BECOMING WHAT WE ARE: THE VERBAL AMBIGUITY

JOSEPH KELLER

> "All are called to be what in the reality of God they are are already." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Beatitudes," *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The verbal ambiguity is this: when we create the image of God in community, chiefly by means of language, we simultaneously deface that image. We all do this because no one is completely selfless. The personal way we use our language makes actual this moral and spiritual flaw. We negotiate with one another from imperfection. We also cooperate with love, and we manage to do both at the same time.

The linguistic process by which we create community is not structured for unambiguous selflessness because it is predicated on encounter, not unity. Paiute animal stories, told to children when their evening chores were done, always began, "Once long ago when we were all the same"; but the stories always ended in strife. Somebody, usually Coyote, gets the better of someone else, or is tricked by their clever words. We trick one another even when we mediate. If we wish to give our life for our friend, therefore, we had better do it silently. The moment we discourse about "sacrifice" we are involved in dialogue, and our selfless act is clouded with uncertainties.

Few verbal encounters are without ambiguity. In fact, linguists tell us, indeterminism constitutes the "truth-value" of the speech act. One person cannot say and another understand the

---

Joseph Keller is Professor of English at Indiana University at Indianapolis.

same word. There is always something unintentionally equivocal in the most careful talk, though we try to compensate by reconstructing what we thought we had heard.

Myths of the origin of our alienation, Paiute Coyote or Hebrew Tower of Babel stories, suggest that language is what it is because we are not what we originally were made to be. Apparently, human beings everywhere perceive or at least suspect that they have been estranged from an original unity with God and nature. For Christians, the immediate cause of our failure to do what we ought to do by saying what we ought to say is our reluctance to become that for which we were bought at Golgotha.

If we loved our neighbor as ourselves, the indeterminism of the speech act would be an occasion for creative love. The mind would eliminate the "truth-value gap" by thinking and speaking decently, for a change, not equivocally. But those "luminous moments" during which the soul "contains no ambiguities," as Simone Weil wrote of the world of the *Iliad*, are few.[1] An analysis of the linguistic process by which human failure is transformed into the shady grammar of encounter shows how deep in the structure of our being reaches the fissure which divides us from unity.

Nevertheless, community is created out of encounter, and the astonishing if rare crown of that effort is communion. The God who is human has come to us one by one and invited us to unity. We build God's house under the urgency of that calling. We seek the impress of that prior communion in our relationship with our neighbor, and through no virtue of our own, we sometimes find it.

Calling and Community

We do not begin with language. Initially, there may be silence. We sense that we are alone, even if we are in a crowd.

---

1 Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1956), p. 27.

"Every man is called separately," Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes, "and must follow alone."[2] In that solitude a potentiality within us is "awakened," and it may seem to us that we are "addressed." (Such metaphors are inevitable. Our humanity requires that we picture the ineffable in dimensionally human terms.) Any meaningful encounter is immediately or remotely preceded by this shock of recognition that Being has extended itself to us; that Christ is "for" us, as Bonhoeffer would have put it.

Because this is an individual recognition, each shape it takes will be unique. We are variously called. And because any subsequent meaningful encounter is characterized on a deep level by the impress of this experience, each such encounter, every conversation, will be unique. Their "truth-values" will be indeterminate. Nevertheless, if we allow that awakened potentiality to teach us that we must be for others as Christ is for us, we discover that we no longer talk with others primarily to maneuver for position or to "win" friends but to understand.

Then one day we will be amazed by a new experience. The reality of what had been discussed with increasing accord will fade and something much more intense than rapport will take its place. Philosophers of language like Roman Ingarden and theologians like Paul Tillich call it "communion."[3] In this experience, "the shell of self-seclusion" is pierced "through the impact of the Spiritual Presence," writes Tillich,[4] and we are no longer alone.

---

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 84.

3 Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art, an Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 392. Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 24.

4 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967), III/IV, 261-62.

We do not attain this unity because of any effort on our part, the ambiguity of language being a sufficient impediment. Nevertheless, a linguistic process usually precedes it and prepares us for it. This is a process by which, in part at least, we renew our minds (cf. Rom 12:2). For all such encounters, despite their indeterminacy, exhibit two marks of Christly validity: a changed view of the world and of our place in it; a decrease of egoism and a corresponding increase of love. The two are causally related.

Only in such significant encounters is meaning created. It is created by a mutual but responsible surrender in which the utmost care is taken to discover approximate equivalents in speech which will reflect experiential similarities. As Erich Fromm observed, "...I understand the other's experiences by mobilizing those within myself which, if not the same, are similar to his."[5] New meanings arise out of such verbal and experiential calibrations.

Invariably our speech is modified. Meanings seem to coincide, and this mutual semantic calibration is accompanied by changes in syntax and pronunciation, since all three systems of language (meaning, grammar, and sound) are essential to the synthesis of speech.

Our personal language structures our perceptual world, the world we "see," by segmenting it according to a personal version of the general consensus, the public vision. Any conversation on a matter of ultimate concern, therefore, changes that perceptual world because our speech is modified. We are, of course, a part of that world. We can never again be what we had been. And because in such a conversation we are not completely selfish, and because our picture of ourselves and our world has changed, the values we had invested in ourselves and in this world depreciate. We have replaced them "...by the way of life in which

[5] Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 28.

each lives for the other," as Emil Brunner put it.[6] Accordingly, love increases.

Perhaps this is the love called *eros*, whose affective circumference grows outward from the self, rather than *agape*, which reaches out to us from the source of our concern, But not entirely, says Hans Urs von Balthasar: "The adventure of losing self will not be worthwhile if I do not meet God in my brother, if no breath of infinity stirs in this love . . . in short, if what in our meeting may bear the sublime name of love does not come from God and return to him."[7]

Our verbal correspondence is basically experiential. The origin of our concern, however, is not. It is ultimate creativity speaking to the potentially creative in us. We are in Christ as we speak. He is for us. What is learned from such an encounter, learned even from the changed picture of our world, is a paradigm of ultimacy seen as the here and now because we are in touch with reality when we are in touch with one another. The first Christians may have discovered their eschatological view of history in fellowship. "Truth happens only in community," said Bonhoeffer in one of his lectures.[8]

The message we produce about that reality must be different from any other such message, inasmuch as our separate origins are unique. Nevertheless, it is a valid message because it is Logos speaking to logos. Of course, the penultimacy of these "ciphers of Being," as Karl Jaspers called such messages,[9] renders their

---

6 Emil Brunner, *Reason and Revelation, the Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), p. 371.

7 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man*, trans. Hilda Graef (New York: Seabury, 1967), p. 143.

8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 51.

9 Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol from Von Der Wahrheit*, trans. Jean T. Wilde, *et al.* (New York: Twayne, 1959).

cognitive value as nothing compared to what shall be known in ultimacy. But the precise degree of our individual need to know so that we may love in knowledge is satisfied in the realm of grace no less than it will be in the realm of love.

Finally, should communion be the result of our growing correspondence, new and perhaps more intense forms of communication take the place of linguistic reciprocity: speaking in tongues, singing, dancing, or silence; and the existential meaningfulness of the preceding dialogue temporarily fades in importance:

> Love is most nearly itself
> When here and now cease to matter.
>
> -- T. S. Eliot, *Dry Salvages*

In sum, we begin alone and we end in community; we begin with nothing but Christ and we end with both knowledge and love.

It is in the penultimate that this occurs, the next to the last neither of which would have been had not a profound alienation cut us off from reality. Although it is in this world that the cross stands and here that we are redeemed, the penultimate exists by virtue of the ultimate; it is determined by it. It is by definition preharmonious, not harmony; it is coming to be. The community we create in it will be mere adjacency and not interpenetration. We may be in Christ but we are not yet one with one another.

For this reason, the experience of communion does not endure and ciphers of Being will themselves be discovered to have been ambiguous. Their source may be Life itself, as Weil noted of the archetypal icons of mythology, folklore, and the parables of the Gospel,[10] but that source is filtered through a verbal and divided human consciousness.

As Bonhoeffer put it in his incomplete *Ethics*, "Thus man remains man, even though he is new, a risen man, who in no way

---

10 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 195.

resembles the old man. Until he crosses the frontier of his death, even though he has already risen again with Christ, he remains in the world of the penultimate..."[11] But only for a while.

An important consequence flows from our having constructed community through the agency of words. This is that the verbal process by which we participate in redemption, the linguistic act initiated by Incarnational love, will somehow be taken up by that love into ultimacy just as this mortal, transmuted, must put on immortality (I Cor 15.53).

Language is sanctified by its Christly use. The temporal is engrafted into the eternal because the eternal is for the temporal. Knowing the will of God and doing it, seeking the impress of the first love in the second, the love of our neighbor, sanctifies the temporal because it is the Spirit of Christ in us that knows and does.

God is for us and that is why God is human. Not only may we give God a drink of water but we create knowledge out of the concepts of human consciousness when we communally reply to God's summons. Because we do these things, we discover that this flesh which gives the water and this speech which replies, both intricately interfaced with spirit, will live in ultimacy.

Calling and Ambiguity

The love that will purge ambiguity of its primordial guilt will forget the sin (Is 43:25). Now, however, in penultimacy, we are only too aware of the self-interest which distorts equivalency in communication. We are less aware of verbal distortions over which we have little conscious control, arising as they do from the primal alienation of humankind. These conscious and unconscious distortions prevent the realization of Christ's community.

---

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Paperback, 1965), p. 132.

The discovery of verbal agreements founded on similar experiences is hedged about by calculation and restrained by caution. Fear has made us timid. We seldom do precisely as Bonhoeffer suggests in *The Communion of Saints*, which is

". . . surrender to each other that [our] new person becomes real and there arises a 'community of new persons'."[12]

Let us suppose that a friend, more than casual but not close, is worried about her brother who is an alcoholic. We discuss our concern and his disease, agreeing that somehow she should help her brother admit his powerlessness to control the symptoms of the illness. We agree that he should allow himself to be sustained and strengthened by the same God who promised to hold Israel by the right hand, saying, "I will help thee" (Is 41:13). We agree that my friend requires the same assistance if she is to succeed. In addition, concrete steps are decided on. She should phone Al-Anon for advice, for example.

In all this we have created a new community, prompted by the prior communion of which we both are aware. But suppose I have withheld evidence of a personal nature which could have made it possible for us to reach closer verbal equivalents and thus further reduce egoism. Quite probably I have prevented an intenser rapport. Caution held me back. After all, she is not that close a friend. And very likely caution held my friend back at some point, too. Are not even lovers tempted to misrepresentation?

Thus omission can cloud equivalency with its own form of equivocation. It is a half-truth which does not reveal the fact of its ambiguity as a properly ambiguous sentence will. (Grammarians tell us that a sentence is ambiguous when we cannot be certain which of two possible meanings has produced it. A favorite example: "Starving children can be dangerous.")

---

12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints, a Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, trans. supervised by R. Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 125.

Most conversations, especially those dealing with matters of ultimate concern, exhibit no such obvious forms of ambiguity. We are, instead, quite capable, *inter alia*, of the trickery that silently reserves private definitions for terms like "God" or "Christ" while seeming to employ more conventional denotations. The lie is intentionally hidden beneath the surface of the sentence.

But no human being is exempt from the unavoidable ambiguities that both differences in viewpoint and experience make inevitable. No two people can have identical outlooks. Each of us segments reality in slightly different ways, notoriously so in the case of speakers of different languages. We are all familiar with such hindrances to communication as differences in sex and age. Although we learn to accomodate ourselves to them, translating as we listen, nevertheless a degree of distortion is inevitable. Distortion and point of view go together.

Experiences, too, are obviously quite different. At best, we can suggest approximations, and our speech as a result is full of generalities, subject to the grossest misinterpretations. Were it not for such correctives as redundancy, reinforcing gestures, and the marvelous expressiveness of our faces, almost everything we say would be wrongly translated. As it is, despite our discovery of experiential near equivalents, we can never be sure that we are precisely understood.

But no matter. The infinite is at the heart of our endeavor. We may be sure that we are ultimately understood even though what we build today be misshapen. We may even be sure that what we wanted to say will sooner or later contribute to the community of humankind. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin explains, "What my lips fail to convey to my brother or my sister he [Christ] will tell them better than I . . . Christ gathers up for the life of tomorrow our stifled ambitions, our inadequate understandings, our uncompleted or clumsy but sincere en-

deavors."[13]

Parody is a different matter entirely. We imitate ourselves, even in our most serious moments. No one can maintain the kind of intensity needed to be constantly open to Being and thus to seek in community the impress of the prior communion. We all falter, grow tired, and make "small talk" even in the most serious discussions. Naturally we rationalize this failing. We tell ourselves that it doesn't matter so long as the other person "sees things clearly," has reached a "new" and "productive" understanding.

But it does matter. A parody is a device which lays bare the device of the original in order to deride it. When we parody the mechanism of conversation, even unintentionally, we burlesque the device by which we build Christ's community. What is then said is not even ambiguous, because it is empty. The possibility of genuine verbal agreement is excluded, since what we achieve is fake. There will be no culmination of that conversation in communion, nor will there be new meaning. *Eros* will not have included the other.

Despite these distortions, half-truths, and lies, despite the ambiguity always present in language, we manage to communicate, after all. This is because Christ stands between us, as Bonhoeffer wrote, bridging the ". . . gulf of otherness and strangeness which resists all our attempts to overcome it by means of natural association or emotional or spiritual union."[14]

Christ stands between us. Rather, he stands among us inasmuch as it is Christ's community we create. Sometimes -- not as often as we would like -- we come to know this. When a conversation culminates in communion, we are aware of Christ's presence. The new-won knowledge, the meaning that develops only

13 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. Simon Bartholomew (New York: Harper & Row) pp. 119-20.

14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 87-8.

in encounter and which had been so exciting a moment before, fades as the dimension of ultimate reality suggests itself. Then ordinary reality returns with its everyday imperatives, and with its return we face once more our everyday predicament, the ambiguity of our speech. But not forever.

The God who is human was born one of us because we were unable to live together in peace and love. God came to the world at a specific place and in a specific time because Being must be knowable in the most tangible way our species can understand. In addition, God comes to each human creature one by one just as in the Gospels, because human beings have to know and love individually.

In this sense, community can be finally formed only after the fact of the cross. Like the first followers of Jesus, we can be formed in community only after we are individually called, after we have been crucified with him, and then, ironically in the process of shaping that community, after we have betrayed our Lord in the ambiguous dimension of speech.

The God who is human and who loves us will remove the guilt. As God called us individually in order to form community, God forgives us individually. Because God is love, we can be sure that God will forgive us collectively in ultimacy when the huge ambiguity of collective guilt built into the human edifice is resolved and forgotten. In the meantime, every community in human history is socketed and joisted with the agony of its architect.

The prior communion invites us to love the Lord. We love our neighbor when with that neighbor we build God's house. Every constructive conversation adds to that house, and is iconic of Incarnation. At the same time, every constructive conversation is betrayal. A betrayal preceded redemption in our everyday talk. For we become what we are only by crucifying the Lord.