On Naming

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IN our everyday activities, be they recreational, emotional, valuational or intellectural, we use a great many names, sounds and words of a particular sort. Inasmuch as all aspects of human communication, especially language, are currently the focal point of rather intensive scrutiny by anthropologists, psychologists, theologans and partcularly philosophers, it would seem appropriate to survey some of the current studies to see what of value — use and significance — one might discover.

It seems rather odd that amid the many pages and volumes of words telling a reader just how vague, nonsensical and meanngless are the combinations of sounds which we evidently use with a relatively high degree of efficiency in our everyday discourse and personal interaction, that there is a noticeable absence of consideration relative to the occurrence, techniques, methods and/or processes of **naming.**

In short, by what manner, means or processes does an occurrence, event, entity, object, relationship, quality or feeling come to have a specific "name" which unites, relates, separates or otherwise identifies that particular "thing" with or from any other "thing"? This essay represents an attempt to summarize and classify some current responses to that question. We are not here concerned with the origin of language but the manner in which "naming" takes place.

Although there is relatively little material available which treats in a direct manner the process of naming there are at least three different ideas or theories as to the manner in which or by which "things" acquire a name. These three theories may be designated as:

1. The Disclosure Theory.
2. The Cultural Theory.
3. The Assignment Theory.

An inquiry into names and naming makes one very much aware of the close relationship of names and naming to a metaphysics and an epistemology, and in some instances to a particular theology. While in actual practice and use these interrelated aspects are not separated, for the purposes of this paper, epistemology, metaphysics and theology will be included only to the extent necessary.

Let us first look at each of these naming theories in summary fashion and then comment on each and indicate some of the implications of each.

I.

1. The Disclosure Theory.

The Disclosure Theory of naming is perhaps one of the oldest and most widely used approaches in the history of language. According to this theory names are disclosed or revealed to an individual by someone other than the person receiving and subsequently using the name.

Ian T. Ramsey asserts that the word which identifies, names, a person belongs to a "disclosure" situation, by which he means a situation which has religious significance. "For someone to tell us his name may be, and in a full sense is to be, bound up with him in a characteristic religious situation."[1] According to Ramsey naming has religious significance only when the name is "given" (disclosed) to us and not when one chooses a name. He does not deny that names may be chosen or assigned but this sort of naming he

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[1] *Religious Language,* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1957), pp.108f.

chooses to call a "label." To name, in what Ramsey calls "the full sense," means that the person giving or doing the naming would be in the position of controlling the named by the namer's power to will. "To name in what we may call the 'full sense,' would mean that it was in our power to will and create a religious situation, and thus to guarantee God, to compel a religious disclosure, and this the religious man would never allow possible. If **we** name, there is no disclosure."[2] And, for Ramsey "disclosure" is a necessary and sufficient condition for a "religious situation" and it is within just such a religious situation that a "name" becomes significant.

Karl Barth supports a similar general position but makes a rather significant distinction between names which are "holy" and names which are "mere sound and breath." A name, according to Barth, "of a thing or a man is the symbol by which we are taught that this is this, he is he; the limits by which we distinguish persons or things that are equal from one another."[3]

Barth grants that man names things and that these names are useful:

> We are told that man, by God's command and yet by his own free and rational judgments, gave names 'to all cattle and the birds of heaven and to every beast of the field; and finally, he named woman, the creature of his own kind.[4]

However, Barth is quite explicit concerning the name of God: "Man did not, and does not give God His name . . . The divine right of giving names belongs not only to man. But the Bible tells us . . . only God Himself can call Himself by name, and when men know His name, they know it only (with fear and trembling) because God Himself has revealed it to them — first to Abraham: 'I am God Almighty!' then to Moses: 'I am that I am!' But God has not revealed it that men . . . may take the name of God upon their lips."[5]

Both Barth and Ramsey appeal to the Bible, especially the Old Testament, in support of their ideas concerning naming. Both men are concerned with naming as it especially refers to God, but Ramsey extends his argument more generally to all naming in which there are personal interactions and relationships. Ramsey is quite explicit in his ideas concerning naming as he refers to the **Tetragrammaton** in the Old Testament. Ramsey argues that since a "name" can so easily become a "label" that if God's name were fully disclosed to us our "vision might become atrophied — loving the name more than Him who had disclosed it."[6] Therefore all we have are situations (characteristically religious) where someone is **about** to disclose his name but never does so fully. Thus there is constant mystery concerning the name of God as we have only the four consonants "JHVH" and no matter how we add the vowels we can never be sure that we have the correct vowels. "Only God could know the answer. Only God could know His own name. Otherwise the permanent irreducibility of a religious situation might be lost. So it is that the sacred **tetragrammaton** is the furthest we could ever go in having a 'name' for God, and it is **quite essential** that such a name should be unpronouncable in its fulness."[7]

The appeal to the ancient belief that the name of God was both so sacred and so powerful that the name was not to be used places one in the midst of primitive attitudes of magic and more explicitly, the magical power of words. The main principle of magical belief concerning words and especially names is that words are, in some very literal

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[3] *Come Holy Spirit*, (New York: Round Table Press, Inc., 1934), p. 27f.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[6] *Religious Language*, p. 112.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

or actual manner, so connected to their referents and exercise or possess some controlling power over the referent by virtue of this connection, that if one knows or has the name of a person or thing he can manipulate and thus control the referent of the word by manipulating the word in prescribed ways.

While there are some people who accept the idea that there is actual power in words, power other than that of emotional and psychological influence, few have stated such a belief so boldly as Barth and Ramsey. It is this explicit expression of the idea that there is some special power in a name that makes it necessary for us to consider the Disclosure theory. The Disclosure theory of naming has very difinite epistemological and metaphysical implications which render a great deal of religious language and techniques understandable. At the same time, in view of this particular theory one can also clearly understand why some language analysts have severely attacked and criticized religious language.

What are some of the few problems which this theory does not seem to resolve? First, if the naming process is as suggested by Ramsey, then how does one differentiate between a "name" and a "label"? Second, if the name of God is never fully disclosed, then how do men refer to God, and does not an incomplete name or "substitute label" then come to be used and accepted as a "name" anyway? Third, if the name is never fully made known, then by what criteria does one reject some "incomplete names" in favor of others?

The Disclosure Theory of naming is important since in religion one must frequently attempt to work within such an orientation, but the problem is not limited to religion. In nearly every area of human behavior one may well encounter a similar attitude toward "names" and their referents as men believe that once a "thing" has been named then they have a means of handling or controlling the referent by virtue of knowledge of its name.

2. The Cultural Theory.

The cultural theory of naming represents an intermediate approach inasmuch as naming is viewed as a designating act of man, but one in which the selection of a "name" is restricted or limited to the particular terms from the vocabulary of one's culture.

Ben F. Kimpel represents this approach and indicates something of its intermediate character. In contrast to the Disclosure Theory no magical power is attributed or ascribed to words or names. "No symbol employed in religious life is supernatural. Only the referent of religious life is 'supernatural.' "[8]

For Kimpel then the selection of a name is arbitrary, but limited to the terms present in one's cultural vocabulary. The assertion that the selection of a name is arbitrary implies that there are no logically or metaphysically "correct names" which must of necessity be used. Kimpel maintains that naming is subsequent to the belief in a reality significant enough to be given a name, and the symbol selected to denote this significant reality is chosen from the language reservoir of the person doing the naming.

Kimpel is further differentiated from the advocates of the Disclosure Theory by his position that one should not confuse the belief in "one Ultimate reality" with the naming of that reality; one "does not infer the existence of a reality from naming it."[9] Furthermore, he says that "naming a reality revered as 'the first' is, therefore not essential to religious faith, but is rather an aspect of reducing faith to linguistic form."[10]

A related theory which deals with deity may be found in the work of

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[8] *Language and Religion.* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 18.
[9] *Language and Religion,* p. 70.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 70.

Shailer Mathews, **The Growth of the Idea of God**, in which he develops the thesis that the idea of God changes in a direction corresponding to the changing social structure of society, i.e., God is not conceived of in terms of "king" until such time as there are kings in the society and culture of the people. Mathews' development and treatment is directed primarily toward the "idea of God" rather than the "naming of God." However, the names employed to denote the "ideas of God" also relate directly to the social and cultural structure of a people, and would therefore warrant consideration within the Cultural Theory of naming.

If names are limited to the vocabulary of a culture as Kimpel suggests then it would be possible for the same symbol or name to denote different "realities believed in" as a common term might be selected by different persons in the same culture to represent different realities, or a term common to different cultures might be selected to represent different "realities believed in." There is a further possibility that the same "reality" might be given quite different names in various cultures. Thus, it would seem that this theory of naming would provide considerable possibility for confusion and ambiguity in understanding the divine as named by others.

3. The Assignment Theory.

The Assignment Theory of naming is similar to the cultural theory in that names are chosen, selected or in a manner arbitrarily asigned, but the selection is limited only to the peculiarities of the "namer." According to the advocates of the Assignment Theory names are **given**, not discovered or disclosed. When a person wishes to refer to a single thing he usually designates it by a name, in this theory the combination of a particular group of sounds chosen from the number and combination of sounds known or available to the person who is naming. Thus in the naming process there are no necessary words which must be used, but rather the sounds are assigned meanings by the person doing the naming.

John Hospers may be selected as representative of this view. According to Hospers there are no "right or wrong" words for things. Instead he contends that human beings stipulate meanings for noises. Meaning is not inherent in words, names or sentences, "it is **given** them by their human users."[11]

Of course, no one at the present is able to assign meaning to words or words to things arbitrarily and hope to communicate because he is born and taught within a particular culture and language structure. These and other influences make complete arbitrary assignment of sounds to designate "things" an impossibility if naming is to facilitate communication of ideas and experiences.

However, Hospers indicates three approaches to naming when one wants to identify a "thing" in order that he may speak of it in ways other than by ostensive or demonstrative "definition" or ways. If one has an experience or wants to identfy some "thing" without having to carry the "thing" about in order to point to it every time he wants to speak of it, he may do one of three things: (1) survey his present language system to see if there is a word which is used which identifies something quite similar to that which he desires to name, and then use the word already in use; (2) survey the present language system to see if there is a word in use which identifies or closely relates something quite similar to that which one desires to identify, but, discovering that the word already in use has a variety of meanings, therefore selecting one of the meanings, stipulate what the selected word will mean when he

[11] *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1953), p. 75.

uses it; or (3) upon surveying the language system and finding no word suitable for identifying the "thing" one wishes to name he might undertake to make up a word, that is, "to take a noise and use it to refer to something that has not been given a name in your language before."[12]

Although the proponents of this theory of naming frequently indicate that names and other words are noises assigned arbitrarily to designate some "thing," it is not their intention to say that each person arbitrarily assigns names to things although this is not impossible. Once an object, entity, relationship, etc., has been given a name, it is both convenient and efficient to use the word as it has been commonly used in one's culture or society. The use of the same noise to identify or refer to different things is not wrong, but confusing and unnecessarily complicates communication.

II.

Among the advocates of the Assignment Theory of naming are John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, who worked together on a number of papers which were concerned with the process of naming, in which they developed a rather clear and helpful theory.

The naming process is an integral part of the whole knowing process for Dewey and Bentley, and is always to be viewed as a process wherein organism and environment must not be separated but viewed as mutually influencing factors, each necessary for understanding the other.

The entire process is divided into three phases: (1) signalling, (2) designating, and (3) symbolizing. It is the second phase, designation, which includes the process of actual naming, although the whole pattern must be included since "naming lies intermediate between early perceptual processes of Signaling, and the later more highly specialized and more intricately involved in the process of Symbolizing."[13]

According to Dewey and Bentley, naming is a type of behavior, that is, a process of organism-in-environment, which is characteristic of man. Except "as living behavioral action — we recognize no name or naming whatever."[14] The idea that a "name" is a type of "thing" separate from the organism or the environment is rejected, as this would separate "name" from its function, as illustrated by those who would hold that a name is a tool which man uses for his aid. "Naming is before us not as a tool . . . but as behavior process itself in action."[15]

Naming as a behavioral activity does things. It states, and to do this it identifies and separates and unites those "things" which are identified. Naming also selects, discriminates, locates, orders, arranges and systematizes the various "things" in the organism-in-environment activity of man. In all these activies naming is a positive activity.[16]

Names, furthermore, refer to "something" existently cosmic or cultural at the time the name is used. However, to say that the "name" refers to something existently cosmic is not to affirm or deny the ontological existence of that something.

Naming as a behavioral activity on the part of man is dependent upon observation, and observation "at once reports that we find no naming apart from a named, and no named apart from a naming, such that we can use it as direct subject of **behavioral** inquiry — whatever physical or physiological observations we can incidentally make on the namings and the named in provisional separations."[17]

[12] *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, p. 8.

[13] "Specification" *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 43 (1946) p. 645.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 646.

[15] "Specification," p. 647.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 648.

[17] "Transactions as Known and Named" *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 43 (1946), p. 548.

Having noted some of the basic ideas relevant to this hypothesis concerning naming, let us look at the processes involved in naming. (1) **Signal:** All the early stages of sign prior to the appearance of language are identified as belonging to this basic or preliminary stage. Signal designates the full range of "sensori - manipulative - perceptive" behavior prior to the modification of this behavior by linguistic behaviors. Signaling then is always action, it is the organism-in-environment acting and being acted upon, a transactional behavioral phenomenon. One must not, however, attempt to isolate the sensory, motor or perceptual aspects of this behavior, for to do so would distort the process. "Each case of signal, like every other case of sign, is a specific instance of the continued durational sign-activity of life in the organic-environmental locus."[18]

(2) **Designation:** Designation is the intermediate stage between perception and the more complex and intricate process of symbolizing. The transactional organic-environmental process called "designation" represents a differentiation behavior in respect to both the organism and in regards to the environment. The organism is "differentiated" from the environment, but this differentiation is not to be understood as separation or asserting existence in mutual detachment of both organism and environment.

> What is 'the named' is, in other words, not detached or detachable environmental existence, but environment - as - presented - in - signalling - behavior. In other words, signallings are the 'named,' even though the manner in naming develops a language-form presumptively presenting an 'outer' as detachable. Neither 'naming' or 'named' under our procedure is taken as either 'inner' or 'outer' whether in connections or separations.[19]

[18]"Specification," p. 652f.
[19]*Ibid.*, p. 653.

The first level of Designation is **Cue,** this is the most primtive language behavior. **Cue** is very close to Signal, the difference being in the influence of linguistic-processes. The level of **cue** in Designation includes the single-word sentence, the onomatopoeic utterance, the ejaculation, and in a fully developed language the **cue** may appear as an interjection, exclamation or abbreviated utterance. **Cue** may be said to be "signal with focal localization shifted from organism-object to organism-organism, but with the object still plain in reach."[20]

Out of **cue** there develops through the clustering of **cues** a loose description which represents the second level or development of Designation which is called **characterization.** This growth of language constitutes a great portion of our every day conversation and as a loose description it is adequate for a great deal of our practical needs. As **cues** overlap a central **cue** comes to represent a variety of **cues.** In this phase of naming the inner connections of **cues** are "practical in the colloquial sense of everyday life," and the "common noun comes to succeed the proper noun. The **characterizations** move forward beyond the "immediately present" of the **cue** as they widen their connections."[21]

As the naming process continues the next phase is called **Description.** A name may be considered to be "a truncated description." An object-named is more fully identified by **description** than by the single word which stands for the description. At this level it may be said that a name refers to the description at times more properly than to the object-named. **Description** represents the phrasing which "develops around namings, and namings arise within phrasings."[22] **Descriptions** specify characteristics of the ob-

[20]*Ibid.*, p. 656.
[21]*Ibid.*, p. 657.
[22]*Ibid.*, p. 659.

ject-named while names do not "in general **specify** any characteristics at all of the objects to which they refer."[23]

The more efficient form of Designation is called **Specification.** This is the type of naming which develops when inquiry gets down to serious work. **Specification** "is the passage from conversational and other 'practical' namings to namings that are likewise practical — indeed, very much more practical — for research."[24]

As this hypothesis has been developed concerning naming, **cue** states and **characterization** connects, but **specification** goes much further.

> It breaks down old barriers, and it is prepared to break down whatever shows itself as barrier . . . What it opens up it retains for permanent range from the furtherest past to the best anticipated futures . . . It looks back on the ancient namings as at least having been designational procedure . . . It looks upon further specifications as opening a richer and wider world of knowledge.[25]

(3) **Symbol:** Symbolizing is the most complex phase of the naming-process, this is the transactional behavior of organism - in - environment in which there is a disappearance of specific references to characteristics. The level of symbol is a further linguistic development in which there is a forfeiting of specific designatory applications in order "to gain heightened efficiency in other ways."[26]

The process of naming as suggested by Dewey and Bentley seems to me to represent the most complete hypothesis of the process which I have found to date. Most of the discussions concerning names and naming are concerned with the classification of names and words, and with discussing the use of words and names, rather than the naming process itself. There are several writers who could be identified as supporting the Assignment theory of naming, although they do not spell out the process themselves.[27]

III.

There are many implications which follow the acceptance of a particular attitude toward language and more explicitly toward naming. The greatest implications would seem to appear in areas relating to religion and epistemology. And although no one theory can be proved or the alternative theories disproved, the acceptance of one theory in preference to others has significance in philosophy and religion.

If the Disclosure Theory of naming is accepted there is a strong tendency to treat names as the "reality" rather than symbols referring to or designating "realities." Word magic very easily becomes a corollary of the Disclosure theory as words and especially names are treated as if they exercised some mystrious power over the "things" named. I. J. Lee has indicated in an explicit manner some of the tendencies of people who give special importance to the words rather than to the "facts" to which the words relate. These tendencies are: (1) people pay more attention to the words used in referring to facts than to the facts themselves; (2) people respond to words as if the words were something more than representations, the words are viewed as the "things" which the words are intended to represent, (3) people tend to forget the "life facts" when exposed to them in favor of the words, and (4) people indulge in verbal proofs instead of going to "life facts."[28]

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[23]J. R. Searle. "Proper Names." *Mind.* Vol. 76 (1958), p. 170.

[24]"Specification," p. 659f.

[25]*Ibid.*, p. 661.

[26] John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and The Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), p. 74.

[27]Irving J. Lee, *Language Habits in Human Affairs* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1941) and James K. Feibleman. "How to read a Word," *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research,* Vol. 3 (1942-43), p. 478ff.

[28]*Language Habits in Human Affairs,* p. 127ff.

Lee discusses another problem which is related to the Disclosure approach to naming as he writes that "People having been trained to respond to words will respond readily to the skillful manipulators too often without regard to the 'realities' which those words represent."[29] The force of this observation seems to be especially relevant for the religious language which is governed by the Disclosure Theory, and especially as suggested by Karl Barth, or by those Frederick Ferre discusses in his chapter "The Logic of Obedience."[30] If religious language is governed by the Disclosure Theory, then the language is shielded from critical study and acquires a "sacredness" of character which may very effectively restrict religious growth and communicative expression in a changing world.

It would seem that in contrast with the Disclosure Theory of naming, the Assignment Hypothesis would permit the growth of religious language along with the growth and changing experiences in the religious life of those who wish to communicate with others concerning their religious experiences, ideas and values. If the language of religion is not surrounded with a sacred cloud then it is possible to analyze and evaluate the language and the names used to identify religious "realities" in terms of various specific criteria. It does not seem to follow, as some would assert, that if religious language or naming in general is a product of the organism-in-environment behavior that the language is less real, vital or valid as a means of expressing or communicating religious experiences, truths or commitment.

If words have meanings as they are assigned by men, organism-in-environment, it would seem that these words would have a great deal of significance in human experience, perhaps more than if the meanings of the terms were disclosed to men. The Assignment Theory does not deny that words are powerful influences in the lives of men, but the power is logical, motivational and psychological rather than physical.

In view of this brief survey of "naming" it would seem appropriate to say that the theory of naming which one accepts has implications for many areas of human experience, but especially for that realm or portion of experience identified as religious. The influence and implications of a particular theory of language for religion have been somewhat neglected by many philosophers and theologians. It seems very likely that this subject will be investigated more completely and the implications spelled out in more detail in the near future.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 171f.

[30] *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1961).