

# Umberto Eco, Paul van Buren, Don Cupitt & Benny Shanon in Search of the Perfect Language

*Babylon is nothing else than an infinite game of chance.*

Jorge Luis Borges

Labyrinths: The Lottery in Babylon

*. . . poetry cannot be translated into prose. To attempt it is to move away from the edges of language and back into the clarity of language's central plains, and that very move takes us away from where the poet was standing*

Paul van Buren

The Edges of Languages (p. 106)

*[L]anguage, even rudimentary, is polysemic, many-layered, expressive of intentionalities only imperfectly revealed or articulate. It encodes ... Language is in itself multilingual. It contains worlds. More often than not, articulate enunciation is the iceberg tip of submerged implicit meanings.*

George Steiner

My Unwritten Books (p. 56)

The Confusion of Tongues

Labyrinths is a book of short stories by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, a writer of mysterious bits and pieces described by Andre Maurois as someone who "creates outside time and space, imaginary and symbolic worlds."<sup>1</sup> Carlos Fuentes captures another aspect of Borges and describes his writing style as "so cold it burns one's lips"<sup>2</sup>, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, while admitting that he can't stand Borges as a writer, nevertheless claims to love him because of "the violin he makes use of for expressing himself."<sup>3</sup> Equally mysterious in his reaction to Borges is George Steiner: "No poet has conveyed with more density of life the possibility that our existence is being 'dreamt elsewhere', that we are mere figures of another's speech."<sup>4</sup> And all this for someone who never wrote a novel, a writer of little poems, essays and short stories the fame of which were to earn Borges many prestigious literary prizes.

What attracted me to Borges on this occasion, apart from the pleasure of revisiting his fiction, and the fact that his use of language is dizzyingly complex and beautiful, was his short story *The Lottery in Babylon*. I had at first chosen a variation on that title for this essay, and had in mind linking it to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel where language itself ends up as a kind of lottery. Then, as is often the way, I stumbled on Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language*, a book dealing with the whole problem of how language had arisen in the first place, and on its cover there was a drawing of the Tower of Babel.

In Borges' story one is drawn into a Kafkaesque nightmare within which games of chance change life itself into a kind of lottery; in Eco one is treated to an exploration of "the essence of all possible things and concepts"<sup>5</sup> in relation to a perfect, authentic language once believed to have been spoken in the Garden of

Eden. But as I was soon to discover, there was a plurality of languages recorded in the book of Genesis prior to the Tower Story,<sup>6</sup> and that suggested divine disapproval was not necessarily involved in the breaking up of this mythical root language. As the Tower Story and its consequences is also to be found in earlier Babylonian and Chaldean writings,<sup>7</sup> it is to these ancient cultures we must turn for the original story of language disruption, although this is not the theme in every source document.<sup>8</sup> And that in spite of the Jews, the early Christian Fathers and St Augustine's belief that Hebrew was the root language spoken prior to Babel,<sup>9</sup> and that in that form it had remained intact since the creation of Adam and Eve. Which of course made Hebrew the only language spoken prior to God's disruption of it, and as observed earlier, the book of Genesis did not wholly uphold that contention.

Besides this contradiction, however, the Old Testament did seem to offer clues as to what this originally perfect language was in itself, and these clues cancelled out as a philosophical problem with unexpected consequences for language in general. God's summoning of the world into existence by means of language ("Let there be light", etc) was not representative of pre-existing things, but that out of which the universe of things was constructed in the first instance.<sup>10</sup> Creating the world through verbal commands should be understood as an act of creating something out of nothing, so making the supposed sounds uttered by God not a description of reality as it came into existence, but that from out of which reality itself had formed. Jewish mysticism (Kabbala) equated this linguistic command structure with the actual structure of the universe,<sup>11</sup> so making language the initial creative force. Hebrew's twenty-two sound units therefore constituted a proto-language, a

system of ideal sounds out of which all other languages had been constructed. These sacred, ideal sounds, underpinned the languages of humanity, Hebrew alone being nearest to the original language of creation, the meta-language used by Adam to name the beasts of the field being the first human diminution of the proto-language.<sup>12</sup> By such reasoning the problem of there being other languages prior to Babel had been solved.

Umberto Eco remarks that stories accounting for the multiplicity of languages that developed are to be found in the mythology of many nations, but what interests him most is not why so many languages came to exist, but why the notion of diverse languages came to be viewed as a curse, and why this curse could only be shed through the process of again acquiring a perfect language.<sup>13</sup> Tracking this problem of inadequacy through an examination of Greek as it developed into the language of intellectual discourse across cultures, and Latin as it developed into the language of enforced empire across nations, Eco burrows his way down into the how and why of these particular languages becoming international forms of communication. All others, we are told, were termed barbaric and unworthy of carrying ideas such as could be found in Greek and Latin, little being known about "what it would be like to think in the language of the barbarians."<sup>14</sup> Then, noting how classical rationalism's ideas eventually became commonplace, and how traditional pagan religious ideas turned into a purely formal exercise, he plays a subtle hand and reflects on how this double syncretism led to an unintended result: "a diffused sort of religiosity [that] began to grow in the souls of the most sensitive."<sup>15</sup> Toleration of religious and philosophical ideas turned commonplace had resulted in a lack of interest in both,<sup>16</sup> so

encouraging a journey beyond classical rationalism and religious ritual to again establish itself. This journey, anchored in the once powerful mysteries of Egypt's Thoth-Hermes, Persian magi and Chaldean oracles is said to have shone forth as something "unutterably profound", the roots of philosophy itself associated with cultures long since vanished.<sup>17</sup> Or, as was the case with the Egyptians and their ideas, all but banished from the earth by their Greek and Roman conquerors.

Umberto Eco defines this rather odd situation as a crisis in public confidence, a crisis of personal identity due to the inability of philosophers and religious leaders to supply schemes of thought matching those of the resurgent mystery schools.<sup>18</sup> Housing their claims to otherworldly knowledge in obscure language forms borrowed from ancient cultures, and in complex, emotionally satisfying initiatory rites, the mystery schools captured the public imagination by revealing formal religion's interior shallowness and formal philosophy's rationalistic tendencies.<sup>19</sup> A new/old language description of reality was on the loose, and it resonated with the public's intuition of obscure metaphysical truths in relation to "a universal World Soul subsist[ing] in stars and in earthly objects alike."<sup>20</sup> And all because an equally intuitive search for a perfect language by philosophers themselves had resulted in a form of language being developed that was difficult for the general public to follow. Philosophers too, it seems, were looking for a way to articulate a perfect understanding of reality, a way in which to paint a perfect verbal picture in relation to the world of external forms, a way by which a rational language serving both a secular and a sacred purpose could be used to unveil the "secret language" on which the universe itself was founded. This is to suggest that

“sacredness” was about to take on a different meaning from that given to it by religious thinkers then, and in the past: sacredness was suddenly an adjunct of “truth” as perceived through the eyes of an embryonic science, a journey into informed imagination relieved of its more fantastical aspects.

Yet not entirely divorced from the distant past as a reborn Pythagorean philosophy showed. According to Eco, the contribution of this newish mysticism was a knowledge of music and mathematics housed in the language of revelation and initiation, a system of mystical ideas borrowed from an already defunct Egyptian culture.<sup>21</sup> There was, it seems, a growing cross-over point between philosophy and religion, and between science and religion, but not religion as generally understood. This was something different, and it heralded the emergence of an alternative approach to philosophy, science and religion by way of an integrated perception of reality in relation to the core self. The self as “mind” governed by language was not the core self, it was being argued; the core self was *psyche as a whole* perceived as the interstices point through which God, creation, language and understanding had to pass to be properly understood. In this mystic conception language was a lottery of logic-driven consequences even philosophers could not avoid, a fallen means of comprehension and communication beyond which human beings had to go in their search for ultimate meaning. Ultimate meaning, in this definition of reality, could not be hatched out of mind governed by language alone: ultimate meaning was the province of *psyche* as an integrated whole reuniting with the universe of which it was an intrinsic part.

Human beings had conjured language out of their perception of the world, God had created the world itself out of sounds that resulted in the birth of language. This tells us that world and language are closely related, indeed interwoven to a point where meaning could be said to reside in the world itself. Such a view is in accordance with mystic Pythagorean philosophy to the extent that it allows mind to penetrate world and intuit its inner form and nature, but it is at odds with today's view where humans are defined as "onlookers" rather than "participators" in reality.

The essayist Owen Barfield teases this problem open in *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* when he says that the received view of our being no more than "onlookers learning to make a better and better mental copy of an independent world"<sup>22</sup> is deficient. Why so? Because it ignores our earlier mental and physical participation in nature. Hence the world-wide tradition of a fall from paradise as reflected in the Garden of Eden myth, and in totemic thinking. It is from such origins and "not from the blank stare of incomprehension" that we have evolved into self-conscious beings.<sup>23</sup>

That world was necessary for the growth and development of mind in relation to space and our orientation within it is now a generally accepted three-step theory. Spatial consciousness would have come first, it is reasoned, then a rudimentary individuality based on the natural dualism of objects interacted with, then a deepening sense of awe as something larger, something mysterious and all encompassing began to register on our developing minds: world itself as a back-grounding phenomenon. Which suggests that human beings wrestled their subjectivity out of their experience of the world, and that in conjunction with the development of self-

consciousness and language, that this deep connection with world allowed them to further distance themselves from world as primary source.<sup>24</sup> Non-verbal experience had been transcended; we were now free to express ourselves through a growing complexity of spoken and written words that seemed to possess a mind of their own. World as "primary source" would dim almost to the point of extinction, but its integral relationship to language, to meaning and to the rise of self-consciousness would be indelibly stamped on everything said or thought. Abstract forms of language would evolve from this basic, object-driven comprehension of self and other, but hidden within even our most sophisticated, world-distancing descriptions of reality, would lurk world as a fundamental experience.

### **The Problem of Non-verbal Experience**

There is no escaping the fact that all forms of thinking, even mystic thinking, end up in language: everything "known" is at base linguistic. And that even if it is mathematical; mathematics is just another language. This means that religion, too, must conform to the limitations of language, even if only marginally. It is of course claimed that religion cannot be wholly encompassed by language, and that mystic experiences, when articulated, carry intimations of non-verbal experience expressed as intuitions or insights. The question that arises here is this: What is a non-verbal experience if, as claimed by many philosophers, we cannot conceive of that for which we have no words.<sup>25</sup> This point is amply illustrated by the fact that if I lacked the words with which to articulate this very notion, it would never form. That would be the end of the matter but for one

thing: how can notions that do not foundationally exist in psyche suddenly exist and take on meaning through language? Our articulations are not "ideal" (sculpted out of nothing) in the sense that God's ideal articulations are said to have been; they are Adam's in the sense of representing in language what is already there. But what does "already there" mean in relation to language? By what means can language as a late development conjure into existence what mind has no sense of? What could possibly be the trigger for such an extraordinary state of mental affairs apart from our being, in the deepest and most disturbing sense, no more than a linguistic program with delusions of grandeur? Is mind, by definition, language and no more than language? Is sense of self no more than a constantly self-referencing linguistic construct? Or is language itself a form of computer program used by mind as Jerzy Grotowski has suggested in his radical explorations of the meaning of theatre. Grotowski's line of reasoning is as follows:

... the best word would be awareness, that is, a consciousness which is not linked to language, to the functioning of the computer, but to presence. Certainly, one could also say that awareness is linked to the mind, but in such a case, surely, this refers to another mind. In it, there is a meeting with the heart, with the domain of the soul, of the emotions, but in this case distinct from the soup of projections, repulsions, and attachments. It is of the same domain, but much higher and, at this point, there no longer exists a perceptible difference between the

higher “psyche” and this higher “mind”. The two aspects are very linked and perhaps identical.<sup>26</sup>

The current view is that human beings graduated from an undifferentiated state of mind to that of a differentiated state via the development of language, and that that is the end of the mind’s developmental journey. Through language we have gained meaningful access to self, other and world, there being no third, non-verbal state that can potentially serve a higher purpose. Non-verbal states can of course arise, but they are by definition “meaningless” in that meanings cannot form beyond the confines of language.

Before tackling how verbal and non-verbal states may be conjoined, there are a few things that have to be got out of the way. In *The Edges of Language*, Paul van Buren contends that we cannot avoid bringing language to the table of understanding: language is in our very bones, he tells us. There is no escape from the fact that everything we encounter, including ourselves, has been named, categorised and catalogued by mind. Our responses to music can certainly be “non-verbal”, but only if we say nothing about them to anyone, including ourselves.<sup>27</sup> Non-verbal experience, stresses Buren “is itself imbedded in our linguistic world, for it is the experience of linguistic beings.”<sup>28</sup> We have, in other words, a linguistically based apprehension of the world that cannot be shaken off even when silent within ourselves.

But language is not all powerful; it has its limitations. Put the verbal cart before the verbal horse and language constructions quickly cease to make sense. There are rules that have to be obeyed, conventions and agreements without which language

cannot function.<sup>29</sup> We are nevertheless constantly in the grip of language; we cannot escape its complex influence. We may have little knowledge of its internal logic, but we can only misuse it up to a point; ignore the need to refine our use of language as a tool of mind and our ability to communicate with others and with ourselves will falter. Whatever we do, think, feel or believe is done in and through language: we are, whether we like it or not, linguistic beings to our core.

This raises the question of what an "experience" is, for isn't experience a core thing, a "happening" prior to anything we may say or think? Paul van Buren does not dispute core experience, what he disputes is the rather narrow view we have of language. Language, he argues, need not be a precise description of anything: poetry and metaphor belie that belief. We do not always speak in precise terms. We also "hint" at things, make "indirect" points, or "talk around" a subject.<sup>30</sup> That tells us that language can fray at the edges and become less distinct, indeed, become so indistinct as to become meaningless. And so, in the final analysis, Buren can say: "there are no non-verbal experiences, if by that is meant experiences about which nothing at all is or can be said."<sup>31</sup> Which makes sense in a brutally logical kind of way. Such reasoning is however not easily dismissed; it presents us with a difficult to refute case for there being no superior vantage point beyond language, all attempts to do so being done, as they have to be done, through the auspices of language. Which brings us to what the outer limit of language is as defined by language, and in Buren's terms that is where "we fall into a misuse of words, into nonsensical jabbering, into the void where the rules [of language] give out."<sup>32</sup> Such jabbering takes place at the outer edge of language, which tells us

there is also a central, no-nonsense area of language where jabbering is less likely to occur.

This central area is where we spend most of our time, but we do on occasions venture beyond its rule-laden, socially-acceptable confines and attempt to stretch or extend how language is used.<sup>33</sup> In such moments we experience language as problematical; we start searching for words to explain ourselves, or produce unusual word combinations in an attempt to express what is getting more and more difficult to pin down. We may even howl! For a brief moment language may lose touch with its rule base and thrust us either towards potential absurdity or, as can also be the case, creative brilliance. This either/or situation depends wholly to what extent we have become sensitised to how language functions in relation to itself, and to how we ourselves function in relation to language. Language embedded in reactive emotion, for instance, seldom accomplishes anything, whereas language embedded in evaluative feeling is almost always creative. This tells us something about our emotional natures that we may not have noticed: emotion and feeling constitute a natural polarity; they are not one and the same thing, and that in spite of their often seamlessly grading into one another. Emotive language is by nature reactive, unpredictable and potentially destructive; feeling-evaluative language is explorative, creatively adventurous and constructive. There can of course be an element of each in the other, but creative excitement is altogether different from what is experienced when emotional language rules the roost.

The safe, central plateau of language is of course limiting in that it reflects a limited world of stale orderliness where, it could be said, flat, unimaginative beings while away their existence.<sup>34</sup> Little in

the way of language-stretching takes place here; all is in accordance with a day-to-day use of concepts that seldom make any kind of mental demand: everything is more or less consensus. And so Buren can say "Decisions about language are decisions about life, and changing our ways of speaking changes our way of life."<sup>35</sup> In relation to this, talking is to be prized, for it is there that the unexpected can happen: we can be faced with forms of language that challenge our assumptions about how language ought to function. Books too can carry us away from our comfort zone and introduce us to ideas and concepts foreign to our usual way of thinking, indeed, force us into communion with minds that delight in thinking language all the way to the horizon of what it means, or does not mean, to be a human being.

### Cupitt's Arrows

The philosopher Don Cupitt is of much the same opinion as Buren when it comes to language and non-verbal experience, particularly in relation to mystical experience. I've referred to Cupitt's approach to this problem elsewhere,<sup>36</sup> but will recap so as to present as full a picture of the current linguistic view of non-verbal experience as possible. Writing as a postmodernist, as an ordained Christian turned atheist, and as the retired Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, Cupitt the philosopher and religious reformer makes short work of any attempt to elevate non-verbal experience beyond what he describes as psychic mush. It is language all the way down for Cupitt; meaningfulness did not exist for human beings prior to the development of language.<sup>37</sup> If this were all Cupitt had to say on the matter, I would have settled for Paul van Buren's thorough

investigation of the same problem, but that is not Cupitt's way. He drives his postmodernist spike into the question of non-verbal experience and emerges from the fray advocating "extra-linguistic experience, knowledge and truth"<sup>38</sup> to be a comforting myth of the Western intellectual tradition. Disillusioned with the whole idea of "unitive states, timelessness and immediate knowledge",<sup>39</sup> he drops almost all mystical claims into the bucket marked "nonsense", interprets what's left as subversive of Church authority, and draws a strict line of demarcation between modernity and postmodernity: modernity is now conceived as old-fashioned and full of misconceptions about self, other and world. We have been fooling ourselves for far too long, he tells us; it's time to wake up into the world as it really is, not as we have imagined it to be.

There is a subtle difference between what Paul van Buren advocates, and what Don Cupitt advocates. In Cupitt's scheme a postmodern approach to non-verbal experience is a rejection of 19th-century modernism's notion that such experiences might constitute a source of knowledge uncontaminated by language. For Buren the situation is more nuanced: he perceives the indistinct outer edge of language as potentially creative as well as potentially dangerous, and only meaningless when that outer edge is crossed. That is of course to agree with Cupitt, but it is also to posit a point beyond the safe, central plateau of language where mind can break with what Buren describes as "stale orderliness and flat, unimaginative thinking".

This raises the question of what that creative outer edge of language is in itself if, as Buren states, it is a point where language begins to falter and becomes indistinct. Why should an approach to that outer rim of language result in originality of thought? Could it

be, however, that Buren and Cupitt are simultaneously correct and incorrect in their assessment of language and its role in psyche? Could it be that language not only goes all the way down as they contend, but that at depth it no longer functions in the way surface, plateau language functions? Or, for that matter, how it functions at its creative outer edge? Is there a point where language begins to function in a more extended fashion, where it ceases to be mind deliberating on "bits" and becomes psyche embracing "wholes"? That, after all, is what creativity is; it is a grasping of something beyond individual parts, an appreciation of something that extends itself in multiple directions without apparent effort. So-called "non-verbal" experience may not signify a meaningless state of mind at all; it may more accurately reflect a state of mind where subjective cognitions displace cognitions that take other objects of attention as their focal point.<sup>40</sup> Language as we have come to understand it may not seem to be at work, but it may only have changed in its behaviour. This is not to dispute that language can, when stressed by incomprehension or emotion (or repetition), break down into meaningless jabbering; it is to suggest that a full-blown non-verbal state is actually a more extended psychological state housing language as a holistic experience. In this sense non-verbal experience in its creative upper reaches – Grotowski's "higher psyche" - is neither linguistically empty nor meaningless, just invisible to itself.

This is to question both Cupitt and Buren on what they mean by the term "non-verbal" experience. For what is a non-verbal experience if it isn't verbal, if it is where words and concepts become progressively indistinct, yet result in creative novelty. There's something odd going on here, and that in spite of Buren

saying again and again that to trespass beyond this outer edge of language is to reach "a point beyond which words no longer do their work."<sup>41</sup> Words may no longer do their work in terms of meanings unfolding through the rules and complexities of language, but is that all that's going on in the unfolding of meanings? Do we actually think meanings into existence through words, or do we give expression to meanings through words? Do we not rather subjectively dance between non-verbal and verbal states until meaning emerges? In saying this I am not questioning the role of language in the formation of meanings meaningful to other minds, including our own in terms of speaking or writing; I am questioning the assumption that such meanings can only arise as the result of language manipulation. Concrete meanings are certainly expressed by that means, but even ordinary thinking seems to be conducted through a process that shades away from verbal coherence towards a kind of darkness. I talk to myself internally, and regularly witness others doing the same, but when thinking "thoughts" my thoughts are, on the whole, not composed of words or sentences, they are a shifting sense of something indescribably vague that delivers up meanings as realisations. Indescribably vague realisations attend not only outer-edge experiences of creativity, they also perfectly describe normal, everyday, central plateau thinking as well. It is all a matter of degree, a matter of how sensitised we are to our own interior life.

Don Cupitt's "psychic mush" description of non-verbal states sounds reasonable if we imagine the rest of psyche as having no coherence apart from what goes on in the conscious mind. But is that how things really are? Buren is much more careful in his approach to this question. In his analysis "We [approach a point] at

which language breaks down, where it ceases to be language because we can no longer do anything with it."<sup>42</sup> Which tells us what? That language has been extinguished? No, just that we don't know how to handle what happens next. We are quite simply out of our depth; or, more accurately, out of the comfort zone of the conscious mind. It is the language-dependent conscious mind that is in trouble, not psyche as a whole. And that returns us to the all-important distinction between states of mind where subjective cognitions displace cognitions that take other objects of attention as their focal point. If we are not familiar with this form of awareness, this strange locale where "bits" are swapped for "wholes", then we will almost certainly write it off as having no relevance.

Cupitt does just that when describing his own experience of meditation, and that even when his description shows traces of creative readjustment. Describing Buddhist meditation as a "therapy" that dissolves away false dualisms and troubling ideas, and his own experience of meditation as the self "melted down into a silent outpouring of pure insubstantial secondariness [where] we find ourselves unlearning our way down to the most perfect happiness in the purest Emptiness,"<sup>43</sup> he nevertheless ends up saying that Western mysticism's talk of meditative unknowing is no more than a form of disguised doctrinal subversion. But which came first, the subversive ideas exhibited by many Western mystics, or the experience of "unknowing" that dissolves away false dualisms? This causes me to ask if Cupitt is making a distinction between Buddhist and Christian meditation, or just assuming that meditational claims made by both are equally overblown?

Don Cupitt leaves this question hanging and proceeds to build a case for Western mysticism being disguised doctrinal subversion, and on that basis concludes that the modern conception of mysticism as a "confirmation of the truths of orthodoxy" was how the Church handled this challenge to its power.<sup>44</sup> That is a correct conclusion, but to make doctrinal subversion the sole motive force of Western mysticism is to go too far. Doctrinal subversion was in the air, but it was the result of experiences that questioned false dualisms as Cupitt himself has admitted. The obscure form of language developed by Western mysticism was in part a special code designed to keep the authorities at bay,<sup>45</sup> but to make mystical language no more than a deconstructive commentary designed to undermine Church doctrine is to ignore much evidence to the contrary.<sup>46</sup> Making everything of consequence in the mind "conscious" by definition, Cupitt's experience of false dualisms dissolving away in emptiness ends up as no more than a momentary escape from troubling thoughts.

### **The Poles of Undifferentiated Experience**

A state of mind where subjective cognitions displace cognitions that take other objects of attention as their focal point is known technically as the point where cognitive-mentations displace meta-mentations. Cognitive-mentations are acts of primary attention where we subjectively relate to our selves as living organisms, meta-mentations those where involvement with self, other or world remains an act of secondary, objectified attention. The Scottish philosopher David Hume argued that it was impossible to subjectively detect one's own existence as a self; the sensation of

being such could not be cognitively intercepted. In psychological terms, that would be the equivalent of trying to look at the back of one's head without a strategically placed mirror. Concluding, however, that we did not have a primary self at all, Hume's formula for selfhood became something that "imagination effects between point and point", and in conjunction with Descartes' "I think therefore I am", the immediacy of self-cognition was turned into a mental conjuring trick embedded in language. And that is how things stand today in both psychology and philosophy: self is perceived as a necessary illusion, a subjective phantom. There is however a sobering truth lurking within this bleak definition of selfhood, for as beings dominated by language, and by language theory, we are in fact so out of contact with ourselves as living organisms as to be all but nonexistent just as Hume contended.

This brings us to Benny Shanon, Professor of psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, whose research in the phenomenology of human consciousness and the philosophy of psychology has marked him out as a frontier thinker. Working also in the domains of psycholinguistics, the semantics and pragmatics of natural language, and with thought processes and creativity, Shanon the all-rounder offers "a new perspective for cognitive psychology as a science and a re-appraisal of its aims and the intellectual challenge it presents."<sup>47</sup> For our purposes it is his paper "A Psychological Theory of Consciousness" that is of interest, for in it he presents a step by step exposition of his own thinking over the years, and develops a highly useful theoretical approach to the study of consciousness in terms of a three-tier system. Three theoretical levels of consciousness are postulated: (1) sensed being or sentience, (2) mental awareness, and (3) meta-mentations. These

are in turn labeled Cons<sup>1</sup>, Cons<sup>2</sup>, and Cons<sup>3</sup>. As “sensed being” (Cons<sup>1</sup>) has no specific structure, does not exhibit differentiation, and is all pervasive and non-local, it is by definition beyond definition. On having admitted this, Shanon does however attempt one further clarification: Cons<sup>1</sup> is there during all of our lives and constitutes the foundation for a next higher stage.<sup>48</sup>

This next stage is of course Cons<sup>2</sup>, or “mental awareness”, and it is composed of “subjective experiences that are distinct and differentiated.”<sup>49</sup> Here resides our inner dialogue, our mental images, our dreams, our stream of articulated thought, indeed everything of which we are aware, everything that is well-defined and well-formed.<sup>50</sup> This is followed by Cons<sup>3</sup>, or “meta-mentations”, a level of mind where objects of attention are subjected to further reflection, even reflection on the process of reflection itself. Meta-mentations are however sometimes confused with the experience of “self-awareness”, warns Shanon, but they are in fact quite different in makeup.

Shanon is at pains to point out that meta-mentations are not cognitive-mentations; meta-mentations involve one in one’s own cognitive activities (thinking and talking, etc), and as such carry one away from the experience of self as a living organism. Reflection on self, and self-awareness, are therefore different levels of cognition for Shanon. Cognitive-mentations (sense of being) are always to some degree present in meta-mentations, whereas meta-mentations (reflection on objects of attention, even on reflection itself) are not fundamental to cognitive-mentations. This is an important point, and in a footnote to his paper Shanon develops it one step further: meta-cognitions, he contends, are not the sole criteria for our being conscious.<sup>51</sup> This suggests that the word

"conscious" is in itself problematical, there being the possibility that "conscious" could also apply to "sense of being" (cognitive-mentation) in spite of there being no "knowing" element in the experience. To "know" something is the general definition of what it means to be consciously aware, but as pointed out by Shanon, the psychologist William James's use of "consciousness" and "sciousness" (1890/1950) tantalisingly suggests there may be a form of knowing that does not knowingly entail having an object of attention as its focus.

This curious state of internal affairs leads to an interesting double question: Is "self-consciousness" actually consciousness of self, and is "consciousness of self and world" the final arbiter of what it means to be a conscious human being? Shanon is particularly clear on this point. He says, "It should be noted that for some investigators reflection and self-awareness are the critical features of consciousness".<sup>52</sup> This makes the mind's ability to reflect on its own existence, and on the existence of all other elements of inner/outer reality the yardstick by which we have to gauge mind as being conscious, and that for Shanon is too narrow a definition. In this context, he says, "I favour a dynamic picture whereby the different types (Cons<sup>1</sup>, <sup>2</sup> & <sup>3</sup>) may co-exist and which displays a constant flux between them."<sup>53</sup> Why should this be the case? Because just as Con<sup>3</sup> is dependent on Cons<sup>2</sup> for its extended functioning, so also must Cons<sup>3</sup> and Cons<sup>2</sup> be dependent on Cons<sup>1</sup> as a supporting substrate. While appearing conceptually and structurally distinct, that is, theoretically separated for the purpose of analysis, they are nevertheless an integrated whole sharing "content" in unexpected combinations.<sup>54</sup> Consciousness is then a

system of dynamic alternatives,<sup>55</sup> not a fixed, static hierarchy with “meaning” isolated in its upper, conscious reaches.

To say that Don Cupitt’s and Paul Buren’s scheme of mind is different from that of Benny Shanon’s would be to state the obvious. In their scheme the subjective, non-verbal, undifferentiated substrate of personal experience carries no significance in terms of meaning: it is no more than biological white-noise. Beyond language the possibility of understanding anything is conceptually impossible, the outer edge of language perceived as a place where meanings progressively deteriorate into gibberish. All “knowing” is necessarily conscious, reflective, and subject to pre-existing categories of meaning, the notion that it can be otherwise a sad dependency on modernist theories which post-modernist thinking has shown to be inadequate. As noted by Buren, however, that outer edge is also the place where real creativity takes place, the area where surprising and unexpected “combinations of thought” can materialise.

Shanon, too, is aware that his tripartite system cannot fully account for non-ordinary states of consciousness such as those attained through solitude, meditation, sensory deprivation and fasting. But he has not always been of this opinion; he admits to having argued in earlier papers that such states were only extended acts of meta-cognition, no more than meta-mentation layers of reflection on reflection further up the chain of awareness.<sup>56</sup> Shanon has however changed his mind. Clinical research into powerful psychoactive potions have revealed facets of mind that are entirely new and unexpected, forms of thinking that have radically changed the way in which Shanon views self, mind and consciousness. Creating a wholly new mental cartography in subsequent papers,

and in his book *The Antipodes of the Mind*, Shanon challenges the postmodernist approach to mental functioning and adds two extra levels to his tripartite system. These are Cons<sup>4</sup>, where mentations are experienced as being generated by something other than one's own mind, and Cons<sup>5</sup> where states of mind lacking an object of attention can be "linked with mystical experiences and with distinctions made in the literature on mysticism."<sup>57</sup> Such experiences often defy words and concepts, and can be characterised as ineffable, although not all fit neatly into the category marked "real" mysticism. On the whole, however, Cons<sup>5</sup> experiences had as a result of psychoactive influence often mirrored visions described in classical Judeo-Christian mystical literature,<sup>58</sup> and, interestingly, as collected by the psychologist Carl Jung from his patients, and described by Jung from his own experience.

Shanon's analysis of experiences had at Cons<sup>4</sup> and Cons<sup>5</sup> is thorough and extensive, but at this point I'm much more interested in his observation that Cons<sup>5</sup> does not actually correspond to Cons<sup>1</sup>. Both seem to be undifferentiated, elemental experiential states at opposite ends of an integrated system, but they are in fact not the same thing at all. At one end we have the undifferentiated primitive quality of sentience, at the other a graded diminishing of differentiated experience into non-ordinary experience between Cons<sup>4</sup> and Cons<sup>5</sup>. So what is the underlying difference between the two polar states? Well, it's basically this: As Cons<sup>2</sup> is a clinically observable progression built on Cons<sup>1</sup>, Cons<sup>3</sup> a progression built on Cons<sup>2</sup>, and Cons<sup>4</sup> a progression on Cons<sup>3</sup> in terms of creativity, then by definition Cons<sup>5</sup> should be a progression from Cons<sup>4</sup> and not a retrogression back to Cons<sup>1</sup>. Cons<sup>5</sup> would then not be a return to an undifferentiated, primal state, but a move beyond both

differentiation and undifferentiation as normally understood. Hence Shanon's use of the term "non-ordinary state of mind" to describe what lies between Cons<sup>4</sup> and Cons<sup>5</sup>, for it is there on the hinge between those states that real creativity sets in as observed by Buren, and where, as noted above, non-ordinary phenomenological patterns, visions and mystical encounters can erupt.

It is not my intention to pursue the question of mystical experience at this point;<sup>59</sup> all I want to say in this regard is that the postmodernist approach to these difficult and confronting issues is, in my opinion, inadequate. In this regard, Benny Shanon shares a point of view not all that different from that of the Japanese philosopher Tetsuaki Kotoh who, in his paper "Language and Silence" asks, "Can the entire reality of our being be grasped from the level of language?<sup>60</sup> For Shanon, the problem of language is similarly complex and "warrants a study of consciousness which is genuinely psychological;<sup>61</sup> for Kotoh, "Self-transformation [is] a process in which the normal relationship between language and reality breaks down into silence."<sup>62</sup> So what is this "silence" of which Kotoh speaks, and Shanon describes as a state beyond differentiation? Is it Don Cupitt's "psychic mush" given a fancy name, or is it something altogether different. Might it be Meister Eckhart's "ground [that is] impenetrable stillness, motionless in itself"?<sup>63</sup>

#### References and Notes:

- 1) Quote by Andre Maurois is to be found on back cover of *Labyrinths* by Jorge Luis Borges. Penguin Books, 1970.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid.

- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Line taken from the back cover of Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect language*. Fontana Press, 1997.
- 6) Ibid, pp. 8-9. Here Eco draws attention to Genesis 10: 5. where the editor speaks of the sons of Noah after the Flood as "Gentiles divided in their lands; everyone after his tongue, after their families, in their nations."
- 7) Doane, T. W., *Bible Myths and their Parallels in other Religions*, University Books, New York, 1871. p. 34.
- 8) Ibid, p. 35.
- 9) Eco, Umberto, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, (as above) p. 15.
- 10) Ibid, p. 31.
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Ibid, p. 40.
- 13) Ibid, p. 10. Note also George Steiner's argument in his essay 'After Babel' (1975) that the multiplicity of languages once spoken on Earth were not a curse, but rather "a window on being, on creation." (as referred to by Steiner in *My Unwritten Books*, Phoenix, 2008).
- 14) Ibid, p. 11.
- 15) Ibid, p. 13.
- 16) Ibid, p. 13.
- 17) Ibid, P. 12.
- 18) Ibid.
- 19) Ibid, P. 13.
- 20) Ibid.
- 21) Ibid.
- 22) Barfield, Owen, *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays*, Wesleyan University Press, 1977. p. 17.
- 23) Ibid, pp. 17-18.
- 24) bid, p. 16-17.
- 25) Buren, Paul M. van, *The Edges of Language: An Essay in the Logic of Religion*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1972.p. 61.
- 26) Grotowski, Jerzy, 'A Kind of Volcano', an essay in *Gurdjieff*, edited by Jacob Needleman and George Baker, Continuum, New York, 1997. p. 90. See also Bruce Mangan's article 'Meaning, God, Volition and Art' (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 21. No. 3-4, 2014) pp. 164-167, where non-

verbal, fringe consciousness, is described as a 'gap' that isn't actually a gap at all; more a non-sensory fringe where we "experience a structured vacancy that is certainly not void and seems to be doing important cognitive work."

- 27) Ibid, p. 63.
- 28) Ibid.
- 29) Ibid, p. 78.
- 30) Ibid, p. 66.
- 31) Ibid.
- 32) Ibid, p. 83.
- 33) Ibid.
- 34) Ibid, p.100.
- 35) Ibid.
- 36) Lockhart, Douglas, Volume One of *Even When Your Voice Shakes* (provisional title for an as yet unpublished book), and *Going Beyond the Jesus Story*, O Books, UK., 2011, p. 17.
- 37) Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, 1998. p. 11.  
Hegel was of much the same opinion as Cupitt: the ineffable was nothing more than muddled thinking; it had no meaning until words were found. Bernard d'Espagnat questions this approach in *On Physics and Philosophy*, Princeton University, 2006, where he says "Finding words is certainly not a sufficient condition for valid thinking, and, after all, it is not absolutely sure that everything meaningful is, ipso facto, analyzable." (Forward p. 5)
- 38) Ibid, p. 10. In relationship to postmodern forms of thought and argument, I can do no better than direct attention to *A Devil's Chaplain*, selected Essays by Richard Dawkins, where Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont deal with what they term "Intellectual Impostures". In what is an extremely funny, but telling, essay, these writers deal with postmodern jargon and reveal its primary weakness as "randomly generated syntactically correct nonsense." Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2003. p. 53)
- 40) Lockhart, Douglas, *Going Beyond the Jesus Story*, O Books, UK., 2011, p. 261. It's worth noting William James' and Henri Bergson's approach to so-called "non-verbal" experience. James referred to non-verbal experience as knowledge of, or by, acquaintance, (as opposed to knowledge-about), Bergson as a fusion of immediacy with that-ness carrying an overlay of

memory. Not memory consciously articulated, more memory as a distillation or internalisation of cultural and psychological patterns. For Bergson and James memories were indiscernibly woven into moments of pure perception in terms of a tacit conceptual background - we were not passive receivers of information, we were also subconscious co-creators of the world of experience. I am indebted to G. W. Bernard's article "The Unseen Worlds of Consciousness" *Journal of Consciousness Studies* Vol. 21, No. 3-4, 2014. pp 41-43, for these observations. But I would add a rider: the memory aspect of this tacit conceptual background should not be mistaken for the raw core material that both James and Bergson intuited to be available during creative and mystical epiphany. For them such moments overrode psychological and cultural expectations to the extent that they annulled even subconscious memories. Michael Polanyi's remarks on tacit integrations, and Chris Clarke's article 'Quantum Consciousness' (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 21. No. 3-4, 2014) where he carefully differentiates between propositional, verbally-based reasoning and implicational reasoning where sensed occurrences impinge on essential being, are also relevant.

- 41) Buren, Paul van, *The Edges of Language*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1972. p. 81. See also Todd Bresnick's and Ross Levin's paper 'Phenomenal Qualities of Ayahuasca Ingestion and its Relation to Fringe Consciousness and Personality' (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 9, 2006), where they suggest that the psychotropic substance Ayahuasca may "reverse the background and foreground of cognition [and] provide better access to the structure of consciousness than do other phenomenological and introspective research methods alone."
- 42) Ibid, p. 83.
- 43) Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, (as above) p. 5.
- 44) bid.
- 45) Ibid, p. 4.
- 46) Ibid.
- 47) Shanon, Benny, "A Psychological Theory of Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 5, 2008.p. 6.
- 48) Ibid, p. 8.
- 49) Ibid.

- 50) Ibid.
- 51) Ibid, p. 9.
- 52) Ibid.
- 53) Ibid.
- 54) Ibid, p. 19.
- 55) Ibid, p. 11. Note also that in William James's account of fringe consciousness it is the fringe, not the conscious nucleus, that is the cognitive workhorse. Bruce Mangan remarks on this interesting fact in his article 'Meaning, God, Volition and Art' (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3-4, 2014), and adds (p.163) that for James "the fringe contains most context information, guiding the direction of our thoughts; it is the domain of meaning, of interpretation, of intentions, of evaluations - indeed of relational information of all kinds, from the most concrete to the most abstract ... Of most of its relations we are only aware in the penumbral nascent way of a 'fringe' of inarticulate affinities."
- 56) Ibid, p. 15.
- 57) Ibid, p. 21.
- 58) Ibid.
- 59) Lockhart, Douglas, *Even When Your Voice Shakes*, Volume One of a not yet published book.
- 60) Kotoh, Tetsuaki, "Language of Silence", as found in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, edited by Graham Parkes, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1990, pp. 201-211.
- 61) Shanon, Benny, 'A Psychological Theory of Consciousness', (as above) p. 42.
- 62) Kotoh, Tetsuaki, 'Language of Silence', as found in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, edited by Graham Parkes, (as above) pp.201-211.
- 63) Eckhart, Meister, *German Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2.

