On the Names of God and Man

The authors of Genesis 1 and 2, whoever they may be, share a deep interest in names and their origins. In fact, many of the stories in this book seem to have come about from a deep contemplation on certain names. This kind of creation from philology is reflected in the conceit of God's naming, beginning in Genesis 1. There, names are creative; they establish the nature of things.

The stories of Man's naming, however, which begin in Genesis 2, clearly present the opposite relationship, in which names *follow* the nature of things. Because this is so, we the readers can actually observe the workings of Man's mind in the process of naming. That is, we can see why the man gives the names that he does. This is precisely because for Man, naming is an expression of his concrete knowledge of the nature of a thing, especially as it relates to his own nature as a human being. So we can see the man's experience of the world in the names that he gives to express that experience.

Now what Man's experience of himself is at this point is a silent spot in the text. We the readers are told that "the LORD God formed man (*adam*) from the dust of the ground (*adamah*)" (Gen 2:7). But we are not told whether the man is aware of himself as *adam*, or when this self-awareness comes about. This raises a number of questions: what does the man know of himself at this point? What has God told him of himself, if anything? Does the man know what he is, and what it means to be Man? The text simply does not give us the answers right out. But what it does give us is a story of Man's naming of himself.

In this story, God first invites Man to take part in the process of naming all the other living beings: "So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the

field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Gen 2:19). This invitation is the hinge between God's naming in Genesis 1 and Man's in Genesis 2, the two forming a sort of diptych, set against one another to show both how they are like, and how they are unlike.

Let us first return then to God's naming, so as to put Man's naming in its proper context. In Genesis 1, by giving a name to each thing, God makes it what it is, the way it is and no other. One can take, for example, God's creation of light: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Here, the creation is in the giving of the name, *light*. The moment God puts a name to the idea of light, it becomes a reality; the moment he speaks the word *light*, light comes to be.

God's naming in Genesis 1 is distinctive as well as creative. God distinguishes between the natures of things by giving them different names, thus ordering the world. Immediately after bringing light to be with a word, God makes a distinction in nature between the new-made light and the already existing darkness: "And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night […]" (Gen 1:4-5). The statements are parallel, and seem to describe the same action. God separates the light from the darkness by calling the light "Day," and the darkness "Night"; the act of giving different and distinct names is the very act of separating the two things. In this very first act of Genesis, God's effective naming—creating and ordering the world—sets the stage for Man's naming in Genesis 2 and beyond by establishing the bond between name and nature, as determined in the act of creation.

With this fresh in mind, one turns to the second creation story in Genesis 2, in which it is Man that does the naming. Here it is important to note that God will create the living beings, but Man will name them. Also, Man's participation in the naming process is directly related to his loneliness and lack of a partner; the issue bookends the episode in which Man names the animals:

> Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. (Gen 2:18-20)

So it would seem that God invites the man to take part in the naming process precisely to let him find for himself the answer to his loneliness; the process of naming all the living beings will be, for the man, a search for something like himself, for "a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:19,20).

Here the man, like God in Genesis 1, distinguishes between the kinds of animals according to their distinct natures. But unlike the names God gives, Man's names do not determine their natures; rather, they are an expression of an awareness on Man's part of distinctions in nature—distinctions already established by God in the act of creation. God creates, Man classifies.

The names the man gives to the animals seem to be rather arbitrary: the text simply says, "whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Gen 2:19). There is not presented in the text any particular reason for giving whatever names he does, any particular relation between the sound and the sense. But the truth that the man is recognizing is not revealed in the names taken individually; the truth about their

natures as he knows them is revealed simply in the difference in the names in relation to one another. That is to say, the man expresses his recognition of their different natures by giving them different names.

Far the most important distinction the man makes in his naming of the animals is that between all other living beings and himself. This text seems to conceive that Man cannot identify himself except in the presence of another of his own kind. So the man, not yet in the presence of this other self, begins the process of self-identification by recognizing what is *not* like him: "The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man (*adam*) there was not found a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:20). This awareness of himself as different from the other creatures is expressed by a non-identification: Man does not yet name himself during this process. This is precisely because "for the man there was not found a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:20). At this point, the man has recognized distinctions between each kind of animal, expressed in the different names he gives them, and between all other animals and himself, expressed by his lack of a name. But he has not yet found something like him in the world; he has not yet recognized himself, his own humanity, in any other living being. And so Man has not yet named himself. This will only come upon the creation of the woman, the partner the man has been wanting.

The creation of the woman from the man immediately follows—both sequentially and logically—the man's classification of the animals, in which he failed to find a partner like him. It is in some ways the crowning act of God's creation in this story, in that it completes the creation of the human being, begun with the creation of the man in Genesis 2:7, and spanning the creation of all other living things. It is certainly the most important

moment in the man's life, which has been incomplete without the woman: his loneliness, for which the woman is found to be the only answer, God himself declares to be "not good" (Gen 2:18). The creation of the woman will lead to the man's joyous affirmation of what is human, expressed in a twin naming:

> This at last is bone of my bones
> and flesh of my flesh;
> this one shall be called Woman (*Ishshah*),
> for out of Man (*Ish*) this one was taken. (Gen 2:23)

In naming himself, now distinctly *ish* with the presence of *ishshah*, he first recognizes the essential likeness between the two of them: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh […]" (Gen 2:23). That is, he recognizes that they share the same being. Then he expresses this awareness in the names he gives. And here he makes a master stroke; for he makes a subtle distinction in naming which recognizes their difference while preserving their essential likeness, giving different yet related names. The names express the man's new self-awareness, and his knowledge of the relationship between male and female as established in God's creation of the woman from the man. They become memorials of this original bond between them: *ishshah* and *ish*, like yet unlike, dual yet complementary, together making up humanity, otherwise incomplete. Every time one hears *ish* and *ishshah*, one is reminded of the integrity of man and woman.

Man's naming here reaches a sublime level. The extraordinary care with which the man names the woman and himself in relation to one another reveals a man who has fully realized his linguistic potential: in fitting the sound of the two words to the true nature of the bond between them, the man comes as close as Man can to the language of God, that language of Genesis 1 in which the nature was established by the name. For the correspondence, the play between the sounds of the words, realizes the nature of the

original bond between the man and the woman. Just as the man's life is incomplete without the woman, so the name *ish* has no meaning except in relation to *ishshah*. That is, the truth that these names memorialize is not to be found in either name taken alone; the truth is found in the aural likeness of the two.

Here is established the concept of Man's naming which echoes throughout Genesis and beyond: names follow the nature of things. At this point, Man's words, the names that he gives, are direct reflections upon the nature of the world as he experiences it, as he lives it every day. Thus the natural bond between their bodies, relived each time a man and woman have sex[1], is reflected in the names *ishshah and ish* (Gen 2:24). Thus does Man's naming approach that of God, though without quite reaching it.

Man will continue to give names as he comes to know new realities. When the man learns about the process of childbirth in Genesis 3—apparently for the first time—he calls his wife *Eve*, 'living,' "because she was the mother of all living" (Gen 3:20). When Eve first brings forth a son, when childbirth becomes a part of her reality, she names him *Cain,* seen as related to the word *qanah*, 'to beget,' saying "I have begotten a man with the help of the LORD" (Gen 4:1). And so it goes, and a pattern is established. Behind every name, there is a story of origins; names themselves are compact stories, unfolded in the pages of Genesis. These names, then, become memorials. They are set up as Man comes to know himself and the world around him, which he is given to order. Naming itself is a reminder of Man's position in the world, and his relation to other living beings and to God. For naming is something that God and Man share; but Man's naming is dependent upon God's. God makes the world the way it is, what it is and no other, by naming; Man names this world to express his experience of it, and to remember.

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[1] Cf. Gen 2:24

Works Cited

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