

The Dialectics of Language and Experience in
David Tracy’s Epistemology:
A Response to David Brockman¹

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MR. BROCKMAN’S CONCLUSION ON THE NATURE OF DAVID TRACY’S EPISTEMOLOGY is: “All experience and understanding is hermeneutical because it is linguistic. To experience and to understand is to interpret, and we cannot interpret apart from language. *There is no prelinguistic or extralinguistic experience or understanding*” (italics mine).² This, he says, is in conflict with the radically different epistemology of Mahayana Buddhism, which believes that Ultimate Reality can only be experienced outside of language, and that language can constitute an obstacle to this experience. The problem that Mr. Brockman foresees is this: “...it is unclear how [Tracy] can truly hear what Mahayana is saying about the extralinguistic character of the awakening experience when he presupposes the contrary”.

¹ I am indebted to Prof. Mark Taylor of Princeton Theological Seminary and Prof. Dirkie Smit of the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, for their valuable comments on the subject matter of this paper.

² The distinction between prelinguistic and extralinguistic is not made clear in Mr. Brockman’s paper, so I must assume that he reads them as synonymous. I prefer the term “extralinguistic” over “prelinguistic” because the latter seems to imply consecutive moments in time (understood in linear fashion) as if the self can exist without language now and then move into language (an or/or situation), whereas the former seems to imply the possibility of the co-existence of language and non-language at the same time (a both/and situation).

Mr. Brockman's reading of Tracy struck me as odd in light of the well-known debate between the "Chicago school," represented by Tracy, and the "Yale school," represented by George Lindbeck. In his now classic 1984 statement on "postliberal theology," *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck depicted Tracy as a so-called liberal "experiential-expressivist,"³ describing this position as follows: "...whatever the variations, thinkers of this tradition all locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion [read: experience of Ultimate Reality] in the *prereflective experiential depths of the self* [read: extralinguistic] and regard the public or outer features of religion [read: language] as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e. nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience" (21, italics and interpolations mine).

His own model, the "cultural-linguistic" model, said Lindbeck, can be seen as a reversal of the liberal model under which he included Tracy: "the major contrast between the two models...[is] a *reversal of the relation between the inner and outer*" (36). "In short," said Lindbeck, "it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it" (37). The way Lindbeck would then construe the difference between his own position and that of "experiential-expressivists" is this: while he (Lindbeck) holds to the view that expressive and communicative symbol systems, including language, are primary, so that there are no uninterpreted experiences; the experiential-expressivists (including Tracy) think of experience as prior to conceptualization or symbolization, i.e., as *prior to language*. In other words, in depicting Tracy as an "experiential-expressivist," Lindbeck's reading of Tracy was the exact opposite of Brockman's reading.

Why these different readings of Tracy? I suspect it has to do with the complexities of Tracy's understanding of the relationship between experi-

³ Although Lindbeck allowed for some diversity among the theologians of the liberal trajectory, there is no doubt that he listed Tracy under the heading of "experiential-expressivist" in *The Nature of Doctrine*. On p. 38 he wrote: "I shall simply note that even those experiential-expressivists – such as Lonergan (or Karl Rahner and David Tracy) – who acknowledge that experience cannot be expressed except in public and intersubjective forms, do seem to maintain a kind of privacy in the origins of experience and language that, if Wittgenstein is right, is more than doubtful"; and on p. 136 (footnote 4), on the notion of the classic, he wrote, "Tracy's model, unlike mine, is experiential-expressive."

ence and language. In his response to Lindbeck's reading of his position, Tracy took issue with the former's claim that the theologians of the liberal trajectory all possess a unilateral understanding of the relationship of experience and language (1985, 462). Agreeing that Lindbeck's analysis points to real problems in the liberal tradition from Schleiermacher to Tillich, Eliade, Rahner, Lonergan et al, Tracy nevertheless rejects the depiction of this tradition as experiential-expressivist, arguing that the heirs of this tradition, following Gadamer, Ricoeur and other hermeneutical thinkers, have been rethinking the dialectical (not unilateral) relationship between experience and language. "In fact," he says, "the major argument of the hermeneutical tradition since Gadamer has been against Romantic 'expressivist' understandings of language's relationship to 'experience'" (1985, 463).

Experience can thus not be understood on a Romantic expressivist model. But, says Tracy, "*this crucial insight does not mean that we should, in effect, abandon half the dialectic by simply placing all experience under the new guardianship of and production by the grammatical rules of the codes of language*" (1985, 464). Tracy's approach, by his own account, is thoroughly hermeneutical, honoring a dialectical relationship between language and experience. Tracy's response to Lindbeck, albeit to the opposite accusation than that of Brockman, can thus easily be used to refute Brockman's reading of Tracy. However, that still leaves us with the question, what does Tracy mean when he says that all experience is "linguistic through and through," and how does that rhyme with his refusal to place all experience under the "guardianship" of language?

A reading of Tracy against the background of the so-called "linguistic turn" in Western philosophy provides some clues in this regard. In *Plurality and Ambiguity*, Tracy focuses on this linguistic turn as the rejection of both positivism and romanticism. Both saw language as instrumental, as secondary and even peripheral to the "real thing," the latter being purely extralinguistic "truth." Tracy rejects both these modernist trajectories, writing that "what is lost in both these interpretations of language as instrument is not only the more subtle relationships of language, knowledge, and reality, but also *the social and historical character of all understanding through language*" (1987, 49, italics mine).

The challenge to instrumentalist notions of language thus implies a revolution of the notion of the self in postmodern thought: "to challenge instrumentalist interpretations of language is not only to reintroduce society and history into all notions of reality and truth, but also to displace the auto-

mous ego from its false pretensions to mastery and certainty” (1987, 50). What Tracy rejects is the individualism that believes that language is used to express a deeper self, and that Truth is the possession of the individual. What he affirms is the notion of a socially constructed self, the awareness that Ultimate Truth is not the possession of the individual. Ironically, in *Dialogue with the Other*, Tracy finds this understanding of the self to be the Western thought pattern that has the greatest *affinity* (he would not speak of *identity* – 88) with Buddhism: “My own belief is that the nearest affinity to Buddhist thought (or, more exactly, to the Mahayana Buddhism of Nagarjuna as the more radical form of Buddhism)... is to be found in... certain contemporary strands of post-modern thought... [in] the common insistence on the illusionary character of the self and thereby of any modern Western attempt to use that self to ground or provide a foundation for ‘reality’” (1990, 70-1).

The decentering of the self in postmodern thought is thus intricately intertwined with the linguistic turn, for the latter implies the social construction of the self, and the impossibility of private access to total truth. From the perspective of Western thought, those links would imply an instability in Mahayana Buddhist thought, an instability that lies in its affirmation of both no-self (similar to Western postmodernity’s linguisticity of the self) and the ineffability of the experience of Ultimate Reality (similar to Western modernity’s concept of pure and objective truth). But Buddhist scholar Dale S. Wright points out that we should be very careful not to read our Western presuppositions into Buddhist thought (however impossible it might be to avoid that completely). He argues that it was Western modernist presuppositions that often led to the idea that Buddhist enlightenment is an undistorted “pure experience” of “things as they are” beyond the shaping power of language. He argues that, “whatever connections East Asians have or have not been able to make between language and silence, our Western interpretations have been naïve in taking their antilanguage rhetoric literally and have failed to appreciate the ironic fact that this was their most powerful religious language” (1992, 129). His basic argument for this stance is as follows:

...the claim to have transcended language is distinct from the claim to a kind of experience that is prior to conceptual reflection. Understood in this way, the experience of ‘sudden awakening’ in Zen is immediate, but only in the sense that it is not mediated by self-conscious reflection on the part of

the experiencer. It is, however, thoroughly interpenetrated by the forces of linguistic shaping that are communicated through the institutions, practices, and beliefs of the community and its underlying tradition. While a great deal of experience is, in fact, prior to conceptual reflection, none is prior to the norms, values, and language of the culture within which the experiencer has been raised" (1992, 131, italics mine).⁴

I realize that Wright is referring to Zen Buddhism here, and that one should not equate all forms of Buddhism. Yet his point stands, namely that even the question of the relationship between language and experience in the Buddhist experience of Ultimate Reality has much more to do with what has been going on in Western culture than it does with Buddhism. He therefore asks: "What would it mean for our understanding of Zen to have undergone the transformation in perspective afforded by the 'linguistic turn' in contemporary Western thought?" (1993, 121). Part of this linguistic turn is the rejection of an instrumentalist and purely conceptual understanding of language, and the acknowledgement that language is present at the level of perception in such a way that even the apophatic experience is shaped by the rhetoric that has shaped the experiencer. Wright emphasizes that two quite different views of language are at play in Western interpretations of Buddhism: an instrumentalist ("modernist") view of language, and the view that human beings are linguistically constructed, situated selves ("postmodernist") (1992, 117).

Thus Wright concludes that understanding – even Zen understanding – is a social and linguistic practice into which participants must be initiated. The essence of Wright's argument seems to be that postmodern Western rejections of language-as-only-instrumental, make it possible for the first time to understand that the Buddhist rejection of language is not so much directed at language as at reflection (1992, 130). Whatever the verdict on Zen or Mahayana Buddhism, Wright's point is worth noting. It is thus very possible that Western interpretations of Buddhism, thus far, have reflected more of Western Enlightenment ideals of the absolute subject and the ability of having pure knowledge, than of Buddhist Enlightenment. It is likewise possible that the problems Mr. Brockman foresees in connection with the lan-

⁴ For a more full-length discussion, which includes reflection on Mahayana Buddhism, see also Wright's *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

guage/experience relationship, has more to do with Western philosophical clashes between modernist and postmodernist understandings of the self, than with Buddhism.

Yet (and here we enter the “second half” of the dialectic in Tracy), it is possible, for all I know, that Mahayana Buddhism would challenge this linguistic non-linguisticity, despite its own version of the illusionary character of the self, by pointing again to the radically apophatic nature of the experience of Ultimate Reality. Ironically, it is precisely on this point where Tracy also finds some affinity between his own Catholic sensibilities and Buddhist thought (1990, 81). In regard to Tracy’s “apophatic turn” (which in no way contradicts his linguistic turn), we need to take a short detour first into Tracy’s understanding of Truth as Manifestation, which is, like his emphasis on language, based on the thought of the great hermeneutical thinkers, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur (1987, 28). In this view, Truth is fundamentally something that happens to a subject (it has an event-character) and is not under the control of the subject or that of language. In *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy depicts this understanding of Truth as Manifestation as the typical Catholic vision, to be held in dialectical relation with the more typically Protestant Truth as Proclamation (1981, 193-229). Whereas the latter is more tied up with instrumentalist uses of language, the oft-neglected understanding of truth as manifestation implies very clearly the transcendence of linguistic categories: “We can experience the realm of the sacred only by a willingness to enter into that purely given, that sheer event of manifestation” (1981, 206). In Tracy’s later works, manifestation is more specifically understood in terms of the apophatic, as mysticism, and proclamation in terms of the ethical, as prophetic. But he never wants to separate the two, emphasizing the mystical-prophetic as the inseparable hearts of Christianity.

Tracy’s awareness of the extent to which we are shaped by the rhetoric within which we live does not lead him to argue that reality, especially Ultimate Reality, can only be experienced within a specific (or any) “language-game,” à la the late-Wittgensteinians. He is too much aware of the power of the whole that breaks through our preconceived categories even as we tend to interpret that power in terms of those categories. Although, as said above, this awareness was sharpened by his dialogue with Buddhists, it informed his thought from the start. Already in *Blessed Rage for Order* (originally published in 1975), Tracy affirmed the need for both a hermeneutical and a transcendental reflection (1996, 49-56). Werner Jeanrond summarizes the

dialectic in Tracy's thought well: "Hermeneutics, that is the theory of interpretation, is necessary to inform any concrete retrieval of the meanings inherent in our Christian texts; and the transcendental reflection is necessary because only an adequate appraisal of the limits of human thinking can point us in the direction of becoming receptive for the mystery of God without identifying one thing or the other with God" (1993, 147).

So not only do we find a non-instrumentalist understanding of language as bound up in experience in Tracy, denoting the situatedness of the self, but his thought on the language/experience relationship is further complicated by his refusal to separate the mystical and the prophetic, manifestation and proclamation. Theology as proclamation can only continue to live when rooted in real manifestation (1981, 214): "*The prelinguistic always precedes and envelops even as it is transformed by the linguistic power of proclamation...* Manifestation envelops every word from beginning to end, even as it allows itself to be transformed by the shattering paradigmatic power of the proclaimed word" (1981, 215, italics mine). Tracy's notion of the "classic" is based on this awareness: "...what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols and persons 'classics' is that here we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth... an experience that upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible..." (1981, 108).

In summary, then, Tracy finds a point of contact between Western and Buddhist thought at precisely the point where Brockman finds the problem, namely the postmodern turn to language, which is at the same time the decentering of the self, and which has some affinity with the Buddhist notion of no-self. Yet at the same time his thought is characterized by an emphasis on the apophatic, an awareness of the mystical, the language-breaking power of manifestation. Although this theme was present in his thought from the start, it is his dialogue with Buddhists that led him to an even greater appreciation of the radical mystics within the Christian tradition and thus deepened his "apophatic turn," although he does not thereby necessarily accept a Buddhist interpretation of the Christian God (1991, 135). One can therefore argue that it is precisely Tracy's awareness of our linguisticity (i.e., the radical historicity of our understanding) that makes it possible for him to be open to the religious other to the extent of being able to ultimately affirm silence as the "most appropriate kind of *speech* for evoking [the] necessary sense of the radical mystery [of Ultimate Reality]" (1987, 109)!

In conclusion, I will try to sketch briefly how I see Tracy's model for inter-religious dialogue. In his current apophatic turn Tracy sees Ultimate Reality as breaking through our linguistic categories, albeit in fragmentary form, and the task of the theologian as the gathering of the fragments (1999, 1-15). In finding the universal (Reality) revealed in the particular ("language" if you will), this understanding of manifestation is a departure from the Enlightenment's notion of a rational natural religion that undergirds all forms of religious expression, but it is also a departure from the notion that experience is controlled by language. As Tracy puts it in *Plurality and Ambiguity*: "When it is believable, religious faith manifests a sense of the radical mystery of all reality... the mystery, above all, of Ultimate Reality" (107). But at the same time "[t]here is no historyless, discourseless human being" (107), and no "natural religion" freed from history and discourse of the historical religions: "If anyone believes in a revelation of Ultimate Reality in a particular religious tradition, this affects her or his understanding of *all* reality" (108).

In other words, for Tracy no choice is possible between the linguistic turn and the apophatic turn. The linguistic turn decenters the self that would control and own truth, and opens it up to the breaking in of truth as manifestation. In turn, then, the truth that is manifested is proclaimed, or rather, shared (not just confessed).⁵ Moreover, I believe that new manifestation happens within this intersubjective proclamation rooted in earlier manifestation (thus, even in "instrumentalist" language-use, conceptual categories are transcended). That is why there is more than one classic – each contains that excess of meaning that is manifestation of Ultimate Reality. The task of the theologian is to gather these fragments of the breakthrough of Ultimate Reality, of the events of awakening.

⁵ The language that follows upon experience should have an element of intersubjectivity, opening up the possibility of new manifestation, new glimpses of truth that happen in the dialogue with the other. The way Mr. Brockman seemed to use the notion of "confession" implied a rhetoric of non-openness. Not even the ineffable experience of Ultimate Reality can merely be confessed – if there is no one to listen (to), to dialogue with, then why even bother to move to language? Mahayana Buddhism itself, in its doctrine of skillful means, obviously embraces more than confession, and moves to proclamation and, hence, some measure of interpretation.

Dialogue is thus both rooted in the manifestations of Truth (which is the extralinguistic breaking through of the whole, yet which is already “linguistic” in the sense of happening to a situated self), and dialogue can in itself become the occasion for further manifestation (i.e., in the dialogical instrumentalist use of language, something extralinguistic happens). The dialectic is thus to and fro, involving the dynamic interplay between the linguistically shaped self, the breaking through of ineffable Reality, and the proclamation and dialogue that follow upon it (finding form in the “classic”) and which in turn transcends conceptual categories (i.e. is again manifestation).

It is when our diverse “language” structures interact that we can finally experience Ultimate Reality as “greater, deeper, wider”⁶ than our particularities, our linguisticity. Such an understanding of Ultimate Reality, or God, is greater than the sum of our particularities, runs deeper than the linguistic shaping of our very selves, and is wider than the wide variety of linguistic forms, cultures, views and opinions out there. But this is not the Universal of modernity, the Great Subject that interacts with “Universal Man” – no, this is the Ultimate Reality that is experienced by humans *in* their particularity, *in* their linguisticity. It is not liberalism’s search for common ground, which carries with it the risk of hegemony, nor is it the kind of pluralism that affirms only difference to the point of nihilism, relativism or indifference. Tracy’s entire theological project has focused on trying to escape these two equally unsatisfactory alternatives, and thinkers working in his tradition have tried to find a way between the devil of modernity and the deep blue sea of relativistic postmodernity, whether in the field of inter-religious dialogue, ethics, liberation theology, or interdisciplinary work.

So, in conclusion, it seems as if Mr. Brockman’s reading of both Tracy and Mahayana Buddhism functions within the modernity/postmodernity debate in the West. He seems to be reading Tracy as an extreme postmodern, caught up in the linguistic turn, thus missing the dialectical relationship Tracy sees between experience and language. He seems to be reading Mahayana Buddhism in terms of Western modernity’s search for “pure” truth, thus ignoring the possibility that Mahayana Buddhism might include other

⁶ This phraseology is from Mark Lewis Taylor’s “The Executed God”, 6-7, where it indicates the notion that God is that which is greater, deeper and wider than the power of political oppression. This understanding of God, or Ultimate Reality, was elegantly expressed by that giant of liberal theology, Paul Tillich, when he depicted God as one’s ultimate concern, the “infinite depth and ground of all being” (“The Shaking of the Foundations”, 57).

understandings of linguisticity while rejecting instrumentalist notions of language (as Tracy does, and as Wright claims Buddhism does!). In short, I am not at all sure that Tracy and Mahayana Buddhism could not find some epistemological affinities.

But even then, with Tracy, I have to reject the notion of sameness or identity as the starting point of inter-religious dialogue. We cannot even insist on identity as the end of inter-religious dialogue, much less demand it as the starting point. Apparently Tracy is not fazed by the radical otherness of Buddhism, and presumably that would even include difference in epistemology: “a more ‘other’ form of thought than Buddhist thought on God and self, on history and nature, indeed, on thought itself (including dialogical thought) would be difficult to conceive for Western Christians with our different strategies and categories of philosophical and theological thought” (1990, 69). Tracy does not demand epistemological unity as the starting point for inter-religious dialogue; what is needed, he says, are the following three elements: self-respect (reverence for one’s own tradition); self-exposure to the other as other; and the willingness to risk all in the questioning and inquiry that constitutes the dialogue itself (1992, 73). We start in radical difference, and, as to the end, the most we can hope for is the sharpening of our analogical imagination, the possibility of seeing similarities-in-difference. The rhetoric of sameness is typical of Western modernity. But sameness is neither the starting point, nor the end of inter-religious dialogue.

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