



The Reality of Addressing God in Prayer

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[The] tendency toward an intersubjective pragmatics shows itself in the work of the leading philosopher of the Scottish “Common Sense” school, Thomas Reid, who believed that the most important function of language is to perform “social acts” such as promising, commanding, contracting, or testifying.¹

In the above quotation, Angela Esterhammer maintains that the Scottish ‘Common Sense’ school of the Enlightenment brought about a dynamic understanding of language as being social and also as a mode of stating our internal beliefs. The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of speech in prayer, that is, we wish to reach an understanding in terms of speech act theory. The central problem here is that anything uttered in a prayer is addressed to God who is unverifiable and is not addressed to humans who can witness the outcome of the speech act and be passive or active hearers of the prayer. There is understandably no mention of God or of prayer in the writings of the major speech act theorists, J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle. Coming from a positivist background, it is not surprising that they make no such mention but it is possible to go further back in history and discover a theory of language and of belief that may make it possible to apply speech act theory to prayer.

Prayer is addressed *to* God, whereas theology is *about* God. Prayer can take the form of praise or intercession, confession or blessing. It is sometimes described as communion with God. It can basically be defined as the activity of communicating with a God who is believed to wish our communication and who responds in ways which are beyond our control. It is argued by many sources that Thomas Reid

offered a seminal epistemological understanding of non-verifiable religious utterances and that when his theories are combined with some of the argumentation of modern commentators it is possible to argue that speech acts are contained within prayer and may be used to provide a descriptive analysis. Speech act theory works when there is evidence that someone has spoken and that the effect of that speech can be verified by its effect on another individual or society. This is not possible in the case of prayer because the effect it has upon God cannot be known or verified. This makes traditional speech act theory apparently impotent when it comes to analysing prayer. We hope to show, however, that because Reid introduces a metaphysical element into speech and its meaning, we may be able to show that utterances in a prayer do constitute speech acts.

Thomas Reid (1710–1796) was a Regent at King's College, Aberdeen where he wrote his first major work. He began a life-long dispute with David Hume after taking up a Chair in Glasgow and he famously put forward a theory of Common Sense which contradicted Hume's scepticism. Reid offered a way of understanding those internalized beliefs which have lately become so important in postmodern philosophy and theology. It will be argued in this article that the problem lies in the inability of modern speech act theory to accommodate the metaphysical. The solution lies in regarding the speech in prayer as a speech act as understood by Reid. There are four stages to the argument. 1) We must review modern speech act theory and its limitations regarding this question. 2) Shoshana Felman in her book, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, can help to advance the argument by demonstrating that speech acts may refer to something, in this case the flattery of beautiful women by Cervantes' Don Juan, which is unverifiable and intrinsically subjective. 3) A review of speech act theory and religion will show that work has been undertaken in this field in relation to the notion that God speaks but not how we claim to speak to God. 4) It will finally be argued that Reid offers a theory of speech acts, which when combined with his understanding of belief, shows that prayer can be understood as comprising various sorts of speech act.

When it comes to examining Austin, it will be sufficient to concentrate on his concept of performatives such as promises and

legal prescriptions. He outlines most of our concerns in Lecture V of *Doing Things With Words*. Throughout the book there is no mention of God or of prayer. Austin recognises that when we make a promise we enter into an act which entails an outcome which normally will be considered to be the fulfilment of the promise. He talks of promises being ‘happy’ by which he means that they are kept. Sometimes the word ‘felicitous’ is used. In general, he writes:

this amounted to saying, if you prefer jargon, that certain conditions have to be satisfied if the utterance is to be happy—certain things have to be so. And this, it seems clear, commits us to saying that for a certain performative utterance to be happy, certain statements have *to be true*.²

When he goes on to talk about refereeing a cricket match, he recognises that a decision may be disputed or that a mistake may have been made but the outcome is not as serious as breaking a promise. A promise as an act has certain expected, happy, outcomes which are dashed by dishonesty or other reasons there may be for breaking promises. In the case of a promise its performative value is totally tied up with its conclusion. The choice of this particular example provides Austin with an immediate verification of a chosen performative. However, on Austin’s analysis, no truth can verify a performative utterance in prayer. Thus, the ascription of the word ‘happy’ (or ‘unhappy’ for that matter) cannot be made.

However, what if there is a way of moving from an understanding of a solemn promise manifestly kept – to an empty promise which nevertheless has meaning and substance – to a promise made to God which is both solemn and kept but cannot be verified? The next stage in the argument is to look at empty promises. Felman recounts the tales of Don Juan who constantly flattered women with no sincerity beyond that of the romantic moment. It will be contended that the properties of God are as real as those which Don Juan admires in women, and that because the properties of God are real, statements about them have the same validity as other subjective statements which are suggestive of speech acts. Can his flattery be understood as a speech act in that he was offering to each woman some understanding

of beauty and attractiveness and affirming something which she could bank as an emotion and promise for the future, only to be betrayed by the shallowness of the affirmation? At first sight there is no truth in Don Juan's statements and nothing which could afford them the status of truth. Felman, however, argues thus:

The source of obligation is displaced here from the first to the second and third persons: "You are not *obliged* to me ... your beauty is your security." The constative itself, in Don Juan's mouth, appears to be the *statement of a promise*, of a commitment undertaken. Whether constative or performative, seductive discourse commits and endebts; but since the debt is contracted here on the basis of narcissism, the two parties to the debt are the woman and her own self-image. "Your beauty is your security."³

Thus, because Don Juan has a subjective concept of beauty in his mind and is addressing it to someone who possesses that property he is not lying, however despicable his behaviour may be. "Your beauty is your security." is the first step to recognising that speech acts may be addressed to subjects which have a purely subjective basis. Schuhmann and Smith⁴ present a fairly convincing argument that there were early signs of speech act theory in Reid's writings but they preferred to concentrate on the idea that they were 'social acts' which stressed the action of a promise between two parties – one spoken, the other received. They make no mention of Reid's religious beliefs (which they find rather confusing) which are so important in the understanding of the mind in the works of Reid. Nevertheless, they stress, in common with most commentators, the social nature of language. They do suggest that Reid may have made more of insincerity and infidelity than either Austin or Searle.

Our intention, however, is to show that the belief that one is communicating to God has the same dynamics as the above example but that Reid offers a threefold understanding of language which allows us to assume that a speech act is taking place in prayer to a real object of belief. Most recent literature tends to concentrate on how God talks to humankind. The Bible is not only regarded as story and

history but as prophecy and fulfilment which gives its words a living meaning if language is considered to be the product of a living being.

A prominent philosopher and theologian who has dealt with the notion of God’s speech is Nicholas Wolterstorff. His work on Thomas Reid will be discussed below but reference must be made to his *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks*. Wolterstorff does not dwell upon Reid by name other than to remind his readers that

Thomas Reid argued that our human constitution includes an inherent *disposition* toward veracity in speech and, correspondingly, toward credulity in listeners. Such dispositions are indispensable to the endurance of the system.⁵

Alvin Plantinga contends that religious beliefs are basic and have a reality in themselves. He argues strongly in favour of the Common Sense school of philosophy. He is one of the main protagonists of ‘Reformed Epistemology’ and argues strongly that beliefs have their warrant from the strength of fundamental beliefs held by individuals who come together in communities to find their common ideas.

... Christian belief is *immediate*; it is formed in the *basic* way. It doesn’t proceed by way of an argument from, for example, the reliability of Scripture or the church. ... Christian belief is basic; furthermore, Christian belief is *properly* basic ...⁶

His analysis owes much to Reid and stresses that the believer is both justified and rational in his doxastic practice. Daniel Robinson, in a paper on William James, points to that author’s references to Reid in his works, and also to what ‘Reid called the “principle of veracity” and “the principle of credulity.”’⁷

The American mathematician and philosopher William Alston, however, presents the most cogent argument for a modern use of Thomas Reid. Some accuse Alston of developing a purely subjective theory whilst others applaud his internalist or phenomenological approach. His purpose is to understand the doxastic practices of believers. He begins by quoting many examples of religious experiences

from William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*⁸ and develops an argument throughout the book that such experiences have an existence which gives them substance which can be understood as a true doxastic practice. He is attracted by Reid's commonsense understanding of perception, which Alston argues is developed out of experience and understanding. Belief in God is as much an experience which comes from a variety of sources as any other belief and must be regarded as real to the believer. In putting aside issues of verification, Alston writes of Reid:

... one reason my account is closer to Reid's is that Reid had the advantage of philosophizing before the advent of verificationist and other antirealist philosophies. Reid never suggests that there is anything unintelligible about the idea that, for example, sense perception is or is not reliable, or that we cannot meaningfully raise the question of whether this is so, however difficult it may be to find a way to answer the question.⁹

We now come to the three elements in Thomas Reid's understanding of language and of its purpose. First, language is given as an internal property of humankind; second, language can be used as a means of describing perceived truths about God; and third, language is used socially as a form of speech act when addressing God.

Reid is remarkably ahead of his time in his conception of language and is acknowledged by some linguists as such. He speaks of language as being acquired at a very early age at the breast and from the nurse. Language as a series of signs facilitates from an early age the ability to demand and receive food and the necessities of life. However, the most interesting connection with modern linguistics is the homage paid to him by Chomsky. Chomsky recognised Reid's understanding of language acquisition from an early age and gave credit for his early understanding.¹⁰ Both were internalists. Reid wrote:

Some have thought that the Origin of Language among Men ... has something in it very unaccountable and mysterious. Some

have thought that Mankind must first have been taught it by heaven & that it could not be a human Invention.¹¹

And again;

If nature had not made man capable of such social operations of mind, and furnished him with a language to express them, he might think, and reason, and deliberate, and will; he might have desires and aversions, joy and sorrow; in a word, he might exert all those operations of mind which the writers in logic and pneumatology have so copiously described; but, at the same time, he would still be a solitary being, even when in a crowd ...¹²

Language achieves the social nature of man and gives to him his unique qualities of social intercourse. As a natural property of man, language gives to us the opportunity to speak the truths that belong to us and to accord to them the social reality of beliefs held in common and mutually understood.

Second, Reid makes it clear that the use of language as a conveyor of our truths must extend to God. Contrary to the philosophy of the sceptics, if a religious experience is conceived as true it is commonsense to accept it as such. As we perceive colours in other sense experiences which we translate into linguistic descriptions which we can share with others, so likewise we can share our knowledge of God with others in the confidence that the veracity of what we are saying will at the least be respected and at best believed.

So large a share has belief in our intellectual operations, in our active principles, and in our actions themselves, that, as faith in things divine is represented as the mainspring in the life of a Christian, so belief in general is the mainspring in the life of man.¹³

Or does Reid acknowledge the complications of understanding belief?

The manner in which a man who sees, discerns so many things by means of the eye, is as unintelligible to the blind, as the manner in which a man may be inspired with knowledge by the Almighty, is to us.¹⁴

In other words, all manner and means of perception are worthy of respect and understanding, even although we may not always understand the nature of the object of perception. Reid accepts as given our abilities to build experiences and beliefs which may be translated into language.

Wolterstorff towards the end of his book *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* notes that Reid emphasises the fact that belief of any kind involves judgement. For a belief to be convincing and coherent a person must use his common sense judgement to make a convincing case for that belief. Wolterstorff writes:

... does Common Sense consist of propositions judged or believed by human beings in common, with a particular principle of Common Sense being some item in that totality of shared beliefs? Or – here's yet a third possibility – does Common Sense consist of those shared faculties that produce beliefs we all share in common?¹⁵

In response to Wolterstorff two questions may be prompted. First, is language the means by which we formulate beliefs in so far as their existence depends upon social intercourse? If we are unable to communicate our beliefs to others they remain untried figments of our imagination and as untested beliefs they cannot be the subject of common sense. This latter point leads to the second question. Does Wolterstorff imply that for Reid beliefs which are subject to the judgement of men and women must have some universal truth because of the route of common sense which they have travelled?

For Reid, beliefs in a deity are entered into wilfully and must be coherent if they are to be convincing in social intercourse. He believes that by common sense, people are able to construct sensible beliefs which are real and beyond the scrutiny of sceptics. These beliefs are real as long as people have the ability to argue that they are true and

valid. Reid's argument gives us a warrant to accept the reality of belief and by so doing to assume the nature of the reality which the individual understands and is prepared to defend in public discourse.

Third, a speech act is mainly assumed to be invalid if it is addressed to a vacuous body. However, we can now see that any speech act offered in a prayer to God has reality and meaning for the person or congregation uttering it. To them, their speech is real and the receptor is also real. To speak to God is absolutely coherent to those who believe that such communication is possible and may indeed result in a reply. Thus we come to speech acts themselves: Reid suggests that language is a characteristic of social intercourse and must therefore be affective in certain transactions. Man cannot live without language which he uses very often as speech acts:

... he would still be a solitary being, even when in a crowd; it would be impossible for him to put a question, or give a command, to ask a favour, or testify a fact, to make a promise or a bargain.¹⁶

Theologians would probably argue that prayer is meant to be altruistic but very often 'vulgar' prayer does appeal to one's baser instincts. 'If you grant me success in business, Lord, I will repay you in years of service.' Such a bargain can be made in prayer and is precisely the kind of act which Reid identifies above. Nevertheless, prayer can also be a testimony of faith or a promise. It is possible to stretch the correlation between speech act and the above quotation and prayer a little too far but it is obvious that all profound prayer can be real if our understanding of Reid is correct.

Thus we have the three elements of Reid's understanding of language which leads to a common sense acceptance of the reality of a conversation conducted in prayer. But is it possible to take this a stage further? It has been argued that one of the surprising features of postmodern theology is the rediscovery of Karl Barth.¹⁷ In one of the volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*, he writes: 'Knowledge of God is obedience to God.'¹⁸

Barth is stating a very succinct view of the internalist argument of Reid. He is suggesting that God can only be understood after

knowledge of his existence is gleaned from the Bible. It is not any God that is demanding obedience but the coherent God which, Barth assumes, can be found in the Bible with its story of God's revelation. There are several genres of discourse which can be used for describing a religious experience or belief. The two most important are theology and prayer. They give the believer the opportunity to put into coherent words descriptions of their beliefs. Prayer is uniquely different in that an attempt is being made to communicate with God. Theology is communication *about*. It is the unique position of prayer which gives rise to the problems surrounding speech acts. We hope that in this paper, we have shown that speech addressed to God is both real and rational and may be verified by the very reality of the belief and awe in which God may be held. As Robinson puts it, 'For Reid, as for James, belief is the prelude to activity, including that of an intellectual or conceptual nature' and that activity must inevitably involve language.¹⁹

The language of prayer can involve very real speech acts. Promises are regularly made to God, promises of obedience and of fidelity. God is glorified in doxologies, and this is tantamount to investing extravagant descriptions of his being and acts in forms which may only be seen as true statements when the coherence of belief is understood and formulated.

Thomas Reid believed in the reality of God and also in the viability and veracity of belief. He wrote:

Of Truths that relate to Existence none are Necessary but those which affirm the Existence and Attributes of the Deity all other Existences depend upon Will & therefore are not necessary. Those truths that relate to the Existence of a Deity are not perhaps to be reckoned first truths but consequences from them²⁰

In this quotation, Reid suggests that our beliefs and understanding of the Deity depend upon our will and judgement. The beliefs are formed from our understanding of the rest of the world and of our general experience. When we choose to worship God through prayer we verbalise our understanding of God in relation to the world and by so doing may make utterances which are tantamount to speech acts.

These involve us in some of the strongest expressions of our faith by committing us to serve God through our promises, covenants and expressions of devotion.

Notes

- ¹ Angela Esterhammer, “Godwin’s Suspicion of Speech Acts,” *Studies in Romanticism* 39 (2000): 553.
- ² J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 45.
- ³ Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, Or Seduction in Two Languages* (trans. with an introduction by Stanley Cavell; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 18.
- ⁴ Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith, “Elements of Speech Act Theory in the Work of Thomas Reid,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7 (1990): 47–66.
- ⁵ Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 89.
- ⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 259.
- ⁷ Daniel N. Robinson, ‘How religious experience “works”: Jamesian pragmatism and its warrants,’ *The Review of Metaphysics* 56 (2003): 765.
- ⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985 [1902]).
- ⁹ William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 165.
- ¹⁰ Noam Chomsky, *Language and Thought* (Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1993), 18.
- ¹¹ Thomas Reid, *Thomas Reid on Logic, Rhetoric and the Fine Arts: Papers on the Culture of the Mind*, (ed. Alexander Broadie; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 46 f.

- ¹² Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005 [1788]), 364.
- ¹³ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (ed. James Walker; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2006 [1785]), 183.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (ed. Derek R. Brookes; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000 [1764]), 81.
- ¹⁵ Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 219.
- ¹⁶ Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, 364.
- ¹⁷ Gary Dorrien, 'The "Postmodern" Barth? The Word of God as True Myth,' *The Christian Century* 114 (1997): 338–42.
- ¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 (eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), § 25, p. 26.
- ¹⁹ Robinson, 'How religious experience "works"', 766.
- ²⁰ Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, 165.