

2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN THOUGHT

(A) LANGUAGE AND LOGOS

In the earliest times the intimate unity of word and thing was so obvious that the true name was considered to be part of the bearer of the name, if not indeed to substitute for him. In Greek the expression for "word," *onoma*, also means "name," and especially "proper name"—i.e., the name by which something is called. The word is understood primarily as a name. But a name is what it is because it is what someone is called and what he answers to. It belongs to its bearer. The rightness of the name is confirmed by the fact that someone answers to it. Thus it seems to belong to his being.

Greek philosophy more or less began with the insight that a word is *only* a name—i.e., that it does not represent true being. This is precisely the breakthrough of philosophical inquiry into the territory over which the name had undisputed rule. Belief in the word and doubt about it constitute the problem that the Greek Enlightenment saw in the relationship between the word and thing. Thereby the word changed from presenting the thing to substituting for it. The name that is given and can be altered raises doubt about the truth of the word. Can we speak of the rightness of names? But must we not speak of the rightness of words—i.e., insist on the unity of word and thing? Did not the most profound of all early thinkers, Heraclitus, discover the depth of meaning contained in the play on words? This is the background of Plato's *Cratylus*—the fundamental statement of Greek thought on language, which covers the whole range of problems so thoroughly that later Greek discussion (of which we have, in any case, only an imperfect knowledge) adds scarcely anything essential.¹⁹

Two theories discussed in Plato's *Cratylus* try in different ways to describe the relationship between word and thing: the conventionalist theory regards unambiguous linguistic usage, reached by agreement and practice,

as the only source of the meaning of words. The opposed theory holds that there is a natural agreement between word and object that is described by the idea of correctness (*orthotes*). It is clear that both of these positions are extremes and so do not necessarily exclude each other in fact. At any rate, the ordinary speaker knows nothing of the "correctness" of the word that this position presumes.

The mode of being of language that we call "customary usage" sets a limit to both theories: the limit of *conventionalism* is that we cannot arbitrarily change the meaning of words if there is to be *language*. The problem of "special languages" shows the conditions that apply to this kind of renaming. In the *Cratylus* Hermogenes himself gives an example: the renaming of a servant.²⁰ The dependency of a servant's life world, the coincidence of his person with his function, makes possible the renaming that a free man's claim to independence and the preservation of his honor would make impossible. Children and lovers likewise have "their" language, by which they communicate with each other in a world that belongs to them alone. But even this is not so much because they have arbitrarily agreed on it, but because a verbal custom has grown up between them. Language always presupposes a common world—even if it is only a play world.

The limitation of the *similarity theory* is also clear. We cannot look at the things referred to and criticize the words for not correctly representing them. Language is not a mere tool we use, something we construct in order to communicate and differentiate.²¹ Both these interpretations of language start from the existence and instrumentality of words, and regard the subject matter as something we know about previously from an independent source. Thus they start too late. We must then ask if, in showing the two extreme positions to be untenable, Plato is questioning a presupposition common to them both. Plato's intention seems quite clear to me—and this cannot be emphasized sufficiently in view of the fact that the *Cratylus* is constantly misused in discussing the systematic problems of the philosophy of language: in this discussion of contemporary theories of language Plato wants to demonstrate that no truth (*aletheia ton onton*) can be attained in language—in language's claim to correctness (*orthotes ton onomaton*)—and that without words (*aneu ton onomaton*) being must be known purely from itself (*auta ex heauton*).²² This radically displaces the problem to another plane. The dialectic which aims to achieve this obviously claims to make thought dependent on itself alone and to open it to its true objects, the "ideas," so that the power of words (*dunamis ton*

onomaton) and their demonic technologization in sophistical argument are overcome. The conquest of the sphere of words (onomata) by dialectic does not of course mean that there really is such a thing as knowledge without words, but only that it is not the word that opens up the way to truth. Rather, on the contrary, the adequacy of the word can be judged only from the knowledge of the thing it refers to.

We can grant that this is true and yet feel there is something missing. Plato avoids considering the real relationship between words and things. Here he clarifies the question of how one can know that something is too big; and where he does speak about it, where he does describe the true nature of dialectic, as in the excursus of the *Seventh Letter*,²³ language is regarded only as an external and equivocal element. Like the sensible appearance of things, it is one of those specious things (proteimomena) that insinuate themselves and that the true dialectician must leave behind. The pure thought of ideas, dianoia, is silent, for it is a dialogue of the soul with itself (aneu phones). The logos²⁴ is the stream that flows from this thought and sounds out through the mouth (rheuma dia tou stomatos meta phthongou). It is obvious that, of itself, audible perceptibility involves no claim that what is said is true. Plato undoubtedly did not consider the fact that the process of thought, if conceived as a dialogue of soul, itself involves a connection with language; and although we find that there is something about this in the *Seventh Letter*, it is in relation to the dialectic of knowledge—i.e., to the orientation of the whole movement of knowing toward the one (auto). Although there is here a fundamental recognition of the connection with language, its significance does not really emerge. It is only one of the elements of knowing, and its dialectical provisionality emerges from the subject matter itself toward which the act of knowing is directed. The net result, then, is that Plato's discovery of the ideas conceals the true nature of language even more than the theories of the Sophists, who developed their own art (technē) in the use and abuse of language.

Even where Plato moves beyond the level of discussion in the *Cratylus* and points forward to his dialectic, we find no other relation to language than that already discussed there: language is a tool, a copy constructed and judged in terms of the original, the things themselves. Thus even when he assigns no independent function to the sphere of words (onomata) and calls for transcending it, he stays within the horizon in which the question of the "correctness" of the name presents itself. Even when (as in the context of the *Seventh Letter*) he does not accept a natural correctness of names, he still retains resemblance (homoion) as the

criterion: for him the copy and the original constitute the metaphysical model for everything within the noetic sphere. In their various media the craftsman and the divine demiurge, the orator and the philosophical dialectician, copy the true being of ideas. There is always a gap (apechei), even if the true dialectician bridges it for himself. The element of true speech remains the word (onoma and rhema)—the same word in which truth is hidden to the point of unrecognizability and even complete disappearance.²⁵

If against this background we consider the dispute about the "correctness of names," as settled by the *Cratylus*, the theories discussed there suddenly acquire an interest that goes beyond Plato and his own particular purpose. For neither of the theories that Plato's Socrates disproves is considered in its full weight. The conventionalist theory bases the idea of the "correctness" of words on giving names to things—christening them, as it were. This theory obviously does not regard names as having any claim to purvey knowledge of the thing. Socrates refutes the exponent of this view by starting from the distinction between the true and the false logos, then making him admit that the constituents of the logos, the words (onomata), are also true or false—thus relating naming, as part of speaking, to the revelation of being (ousia) that takes place in speaking.²⁶ This is a proposition so incompatible with the conventionalist view that it is easy to see that it implies, on the contrary, a "nature" that is the criterion of the true name and correct naming. Socrates himself admits that understanding the "correctness" of names in this way leads to etymological intoxication, among other absurd consequences. But the same is true of his treatment of the opposed view, according to which words are part of nature (phusē). Although we might expect this view to be refuted by revealing the faultiness of arguing from the truth of discourse to that of the words of which it is made up (the *Sophist* rectifies this), we are disappointed. The discussion stays entirely within the fundamental assumptions of the "nature" theory—i.e., the similarity principle—demolishing it only by progressive limitation. If the "correctness" of names really depends on finding the right name—i.e., the name that is adequate to the thing—then, as with all such adequacy, there are grades and degrees of correctness. If a name with only a small degree of correctness still conveys the outline (tupos) of a thing, then it may still be good enough to be usable.²⁷ But we must be even more generous: a word can be understood, obviously from habit and convention, if it contains sounds that bear no resemblance to what it names, so that the whole principle of similarity falters and is

refuted by such examples as the words for numbers. There can be no similarity at all here, because numbers do not belong to the visible and moved world, so that they obviously come under the principle of convention alone.

The abandonment of the *phusei theory* seems very conciliatory, for the convention principle has to act as a complement when the similarity principle fails. Plato seems to hold that the similarity principle is reasonable, but it needs to be applied in a very liberal way. Convention—which operates in practical usage and alone constitutes the correctness of words—can make use of the similarity principle but is not bound to it.²⁸ This is a very moderate point of view, but it involves the basic assumption that words have no real cognitive significance of their own, a conclusion that points beyond the whole sphere of words and the question of their correctness to the knowledge of the thing. This is obviously Plato's sole concern.

And yet, by keeping within the framework of finding and giving names, the Socratic argument against Cratylus suppresses a number of insights. To say that the word is a tool we construct in order to deal with things for purposes of instruction and differentiation, and so that it is a being that can be more or less adequate to and in accord with its Being, fixes the nature of the inquiry into the nature of the word in a dubious manner. The specific way of dealing with the thing that we are concerned with here is that of making the thing meant apparent. The word is correct if it brings the thing to presentation (*Darstellung*)—i.e., if it is a representation (*mimesis*). What is involved here is certainly not an imitative representation in the sense of a direct copy, depicting the visual or aural appearance of something, but it is the being (*ousia*)—that which is considered worthy of the attribute "to be" (*einaí*)—that is to be revealed by the word. But we must ask whether the concepts used in the dialogue, the concepts of *mimema* and of *deforma* understood as *mimema*, are correct.

The word that names an object names it as what it is because the word itself has the meaning whereby the object intended is named, but that does not necessarily imply that the two are related as original and copy. Certainly the nature of *mimema* consists in part in representing something different from what it itself contains. Thus, mere imitation, "being like," always offers a starting point for reflecting on the ontological gap between the imitation and the original. But words name things in a much too intimate and intellectual way for the question of the degree of similarity to be appropriate here. Cratylus is quite right when he resists this notion. He

is likewise quite right when he says that inasmuch as a word is a word, it must be "correct," must fit correctly. If not, it has no meaning, and it is merely sounding brass.²⁹ It makes no sense to speak of wrongness in such a case.

Of course it can also happen that we do not address someone by his right name because we confuse him with someone else, or that we do not use the right word for something because we do not recognize the thing. It is not the word that is wrong here but its use. It only seems to fit the thing for which it is used. In fact it is the word for something else and, as such, is correct. Likewise, someone learning a foreign language assumes that words have real meanings that are displayed in usage and conveyed in the dictionary. One can always confuse these meanings, but that always means using the "right" words wrongly. Thus we may speak of an *absolute perfection of the word*, inasmuch as there is no perceptible relationship—i.e., no gap—between its appearance to the senses and its meaning. Hence there is no reason why Cratylus should allow himself to be subjected to the yoke of the schema of original and copy. It is true that a copy, without being a mere duplicate of the original, resembles the original; it is a different thing that, because of its imperfect similarity, points to the other that it represents. But this obviously does not pertain to the relationship between the word and its meaning. Thus it is like the revelation of a wholly obscured truth when Socrates says that words, unlike pictures (*zoa*), can be not only correct but true (*alethe*).³⁰ The "truth" of a word does not depend on its correctness, its correct adequation to the thing. It lies rather in its perfect intellectuality—i.e., the manifestness of the word's meaning in its sound. In this sense all words are "true"—i.e., their being is wholly absorbed in their meaning—whereas a copy is only more or less similar and thus, judged by reference to the appearance of the original, only more or less correct.

But, as always with Plato, there is a reason for Socrates' being so blind to what he refutes. Cratylus is unaware that the meaning of words is not simply identical with the objects named; and still less is he aware—and this is the reason for Socrates' tacit superiority—that *logos* (discourse and speech) and the manifestation of things that takes place in it, is something different from the act of intending the meanings contained in words, and it is here, in speaking, that the actual capacity of language to communicate what is correct and true has its locus. The Sophists' misuse of speech arises from their failure to recognize its capacity for truth (the contrary capacity of which is falseness, *pseudos*). If *logos* is understood as

TRUTH AND METHOD

a thing's presentation (*deloma*), as its manifestation, without making a fundamental distinction between this truth function of speech and the significant character of words, then there opens up a kind of confusion peculiar to language. We can then imagine that in the word we have the thing. The legitimate path to knowledge will seem to be to stick to the word. But the reverse is also true. Where we have knowledge, the truth of an utterance must be built up out of the truth of words, as if out of its elements, and just as we assume the "correctness" of these words—i.e., their natural adequation to what they name—we should be able to interpret even the elements of these words, namely the letters, in terms of their copying function in relation to things. This is the conclusion to which Socrates compels his partner.

But all this misses the point that the truth of things resides in discourse—which means, ultimately, in intending a unitary meaning concerning things—and not in the individual words, not even in a language's entire stock of words. It is this error that enables Socrates to refute the objections of Cratylus, even though they are so apt in relation to the truth of the word—i.e., to its significance. Against him Socrates employs the usage of words—that is speech, *logos*, with its possibility of being either true or false. The name, the word, seems to be true or false to the extent that it is used rightly or wrongly—i.e., rightly or wrongly associated with something. This association, however, is not that of the word; rather, it is already *logos* and in such a *logos* can find its adequate expression. For example, to name someone "Socrates" is to say that this person is called "Socrates."

Thus the relational ordering that is *logos* is much more than the mere correspondence of words and things, as is ultimately assumed in the Eleatic doctrine of being and in the copy theory. The truth contained in the *logos* is not that of mere perception (of *noein*), not just letting being appear; rather, it always places being in a relationship, assigning something to it. For precisely this reason, it is not the word (*onoma*) but the *logos* that is the bearer of truth (and also error). From this it necessarily follows that being expressed, and thus being bound to language, is quite secondary to the system of relations within which *logos* articulates and interprets the thing. We see that it is *not word but number* that is the real paradigm of the noetic: number, whose name is obviously pure convention and whose "exactitude" consists in the fact that every number is defined by its place in the series, so that it is a pure structure of intelligibility, an *ens rationis*, not in the weak sense of a being-validity but in the strong sense of perfect rationality. This is the real conclusion to which the *Cratylus* is drawn, and

it has one very important consequence, which in fact influences all further thinking about language.

If the sphere of the *logos* represents the sphere of the noetic in the variety of its associations, then the *word*, just like the number, becomes the mere *sign* of a being that is well defined and hence preknown. This is, fundamentally, to turn the question around. Now we are not starting from the thing and inquiring into the being of the word as a means of conveying it. Rather, beginning from the word as a means, we are asking what and how it communicates to the person who uses it. By nature, the *sign* has its being only in application, and so its "self" consists only in pointing to something "other." It must be foregrounded from the context in which it is encountered and taken as a sign, in order for its own being as an object to be superseded and for it to dissolve (disappear) into its meaning. It is the abstraction of pointing itself (*Verweisung*; also, referring).

A sign, then, is not something that insists on its own content. It does not even need to have any similarity to its referent—and if it has, then it need be only schematic. But this means again that all visible content of its own is reduced to the minimum necessary to assist its pointing function. The more univocally a sign-thing signifies, the more the sign is a pure sign—i.e., it is exhausted in the co-ordination. Thus for example, written signs are co-ordinated with particular sounds, numerical signs with particular numbers, and they are the most ideal signs because their position in the order completely exhausts them. Badges, marks, ciphers, and so on have ideality insofar as they are taken as signs—i.e., are reduced to their referential function. Here a sign-being subsists only in something else, which, as a sign-thing, both exists in itself and has its own meaning on the one hand and on the other has the meaning that it signifies as a sign. In this case the sign acquires meaning as a sign only in relation to the subject who takes it as a sign. "It does not have its absolute significance within itself—i.e., the subject is not superseded in it."³¹ It is still an immediate entity (it still subsists in the context of other entities; in a decorative context, for example, even written signs have ornamental value), and only on the basis of its own immediate being is it at the same time something referential, ideal. The difference between what it is and what it means is absolute.

At the other extreme—the *copy*—the situation is quite different. Certainly the copy implies the same contradiction between its being and its meaning, but it does so in such a way that it supersedes this contradiction within itself precisely by means of the resemblance that lies within itself. It

does not acquire the function of pointing or representing from the subject who takes it as a sign but from its own content. It is not a mere sign. For in it the thing copied is itself represented, caught, and made present. That is why it can be judged by the standard of resemblance—i.e., by *the extent to which it makes present in itself what is not present.*

The legitimate question whether the word is nothing but a "pure sign" or instead something like a "copy" or an "image" is thoroughly discredited by the *Cratylus*. Since there the argument that the word is a copy is driven ad absurdum, the only alternative seems to be that it is a sign. Although it is not especially emphasized, this consequence results from the negative discussion of the *Cratylus* and is sealed by knowledge being banished to the intelligible sphere. Thus, in all discussion of language ever since, the concept of the image (eikon) has been replaced by that of the sign (semeion or semainon). This is not just a terminological change; it expresses an epoch-making decision about thought concerning language.³² That the true being of things is to be investigated "without names" means that there is no access to truth in the proper being of words as such—even though, of course, no questioning, answering, instructing, and differentiating can take place without the help of language. This is to say that thought is so independent of the being of words—which thought takes as mere signs through which what is referred to, the idea, the thing, is brought into view—that the word is reduced to a wholly secondary relation to the thing. It is a mere instrument of communication, the bringing forth (ekpherein) and uttering (logos prophorikos) of what is meant in the medium of the voice. It follows that an ideal system of signs, whose sole purpose is to coordinate all signs in an unambiguous system, makes the power of words (dunamis ton onomaton)—the range of variation of the contingent in the historical languages as they have actually developed—appear as a mere flaw in their utility. This is the ideal of a characteristic universalis.

The exclusion of what a language "is" beyond its efficient functioning as sign material—i.e., the self-conquest of language by a system of artificial, unambiguously defined symbols—this ideal of the eighteenth- and twentieth-century Enlightenment, represents the ideal language, because to it would correspond the totality of the knowable: Being as absolutely available objectivity. We cannot object that no such mathematical sign language is conceivable without a language that would introduce its conventions. This problem of a "metalanguage" may be unsolvable because it involves a reiterative regress. But the interminability of this

process constitutes no fundamental objection to accepting the ideal it approaches.

It must also be admitted that every development of scientific terminology, however confined its use may be, constitutes a phase of this process. For what is a *technical term*? A word whose meaning is univocally defined, inasmuch as it signifies a defined concept. A technical term is always somewhat artificial insofar as either the word itself is artificially formed or—as is more frequent—a word already in use has the variety and breadth of its meanings excised and is assigned only one particular conceptual meaning. In contrast to the living meaning of the words in spoken language—to which, as Wilhelm von Humboldt rightly showed,³³ a certain range of variation is essential—a technical term is a word that has become ossified. Using a word as a technical term is an act of violence against language. Unlike the pure sign language of symbolic logic, however, the use of technical terminology (even if often in the guise of a foreign word) passes into the spoken language. There is no such thing as purely technical discourse; but the technical term, created artificially and against the spirit of language, returns into its stream (as we can see even from the artificial terms of modern advertising). This is indirectly confirmed by the fact that sometimes a technical distinction does not catch on and is constantly denied in common usage. Obviously this means that it must bow to the demands of language. We need think only of the impotent pedantry with which neo-Kantianism castigated the use of "transcendental" for "transcendent," or the use of "ideology" in a positive, dogmatic sense which has become general despite its being originally coined for polemical and instrumental purposes. Hence, in interpreting scientific texts, one must always count on finding the technical and the freer use of a word juxtaposed.³⁴ Modern interpreters of classical texts easily underestimate the need to do so because in modern scientific usage a concept is more artificial and hence more fixed than in the ancient world, which had no foreign words and very few artificial ones.

Only through mathematical symbolism would it be possible to rise entirely above the contingency of the historical languages and the vagueness of their concepts. Through the permutations and combinations of such a sign system, Leibniz believed, we would acquire new, mathematically certain truths, because the "ordo" imaged in such a sign system would find an echo in all languages.³⁵ Leibniz's claim that the characteristic universalis is an *ars inveniendi* clearly depends on the artificiality of its symbols. This is what makes calculation possible—i.e., the discovery of

relations from the formal laws of the system of combinations—independently of whether or not experience presents us with relationships between things corresponding to those combinations. By thinking ahead in this way into the sphere of possibilities, thinking reason is itself brought to its absolute perfection. For human reason there is no more adequate form of knowledge than the *notitia numerorum*,³⁶ and all calculation proceeds on its model. But it is a universal truth that human imperfection precludes adequate knowledge a priori, and that experience is indispensable. Knowledge acquired through these symbols is not clear and distinct, for a symbol gives nothing to the senses to perceive; rather, such knowledge is “blind,” inasmuch as the symbol is a substitute for a real piece of knowledge, merely indicating that it could be acquired.

Thus the ideal of language that Leibniz is pursuing is a “language” of reason: an “analysis notionum” which, starting from “first” concepts, would develop the whole system of true concepts and so be a copy of the universe of beings, just as is the divine reason.³⁷ In this way, the world—conceived as the calculation of God, who works out the best among all the possibilities of being—would be recalculated by human reason.

From this ideal it becomes clear that language is something other than a mere sign system denoting the totality of objects. A word is not just a sign. In a sense that is hard to grasp, it is also something almost like a copy or image. We need only think of the other extreme possibility—of a purely artificial language—to see the relative justification of such an archaic theory of language. A word has a mysterious connection with what it “images”; it belongs to its being. This is meant in a fundamental way; it is not just that mimesis has a certain share in creating language, for no one denies that. Plato obviously thought so, as does philology today when it assigns a certain function to onomatopoeia in the history of language. But fundamentally language is taken to be something wholly detached from the being of what is under consideration; it is taken to be an instrument of subjectivity. To say this is to follow a path of abstraction that ultimately leads to the rational construction of an artificial language.

In my view this path leads us away from the nature of language.³⁸ Language and thinking about things are so bound together that it is an abstraction to conceive of the system of truths as a pregiven system of possibilities of being for which the signifying subject selects corresponding signs. A word is not a sign that one selects, nor is it a sign that one makes

or gives to another; it is not an existent thing that one picks up and gives an ideality of meaning in order to make another being visible through it. This is mistaken on both counts. Rather, the ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful already. But this does not imply, on the other hand, that the word precedes all experience and simply advenes to an experience in an external way, by subjecting itself to it. Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. We seek the right word—i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing—so that in it the thing comes into language. Even if we keep in mind that this does not imply any simple copying, the word still belongs to the thing insofar as a word is not a sign coordinated to the thing *ex post facto*. Aristotle’s analysis of how concepts are formed by induction, which we considered above, offers an indirect proof of this. Admittedly, Aristotle himself does not explicitly connect the formation of concepts with the problem of the formation of words and the learning of language, but in his paraphrase Themistius exemplifies the formation of concepts by children’s learning to speak.³⁹ So much is the *logos* bound up with language.

If Greek philosophy does not want to admit this relationship between word and thing, speech and thought, the reason no doubt is that thought had to protect itself against the intimate relationship between word and thing in which the speaker lives. The dominion of this “most speakable of all languages” (Nietzsche) over thought was so great that the chief concern of philosophy was to free itself from it. Thus from early on, the Greek philosophers fought against the “*onoma*” as the source of the seduction and confusion of thought, and instead embraced the ideality that is constantly created in language. This was already true when Parmenides conceived the truth of the thing from the *logos*, and certainly after the Platonic turn to “discourse,” followed by Aristotle’s orienting the forms of being to the forms of assertion (*schemata tes kategorias*). Because here orientation to the *eidos* was conceived as determining the *logos*, the notion that language should have a being of its own could only be regarded as a confusion, and to banish and control it was the purpose of thought. Hence the critique of the correctness of names in the *Cratylus* is the first step toward modern instrumental theory of language and the ideal of a sign system of reason. Wedged in between image and sign, the being of language could only be reduced to the level of pure sign.

(B) LANGUAGE AND VERBUM

There is, however, an idea that is not Greek which does more justice to the being of language, and so prevented the forgetfulness of language in Western thought from being complete. This is the Christian idea of *incarnation*. Incarnation is obviously not embodiment. Neither the idea of the soul nor of God that is connected with embodiment corresponds to the Christian idea of incarnation.

The relation between soul and body as conceived in these theories—for instance, in Platonic and Pythagorean philosophy, and corresponding to the religious idea of the migration of souls—assumes that soul and body are completely different. The soul retains its own separate nature throughout all its embodiments, and the separation from the body is regarded as a purification—i.e., as a restoration of its true and real being. Even the appearance of the divine in human form, which makes Greek religion so human, has nothing to do with incarnation. God does not become man, but rather shows himself to men in human form while wholly retaining his superhuman divinity. By contrast, the fact that God became man, as the Christian religion teaches, implies the sacrifice that the crucified Christ accepts as the Son of Man. But this is a relationship that is strangely different from embodiment and is expressed theologically in the doctrine of the Trinity.

This cornerstone of Christian thought is all the more important for us because for Christian thought too the incarnation is closely connected to the problem of the word. First in the Fathers and then in the systematic elaboration of Augustinianism during the Scholastic period, the interpretation of the *mystery of the Trinity*, the most important task confronting the thinking of the Middle Ages, had to do with the relationship between human speech and thought. Here dogmatic theology relied chiefly on the prologue to the Gospel of John and, although theology was applying Greek ideas to its own theological tasks, philosophy acquired by this very means a dimension foreign to Greek thought. If the Word became flesh and if it is only in the incarnation that spirit is fully realized, then the logos is freed from its spirituality, which means, at the same time, from its cosmic potentiality. The uniqueness of the redemptive event introduces the essence of history into Western thought, brings the phenomenon of language out of its immersion in the ideality of meaning, and offers it to philosophical reflection. For, in contrast to the Greek logos, the word is pure event (*verbum proprie dicitur personaliter tantum*).⁴⁰

Of course human language thereby only indirectly becomes an object of reflection. The human word is used only as a counterpart to the theological problem of the Word, the *verbum dei*—i.e., the unity of God the Father and God the Son. But the important thing for us is precisely that the mystery of this unity is reflected in the phenomenon of language.

Even the way the Fathers connect theological speculation about the mystery of the incarnation to Hellenistic thought is interesting because of the new dimension which they envisage. Thus initially they tried to make use of the Stoic antithesis of the inner and the outer logos (*logos endiathetos*—*prophorikos*).⁴¹ This distinction was originally intended to distinguish the Stoic world principle of the logos from the externality of merely repeating a word.⁴² But now the contrary immediately acquires a positive significance for the Christian doctrine of incarnation. The analogy between the inner and the outer word, speaking the word aloud in the *vox*, now acquires an exemplary value.

Creation once took place through the word of God. In this way the early Fathers used the miracle of language to explain the un-Greek idea of the creation. But most important the actual redemptive act, the sending of the Son, the mystery of the incarnation, is described in St. John's prologue itself in terms of the word. Exegesis interprets the speaking of the word to be as miraculous as the incarnation of God. In both cases the act of becoming is not the kind of becoming in which something turns into something else. Neither does it consist in separating one thing from the other (*kat' apokopen*), nor in lessening the inner word by its emergence into exteriority, nor in becoming something different, so that the inner word is used up.⁴³ Even in the earliest applications of Greek thought we can discern a new orientation toward the mysterious unity of Father and Son, of Spirit and Word. And if direct reference to the act of uttering, to speaking the word aloud, is ultimately rejected in Christian dogmatics—in the rejection of subordinationism—it is still necessary, because of this very decision, to reconsider philosophically the mystery of language and its connection to thought. The greater miracle of language lies not in the fact that the Word becomes flesh and emerges in external being, but that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance is always already a word. That the Word is with God from all eternity is the victorious doctrine of the church in its defense against subordinationism, and it situates the problem of language, too, entirely within inner thought.

The external word, and with it the whole problem of the variety of languages, was explicitly devalued by Augustine, though he still discusses

it.⁴⁴ The external word—just like the word that is reproduced only inwardly—is tied to a particular tongue (*lingua*). The fact that the *verbum* is spoken differently in different languages, however, means only that it cannot reveal itself through the human tongue in its true being. In a depreciation of sensible appearance that is entirely Platonic, Augustine says, "We do not say a thing as it is but as it can be seen or heard by our senses." The "true" word, the *verbum cordis*, is completely independent of such an appearance. It is neither *prolativum* (brought forth) nor *cogitativum in similitudine soni* (thought in the likeness of sound). Hence this inner word is the mirror and the image of the divine Word. When Augustine and the Scholastics consider the problem of the *verbum* in order to attain the conceptual means to elucidate the mystery of the Trinity, they are concerned exclusively with this inner word, the word of the heart, and its relation to the "*intelligentia*" (Lat.).

Thus it is a quite specific side of the nature of language that comes to light here. The mystery of the Trinity is mirrored in the miracle of language insofar as the word that is true, because it says what the thing is, is nothing by itself and does not seek to be anything: *nihil de suo habens, sed totum de illa scientia de qua nascitur*. It has its being in its revealing. Exactly the same thing is true of the mystery of the Trinity. Here too the important thing is not the earthly appearance of the Redeemer as such, but rather his complete divinity, his consubstantiality with God. To grasp the independent personal existence of Christ within this sameness of being is the task of theology. Here a human analogue—the mental word, the *verbum intellectus*—is helpful. This is more than a mere metaphor, for the human relationship between thought and speech corresponds, despite its imperfections, to the divine relationship of the Trinity. The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father.

One might well ask whether we are not here using the unintelligible to explain the unintelligible. What sort of word is it that remains the inner dialogue of thought and finds no outer form in sound? Does such a thing exist? Does not all our thinking always follow the paths of a particular language, and do we not know perfectly well that one has to think in a language if one really wants to speak it? Even if we remember that our reason preserves its freedom in the face of the bond of our thinking with language, either by inventing and using artificial sign languages or by translating from one language into another—which presume a capacity to rise above bondage to language to attain the sense intended—nevertheless

this capacity itself is, as we have seen, linguistic. The "language of reason" is not a special language. So, given that the bond to language cannot be superseded, what sense does it make to talk about an "inner word" that is spoken, as it were, in the pure language of reason? How does the word of reason (if we can translate "*intellectus*" here by "reason") prove itself a real "word," if it is not a word with a sound nor even the image of one, but that which is signified by a sign—i.e., what is meant and thought itself?

Because the doctrine of the inner word is intended to undergird theological interpretation of the Trinity by analogy, the theological question as such can be of no further help to us. Rather, we must turn our attention to the "inner word" itself and ask what it may be. It cannot be simply the Greek *logos*, the dialogue that the soul conducts with itself. On the contrary, the mere fact that *logos* is translated both by *ratio* and *verbum* indicates that the phenomenon of language is becoming more important in the Scholastic elaboration of Greek metaphysics than was the case with the Greeks themselves.

The particular difficulty of enlisting the aid of Scholastic thinking for our problem is that the Christian understanding of the word—as we find it in the Fathers, who in part take over and in part extend late classical ideas—once again approximated the classical concept of *logos* when Aristotelianism entered High Scholasticism. Thus St. Thomas took the Christian doctrine developed from the prologue to the Gospel of John and systematically combined it with Aristotle.⁴⁵ With him, significantly, there is hardly any talk of the variety of languages, although Augustine still discusses it, even if only to discard it in favor of the "inner word." For him the doctrine of the "inner word" is the self-evident premise for investigating the connection between *forma* and *verbum*.

Nevertheless, even for Thomas *logos* and *verbum* do not completely coincide. Certainly the word is not the event of utterance, this irrevocable handing over of one's own thinking to another, but the word still has the ontological character of an event. The inner word remains related to its possible utterance. While it is being-conceived by the intellect, the subject matter is at the same time ordered toward being uttered (*similitudo rei concepta in intellectu et ordinata ad manifestationem vel ad se vel ad alterum*). Thus the inner word is certainly not related to a particular language, nor does it have the character of vaguely imagined words that proceed from the memory; rather, it is the subject matter thought through to the end (*forma excogitata*). Since a process of thinking through to the end is involved, we have to acknowledge a processual element in it. It

proceeds per modum egredientis. It is not utterance but thought; however, what is achieved in this speaking to oneself is the perfection of thought. So the inner word, by expressing thought, images the finiteness of our discursive understanding. Because our understanding does not comprehend what it knows in one single inclusive glance, it must always draw what it thinks out of itself, and present it to itself as if in an inner dialogue with itself. In this sense all thought is speaking to oneself.

Greek logos philosophy undoubtedly knew this. Plato described thought as an inner dialogue of the soul with itself,⁴⁶ and the infiniteness of the dialectical effort that he requires of the philosopher expresses the discursiveness of our finite understanding. However much he called for "pure thought," Plato always recognized too that the medium of onoma and logos remained essential for thought about an object. But if the doctrine of the inner word means nothing more than the discursiveness of human thought and speech, how can the "word" be analogous to the process of the divine persons expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity? Does not the very antithesis between intuition and discursiveness get in the way here? What is common to both "processes"?

It is true that no temporality enters into the relations of the divine persons to one another. But the successiveness characteristic of the discursiveness of human thought is not basically temporal in nature either. When human thought passes from one thing to another—i.e., thinks first this thing and then that—it is still not just a series of one thought after another. It does not think in a simple succession, first one thing and then another, which would mean that it would itself constantly change in the process. If it thinks first of one thing and then of another, that means it knows what it is doing, and knows how to connect the one thing with the next. Hence what is involved is not a temporal relation but a mental process, an emanatio intellectualis.

Thomas uses this Neoplatonic concept to describe both the processual character of the inner word and the process of the Trinity. This brings out a point not implied in Plato's logos philosophy. The idea of emanation in Neoplatonism implies more than the physical movement of flowing out. The primary image, rather, is that of a fountain.⁴⁷ In the process of emanation, that from which something flows, the One, is not deprived or depleted. The same is true of the birth of the Son from the Father, who does not use up anything of himself but takes something to himself. And this is likewise true of the mental emergence that takes place in the process of thought, speaking to oneself. This kind of production is at the same time

a total remaining within oneself. If it can be said of the divine relationship between word and intellect that the word originates not partially but wholly (totaliter) in the intellect, then it is true also that one word originates totaliter from another—i.e., has its origin in the mind—like the deduction of a conclusion from the premisses (ut conclusio ex principiis). Thus the process and emergence of thought is not a process of change (motus), not a transition from potentiality into action, but an emergence ut actus ex actu. The word is not formed only after the act of knowledge has been completed—in Scholastic terms, after the intellect has been informed by the species; it is the act of knowledge itself. Thus the word is simultaneous with this forming (formatio) of the intellect.

Thus we can see how the creation of the word came to be viewed as a true image of the Trinity. It is a true generatio, a true birth, even though, of course, there is no receptive part to go with a generating one. It is precisely the intellectual nature of the generation of the word, however, that is of decisive importance for its function as a theological model. The process of the divine persons and the process of thought really have something in common.

Nevertheless, it is the differences rather than the similarities between the divine and human word that are important to us. This is theologically sound. The mystery of the Trinity, which the analogy with the inner word is supposed to illuminate, must ultimately remain incomprehensible in terms of human thought. If the whole of the divine mind is expressed in the divine Word, then the processual element in this word signifies something for which we basically have no analogy. Insofar as, in knowing itself, the divine mind likewise knows all beings, the word of God is the word of the Spirit that knows and creates everything in one intuition (intuitus). The act of production disappears in the immediacy of divine omniscience. Creation is not a real process, but only interprets the structure of the universe in a temporal scheme.⁴⁸ If we want to grasp the processual element in the word more exactly, which is the important thing for our inquiry into the connection between language and understanding, we cannot rest content with the theologians' way of stating this difference; rather, we will have to linger over the imperfection of the human mind and its difference from the divine. Here we can follow Thomas, who specifies three differences.

1. The first thing is that the human word is potential before it is actualized. It is capable of being formed, though it is not yet formed. The

process of thought begins with something coming into our mind from our memory. But even this is an emanation, for the memory is not plundered and does not lose anything. But what comes into our mind in this way is not yet something finished and thought out to its conclusion. Rather, the real movement of thought now begins: the mind hurries from one thing to the other, turns this way and that, considering this and that, and seeks the perfect expression of its thoughts through inquiry (*inquisitio*) and thoughtfulness (*cogitatio*). The perfect word, therefore, is formed only in thinking, like a tool, but once it exists as the full perfection of the thought, nothing more is created with it. Rather, the thing is then present in it. Thus it is not a real tool. Thomas found a brilliant metaphor for this: the word is like a mirror in which the thing is seen. The curious thing about this mirror, however, is that it nowhere extends beyond the image of the thing. In it nothing is mirrored except this one thing, so that the whole mirror reflects only the image (*similitudo*). What is remarkable about this metaphor is that the word is understood here entirely as the perfect reflection of the thing—i.e., as the expression of the thing—and has left behind it the path of the thought to which alone, however, it owes its existence. This does not happen with the divine mind.

2. Unlike the divine word, the human word is essentially incomplete. No human word can express our mind completely. But as the image of the mirror shows, this does not mean that the word as such is incomplete. The word reflects completely what the mind is thinking. Rather, the imperfection of the human mind consists in its never being completely present to itself but in being dispersed into thinking this or that. From this essential imperfection it follows that the human word is not one, like the divine word, but must necessarily be many words. Hence the variety of words does not in any way mean that the individual word has some remediable deficiency, in that it did not completely express what the mind is thinking; but because our intellect is imperfect—i.e., is not completely present to itself in what it knows—it needs the multiplicity of words. It does not really know what it knows.

3. The third difference is connected with this point. Whereas God completely expresses his nature and substance in the Word in pure immediacy, every thought that we think (and therefore every word in which the thought expresses itself) is a mere accident of the mind. The word of human thought is directed toward the thing, but it cannot contain it as a whole within itself. Thus thought constantly proceeds to new

conceptions and is fundamentally incapable of being wholly realized in any. This incapacity for completeness has a positive side: it reveals the true infinity of the mind, which constantly surpasses itself in a new mental process and in doing so also finds the freedom for constantly new projects.

Summing up what we have learned from the theology of the *verbum*, first let us make a point that has hardly come to the fore in the preceding analysis—nor was it expressed in Scholastic thought. Yet it is of particular importance for the hermeneutical phenomenon. The inner unity of thinking and speaking to oneself, which corresponds to the Trinitarian mystery of the incarnation, implies that the inner mental word *is not formed by a reflective act*. A person who thinks something—i.e., says it to himself—means by it the thing that he thinks. His mind is not directed back toward his own thinking when he forms the word. The word is, of course, the product of the work of his mind. It forms the word in itself by thinking the thought through. But unlike other products it remains entirely within the mental sphere. This gives the impression that what is involved is a relationship to itself and that speaking to oneself is a reflexive act. This is not so, in fact, but this structure of thought undoubtedly explains why thought can direct itself reflectively toward itself and can thus become an object to itself. The inwardness of the word, which constitutes the inner unity of thought and speech, is the reason for its being easy to miss the direct and unreflective character of the “word.” In thinking, a person does not move from the one thing to the other, from thinking to speaking to himself. The word does not emerge in a sphere of the mind that is still free of thought (*in aliquo sui nudo*). Hence the appearance is created that the formation of the word arises from the mind’s being directed toward itself. In fact there is no reflection when the word is formed, for the word is not expressing the mind but the thing intended. The starting point for the formation of the word is the substantive content (the species) that fills the mind. The thought seeking expression refers not to the mind but to the thing. Thus the word is not the expression of the mind but is concerned with the *similitudo rei*. The subject matter that is thought (the species) and the word belong as closely together as possible. Their unity is so close that the word does not occupy a second place in the mind beside the “species” (Lat.); rather, the word is that in which knowledge is consummated—i.e., that in which the species is fully thought. Thomas points out that in this respect the word resembles light, which is what makes color visible.

But there is a *second* thing that Scholastic thinking teaches us. The difference between the unity of the divine Word and the multiplicity of human words does not exhaust the matter. Rather, unity and multiplicity are fundamentally in dialectical relationship to each other. The dialectic of this relationship conditions the whole nature of the word. Even the divine Word is not entirely free of the idea of multiplicity. It is true that the divine Word is one unique word that came into the world in the form of the Redeemer; but insofar as it remains an event—and this is the case, despite the rejection of subordinationism, as we have seen—there is an essential connection between the unity of the divine Word and its appearance in the church. The proclamation of salvation, the content of the Christian gospel, is itself an event that takes place in sacrament and preaching, and yet it expresses only what took place in Christ's redemptive act. Hence it is one word that is proclaimed ever anew in preaching. Its character as gospel, then, already points to the multiplicity of its proclamation. The meaning of the word cannot be detached from the event of proclamation. *Quite the contrary, being an event is a characteristic belonging to the meaning itself.* It is like a curse, which obviously cannot be separated from the act of uttering it. What we understand from it is not an abstractable logical sense like that of a statement, but the actual curse that occurs in it.⁴⁹ The same holds for the unity and the multiplicity of the word proclaimed by the church. The saving message preached in every sermon is the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The Christ of the resurrection and the Christ of the kerygma are one and the same. Modern Protestant theology, in particular, has elaborated the eschatological character of the faith that depends on this dialectical relationship.

The human word puts the dialectical relationship between the multiplicity of words and the unity of the word in a new light. Plato recognized that the human word is essentially discursive—i.e., that the association of a multiplicity of words expresses one meaning; this structure of the logos he developed dialectically. Then Aristotle demonstrated the logical structure of the proposition, the judgment, the syllogism, and the argument. But even this does not exhaust the matter. The unity of the word that explicates itself in the multiplicity of words manifests something that is not covered by the structure of logic and that brings out the *character of language as event: the process of concept formation.* In developing the doctrine of the verbum, Scholastic thought is not content with viewing concept formation as simply the reflection of the order of things.

(C) LANGUAGE AND CONCEPT FORMATION

The natural concept formation that keeps pace with language does not always simply follow the order of things, but very often takes place as a result of accidents and relations. This is confirmed by a glance at Plato's analysis of concepts and at Aristotle's definitions. But the precedence of the logical order established by the concepts of substance and accident makes language's natural concept formation appear only as an imperfection of our finite mind. It is because we know only the accidents that we follow them in forming concepts. Even if this is right, a curious advantage follows from this imperfection, as Thomas seems correctly to have pointed out: the freedom to form an infinite number of concepts and to penetrate what is meant ever more deeply.⁵⁰ Because the process of thought is conceived as the process of explication in words, a logical achievement of language becomes apparent that cannot be fully understood in terms of an order of things as they would appear to an infinite mind. The subordination of the natural concept formation that occurs in language to the structure of logic, as taught by Aristotle and, following him, Thomas, thus has only a relative truth. *Rather, when the Greek idea of logic is penetrated by Christian theology, something new is born: the medium of language, in which the mediation of the incarnation event achieves its full truth.* Christology prepares the way for a new philosophy of man, which mediates in a new way between the mind of man in its finitude and the divine infinity. Here what we have called the hermeneutical experience finds its own, special ground.

Thus we turn to the natural formation of concepts that takes place in language. Even if each particular case of speech involves subordinating what is meant to the universality of a pre-established verbal meaning, it is obvious that speaking cannot be thought of as the combination of these acts of subsumption, through which something particular is subordinated to a general concept. A person who speaks—who, that is to say, uses the general meanings of words—is so oriented toward the particularity of what he is perceiving that everything he says acquires a share in the particularity of the circumstances he is considering.⁵¹

But that means, on the other hand, that the general concept meant by the word is enriched by any given perception of a thing, so that what emerges is a new, more specific word formation which does more justice to the particularity of that act of perception. However certainly speaking implies using pre-established words with general meanings, at the same

time, a constant process of concept formation is going on, by means of which the life of a language develops.

The logical schema of induction and abstraction is very misleading here, since in verbal consciousness there is no explicit reflection on what is common to different things, nor does using words in their general meaning regard what they designate as a case subsumed under a universal. The universality of the genus and the formation of classificatory concepts are far removed from verbal consciousness. Even disregarding all formal similarities that have nothing to do with the generic concept, if a person transfers an expression from one thing to the other, he has in mind something that is common to both of them; but this in no way needs to be generic universality. Rather, he is following his widening experience, which looks for similarities, whether in the appearance of things or in their significance for us. The genius of verbal consciousness consists in being able to express these similarities. This is its fundamental metaphorical nature, and it is important to see that to regard the metaphorical use of a word as not its real sense is the prejudice of a theory of logic that is alien to language.⁵²

It is obvious that the particularity of an experience finds expression in metaphorical transference, and is not at all the fruit of a concept formed by means of abstraction. But it is equally obvious that knowledge of what is common is obtained in this way. Thus thought can turn for its own instruction⁵³ to this stock that language has built up. Plato explicitly did so with his "flight into the logoi." But classificatory logic also starts from the logical advance work that language has done for it.⁵⁴

This is confirmed by a look at its *prehistory*, especially at the theory of concept formation in the Platonic Academy. We have seen that Plato's call to rise above names assumes that the cosmos of ideas is fundamentally independent of language. But since rising above names takes place in regard to the idea and is a dialectic—i.e., an insight into the unity of what is observed, seeing what is common to various phenomena—it follows the natural direction in which language itself develops. Rising above names means simply that the truth of the thing is not contained in the name itself. It does not mean that thinking can dispense with the use of name and logos. On the contrary, Plato always recognized that these intermediaries of thought are necessary, even though they must always be regarded as susceptible of improvement. The idea, the true being of the thing, cannot be known in any other way than by passing through these intermediaries.

But is there a knowledge of the idea itself as this particular and individual thing? Is not the nature of things a whole in the same way that language too is a whole? Just as individual words acquire their meaning and relative unambiguity only in the unity of discourse, so the true knowledge of being can be achieved only in the whole of the relational structure of the ideas. This is the thesis of Plato's *Parmenides*. This, however, raises the following question: in order to define a single idea—i.e., to be able to distinguish it from everything else that exists—do we not need to know the whole?

We can hardly escape this consequence if, like Plato, we regard the cosmos of ideas as the true structure of being. We are told that the Platonist Speusippus, Plato's successor as the head of the Academy, did not escape it.⁵⁵ We know that he was particularly concerned with discovering what is common (*homoia*) and that he far exceeded what generic logic called universalization by using analogy—i.e., proportional correspondence—as a method of research. Here the dialectical capacity of discovering similarities and seeing one quality common to many things is still very close to the free universality of language and its principles of word formation. Analogies, which Speusippus sought everywhere—correspondences such as "wings are to birds what fins are to fish"—thus serve the definition of concepts because at the same time these correspondences constitute the most important developmental principles in the formation of words. Transference from one sphere to another not only has a logical function; it corresponds to the fundamental metaphoricity of language. The well-known stylistic figure of metaphor is only the rhetorical form of this universal—both linguistic and logical—generative principle. Thus Aristotle says, "To make a good metaphor means to recognize similarity."⁵⁶ Aristotle's *Topics* offers many confirmations of the indissolubility of the connection between concept and language. There, the *common genus* is derived explicitly from the observation of similarity.⁵⁷ Thus at the beginning of generic logic stands the advance work of language itself.

Accordingly Aristotle himself always assigns the greatest importance to the way in which the order of things becomes apparent in speaking about them. (The "categories"—and not only what Aristotle explicitly calls such—are forms of statement.) The formation of concepts by language is not only used by philosophical thought; it is developed further in certain directions. We have already referred above to the fact that Aristotle's theory of concept formation, the theory of the *epagoge*, could be illustrated by children learning to speak.⁵⁸ In fact, however fundamental Plato's

demystification of speech was for Aristotle, however great its influence on his own development of "logic," however much he was concerned to reflect the order of things and to detach it from all verbal contingencies by the conscious use of a logic of definition, especially in the classificatory description of nature, nevertheless for him speech and thought remained completely unified.

Hence the few places where he speaks of language as such hardly isolate the sphere of verbal meaning from the world of things it names. When Aristotle says of sounds or written signs that they "describe" when they become a symbolon, this means, certainly, that they do not exist naturally but by convention (*kata suntheken*). But his is not an instrumental theory of signs. Rather, the convention according to which the sounds of language or the signs of writing mean something is not an agreement on a means of understanding—that would already presuppose language; it is the agreement on which human community, its harmony with respect to what is good and proper, is founded.⁵⁹ Agreement in using verbal sounds and signs is only an expression of that fundamental agreement in what is good and proper. It is true that the Greeks liked to consider what was good and proper, what they called the *nomoi*, as the decree and the achievement of divine men. But for Aristotle this derivation of the *nomos* characterizes more its value than its actual origin. This is not to say that Aristotle no longer acknowledges the religious tradition, but that this, like every question of origin, is for him a way to the knowledge of being and value. The convention of which Aristotle speaks in regard to language characterizes its mode of being and implies nothing about its origin.

If we recall the analysis of the epagoge, we shall find further evidence of this.⁶⁰ There, we saw, Aristotle ingeniously left open the question of how universal concepts are formed. We can see now that he was taking account of the fact that the natural process of concept formation by language is always already going on. Thus even according to Aristotle the formation of concepts by language possesses a perfectly undogmatic freedom, for experiencing similarity among the things one encounters, which then leads to a universal, is merely a preliminary achievement: it stands at the beginning of science but is not yet science. This is what Aristotle emphasizes. If science erects compelling proof as its ideal, then it must advance beyond such modes of procedure. Thus, in accord with this ideal of proof, Aristotle criticized both Speusippus' doctrine of the common and the diaretical dialectic of Plato.

The consequence of accepting the ideal of logical proof as a yardstick, however, is that the Aristotelian critique has robbed the logical achievement of language of its scientific legitimacy. That achievement is recognized only from the point of view of rhetoric and is understood there as the artistic device of metaphor. The logical ideal of the ordered arrangement of concepts takes precedence over the living metaphoricality of language, on which all natural concept formation depends. For only a grammar based on logic will distinguish between the *proper* and the *metaphorical* meaning of a word. What originally constituted the basis of the life of language and its logical productivity, the spontaneous and inventive seeking out of similarities by means of which it is possible to order things, is now marginalized and instrumentalized into a rhetorical figure called metaphor. The struggle between philosophy and rhetoric for the training of Greek youth, which was decided with the victory of Attic philosophy, has also this side to it, namely that thinking about language becomes the matter of a grammar and rhetoric that have already acknowledged scientific concept formation as an ideal. Thus the sphere of verbal meanings begins to become detached from the sphere of things encountered in verbal form. Stoic logic speaks of incorporeal meanings by means of which talk about things occurs (*to lekton*). It is highly significant that these meanings are put on the same level as *topos*—i.e., space.⁶¹ Just as empty space is first given to thought only by mentally removing the objects related to each another within it,⁶² so "meanings" as such are now conceived by themselves for the first time, and a concept is created for them by mentally removing the things that are named by the meaning of words. Meanings, too, are like a space in which things are related to one another.

Such ideas obviously become possible only when the natural relationship—i.e., the intimate unity of speech and thought—is upset. We can mention the connection between Stoic thought and the grammatical and syntactical structure of the Latin language, which Lohmann has pointed out.⁶³ Undoubtedly, the fact that two languages were beginning to be used throughout the Hellenistic oikumene had a beneficial influence on thinking about language. But perhaps this development originates far earlier, and it is the birth of science itself that initiates this process. If so, its beginnings go back to the early days of Greek science. That this is so is suggested by the development of scientific concepts in the fields of music, mathematics, and physics, because there a field of rational objectivities is marked out, the construction of which calls into being corresponding

terms that can no longer really be called words. It can be stated as a fundamental principle that wherever words assume a mere sign function, the original connection between speaking and thinking, with which we are concerned, has been changed into an instrumental relationship. This changed relationship of word and sign is at the basis of concept formation in science and has become so self-evident to us that it requires a special effort of memory to recall that, alongside the scientific ideal of unambiguous designation, the life of language itself continues unchanged.

There is no lack of reminders, of course, when we consider the history of philosophy. Thus we showed that in medieval thought the problem of language as it pertains to theology constantly points back to the problem of the unity of thinking and speaking, and also brings out an aspect of the problem that classical Greek philosophy was unaware of. That the word is a process in which the unity of what is meant is fully expressed—as in speculation on the *verbum*—is something new that goes beyond the Platonic dialectic of the one and the many. For Plato sees the *logos* itself as moving within this dialectic and being nothing but the undergoing of the dialectic of the ideas. There is no real problem of interpretation here, in that its means, word and speech, are constantly being overtaken by the thinking mind. In contrast, we found that in Trinitarian speculation the procession of the divine persons involves the Neoplatonic inquiry into explication, unfolding—i.e., the proceeding from the One, and hence for the first time does justice to the processual character of the Word. But the problem of language could not emerge fully until the Scholastic combination of Christian thought with Aristotelian philosophy was supplemented by a new element that turned the distinction between the divine and the human mind into something positive and was to acquire the greatest importance for modern times. This is the element, common to both, of the *creative*. This, it seems to me, is the real importance of *Nicholas of Cusa*, who has recently been so much discussed.⁶⁴

Of course the analogy between the two modes of creativity has its limits; they correspond to the differences stressed above between the divine and the human word. Certainly, the divine word creates the world, but not in a temporal succession of creative thoughts and creative days. The human mind, on the other hand, possesses the whole of its thoughts only in temporal succession. It is true that this is not a purely temporal relationship, as we have seen already in St. Thomas. *Nicholas of Cusa* also points this out. It is like the number series, whose production is not really a temporal occurrence either but a movement of reason. *Nicholas of Cusa*

discerns the same movement of reason operating when genera and species are developed from out of the sphere of the sensible and explicated in individual concepts and words. They, too, are *entia rationis*. However Platonic and Neoplatonic this talk of unfolding may sound, in actual fact *Nicholas of Cusa* has decisively overcome the emanistic schema of the Neoplatonic doctrine of explication. He opposes to it the Christian doctrine of the *verbum*.⁶⁵ The word is for him no less than the mind itself, not a diminished or weakened manifestation of it. Knowing this constitutes the superiority of the Christian philosopher over the Platonist. Accordingly, the multiplicity in which the human mind unfolds itself is not a mere fall from true unity and not a loss of its home. Rather, there has to be a positive justification for the finitude of the human mind, however much this finitude remains related to the infinite unity of absolute being. This is prepared for in the idea of complication, and from this point of view the phenomenon of language also acquires a new aspect. It is the human mind that both complicates and explicates. The unfolding into discursive multiplicity is not only conceptual, but also extends into the verbal sphere. It is the variety of possible appellations—according to the various languages—that potentiates conceptual differentiation.

With the nominalist breakup of the classical logic of essence, the problem of language enters a new stage. Suddenly it is of positive significance that things can be articulated in various ways (though not in any way at all) according to their similarities and their differences. If the relationship of genus and species can be justified not only with regard to the nature of things—on the model of the “genuine” species in the self-construction of living nature—but also in another way with regard to man and his power to give names, then languages as they have grown up historically, with their history of meanings, their grammar and their syntax, can be seen as the varied forms of a logic of experience, of natural—i.e., historical—experience (which even includes supernatural experience). The thing itself is quite clear.⁶⁶ The articulation of words and things that each language performs in its own way always constitutes a primary natural way of forming concepts that is much different from the system of scientific concept formation. It exclusively follows the human aspect of things, the system of man’s needs and interests. What a linguistic community regards as important about a thing can be given the same name as other things that are perhaps of a quite different nature in other respects, so long as they all have the same quality that is important to the community. A nomenclature (*impositio nominis*) in no way corresponds

to the concepts of science and its classificatory system of *genus and species*. Rather, compared to the latter, it is often accidental attributes from which the general meaning of a word is derived.

Moreover, we must take account of the fact that science has a certain influence on language. For example, we no longer call whales fish because now everyone knows that whales are mammals. On the other hand, the rich variety of popular names for certain things is being ironed out, partly as a result of modern communications and partly by scientific and technological standardization, just as our vocabulary has generally contracted rather than expanded in such areas. There is said to be an African language that has two hundred different words for camel, according to the camel's particular circumstances and relationships to the desert dwellers. The specific meaning that "camel" has in all these different denominations makes it seem an entirely different creature.⁶⁷ In such cases we can say that there is an extreme tension between the *genus* and the linguistic designation. But we can also say that the tendency toward conceptual universality and that toward pragmatic meaning are never completely harmonized in any living language. That is why it is always artificial and contrary to the nature of language to measure the contingency of natural concept formation against the true order of things and to see the former as purely accidental. This contingency comes about, in fact, through the human mind's necessary and legitimate range of variation in articulating the essential order of things.

Despite the scriptural importance of the confusion of tongues, the fact that the Latin Middle Ages did not really pursue this aspect of the problem of language can be explained chiefly by the unquestioned dominance of Latin among scholars and by the continued influence of the Greek doctrine of the *logos*. It was only with the Renaissance, when the laity became important and the national languages part of cultivated learning, that people began to think productively about the relation of these languages to the inner—i.e., "natural"—word. But we must be careful not to ascribe the posture of inquiry characteristic of modern linguistic philosophy and its instrumental concept of language to the Renaissance. The significance of the first emergence of the problem of language in the Renaissance lies rather in the fact that the Graeco-Christian heritage was still automatically accepted as valid. This is quite clear in Nicholas of Cusa. As an explication of the unity of the spirit, the concepts expressed in words still retain their connection with a natural word (*vocabulum naturale*), which is reflected (*relucet*) in all of them, however arbitrary the individual name may be

(*impositio nominis fit ad beneplacitum*).⁶⁸ We may ask ourselves what this connection is and what this natural word is supposed to be. But it makes methodological sense to say that the individual words of each language are in an ultimate harmony with those of every other one, in that all languages are explications of the one unity of the mind.

Nicholas of Cusa, too, does not mean by the *natural word* the word of an original language that preceded the confusion of tongues. This kind of language of Adam, in the sense of the doctrine of a primal state, is far removed from his thinking. He starts, rather, from the fundamental inexactness of all human knowledge. Combining Platonic and nominalist elements, Cusa's theory of knowledge is that all human knowledge is mere conjecture and opinion (*conjectura, opinio*).⁶⁹ It is this doctrine that he now applies to language. Thus he can acknowledge the differences among national languages and the apparent arbitrariness of their vocabularies, without for that reason falling into a purely conventionalist theory of language and an instrumentalist conception of language. Just as human knowledge is essentially "inexact"—i.e., admits of a more or a less—so also is human language. Something for which there is a proper expression in one language (*propria vocabula*) is expressed in another by a more barbarous and remote word (*magis barbara et remotiora vocabula*). Thus expressions are more or less proper (*propria vocabula*). In a certain sense, all actual designations are arbitrary, and yet they have a necessary connection with the natural expression (*nomen naturale*) that corresponds to the thing itself (*forma*). Every expression is fitting (*congruum*), but not every one is exact (*precisum*).

Such a theory of language presupposes not that the things (*formae*) to which the words are attached belong to a pre-established order of original models that human knowledge is gradually approaching, but that this order is created by differentiation and combination out of the given nature of things. In this Nicholas of Cusa's thought has been influenced by nominalism. If the genera and species are themselves in this way intelligible being (*entia rationis*), then it is clear that the words can be in agreement with the perception of the thing to which they give expression, even if different languages use different words. For in this case it is not a question of variations in expression but of variations in the perception of the thing and of the formation of concepts that follows it—i.e., there is an essential inexactness; nevertheless, this variability does not preclude all expressions from being a reflection of the thing itself (*forma*). This kind of essential inexactness can be overcome only if the mind rises to the infinite.

TRUTH AND METHOD

In the infinite there is, then, only one single thing (forma) and one single word (vocabulum), namely the ineffable Word of God (verbum Dei) that is reflected in everything (relucet).

If we thus regard the human mind as related to the divine as a copy to the original, we can accept the range of variation in human languages. As at the beginning, in the discussion about the search for analogies in the Platonic academy, so also at the end, in the medieval discussion of universals, there is the idea of a real affinity between word and concept. We are still a long way here from the relativity of worldviews that modern thought considers a consequence of the variation of languages. Despite all their differences, Nicholas of Cusa still preserves their concordance, and that is what the Christian Platonist is concerned with. Essential for him is the fact that all human speech is related to the thing, and not so much the fact that human knowledge of things is bound to language. The latter represents only a prismatic refraction in which there shines the one truth.