled to say that an account of substances and accidents is required, even as the declarative uses continue nonplussed by those concerns—think here of how Jesus' own use of the phrase creates confusion and consternation for his disciples and yet he insists on it anyhow. Wycliffe might want to say that the idiom's

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<sup>8</sup>Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," in *Bioethics*, ed. John Harris (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>10</sup>Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 110; and Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 30. See also Sandra Laugier, *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 55, 68; and Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 36.

grammar requires less or more than the exclamatory occasions, but it is the prerogative of A, E, F or I to do what they will with received grammars of use; Luke certainly did when it took a common use and projected it toward new possibilities about which Roman Catholics and Protestants remain in disagreement. The same facts of language that grant the exclamatory or declarative uses their applications also allow interpretations of Luke's story to issue in ways that break fellowship between Catholic and Protestant Christians. It is these facts of language that earlier availed to the Lukan Jesus the idiom, "This is my body," facts that not many were willing to admit (they could not countenance God uttering so common a word, one given so easily into our hands) and hence crucified him. Jesus' resurrection can be thought of as the irrepressibility of linguistic use, and those gathered around his resurrected body—"This is my body"—as alive to its use. "This is my body" is likewise given into our uses and possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

"This is my body" is an idiom like other idioms, such as "This is my chair," though the significance some ascribe to the idiom, the different things some hope the idiom accomplishes, does mean that they will interpret its importance as being different. One might initially think there is not much at stake in claiming a chair, until that chair is literally a throne or proverbially a seat at the table. The weight of any idiom's utterance requires an entire universe of constellated relationships within which the utterance exerts its gravity. Any number of eventualities within this constellation will diminish or increase the utterance's weight, and the success of any expressive act will depend on a set of agreements possessed of everything from social and political conditions, to mental states and external world objects, to past commitments and concerns about the future, to anatomical and biological features, to logical constraints and entailments. All of these things are made to agree in a language; we might even say that such agreement is what makes a language a language. These agreements hold together an idiom's sense and grant it force in such a way that eventualities can have the effect of shifting the idiom's weight, changing its meaning, or vacating it altogether. The many and sometimes difficult differences among uses A through L attest to the effects of eventualities. To say that agreement in language is everything is to say that language is about everything. To say that language is about everything is to say that there is for those gathered in a language nothing irrelevant for their going on in a certain way.

Suppose someone comes across the occasion of Luke's Jesus saying, "This is my body." She might respond, "Surely, sir, that is not your body; your body ends with your pointing finger. The bread is not your body. Your body is your body, and the bread, the bread; it can't even be said to be an extension of your body." A more patient response might be, "Perhaps by 'is' you mean something else or maybe we use the ostensive gesture 'this' differently." The patient response is less likely if the object under consideration changes: Jesus points to another person and says, "This is my body." Utterance A (the play about sex trafficking) objects, "No! It is comments like that that caused the suicide depicted in the film *Ceci est mon corps!*" An entire life populates Example A's use of the idiom: cases of predatory violence, experiences of personal humiliation, plans for escape, forced migrations, scarred bodies and open

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<sup>11</sup> See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 78; and Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 27–30.

wounds, photographs, secret friendships, survivor narratives, hidden locations, traumatic memories, so on and so forth. Since a constellated universe of agreements makes A possible, it will not very easily give up its projection. But neither will those who read Luke as instituting the Eucharist easily relent. Catholics in turn will not take kindly to Wycliffe's use, which says something like, "Surely, sir, that is not Jesus' body; his body ended with his ascension. The bread is not his body. His body, now at the right hand of God, is his body, and the bread, the bread; it can't even be an extension of his body." Pressing their case, Wycliffe's Protestants add, "The bread is not Jesus' body; it might be a symbol of it though. When he says 'is' Jesus must mean something else and probably uses the ostensive gesture 'this' differently." Wycliffe's use of "This is my body" could not be any more offensive, since for Trent's Catholics the idiom is talking about salvation, indeed the whole history of salvation and the salvation of all history. Those worried about sexual abuse feel similarly when certain readers of Luke extend the idiom to include all who now take the sacrament.

In trying to resolve the controversy between Catholic and Protestant sacramentology it will not do to spend overmuch time asking what Jesus meant in Luke's Gospel, how he intended "This is my body," what sense of "is" he had "in mind" or whether his culture gestured ostensively. Supplying those bits will only help matters if the respective constellated sets of agreements have room for them, whether they can imagine them as part of their lives around the idiom; these bits can but need not eventuate new aspects, and if they do, their adoption will come only after the new agreements settle into rewritten histories. Trent's traditioned sacramentology will make it hard for those bits to hold sway. If ever Protestants felt themselves blocked from God because they were wrong about "This is my body," it would not be just their views of salvation that would be affected, but whole grammars of predication, presence, and possibility. Answering for himself, the Protestant will not know what to say because his conceptual resources for saying anything at all will have lost purchase. He will feel himself simultaneously saved and condemned. Given our agreements and the ways they are coordinated within whole ecologies, it is not so easy as substituting some bits for others or of knowing the right name.<sup>12</sup> Meaning may be about use but use is not arbitrary; the agreements that make up convention develop naturally.<sup>13</sup> A language's grammar tends in certain directions, and though a term's use is not preordained or its future predetermined, looking back we will usually be able to trace out the history of its present. Necessity speaks to a whole stretch of determinations natural to the things we find interesting enough to speak about, those features of the world about which we care enough to discover, and the ends to which our words and statements incline.<sup>14</sup> Necessity is ordered to the kinds of creatures we are, interested as we are in biography, narrative, conversation, metaphor, allegory, argument, confession, exasperation, scripture, humor, protest, commonsense, reading, and prayer, and hence those whose loves are constituted by life in words.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Austin, "Other Minds," 87–88; Cf. 113. For Cavell's interpretation of Austin's examples in "Other Minds," see *The Claim of Reason*, 88–90.

<sup>13</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 118, 182 and 189.

<sup>14</sup> See Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers*, 182.

<sup>15</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 119. See also Cora Diamond, "The Face of Necessity," in *The Realistic Spirit*, 259. See also Peter Dula, "Wittgenstein Among the Theologians," in *Unsettling Arguments: A*



The political implications come into view here. If words gain their meaning and language its necessity from agreement amongst mutually attuned speakers, and if in speaking speakers speak not only of the world but for it, then those speakers and no one else are responsible for those words and the maintenance of that language, and hence the life in words such attunement creates.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as criteria of use issue as agreements among those attuned in language (*we* determine what a thing is called), so language is about us (our life in words calls on us) and we (not some original or perfected essence or external world object—"medium size dry goods" to use Austin's phrase—or mental states to which words correspond) grant language its authority (just as language grants us ours) or, more technically, its coherence, meaning, and stability (our coherence, meaning, and stability).<sup>17</sup> This can be a disquieting prospect. If meaning is not derived from elsewhere but rather follows use, then where language goes and what words mean are up for grabs, just as there can be little assurance that those who play a game will do so in a recognizable fashion.<sup>18</sup> If you and I are responsible for the maintenance of our life in words, and if we maintain it, then there is no one to rescue me when my differences rule me out of your world. At that point you can ignore me, regret me, resent me, debate or detest me, anathematize and kill me, and there is no one with words enough (or more precisely no one clear of words enough) to whom we might appeal for those judgments. As human life is one that shares in agreements, just so there may come a time when human life in words will not seem satisfactory, at which point you may seek another route to me when what you seek pertains to me, or around me when what you seek discounts me. Knowing these routes are not open may not be enough to stop you from trying, and so we may forfeit the only way we have to one another. I can only say now that my separateness from you, like our inseparability, is our life in words.

### 3. *Contending with Postliberalism's Detractors*

In order to get at what might be at stake in my description of language and its controls on theological speech, consider how it differs from a rival conception. In John Allan Knight's *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism* we find an argument that makes its case by rejecting the determinative role of publicly maintained criteria, what I have been calling agreement, and hence the priority of language. Earlier I had mentioned those who value divinity by devaluing humanness; with Knight we find a rough parallel, the elevation of philosophical realism by the demotion of communal agreement. Contending with Knight, as opposed to others, has two

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*Festschrift on the Occasion of Stanley Hauerwas' 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, eds. Charles R. Pinches, Kelly S. Johnson, and Charles M. Collier (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010); and Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 8. About the temptation to leave behind mutual agreement in search of something better, Austin speaks of "the original sin by which the philosopher casts himself out from the garden of the world we live in." Austin, "Other Minds," 90. See also Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 249; and Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 196–7.

<sup>18</sup> See Stuart Hampshire, "J. L. Austin 1911–1960," *Proceedings from the Aristotelian Society*, 60 (1959–60): I–XIV.

virtues. First, Knight self-consciously takes the approach to language with which I am taking issue, whereas the others do so tacitly. Second, and related to the first, Knight's is an especially strong version of that approach. Dealing with Knight's well-argued and impressively learned text allows me to engage one of the approach's best articulations.

According to Knight, the hugely influential Yale school of theology rests on the defunct linguistic philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, a therapeutic model that turned out to be less like actual philosophy and more like intellectual evasion. This theological-quasi-philosophical school of thought came to be known as postliberalism, which originated, on Knight's reading, at a moment when Protestant liberals struggling to answer atheism's falsification thesis found a convenient means of escape in Wittgenstein's seeming repudiation of second-order theory (e.g., apologetics, theodicy, and the like). The problem was that significant parts of Wittgenstein's philosophy never did quite get off the ground, and thus any theological approach dependent upon it is also doomed to fail.<sup>19</sup> Because no one ever pointed this out to them, proponents of the Yale school (from George Lindbeck and Hans Frei to the likes of Stanley Hauerwas, William Placher, and Kathryn Tanner) went forward dressed in the emperor's new clothes.<sup>20</sup>

What is Knight's argument regarding Wittgenstein? Namely that Paul Grice and Saul Kripke pushed linguistic philosophy to its limits by demonstrating that agreed upon criteria could not feasibly play the controlling role linguistic philosophers ascribed to them: "It is intuitively plausible that linguistic conventions play some role in determinations of correct usage and hence of meaning, but it is too large a leap to move from that conclusion to the conclusion that linguistic meaning *just* is a community agreement. In fact it is not clear that this leap can be made."<sup>21</sup> What Knight is denying is precisely the determining facts of language that I am here claiming comprise the ecology of human intercourse. The turn to language that marks postliberal thinking is to Knight an evasion of the atheistic challenges theology is better off facing head-on, not by turning to language but rather to philosophical realism in order to develop theories of truth based on reference to extralinguistic reality.<sup>22</sup> But these theories of truth, I argue, turn out to

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<sup>19</sup> John Allan Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism: The Great Divide in Twentieth-Century Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 248. Knight draws largely on the work of Scott Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century: Volume 2 The Age of Meaning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 30–57.

<sup>20</sup> Along these lines, see for example Brad J. Kallenberg's reading of Stanley Hauerwas in *Ethics as Grammar: Changing the Postmodern Subject* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). In a different vein, see Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 139–157; and Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 248.

<sup>22</sup> See Scott Soames, "Paul Grice and the End of Ordinary Language Philosophy," in the aforementioned *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, 197–218. Among misperceptions of ordinary language thought, see A. J. Ayers, *Concept of a Person and Other Essays* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1963); H. P. Grice, "The Causal Theory of Perception," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. xxxv (1961): 121–153; Jerry A. Fodor, "On Knowing What We Would Say," *Philosophical Review* 73, no. 2 (1964): 198–212 and "What Do You Mean?" *Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 15 (1960): 499–506; and Jerry A. Fodor and Jerrold J. Katz, "The Availability of What We Say," *Philosophical Review* 72, no. 1 (1963): 57–71. For clarifications, see Richard G. Henson, "What We Say," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1965): 52–62; Stanley Bates and Ted Cohen, "More On What We Say," *Metaphilosophy* 3, no. 1 (1972): 1–24; Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004); and Avner Baz,

relate only to postulated extralinguistic worlds, to which philosophy since Quine remains beholden.<sup>23</sup>

To understand why Knight pursues this other course, why it occurs to him as necessary, a brief review of W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson is necessary. According to Quine, while “it is obvious that truth depends on both language and extralinguistic fact,” it is difficult to delineate with much precision or determination relationships between language, experience (with extralinguistic facts), and truth that makes of empiricism what we want, namely the cherished belief that knowledge has its warrant in experience which language in turn is meant to convey.<sup>24</sup> For Quine the non-referential quality of language, and so the use-determined role of concepts, does not make for distinctions between logical and empirical judgments. This means that those who subscribe to empiricism, including Quine himself, do so as a matter of faith, that is to say, dogmatically.<sup>25</sup> Quine’s work on radical translation can then be seen as the attempt to work out an epistemological pragmatism that compensates for the ensuing indeterminacy intimated in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.”<sup>26</sup> While much can be said about Quine, for our purposes it is enough to note that any philosophy that takes Quine as its point of departure distances words from world and blurs analytic and synthetic statements. This results in a skepticism the overcoming of which philosophy would henceforth see as its *raison d’être*.<sup>27</sup>

Donald Davidson inherits the task of explicating, extending, and correcting Quine. He states matters as follows: “To give up the analytic-synthetic distinction as basic to the understanding of language is to give up the idea that we can clearly distinguish between theory and language.”<sup>28</sup> Davidson amends what he views as Quine’s committed ontological relativism and, using Tarskian analysis, builds a notion of objectivity meant to contain its menace. Retaining the empiricist bent toward pre-linguistic phenomena, his efforts cemented for the analytic tradition an existential distinction between words and world that could not help but sequester the role of language in human affairs. For Davidson and Quine alike, the strong emphasis on indeterminacy and inscrutability between words and world (a relation recounted in what Davidson called “conceptual schemes”) results in a relativizing of words and a

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*When Words Are Called For: A Defense of Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> See Sandra Laugier, *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 20.

<sup>24</sup> W. V. O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1951): 34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–41. See, for the “illusory” idea of irreducible entities called meanings, Quine’s *From A Logical Point of View: 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1–19, 47–64.

<sup>26</sup> See Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 65 no.7 (1968): 186–187, 198. See also Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” 42.

<sup>27</sup> For challenges and glosses of Quine, see Hartry Field’s “Conventionalism and Instrumentalism in Semantics,” *Noûs* 9, no. 4 (1974): 391; and Field’s “Quine and the Correspondence Theory,” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 2 (1974): 200.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973–1974): 9. See also Davidson, “The Inscrutability of Reference,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 227–242; Davidson, “True to Facts,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 21 (November 1969): 748–764; Davidson, “Reality Without Reference,” *Dialectica* 31, no. 3 (1977): 247–258; Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1986), 433–446; and Davidson, “Radical Interpretation Interpreted,” *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol. 8, Logic and Language (1994): 121–128.

postulation of world, not to mention a strong suspicion of “meaning” (reference that grounds words) and an equally strong elevation of “facts”—thereby relativizing and mythologizing how they dynamically relate to one another. In this vein philosophical realism, by asserting reality (suggesting reality as something in need of asserting) as that to which language refers, while simultaneously interjecting the anxieties of skepticism between reality and language (and hence philosophies of language as theorizing this relation), envisages extra-linguistic reality as ineffable. Their claim about indeterminacy and inscrutability eventuates in a claim that we can no more be sure of language’s ability to translate experience than we can be sure that what can be said in one language can be fully translated into another.

When Knight concludes his book by saying that “the postliberal project stands in need of a theory of truth,” what he seems to be advocating is a Christianity that is willing to tie its fate to philosophical realism’s ability to defeat anti-realism.<sup>29</sup> In Knight’s line of thought, if Christianity can establish truth conditions in an amended and retrofitted (through the likes of Scott Soames, John Searle, William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Bruce Marshall), though still characteristically Davidsonian, manner, then it can counter the paradigmatic charges of the falsification thesis in a way that secures Christianity’s claims to truth.<sup>30</sup> What Knight finds compelling in the line of investigation initiated by Quine and established by Davidson are resources by which Christianity can finally establish its truth claims. Insofar as postliberal Christianity fails to lay claim to these resources (turning instead to the later Wittgenstein), it at best evades the atheist attack and at worst surrenders the validity of Christian claims—giving up, for example, the idea that the Bible refers to anything at all. Indeed, postliberals, according to Knight, did not so much turn to Wittgenstein to evade the falsification thesis as much as the turn to Wittgenstein blinded them to the need for evasion, precluding even the inclination toward justification.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, taking Knight’s approach would mean forfeiting more than he is able to recognize, since those stakes can only be seen from a perspective alive to the ecological considerations I have been attempting to give voice to. What would be lost, becoming unimaginable, is an account of the world demythologized; relinquished would be the ability to resist the strong polemic of words and world; further lost would be an account of words and world that return them to the everyday, a natural account of their relation, which is remarkable but for the gainsaying of the ordinary in the line of thought Knight represents.

Knight invests himself in the falsification thesis because he presupposes an errant view of the truthfulness of statements. Though he eventually demurs, Knight begins by taking at face value philosophical skepticism’s charge that religious statements are empty insofar as they are not verifiable. I have been developing an account of language that does not reduce its work to the threat of skepticism, the distinction between words and world that Knight takes as his point of departure, but rather

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<sup>29</sup> Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 263 and 288. See John Allen Knight, “Wittgenstein’s Web: Hans Frei and the Meaning of Biblical Narratives,” *Journal of Religion* 95, no. 3 (July 2015): 359–360.

<sup>30</sup> Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 277–78.

<sup>31</sup> Jason A. Springs helpfully delineates the critical differences between Wittgenstein’s positions and those positions Knight and Soames respectively ascribe to Wittgenstein. See Jason A. Springs, “A Wittgenstein for Postliberal Theologians,” *Modern Theology* 32, no. 4 (October 2016): 622–658.

opens up to a broad constellation of conditions that make statements things to be adopted or abandoned, their utterances felicitous or not. A statement can be as readily false and hence falsifiable as it can be true and validated, where objectivity names what I am referring to as agreement and its concomitant realistic approach to normativity.<sup>32</sup> One might suppose that religious statements are of the kind that are not accountable in the way other statements are, but that is a mistake both about religious statements and statements as such, where the success of any religious statement depends on it working as a statement.<sup>33</sup> And statements are things of this world, utterances in natural agreement with the world in which the statements arise and have sense. There is no a priori divide here between words and world. But in Knight's Quinian/Davidsonian formulation, the distinction is a real one and so it is not enough to point to natural agreement as the condition of truthfulness. More is needed, Knight thinks, namely verification that can settle the skeptical threat conceptually imposed between words and world.<sup>34</sup>

Recall the expectant mother's use of the utterance "This is my body," the one raised against abortion. The utterance envisions the unborn projecting a sense of personhood as warrant for moral consideration. Adhering to verifiability in a way that would satisfy Knight's concerns would go the route of hanging the question on features like observable physical properties—e.g., insofar as no integrated nervous system can be observed so therefore no relevant moral quality can be either. If skepticism's charge of verifiability/falsifiability is allowed to determine the course of ethical reflection, then the argument about abortion will proceed along the lines, "Well, is it really a baby?" Framed this way, descriptive uses ("That is a person" as demonstrably verifiable or not) override all other considerations as the basis from which to mount an argument for or against abortion. This would give Knight an approach to theological statements advantageously answerable to skepticism. The problem, according to Knight, is that the Yale appropriation of Wittgenstein relinquishes this advantage. Yet by shoehorning the debate into terms of skepticism, this approach misses how religious statements qua statements can be truthful or not without having to answer to skepticism's verification scheme. The skeptical demand for verification rests on an errant view of religious speech, which in turn rests on an errant view of ordinary speech, because it fails to see that religious utterances are a species of ordinary utterances and their ordinary claims to truth.

The empiricist approach misses more still. Recall the woman coming upon the pro-lifer's projection of "This is my body." Offended, she rebuffs, "This is *my* body." She might even invoke Thomson: "if a human being has any just, prior claim to anything at all, she has a just, prior claim to her own body." The woman's point isn't to provoke an appraisal of empirical facts. Her objection to the pro-lifer is not that abortion is licit because there is nothing there attributable to personhood. Rather her objection rests on a belief that no person is so special as to supersede another person's right to her body. There is no property of personhood that would soften her

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<sup>32</sup> See Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016) and *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 170.

<sup>34</sup> See also John Allan Knight, "Why Not Davidson: Neopragmatism in Religion and the Coherence of Alternative Conceptual Schemes," *Journal of Religion* 88, no. 2 (April 2008): 159–189.

objection to the pro-lifer's use of the idiom. Hence, it does no more to ask here about properties as it does to ask about intentions. It is not that she is incapable of believing the foetus a person, but only that these are for her matters of moral imagination, not moral obligation. From her perspective, charity—which is what availing one's body to another amounts to—dwells in the province of empathic projection rather than individual duty. If one sees answering skepticism as moral philosophy's central task, and if one then sees verifying descriptive statements about the foetus as carrying out that task in regards to abortion, then all of this will be missed. The proposition that the foetus is indeed capable of claiming "This is my body" is falsifiable to our imagined woman because of the way she holds the foetus in relation to herself. Neither the foetus' imagined utterance nor the woman's can be reduced to matters of empirical observation; it's not *that* empirical considerations do not matter, but *how* they matter, *where* they come in, depends on each respective use. One can anticipate any number of eventualities, empirical or otherwise, that would avail to the woman new aspects of the matter. Perhaps going through old mail she browses a copy of *The Atlantic* and comes upon these words from Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*, "Nothing is going to happen in this book. There is only a little violence here and there in the language, at the corner where eternity clips time."<sup>35</sup> Intrigued, she picks up a copy of *Holy the Firm* and stumbles into the world of Julie Norwich, a child whose face is burned off in a plane accident. The woman finds herself inexplicably drawn to the little girl's difficult life; she cannot help it, given all of her other involvements; indeed, these other involvements help her into a book where everything happens, where eternity clips time. The woman's knowing that Julie Norwich is not a real little girl but only a fictional one does not diminish her attachment to the girl's fate.<sup>36</sup> Reading *Holy the Firm*, an aspect of the foetus avails itself to her; they become alive to one another: "This is my body, given for you." More than verified, the possibility of the baby saying anything like "This is my body" is enlivened once the woman imagines as much; if she cannot imagine it, she will not have it.<sup>37</sup> What is lost in Knight's verificationist fascination with skepticism is any recounting of language beyond the conceptual schemes that Quine and Davidson rightly taught us to distrust but ultimately encouraged, in turn surrendering an account of words and world more natural and more basic to human existence and its possibilities for moral imagination.

#### 4. Natural Conventions

Something has gone wrong when what is most natural and basic, indeed what is most ordinary, has been denied (or needs to be asserted). We might ask ourselves instead what it might mean to be realistic about words and world, realistic about the world without the need to assert it. Cora Diamond offers a "resolute" reading of the early and later Wittgenstein that would be unrecognizable to Knight.<sup>38</sup> Because

<sup>35</sup> From William Deresiewicz, "Where Have You Gone, Annie Dillard?" *The Atlantic* 317, no. 2 (March 2016): 101. Quoted from Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 36.

<sup>36</sup> Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," 38.

<sup>37</sup> "The only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it." Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 104.

<sup>38</sup> James Conant and Cora Diamond, "On Reading the *Tractatus* Resolutely: Reply to Meredith Williams and Peter Sullivan," in *Wittgenstein's Lasting Significance*, edited by Max Kölbel and Bernhard Weiss (London: Routledge, 2004), 46–99. A succinct summary of the resolute reading of Wittgenstein can

Diamond's reading does not reduce Wittgenstein's philosophy to a meaning-as-use theory of language it can speak about adopting, or maybe countenancing something already native, a spirit toward one's judgments and language that is realistic without necessitating realism's verificationist enterprise. We can advance Diamond's realistic spirit in three ways, any of which would prove salutary, and all three of which taken together would open the way to a natural theology of language. First, the realistic spirit can be advanced in the figurative sense that we can be realistic about what language does and does not do, realistic about its capacities for judgment, not denigrating all that language gives us, and realistic about the reach of words, where "realistic" here indicates an inaugural refusal to denigrate.<sup>39</sup> Second, statements are uttered as if realistic about the world, as if the world exists independent of concepts, where one recognizes that while everything exists for us in language, it does not follow that nothing exists outside language.<sup>40</sup> Hence, the realistic spirit can be advanced in a second more literal sense, where empiricism does not issue in apologetic versions of theodicy.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in a third spiritual sense, one's relation to the world is not postulated as it is in Davidson's truth conditions nor is it dogmatized as it is according to Quine. Rather, we live with the world given to us in words as we live with a mystery. Living realistically with the extraordinary fact of language invites acknowledgment of all that human life in words accomplishes and enables through its bestowed mutual agreement with the world. We can speak of an appreciation of all that is imagined by attunement in words, *and* all that life leaves to be discovered, all that remains separate.

All three senses of the realistic spirit are made available to us through those procedures of linguistic philosophy which therapeutically act upon our anxieties about bodies and the kinds of bodies we are, that is, speaking bodies. Linguistic philosophy's emphasis on criteria and agreement harken back to Kant's initial reordering of metaphysics toward an aesthetic of bodied apperception whereby the turn to thought results in a turn to language, which finally results in a turn to bodies. Unfortunately, Kant's successors followed that initial impulse and, inspired by an ascendant scientism, opened a quest for things-in-themselves and permanently altered the direction of metaphysics. They tied concepts to postulated reality and construed the relationship as one of necessity, accusing anyone who questioned this connection of replacing truth with convention. After all, linguistic philosophy's eventual fixation on concepts and agreement seemed to suggest that language is merely conventional, but the qualification "merely" shows just how vexed these stratagems were, beholden to the idea that unless judgment (transcendental, moral, or aesthetic, and therefore theological) is moored to something other than maintenance of and attunement in

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be found in Alice Crary, "Introduction," in *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1–18. For more elaborate restatements see Cora Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," 149–173; James Conant, "Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein," 174–217, both in *The New Wittgenstein*; and James Conant, "Mild Mono-Wittgenstein," in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, ed. Alice Crary (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 31–142.

<sup>39</sup> See Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 20 and 181.

<sup>40</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §305.

<sup>41</sup> Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 56. See also Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 277; and Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism: The Paul Carus Lectures* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1987), 3–22.

language, judgment—“merely” conventional after all—shoulders no influence, or at least less than if so anchored. Returning to that initial Kantian impulse, linguistic philosophy replaces *merely* conventional with the idea that language is *naturally* conventional, that language’s conventions are natural such that to prise apart use of words from their natural history, the result of which is that words became *useful*, is to detach meaning from existence. What ensues is a way of speaking of the relationship between world and words where bodily experience acts on language and language responds to experience in the world.<sup>42</sup>

Convention is natural in two senses: first, in that a language’s conventions are natural to a grammar’s logical space (say, its constraints and entailments), and secondly, in that the specific conventions of human language are natural to the *human* life form, that is, to the biological and social features of human existence out of which the specifics of any language arise. Both aspects of naturalness expose as wrong-headed and reductive charges of linguistic fideism (the anxiety that decries “merely!”), and as wanting the suggestion that “convention” explains much of anything.<sup>43</sup> According to the first sense, language is conventional but never “merely” so; judgment as necessity obtains grammatically, as articulated in Stanley Cavell’s early formula “we must mean what we say.”<sup>44</sup> The contexts which grant meaning to what we say go before us, necessitating “I mean what we all mean when I say something we all understand,” making speech at once an act of agency *and* participation. Yet agreement also incurs estrangement because while I *must* mean what we all mean when I say something, I sometimes *don’t* mean what we all mean by it. The same facts of language that gather us, that norm us, can also estrange us from one another, make us abnormal to one another. In the second sense, conventions are not unnatural intrusions on human life but rather indicative of and appropriate to what it is to be human, to be able to carry on the way that humans do, to participate in the *human* form of life.<sup>45</sup> Language is conventional to the life form humans inhabit and so its conventions are natural for those whose interests in the world match the ways they speak of it and indeed how they live it. Conventions signal relations of agreement, even intimacy—what I have called internality—between words and world. We could say that we are here furnished with a theory of truth, if we can also admit that we are here furnished with its unnecessary—a theory of truth only *becomes* necessary when words and world are envisioned as separately occurring entities.<sup>46</sup>

Here the relationship between nature and convention is imagined organically, where conventions grow up in the very place they speak truthfully about world, act usefully within it, and determine behaviors continuous with it. Consider, for example, the anatomical necessity of certain conventions in sports or how crucial it is for communities to subscribe to conventional prohibitions against lying.<sup>47</sup> To be sure, we might also identify less savory conventions, but admitting as much only highlights

<sup>42</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 110–111.

<sup>43</sup> Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 262 n2.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 1–43.

<sup>45</sup> On constraints and entailments, see Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy: Wittgenstein-Austin-Cavell Writings on Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 4; and Richard Fleming, *Evil and Silence* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>46</sup> See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 86–126.

<sup>47</sup> Much of what I am interested in here accords with Jean Porter’s “naturalistic ethics” in *A Theory of the Natural Law: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing



the reality that societies rarely produce conventions better than they are. Rather than an overly cognitive sequence where statements travel the distance from intention to speech and then to referent, and where meaning arrives when speech and intention reach referent, these are imagined as rising up through the phenomenological agreement that is nothing other than the natural history of language and its everyday occurrence in speech.<sup>48</sup> Here the world is not external to speakers—like objects they perceive, handle, and so on—but rather names the self's extension by which speakers come to see, show, and view themselves.<sup>49</sup> The world is not principally something I think *about*; it is what I think *through*.<sup>50</sup> There is no need to locate meaning by hanging statements on reference or intention, since the world is for speakers saturated with meaning and intention. Meaning and intention sit on the surface of intelligent action. Every speech act comes from somewhere, heads somewhere, bespeaks some creaturely state of affairs.<sup>51</sup> Use determines meaning within the broad infrastructure of *useful* human activity of which communal agreement is the most explicit aspect.

The tight relationship between word and world means that many of our beliefs will be warranted, but the relationship does not mean that all of them will be. Normative judgments arise insofar as we share a language. Communal agreement does not so much dissolve objectivity, as is suggested by philosophical naturalism, as supply the grounds of its force.<sup>52</sup> Demystifying the natural, which looks like a naturalizing move in the shadow of Davidson and Quine, returns us to the natural formation of concepts. Because they are never apart, conventions and nature do not need to be theorized back together. To be realistic about language, to take seriously its facts, is to presume the *natural* formation of *conventions*.<sup>53</sup>

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Company, 2005), 53–139. Porter references Donald E. Brown, “Human Universals, Human Nature and Human Culture,” *Daedalus* 133, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 47–54.

<sup>48</sup> Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 50 and 70; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §108; and Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledge and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 108–121.

<sup>49</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 216; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 134; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 138. Merleau-Ponty drew upon Jakob von Uexküll's evolutionary theories; see Jakob von Uexküll, “An Introduction to Umwelt,” and “The New Concept of Umwelt: A Link Between Science and the Humanities,” both in *Semiotica* 134–1/4 (2001): 107–110; 111–123.

<sup>50</sup> Consider Heidegger's critique of *Vorhandenheit* as insufficiently reckoning with worldliness, the *Zuhandenheit* of *Dasein* and faltering in its appeal to objectivity. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, revised edition, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 72, 75, and 88. Consider also Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 185–191.

<sup>51</sup> See Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), 108 and 115; Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 72; and Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections of Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 178.

<sup>52</sup> For an account of normative objectivity beyond the standard forms of moral realism, see James Conant, “Rorty and Orwell on Truth,” in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, edited by Abbott Gleason, Jack Goldsmith and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 106–108; See also P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1959), 30.

<sup>53</sup> See H. Peyton Young, “The Evolution of Conventions,” *Econometrica* 61, no. 1 (January 1993): 57–84; and Brian Skyrms, *Signals: Evolution, Learning, and Information* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63–72 and 118–134. Both Young and Skyrms advance and modify the standard treatment as expressed in David K. Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

What is needed, and what I am here trying to develop, is a different account of the natural. I am advancing an account of the natural that locates the human as part and parcel with it, the human as natural such that any speech about the natural is always speech about the human and her ways of living with the natural. In other words, I am presenting an account of phenomena that locates experience of nature within the structures of human experience as always already inextricably part of that nature, not only toward the banal conclusion that pure objectivity is impossible, but in the sense that such perception grants a kind of objectivity to the experience of phenomena, a *human* objectivity. This in turn will grant us a different account of language and a different account of the cosmos in which language ensues as ordinary activity. We can then return to the basic claim that God has been made known to creatures through creation where the natural controls speech about the supernatural. This movement from the ordinary to the natural to the metaphysical is but a re-articulation of the basic orthodox claim about God in Christ as God's word to, in, and for the world.

The naturalness of convention returns us to our words. And to one another. The two senses of the naturalness of convention bear out politically: the naturalness of human political life is the naturalness of human linguistic life. The fact that language supplies the stock of human need and so carries forth *without excuse* renders excuses the most human of artifacts.<sup>54</sup> Herein comes the difficult truth that my words speak for me, go ahead of me, often enjoining me to agreements I played no part in establishing. Life in words is inexhaustibly political, which is to say inexhaustibly natural, and if description goes all the way down, so does political existence. In political life our lives are authorized, even authored in part, by others who speak for us, and we for them. The philosophical insistence on the determinative role of externalized reference or internalized intention existentially unfold as the attempt to escape this naturalness, to have it otherwise than determined by others, to imagine others as things to be known, other minds as external world objects to be possessed, rather than the very conditions of one's co-inherence with all that is not oneself.

##### 5. *A Christian Grammar of Mystery, or Christian Grammar as Mystery*

Earlier I made the case for needing to get away from a picture of human speaking and knowing that postulates something necessarily on the far side of human language and thought, something our words or minds intend but cannot quite reach because we are stuck in, and so are blocked by, language. I conclude this essay by returning to the idea of God playing the role of that which is blocked from us, where God is made to exemplify the idea that something desired could be known except for human language, a picture of language which imagines God as too infinite for finite linguistic conventions.

The problem that language is purported to be is sometimes explained theologically, further demonstrating how our theological views of language often lack the requisite seriousness. Consider two such explanations. The first is that human sin

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Press, 1969). See also David K. Lewis, "Languages and Language," in his *Philosophical Papers: Volume I* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 163–188.

<sup>54</sup> Austin, "A Plea for Excuses." Consider also Rogers Albritton, "On Wittgenstein's Use of the Term 'Criterion'," *Journal of Philosophy*, 56, no. 22 (October 1959): 845–857.

undercuts otherwise adequate faculties for knowing, with the implied converse proposition that holiness enables those faculties to function as they should. One instance of this theological explanation can be traced to the idea of the unity of the virtues, where spiritual and moral failures are seen as impairing otherwise sound intellectual virtues. There is also a Reformed instance of the same kind of explanation, namely, that while total depravity does not mean that human capacities are totally incapacitated, it does nonetheless mean that every capacity is affected, including and especially knowledge of God.

The second theological explanation of the problem proceeds by invoking the notion of mystery, where God's ineffability is taken as indicating that God exists beyond that about which humans can speak. Even in the best possible epistemological conditions (e.g., states of holiness or revelation) the mystery that is God cannot be captured in words (i.e., delimiting from the start holiness or revelation). But this is an odd claim. It is odd because it posits a person who first has concepts and only later possesses or acquires words for those concepts. Problems then arise when our concepts outpace our words. Part of what makes this way of construing matters odd is that it forgets that concepts and words tend to go together.<sup>55</sup> Whatever we think about God, whatever concept of God we may have, is given to us in what we mean by our words. This does not mean that our concepts do not change, only that specific concepts and the way we use particular words change together. Thus, when we hold to a concept of God as mysterious, that idea is given to us in the ways we use the word "God," just as there are those who use the word "God" without much room for mystery. The theological explanation of linguistic delimitation based on divine mystery misunderstands how concepts work, oddly forgetting that we cannot think some idea for which we do not have a word or at least some smattering of nearby words. It is nonsensical to say we *know* there is something *S* "out there" for which we do not yet have a word or for which we *cannot* ever have any word. The words we already have are not only adequate for every thought we have but are the means by which we have them.<sup>56</sup>

For Christians God is not chiefly something beyond words, but given to and arrived at in words (presumably God's being beyond us has less to do with us or our language, and everything to do with God). Now we may furnish the concept with the idea that God is unknowable, eternal, infinite and the like, but that speaks to a *capacity* of language, not its incapacity, namely the capacity to define God as unknowable, eternal, infinite, or conversely, knowable, temporal, finite, etc. For Pseudo-Dionysius, who is often identified with a conception of divine knowledge as mysterious, the names we attribute to God ascend to other names, words to other words, where the structure of knowing/unknowing deepens from the uncontroversial (e.g., "love") to the controversial (e.g., "drunkard") and from the affirmative (e.g., "God is powerful") to the negative (e.g., "God is not powerless").<sup>57</sup> Spiritual

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<sup>55</sup> I make this claim while also cognizant of Christopher Peacocke's point that "'concept' is, however, a term of art in philosophy if anything is." Christopher Peacocke, "Concepts without Words" in *Language, Thought, and Logic: Essays in Honour of Michael Dummett*, ed. Richard Heck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>56</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 47; and Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 154. Also see James Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005): 51–65.

<sup>57</sup> Principally *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 47–132 and 133–42.

maturation can in this line of thought be understood as one's ability to finesse the distinctions one uses in relationship to the one Pseudo-Dionysius refers to as "generous Wisdom."<sup>58</sup> Beyond this manner of life there is not another mode of knowing, say, one where words finally get out of the way, a mode of knowing that captures what words cannot. Rather, beyond this there is nothing we know as knowing at all, only "union superior" to words, conceptions, and being itself.<sup>59</sup> Beyond our life with God in words, we—"actually speechless and unknowing"—literally have no words.<sup>60</sup> On the far side of words is not God-beyond-words but nothing, and it is the Areopagite's genius to thematize life with God as not unrelated to this nothingness. Approaching this nothingness, our speech about God will take on the boundary character of life located beyond familiarity and will begin to develop new valences marked by their attending semiotic configurations and practiced constellations. Hence, ascribing drunkenness to God is to use a familiar predication in an unfamiliar way. The initial mismatch, its felt senselessness, pushes the spiritually mature to abandon the usual meaning for new possibilities. The resolute—those spiritually mature enough to let their words go—will recognize in this moment the conditions under which the idiom's senselessness became necessary.<sup>61</sup>

We say and think these things about mystery in the manner of our saying and thinking anything at all, that is, with language. D. Z. Phillips helps us on this point: "the language in which we talk of God's mysteriousness is language we *do* have. It is not a report on language *we* do not have. Similarly, it is not language which *we* may speak some day, but a language which the believer speaks every day. . . . Instead of asking how we *can* speak of God, we must begin by noting that we *do* speak of God."<sup>62</sup> Theologically we can invoke mystery too early and make little room for the distinctions that life with God allows. But we can also invoke it too late as if positing mystery only on the far side of language. We might rather say that God's mysteriousness most basically has to do with God's inexplicable givenness in language, that that which our vaunted notions of mystery presume beyond us has made itself available to us in human speech. If we hold to the Wittgensteinian conviction that what can grammatically be said about a thing tells us what kind of thing it is (i.e., the properties we can sensibly predicate of a thing differentiate it from other things which can have no sensible relation to those same properties) then we can see that God's availability to human ways of being (words, concepts, and the like) interestingly demonstrates just how mysterious God is (i.e., that we can attribute availability as such to God is the beginning of theological mystery).<sup>63</sup> Mystery on this score bespeaks what *is* there.

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<sup>58</sup>The appellation "generous Wisdom" comes from the letters collected in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 286.

<sup>59</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 49.

<sup>60</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 139.

<sup>61</sup>See Stephen Mulhall, *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 26–34.

<sup>62</sup>D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 263–64, emphasis original. Here Phillips is, in part, replying to David A. Conway's essay "D. Z. Phillips and the Inadequacy of Language," *Analysis* 35, no. 3 (1975): 93–97. See also D. Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality* (London: MacMillan, 1970), 15, along with Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 180 and 119.

<sup>63</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §373.

The very idea that God is not knowable even in the best conditions (e.g., holy or revealed) is either senseless or its sense is provided by us.<sup>64</sup> One is reminded here of what Wittgenstein called a private language, the fanciful notion of individually held linguistic criteria. While the motivation for a private language is something worth investigating, we can simply follow Wittgenstein and say the idea itself is unworkable. When we claim God to be unknowable we mean that God will not readily satisfy some public criteria for knowability, such as empirical verifiability. But the moment we insist that God escapes criteria altogether, empirical verification or whatever, we have lost our grip on the word and the world.<sup>65</sup> Lingering with this insistence of God beyond criteria is the metaphysical sense that begins with the previously discussed regret that human life in words is constituted as it is. Overemphasizing the inadequacy of language threatens belief in the inadequacy of humanness, the belief that creation is on its own terms insufficiently constituted for creaturely life, that human knowing is deficient (due to incapacity) or delinquent (due to sin) for all that is required of our vocation as creature.

One may combine both explanations and say that because humans are sinful they fail to know what they are given to know, a *de facto* inadequacy following a *de jure* inadequacy. But this can have the effect of postulating a prelapsarian state in which humans knew in some other way than we currently know—say, with something other than agreement, by essence (what and whether a thing is) and not by identity (what a thing is called), or by minds immediate to God, or spiritual telepathy between human minds and a divine other mind, etc. Recapitulation then includes returning to this lost state. Perhaps. For now, we should observe that in redeeming us God does not, apparently, restore us to some other mode of knowing. Indeed, it seems as if God goes in a different direction; namely, God submits Godself to human ways of knowing and in so doing demonstrates that creation, even in its diminished state, can still receive, reflect and express God. The same can be said for the sacramentally ordered life, which again does not discard bodily realities but, seemingly, affirms their creaturely possibilities precisely as expressions of their adequacies.

Theological explanations that imagine us primordially knowing God in some prelapsarian way, the restoration of which is the goal of our postlapsarian redemption, tend to make sin primarily a matter of epistemology and so turn a human problem into a philosophical one, as if the drama of scripture were one of knowledge rather than one of love, where knowing turns on possession rather than acknowledgment. Would we rather say that the drama of the human in scripture is one in which we have all the knowledge we need and yet still know not what to do with it? Might we better say that in loving us God puts us in the best possible position to know and love God in return, and yet despite those provisions we fail before God's love either by refusing to acknowledge that love or by faulting God for failing to equip us with adequate capacities?<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> See Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 181.

<sup>65</sup> See John Wisdom's classic essay "Gods," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 45 (1944–1945): 185–206.

<sup>66</sup> Speaking of Shakespeare's Othello, Cavell famously writes, "What the man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it." Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 496. Consider also Sven Lindqvist: "It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions" in *Exterminate All the Brutes: One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*, trans. Joan Tate (New York, NY: New Press, 1992), 2.

The proposition that what can be theologically said and meant depends on what can be ordinarily said and meant may initially sound like a delimitation between things we can say, on the one hand, and things we cannot say, on the other. The force of that claim, however, points to all the things language does enable us to talk about, including God. None of this is meant to deny God's mysteriousness or ineffability, but only to insist that the ordinary use Christians make of those ideas (for instance, that we know now dimly a God we will later know face to face) are intended doxologically, less so epistemologically or metaphysically. It has been my concern throughout to show that the examination of the use conditions of statements can relieve us of certain epistemological and metaphysical anxieties by returning us to the everyday contexts in which those statements have sense. I have tried to propose a picture of language as a naturally occurring mystery that situates linguistic holism and its resident language games inside creaturely life, where selection and self-showing determine the course of events on a field of life, death, procreation, adaptation, and so on, and where the powers of human imagination are likewise birthed and released into the world.<sup>67</sup>

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