Nirukta = Hermeneia[*]

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Every student of Vedic literature will be familiar with what are called by modern scholars "folk etymologies." I cite, for example, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VIII.3.3), "Verily, this Spirit is in the heart[1] (*eṣa ātmā hṛdi*). The hermeneia (*niruktam*) thereof is this: 'This is in the heart' (*hṛdayam*), and that is why the 'heart' is called '*hṛdayam.*' Whoever is a comprehensor of this reaches Heaven every day." Specimens, of course, abound in Yāska—for example, *Nirukta* V.14, *"Puṣkaram* means 'mid-world,' because it 'fosters' (*poṣati*) things that come to be.[2] Water is *puṣkaram* too, because it is a 'means of worship' (*pūjākaram*), and 'to be worshipped' (*pūjayitavyam*). Otherwise, as 'lotus' (*puṣkaram*) the word is of the same origin, being a 'means of adorning' (*vapuṣkaram*); and it is a 'bloom' (*puṣyam*) because it 'blossoms' (*puṣpate*)." Explanations of this kind are commonly dismissed as "etymological triflings" (J. Eggeling), "purely artificial" (A. B. Keith), and "very fanciful" (B. C. Mazumdar), or as "puns." On the other hand, one feels that they cannot be altogether ignored, for as the last-mentioned author says, "There are in many Upaniṣads very fanciful explanations ... disclosing bad grammar and worse idiom, and yet the grammarians who did not accept them as correct, did not say anything about them";[3] that is, the early Sanskrit grammarians, whose "scientific" abilities have been universally recognized, did not embody these

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[1] I.e., "within you," in the sense that "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you."

[2] The space between Heaven and Earth, being and not-being, light and darkness, essence and nature, being precisely the locus, opportunity, and "promised land" of all birth and becoming.

[3] B. C. Mazumdar, review of J. N. Rawson, *The Kaṭha Upaniṣad,* in *Indian Culture,* II (1935/1936), 378.

"explanations" in their "grammar," but at the same time never condemned them.

Nirukta is not, in fact, a part of philology in the modern sense; a hermeneutic explanation may or may not coincide with the actual pedigree of a word in question. *Nirukta* = *hermeneia* is founded upon a theory of language of which philology and grammar are only departments, one may even say the most humble departments, nor do I say this without a real and genuine respect for those "omniscient impeccable leviathans of science that headlong sound the linguistic ocean to its most horrid depths, and (in the intervals of ramming each other) ply their flukes on such audacious small fry as even on the mere surface will venture within their danger,"[4] and whose advice in matters of verbal genealogy I am always ready to accept. Etymology, an excellent thing in its place, is nevertheless precisely one of those "modern sciences which really represent quite literally 'residues' of the old sciences, no longer understood."[5] In India the traditional science of language is the special domain of the *pūrvamīmāṃsā*, of which the characteristic is that "It lays stress on the proposition that articulate sounds are eternal,[6] and on the consequent doctrine that the connection of a word with its sense is not due to convention, but is by nature inherent in the word itself." When, however, A. A. Macdonell adds to this excellent characterization that "Owing to its lack of philosophical interest, the system has not as yet much occupied the attention of European scholars,"[7] he only means that the subject is not of interest to himself and his kind; it is implausible that he should have had in mind deliberately to exclude Plato from the category of "philosophers." For not only does Plato employ the hermeneutic method in the C*ratylus*—for example, when he says " 'to have called' (τὸ καλέσαν) things useful is one and the same thing as to speak of 'the beautiful' (τὸ καλόν)"—but throughout this dialogue he is dealing with the problem of the nature of the relation between sounds and meanings, inquiring whether this is an essential or an accidental one. The general

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[4] Standish Hayes O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London and Edinburgh, 1892), II, v.
[5] René Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne* (Paris, 1927), p. 103.
[6] What is meant by the "eternity of the Veda" is sometimes misunderstood. "Eternal" is "without duration," "not in time" (*akāla*), therefore ever present. The "eternity" of tradition has nothing to do with the "dating" of a given scripture, in a literary sense. As St. Thomas Aquinas expressed it, "Both the Divine Word and the writing of the Book of Life are eternal. But the promulgation cannot be from eternity on the part of the creature that hears or reads" (*Sum. Theol.* II-I.91.1 *ad* 2).
[7] *History of Sanskrit Literature* (London, 1900), p. 400.

conclusion is that the true name of anything is that which has a natural (Skr. *sahaja*) meaning—i.e., is really an "imitation" (μίμησις) of the thing itself in terms of sound, just as in painting things are "imitated" in terms of color—but that because of the actual imperfection of vocal imitation, which may be thought of as a matter of inadequate recollection, the formation of words in use has been helped out by art and their meaning partly determined by convention. What is meant by natural meaning can be understood when we find that Socrates and Cratylus are represented as agreeing that "the letter *rho* (Skr. *ṛ*, *r*) is expressive of rapidity, motion, and hardness." Cratylus maintains that "he who knows the names knows also the things expressed by them," and this is as much as to imply that "He who first gave names to things did so with sure knowledge of the nature of the things"; he maintains in so many words that this first giver of names (Skr. *nāmadhāḥ*) must have been "a power more than human" and that the names thus given in the beginning are necessarily their "true names." The names themselves are dualistic, implying either motion or rest, and are thus descriptive of acts, rather than of the things that act; Socrates admits that the discovery of real existence, apart from denotations, may be "beyond you and me."

It is likewise the Indian doctrine (*Bṛhad Devatā* I.27 *ff., Nirukta* I.1 and 12, etc.) that "Names are all derived from actions"; insofar as they denote a course of action, names are verbs, and insofar as someone or something is taken to be the doer of the action, they are nouns. It must not be overlooked that Skr. *nāma* is not merely "name," but "form," "idea," and "eternal reason.[8] Sound and meaning (*śabdārtha*) are inseparably associated, so that we find this expression employed as an image of a perfect union, such as that of Śiva-śakti, essence and nature, act and potentiality *in divinis*. Names are the cause of existence; one may say that in any composite essence (*sattva, nāmarūpa*), the "name" (*nāma*) is the form of the "phenomenon" (*rūpa*) in the same sense that one says that "the soul is the form of the body." In the state of nonbeing (*asat*) or darkness (*tamas*), the names of individual principles are unuttered or "hidden" (*nāmāni guhyā, apīcyā,* etc.; *Ṛgveda passim*);[9] to be named is to proceed from death to life. The Eternal Avatar himself, proceeding as a child (*kumāra*) from the

[8] See Coomaraswamy, "Vedic Exemplarism," *Selected Papers 2: Metaphysics* (Princeton, 1987). Also René Guénon, "Le Symbolisme du théâtre," *Le Voile d'Isis,* XXXVII (1932), 69.

[9] "When names were not, nor any sign of existence endowed with name" (Rūmī, *Dīvan,* Ode XVII).

unfriendly Father, demands a name, because it is "by name that one strikes away evil" (*pāpmānam apahanti, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* VI.1.3.9); all beings on their way dread most of all to be robbed of their names by the powers of Death, who lies in wait to thieve (*krivir nāmāni pravaṇe muṣayati,* ṚV V.44.4). "It is by his deathless name (*amartyena nāmnā*) that Indra overliveth human generations" (ṚV VI.18.7). So long as an individual principle remains in act, it has a name; the world of "names" is the world of "life." "When a man dies, what does not go out of him is 'name,' that is 'without end,' and since what is 'without end' is the Several Angels, thereby he wins the 'world without end' " (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.2.12).

It is by the enunciation of names that a "more than human power" not merely designates existing things correctly but endows them with their being, and the All-maker can do this because He is omniscient of the hidden or titanic names of things that are not yet in themselves; it is by the foreknown names of mediate causes that He does all that must be done, including the creation of all separated beings. For example, ṚV I.155.6, "He by the names of the Four [Seasons] has set in motion the rounded wheel [of the Year] that is furnished with ninety steeds"; X.54.4, "Thy titan names, all these, O Maghavan, thou surely knowest, whereby thou hast performed thy mighty deeds"; VIII.41.5, "Varuṇa knoweth the hidden names remote, many a locution maketh he to blossom (*kāvyā purū … puṣyati*), even as the light of heaven (*dyauḥ,* here the Sun, *pūsan, savitṛ,* as in V.81.2) bringeth into blossom all kind (*puṣyati … rūpam*)." It is by the same token that all words of power are efficacious—for example, *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* VI.9.5 and VI.10.3, "By the word 'born' (*jātam*) he 'brings to birth' (*jījanat*).… In saying 'lives' he enlivens them that 'live.' "

It is thus by a divine providence that all things are brought forth in their variety: "Varuṇa knows all things speculatively" (*viśvaṃ sa veda varuṇo yathā dhiyā,* ṚV X.11.1). "All-maker, supernal seer-at-one-glance (*saṃdṛk*), of whom they speak as 'One beyond the Seven Prophets,' who is the only one Denominator of the Angels (*yo devānāṃ nāmadhā eka eva*), to him all other things turn for information (*sampraśnam*)," ṚV X.82.2-3,[10] should be

[10] It is quite right for us to think of "names as the *consequences* of things" (Aristotle, as quoted by Dante in the *Vita nuova*), because our knowledge of things is not essential, but accidental; aspiring to essential knowledge, names are for us a means to knowledge and not to be confused with knowledge itself. But let us not forget that from the point of view of the Creator, Plato's "more than human power" which was the First Denominator, names (ideas)

read in connection with I.72.3, where the Angels, by their sacrificial service, "obtained their names of worship, contrived their high-born bodies"; to be named—to get a name, in other words—is to be born, to be alive. This denominative creation is a dual act: on the part of the One Denominator, the utterance is as single as himself; on the part of the individual principles, this single meaning that is pregnant with all meanings is verbally divided, "by their wordings they conceived him manifold who is but One" (ṚV X.114.5). And inasmuch as such a sacrificial partition is a contraction and identification into variety, it must be realized that to be named, while indispensable to wayfaring, is not the goal: "Speech (*vāc*) is the rope, and names the knot whereby all things are bound" (*Aitareya Āraṇyaka* II.1.6). The end is formally the same as the beginning; it is as one "no longer fed by form or aspect (*nāmarūpādvimuktaḥ*) that the Comprehensor reaches the heavenly Person beyond the yon, knowing the Brahman becomes the Brahman" (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* III.2.8-9). "As these flowing rivers tend towards the sea, their name and aspect are shattered, it is only spoken of as 'sea' " (*Praśna Upaniṣad* VI.5). "The fastidious soul," as Eckhart says, "can rest on nothing that has name"; "On merging into the Godhead all definition is lost," and this is also why he says, "Lord, my welfare lies in thy never calling me to mind"; for all of these quotations innumerable parallels could be cited from other Christian as well as from Sūfī and additional Indian sources.

One thus begins to glimpse a theory of expression in which ideation, denomination, and individual existence are inseparable aspects, conceptually distinguishable when objectively considered, but coincident in the subject. What this amounts to is the conception of a single living language, not knowable in its entirety by any individual principle but in itself the sum of all imaginable articulations, and in the same way corresponding to all imaginable acts of being: the "Spoken Word" of God is precisely this "sum of all language" (*vācikaṃ sarvaṇmayam; Abhinaya Darpaṇa* I). All existing languages are partially remembered and more or less fragmented echoes of this universal tongue, just as all modes of vision are more or less obscure refractions of the world-picture (*jagaccitra; Svātmanirūpaṇa* 95) or eternal mirror (*speculum aeternum;* Augustine, *De*

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preceded things, which He *knew* before they *were*. Already possessed of essential knowledge, for Him to *name* is the same as to *create;* from the point of view of the First Mind, "things are the consequences of names."

civitate Dei XII.29) which, if one knew and saw in their entirety and simultaneity, would be to be omniscient. The original and inexhaustible (*akṣara*) affirmation (OṂ) is pregnant with all possible meaning; or, thought of not as sound but as "omniform light" (*jyotir-viśvarūpam,* VS V.35), is the exemplary form of very different things, and either way is precisely "that one thing by which when it is known, all things are known" (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* I.3, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.5). The paternal comprehension and the mother tongue which are, thus, in their identity the first principle of knowledge are evidently inaccessible to empirical observation;[11] as long as an individual consciousness can be distinguished as such, an omniscience is inconceivable, and one can only "turn to the One Denominator for instruction" (ṚV X.82.3)—namely, to Plato's "more than human power," to recover lost potentialities by acts of recollection, raising our level of reference by all available dispositive means. The metaphysical doctrine of universal language is, thus, by no means to be thought of as asserting that a universal language was ever actually spoken by any people under the sun; the metaphysical concept of a universal speech is, in fact, the conception of a single sound, not that of groups of sounds to be uttered in succession, which is what we mean when we speak of "a spoken language," where in default of an *a priori* knowledge of the thought to be expressed, it

[11] "And thus, as a modern scholar would say, "meaningless to us and should not be described as knowledge" (A. B. Keith's edition of the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, Oxford, 1909, p. 42), where, however, it should be borne in mind that the kind of knowledge intended corresponds to Skr. *avidyā*, as being a relative knowledge or opinion, as distinguished from an ascertainment. [Augustine, C*onfessions* XI.4, "Scientia nostra scientiae tua ecomparata ignorantia est … Ignorantia divisiva est erratium."] It is not, as Macdonell pretends, because the theory of an adequate symbolism of sound is devoid of philosophical (or, rather, metaphysical) interest, but because the modern scholar is not interested in principles but only in "facts," not in truth but only in statistical prediction, that "the [Pūrva Mīmāṃsā] system has not as yet much occupied the attention of European scholars." The same might be said with respect to any other traditional science.

All tradition proposes means dispositive to absolute experience. Whoever does not care to employ these means is in no position to deny that the proposed procedure can lead, as asserted, to a principle that is precisely *aniruktam*, no thing and no where, at the same time that it is the source of all things everywhere. What is most repugnant to the nominalist is the fact that, granted a possibility of absolute experience, no rational demonstration could be offered in a classroom, no "experimental control" is possible, very much as *cogito ergo sum* is to every individual an adequate proof of his own conscious existence, of which, however, no demonstrative proof could be offered to the solipsist because he cannot directly experience the consciousness of another who also claims to be a "person."

may be "difficult to tell whether it is the thought which is defective or the language which has failed to express it' (Keith, *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, p. 54).

The assumption more immediately underlying the traditional science of hermeneutics (*nirukta*) is that there remains in spoken languages a trace of universality, and particularly of natural *mimesis* (by which, of course, we do not mean a merely onomatopoetic likeness but one of true analogy); that even in languages considerably modified by art and by convention, there still survives a considerable part of a naturally adequate symbolism. It is assumed, in other words, that certain assonances, which may or may not correspond to the actual pedigrees of words, are nevertheless indications of their affinities and meanings, just as we recognize family likeness, both of appearance and of character, apart from the line of direct inheritance. All of which is anything but a matter of "folk etymology"; it is not a matter of etymology at all in the narrowest sense of the word, but rather of significant assonance,[12] and in any case the "folk" tradition is a matter of the "folk" only in respect to its transmission, not its origin; "folklore" and Philosophia Perennis spring from a common source.

To neglect the *nirukta* is, indeed, to impose upon oneself a needless handicap in the exegesis of doctrinal content. Compare in this connection the more intelligent procedure of "Omikron": "A further decision led me constantly to consult such ancient lexika and fragments of lexika as were obtainable; for I believed that in these original dictionaries of the Hellenes, the ancient scholars would have given apposite meanings, as well as clues to symbolic and allegoric expression. I paid particular attention to the strange *Hermēneia* of the old grammarians, supposing that they had good reasons for it, and even for giving, usually, more than one *Hermēneia* for the same word."[13]

From an empirical point of view, it can hardly be claimed that the connection of sounds with meanings has been seriously investigated in modern times; we have the word of Macdonell that "the system has not much occupied the attention of European scholars." Even if such investigations had been made, with indefinite or negative results, it would

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[12] "For example, we do not mean to imply that as between the words *Agnus* and *Ignis* (Latin equivalent of *Agni*) there is anything more than one of those phonetic similarities to which we referred above, which very likely do not correspond to a line of linguistic descent, but are not therefore to be regarded as purely accidental" (René Guénon, *L'Esotérisme de Dante,* Paris, 1925, p. 92, n. 2).

[13] Omikron, *Letters from Paulos* (New York, 1920), Introduction.

still hold that *hermeneia* (*nirukta*) as actually employed by ancient authors presents us with an invaluable aid to the understanding of what was actually intended by the verbal symbols that are thus elucidated. The words of Scripture are for the most part highly technical and pregnant with many meanings on various levels of reference, so that even the nominalist should feel himself indebted to the hermeneutist from a semantic point of view.

NIRUKTA = HERMENEIA: ADDENDUM

In the preceding article, I described the Oṃkāra as the "sum of all language" (*vācikaṃ sarvaṇmayam*), and "that one thing by which when it is known, all things are known." There is a remarkable text exactly to this effect in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* II.23.3, "As all the leaves [of a book] are pinned together by a spike (*śaṇkunā*), so all speech (*sarvā vāc*) is pinned together by the Oṃkāra; verily, the Oṃkāra is all this, the Oṃkāra verily [is] all this"; and for this, too, there is a striking parallel in Dante (*Paradiso* XXXIII.85-92): "Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one volume, the scattered leaves of all the universe … after such fashion that what I tell of is one simple flame. The universal form of this complex I think that I beheld." The parallel is all the closer because in the first case the universal form is that of the eternal sound, in the other, that of the eternal light; for light and sound are coincident *in divinis* (cf. *svar* and *svara*), and just as Dante speaks of "these singing suns" (*Paradiso* X.76; cf. XVIII.76, "So within the lights the flying sacred creatures sang"), so *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* III.33 has "The Sun is sound, therefore they say of this Sun 'It is as sound that He proceeds' (*svara eti*)," and in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* I.5.1, "The Sun is OṂ, for he is ever sounding forth 'OṂ.' "

Incidentally, the *Chāndogya* passage cited above, "As all the leaves are pinned together by a spike (*yathā śaṇkunā sarvāṇi parṇani samtṛṇṇani*)," affords very strong evidence for the contemporaneity of writing with the redaction of this Upaniṣad, for everyone who has seen a South Indian palm leaf manuscript of many leaves held together by a spike passed through one of the string-holes will recognize the aptness of the simile.