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Deconstruction: Gagging the Speaking God?

by Michael Ovey

Summary:

This paper aims to describe how the new literary theory of deconstructionism works, the way it abolishes the idea of a speaking God, and to examine some ideas for rejecting it.

Scholars have been thrilled recently at discovering a hitherto unpublished fragment of Lewis Carroll's work about Alice. It goes like this:

"When I use a word," said Humpty Dumpty scornfully, "it means what I want it to mean, neither more nor less."

"My dear old thing," said the March Hare, "there's more to it than that. When you say or write something, you've got to reckon that you can't keep tabs on it. Other people may take what you say quite differently from how you meant it. It's like setting a bird free. Once it's gone, it flies where it wants."

"I'm afraid he's right, Humpty," chipped in Alice, passing him his tea. "If you want to get through to us, you've got to use words in ways that we'll understand."

"Absolutely." The March Hare agreed. "There's no ultimate reason why we shouldn't call that tea pot over there by the name 'hot water bottle' instead. But if you were the only one who did call it 'hot water bottle' you'd be in for a shock come tea time."

Alice continued, "Of course, you could start a new fashion, and if you did it frequently enough then at least all your friends could get the hang of it, and we'd know 'hot water bottle' meant 'tea pot'."

The Mad Hatter had been listening to all this with mounting displeasure. "What tommy rot! You're both talking as though Humpty could use language to communicate something."

"He's not as thick as that," objected the March Hare defensively.

"Not just him, anyone." The Mad Hatter came back splattering bits of muffin over the tea party in his intensity. "Language doesn't give me access to what Humpty thinks. How could I know he was using language in the same way I was? When he says 'I'm having a nice time here' he might mean by 'nice' what I mean by 'nasty'. And we could never find that out, because all we have to say is that what we mean by 'nice' and 'nasty' are other words. It's all just words. It's as though each one of us is inside a little bubble, all on our own, and every now and then we float close to each other, but we never know what's going on in the bubble next door." He paused for breath and turned to Alice, "Another cuppa, please, Alice pet, three sugars."

"Pet, eh?" said Alice from between clenched teeth. "That sounds like an offensive socially conditioned sexist term."

"Only to you, Alice, dear, just your subjective reaction," said the Mad Hatter taking his tea and sipping it. "Blinking heck! I asked for sugar, didn't I?"

"So sorry," said Alice sweetly. "In my language 'three sugars' means you don't want any."

"You know jolly well what I meant . . ." the Mad Hatter accused as the tea party broke up in disarray.

1. Introduction

In this "fragment" the Mad Hatter adopts an approach to interpretation very similar to deconstructionism. Deconstructionism itself is a new and potent player on the interpretative stage, applying to many fields and disciplines. As such it already features in the courses of many of our students, especially the humanities. One Christian student

remarked after a year studying deconstructionism that there was simply no point in studying the Bible any more – it could communicate no truth: such were the implications of deconstruction.

This was not an unwarranted reaction. Thus, P. Miscall, utilising deconstructionist approaches, observes that questions of interpretation are insoluble: "The reader encounters ambiguity, equivocation, opposed meanings and cannot decide for or establish one or the other..." (*The Workings of Old Testament Narrative,* Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983, p2). Hence Miscall's reaction to 1 Samuel 17 and David's combat with Goliath: it is impossible to determine what David's character is (ibid. p73) and hence what the incident is to teach.

To that extent, deconstructionism tends to eliminate our dependence on the Bible, and indeed the doctrine that God reveals himself. It is, therefore, vitally important to examine it.

2. The Background

Before plunging into deconstructionism it is as well to set the scene. Several schools of thought have grown up in recent years about how language works and whether words, and literature in particular, can be a vehicle for truth. This is strikingly relevant for the Christian doctrine that God reveals himself in and through the Bible. Whatever else it is, it is also a collection of written words, employing human language.

Some of those schools of thought are represented, albeit in cartoon form, in the literary fragment above. Humpty Dumpty starts with the importance of the author. In the early years of this century recovering the author's intention was indeed greatly emphasised: what did Isaiah mean in chapter 53? And so on. This emphasis obviously appeals to biblical Christians. If God has inspired human authors, then we long to recover that authorial intent.

However, in the years after the Second World War this "intentional fallacy", as it was dubbed, came under fire from the so-called New Criticism, which asserted the difficulty/impossibility of recovering authorial intent. Rather we should accept that a text created by an author becomes, so to speak, independent of the author, as the March Hare's opening remarks suggest. An example of this is the way a legal agreement may be construed in a way the solicitor drafting it never anticipated. So, for this school, we must focus attention on the text, not the author.

Structuralism also concentrates on text. It builds on the work of the great linguist Saussure who pointed out that there is no essential, intrinsic link between the word which signifies and the thing which it signifies. (Alice and the March Hare recognise this conventional, arbitrary aspect of language in their discussion of what to call a tea pot.) This means that what a word signifies depends on the place that word has in the overall language system, its structural position. For the structuralist, therefore, it is tremendously important to discover the structure and accordingly context becomes vital, both the immediate context of a word or phrase in a literary work and also the context of the total language usage of a particular society. In a way this is, of course, a systematic presentation of the old maxim of construction in English law "*Noscitur a sociis*" (a thing is known and understood by the company it keeps).

However, other schools would criticise the New Criticism and the type of structuralism described here for implying that meaning in language is objective. That objectivity would be called an illusion. Instead of concentrating on the text, they would suggest a reader-centered approach. Meaning is only what the reader decides the meaning is. The Mad Hatter plays with this when provoking a particular response to Alice by his use of the term "pet". Reader response theories are already employed in some feminist and liberation theology readings of certain texts.

The Mad Hatter has another string to his linguistic bow, deconstructionism itself. He takes the line that language is outsideless (a formulation adopted by Don Cupitt, for whom orthodox religious language is non-realist, that is to say, does not refer to anything real). "Outsideless" refers to the idea that we cannot transcend language and its limits. A crucial claim here is that language is simply self-referring. Thus, any word, any phrase can only be known from other words and phrases. They, in their turn, derive their significance from their structural position with respect to still more, and so on. As language is essentially self-referring, there is no guaranteed "real" meaning. We are in fact in an endless labyrinth. Language therefore deconstructs. Further, as the Mad Hatter continues, it is not even clear whether as individuals we are in the same linguistic labyrinth. I claim to speak "English", but is this the same "English" as the man next door? Could I show they are part of the same linguistic system?

This way of putting the deconstructionist case means language disappears as a sure vehicle for transmitting objective meaning between persons – an earth-shaking claim.

3. What we Gain from Modern Literary Theories

Some modern theories are of great use in reinforcing and expanding traditional concerns in interpreting the Bible.

Structuralism, for example, serves both to warn us and to provide incentives for study. By stressing the importance of context it reminds us of the very real danger of "proof-texting". It is not a legitimate use of the Bible simply to find a form of words grammatically capable of supporting a particular position. Rather we are driven to rigorous examination of our texts within the context of the book that contains them and ultimately the canon as a whole. The structuralist view encourages us to beware of an over-atomistic reading of the Bible and to take extremely seriously the principle of looking to the whole counsel of God.

Structuralism pushes us in other directions too. Paul's letters are rooted in the Greek of the Near East of the first century. That puts a value on investigating other uses of the language to rebuild the linguistic context of that particular time. Moreover, it reinforces the usefulness of an informed social history of, say, first century Corinth.

None of this is strikingly new. But what structuralism does underline for us is the importance of these tasks if we want to arrive at what the text says rather than what we assume it to say.

Text-centred and reader-centred theories can be suggestive in other positive ways. Evangelicals stress the Bible as a living rather than a dead text. It can and does address us in our present day lives. As we study a passage like Ephesians 4:29 with its instructions about the edifying use of the tongue, we may see it directly applying to us in a current situation. Yet it scarcely seems that Paul could have directly had that in mind. It therefore seems illegitimate to say that the human author "intended" to address us in that situation (although he might have wanted to had he thought about it). At that point it is clear that *one* way of putting the "authorial intent" view, far from protecting the Bible, tends to render it a dead letter by restricting it to the particular human author.

This does not, of course, entail accepting extreme reader response views. To say all interpretations are equal distorts our relationship with God (see 5(a) below). Rather the point made here is that text and reader-centred theories can redress certain overemphases in author-centred theories of meaning.

Text and reader-centred theories are also suggestive in approaching another puzzle in our doctrine of revelation: the way that prophecy, for instance, can have a meaning different from the one the original human author had in mind. One example is Matthew 2:15 with its application of Hosea 11:1 "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Another is Paul's application of Deuteronomy 30:12 to Jesus in Romans 10:6-7. In neither case does it seem apparent that the human author had Jesus himself in mind. As such one is conscious that "authorial intent" defined simply and solely as human authorial intent seems inadequate to draw out the full meaning of scripture.

Both these instances deal with New Testament applications of Old Testament texts. As such they may be said to form God's footnotes to his own earlier word, and such use of the Old Testament could be said to be no longer possible (we are not apostles) or at

least practised with extreme caution because of the risks of subjectivity. We are nevertheless reminded that human authorial intent does not exhaust the text's meaning. Nor come to that do the efforts of generations of interpreters of Hosea before the birth of Jesus.

In this way biblical Christians need not write off all the interpretative theories that have arisen recently as being irrelevant or completely unhelpful. There are congruencies and resonances with traditional doctrines of revelation and they can be useful in helping us to present a properly nuanced account of what inspiration and revelation really involve.

However, the development of deconstructionism, has a strong tendency to undermine the doctrine of revelation, with fatal effects elsewhere in our theology. To the consequences of that theory we now turn.

4. Deconstructionism

At first glance, deconstructionism could appear to be simply an extension, possibly extreme, of some of the approaches outlined above. Is it in fact essentially harmful?

(a) The demolition of personal relationship with God

The most serious casualty is what Martin Buber called an I-Thou relationship between humans and God, by which is meant the idea of a relationship between persons in which each encounters the other as a person and communicates with them as a person. This is in contrast to an I-It relationship where I may indeed encounter another person but do not treat them as such nor communicate with them as such.

Deconstructionism tends to destroy an I-Thou relationship with God by denying communication. If language is not a possible vehicle for God to use in revealing himself to us, then the Bible cannot give us direct knowledge of God. Nor can we avoid this by using the notion of "direct encounter" with God (through prayer, meditation, thought, or ecstasy). The results of such encounters ought in principle to be capable of some kind of verbal description. But if verbal description is inherently and totally inadequate then it is difficult in the extreme to know what kind of relationship there is, what contours it has, what content there is to it. If I cannot say the relationship is pleasant or unpleasant, worthwhile or pointless, then what in fact do I know about it, in what sense is it a genuinely I-Thou relationship?

It may be justly pointed out that the words are not the relationship. Those sympathetic to the deconstructionist view may cite John 5:39 with Christ's warnings about those who scour the scriptures but do not find Jesus, the person. Yet the thrust of those words (in the context of John) is that the words of scripture do point to Jesus and that the scribes and others are at fault for not seeing that. C.S. Lewis points out that while scripture may only be a "map", and not itself the country that has to be navigated, navigation is nevertheless only possible with a map. This is equally applicable to our relationship with God. If decontructionism is correct then a certain type of relationship, I-Thou, disappears.

Momentous consequences follow from that.

First, God's personal sovereignty over us necessarily disappears too. God may be the creator and ruler of the universe, but we are capable only of conformity and not of obedience. We may fall in with God's wishes through good fortune but obedience presupposes knowledge of another's will. That in turn depends on communicating that will, which is just what deconstructionism rules out.

Naturally with obedience goes disobedience. It is really extremely difficult to say I am answerable to God or responsible to him if his will is unascertainable. Sin becomes meaningless: the concept of rebellion which is central to sin (Romans1:18ff) is not applicable in that context. That in turn removes the need for Christ's redeeming death.

Secondly, God's love becomes problematic. If God cannot express this, how can we know we are loved? We might have a sensation which we think is from God, and which we imagine is produced by his love. But we cannot know this if he cannot tell us.

This in turn throws our entire relationship with him into serious doubt. Logically we can only remain unsure of our status with him and thus insecure. Even if I was right about those feelings (perhaps they were only self-serving delusions?), how can I be sure that they will last for eternity. A very serious casualty of deconstructionism is our assurance of salvation (as well as our assurance that being saved is worthwhile).

(b) The demolition of other personal relationships

Naturally this demolition of personal relationships extends logically to other relationships with each other as well as with God, although here, of course, we experience strong empirical resistance (see 5(c) below). This leaves us in a kind of linguistic solipsism: we are left only with ourselves because we have no access to others. This may well be attractive to a highly individualistic culture, with its prospect of apparent freedom. Part of its attraction, indeed, may be that it tends to diminish personal responsibility to others.

(c) The demolition of the ego?

Yet it is worth questioning whether even this solipsism can be sustained. If even my own language deconstructs by its self-referential nature, can I describe myself, even to myself? And if I cannot describe myself, who is the "I" of whom I so glibly speak? In that sense the ultimate casualty of deconstruction may be the individual ego.

Given these momentous consequences it is vital to see if deconstructionism is correct.

5. Objections to Deconstructionism

These can be grouped under three headings.

(a) Theological

Deconstructionism, if it addresses the question of God at all, seems to rest on an implicit doctrine of God. But the God implied by this view is not the God of orthodox Christianity. After all, that orthodox God enjoys the advantages of both omnipotence and omniscience. As such he is surely a competent linguistic performer, able to find apt words to express his meaning even to fallen and finite beings. The "distance" which exists between the minds of author and reader, the problems created by the difficulty of any individual getting "outside" his or her own linguistic code, would surely be obviated by these attributes of the orthodox God, who knows the minds of author and reader and can act in the minds of both (although this should not be taken as an endorsement either of a "dictation" theory of inspiration or a "dictatorial" theory of reading).

Of course, there are traditional constraints on God's actions: but using his omnipotence to communicate does not seem inherently evil. Nor does it seem self-contradictory (as when one might say that God cannot make both an immovable object and an irresistible force). Rather it seems that one is simply being faced with the assertion "Even God cannot use language to communicate". This assertion seems highly problematic because it involves considerations of the nature of God as well as of the nature of language. Deconstructionism here seems to be saying, indirectly, something about God. But, on deconstructionism's own premises, how can we know that? Is there, in fact, an assumption within deconstructionism that God simply *cannot* be the God of orthodox Christianity?

In fact, of course, it is just those attributes of omnipotence and omniscience that the biblical God does claim to have.

A second theological objection to a certain kind of deconstructionism (and a certain type of reader response theory) also arises. It could be said that any response by a reader to scripture is as valid as any other. Thus an interpretation of feeding the Five Thousand as a sermon on sharing community wealth is as valid as the one that Jesus has miraculous powers. It is said that the Bible is polyvalent (conveys a number of different meanings), and that the *sensus plenior* discussed above (section 3) recognises this.

Yet it is one thing to say the Bible is polyvalent, with many meanings, quite another to say it is omnivalent, that it can mean *all* things. This is, however, where these extreme views end up, that the text can "mean" anything. If it were so, God would indeed be a God of inconsistency (since one could respond to a text with two mutually inconsistent reactions about his character: but both would be true). Moreover, this God would be shaped essentially by us and by our reactions, rather than what he discloses himself to be. Indeed this is one of the greatest objections to seeing God in I-It terms, that it encourages idolatry.

Theologically, deconstructionism involves us by its assumptions with a "dark, dumb, idol". Yet it is precisely that point which remains to be established.

(b) Philosophical

It is extremely hard to rescue deconstructionism from self-refutation. The case is advanced using language and discussed using language. Its proponents write books presumably expecting to be understood. But if so, there is at least one privileged, communicable, objectively true proposition, namely the deconstructionist thesis. But if so, there are two alternatives:-

(i) if the proposition is true, then language in at least one instance communicates truth. But the words and concepts used to express this proposition are not severable from the rest of the linguistic structure: they are part of it. In which case does not the entire system receive some kind of grounding from this proposition? If deconstructionism is true, why does it not apply to the proposition itself? In which case we could ignore it, because it could never be communicated to us.

(ii) if the proposition is false then it can be ignored anyway.

Moreover, it is far from clear whether deconstructionism faces us with a correct set of alternatives. It appears to assert that we have a choice between absolute understanding and deconstructionism. But as has often been observed, there may be other options, such as an understanding which we accept as true but is in principle open to falsification and which we concede is not exhaustive. Thus we understand "God is love" as indicating that God has a disposition towards us describable as love because it bears an affinity to love in our own lives. We accept that this understanding of the text is *in principle* falsifiable, although falsifying it would involve such a massive shift in our understanding of other texts too that it seems *in practice* inconceivable. We also accept that we have not exhausted what this love means – human love is not a perfect exemplar of it.

However, there is no need to dismiss this knowledge just because it is provisional, and true but not exhaustive. That point could equally be made of my knowledge of the physical world (human senses may be deceptive), but most of us find provisional limited knowledge of the world around us nevertheless useful.

(c) Empirical

Deconstructionism faces a massive difficulty in explaining the successful use of language in the everyday world. True, misconstructions do occur. But the fact that they are occasions for comment or for humour or for irritation reveals how overwhelmingly successful language seems to be. If language is so unreliable, why do we so readily assume it is a viable means of communication?

Part of the answer no doubt is the public nature of language. If I use words in an unusual way, others remark on it and correct me. There is a pervasive pressure towards using language uniformly and with sufficient uniformity comes the possibility of transmitting information. It is doubtful whether the deconstructionist model takes sufficient account of the social pressure created by the public nature of discourse.

This is related to the point that deconstructionism oversimplifies by claiming that language is self-referring. Clearly, language is more than a mere "nomenclature" but words are often used with respect to physical phenomena ("This knife is sharp"). If I "misuse" language to convey that, eg "This knife is blunt", the fact that words are being used with respect to physical phenomena provides an opportunity for my use of language to be corrected and brought into conformity with others' usage of "sharp" and "blunt". The physical world is a shared world and a public world, and the fact that language is at times used in respect of it suggests that the slogan "language is self-referring" is not the whole truth. And at that point one is aware that although language may sometimes be a complex maze, it is not quite accurate to say it is simply an endless labyrinth.

Conclusion

Deconstructionism is a curious thesis. In a way it takes the Babel story a stage further. Instead of the multiplicity of languages and the confusion it creates, we are left, as it were, with no language at all, either in which God could speak to us or in which we can address each other. As such it would deprive us of the knowledge of God as well as any rationale for evangelism.

Its influence, however, is pervasive. Since so many academic disciplines employ language, they are all potentially affected by it and our students already have to reckon with it in their courses, sometimes with grave effects for their spiritual lives.

The tragedy is, of course, that there is no compelling (or even ultimately persuasive) reason for adopting the thesis. This should not hide how attractive we may find it in some ways. The serpent now no longer has to say "Did God really say ...?" (Genesis 3:1). Instead he may only have to remind us "God can't really speak anyway..."