

God Is A Not A Noun in Native America: Worldview Thought Experiment

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SPEAKER'S NOTES

1. Introduction

a. Ever since the Europeans began exploring, exploiting and dominating the other countries and peoples of the Earth, they have wondered about the spiritual life of those people: who do they worship? who do they pray to? what is or are the name or names of their god or gods or goddess or goddesses?

b. Of course, there was a hidden assumption in all of this: that everyone conceived of God in the same way as the Europeans did -- same concept, just different names.

c. Physicists use Thought Experiments to help people see certain physics concepts. I want to use this Thought Experiment as a way of showing you worldview concepts, of showing you that it is always a mistake to assume that other people from other cultures speaking other languages perceive and think just like you do. Cultural thought patterns and worldviews evolve in the same way as plants or animals, and the only way there can be any similarity is by accident, borrowing, or some similarity of linguistic backgrounds.

d. This worldview or cognitive linguistic relativity can be examined by looking at the major differences between the ways Europeans and Native Americans tend to view the concept of God.

2. Grammar and God

a. Nietzsche's comment (You say you no longer believe in the gods, and yet you still believe in grammar.) -- but I'd like to turn that around: you must understand about grammar to understand a larger global notion of God, how God is experienced for other people around the world.

b. this starts when Sakej said: the toughest job Indians ever had was explaining to the whiteman who their noun-god is. Repeat. That's

because God isn't a noun in Native America.

c. Let me give you an analogy from physics, from the theory of relativity: when physicists during the past century asked of incoming light are you a particle, it said yes; when they asked if it was waves, it also said yes. Previously, these were thought to be contradictory answers, but in this century we have seen the rise of the notion of complementarity, very similar to the Tao in Chinese philosophy, which says that two contradictory answers can both be right. Things wriggle and wriggles thing -- and they're either wriggles or things depending on the question we're asking at the time. In grammatical terms, nouns and verbs are thought to be totally distinct. But since anything whatsoever can be particle or wave, then it is logical using complementarity that God can be a noun or a verb, depending on your viewpoint.

3. Paint a Langscape or sculpt a figurine or compose a musical score in your mind which will depict the following details of the English language.

a. we'll start from where we are, describing particular aspects of the langscape of English, and then move and change in increments until we wind up somewhere else.

Ex: *the man kissed the woman*. We'll watch it change as we go along.

b. Aspects of English to notice

- **ARBITRARY** relation between word and world: God, Gott, Dieu, Deus -- doesn't matter; then all over the world
- **LIFE** is a property of the object -- the dog **IS** alive, the cloud **IS NOT** alive.
- **NOUNS** -- we need them to create sentences, they refer to things in the material world as well as abstractions, etc. the man, the woman.
- **VERBS** -- hold nouns together, create syntax by assigning roles to nouns. kissed. Also carries 'time': past, present, future. River of time.
- **PRO-NOUNS** -- stand for he/she/it: masc/fem/neuter. i.e., gendered person/inanimate, non-living. he kissed her.
- **who/which/that**: person vs non-person vs either -- babies, dogs, dolphins, ships, autos, guns, etc.
- **big gap**: no animate 'it' or 'which' -- it-ting Mother Earth to death

c. Now that we have a work of art in our mind representing this landscape, let's change it by increments -- take off some pieces and add some other pieces and see where it takes us. he kissed her.

PRO-NOUNS: get rid of any sexual gender. And same in the nouns: get rid of words like man, woman, boy, girl. Algonquian languages, which make up the largest Native American language family, do not distinguish between male or female anything. The only seeming exception is when they refer to something that is pregnant. -moosie example

But with sexual gender gone, we have a kind of vacuum, so let's add the notion **ANIMATE** to fill this vacuum. Animate in Algonquian languages is a grammatical device that helps you pay attention to signs of life and mystery; also, a 3/4-person distinction

John was walking in the mall and saw George. He asked him what he was there for, and he told him that he was shopping for his wife's birthday present

Animate starts out the same as we consider it, including humans and animals -- plus things that might be iffy to us: clouds, plants, trees, spirits, rocks; pipe/Pipe.

Then gets weird to us: calf/thigh, straw-/raspberry -- we can just stretch our categories so far, then cognitively snap as our grammar reasserts itself.

But what's really in the way here is our equating the word 'animate' with 'living' -- how many were doing that? Probably all of you. But in this new world, foreign to our way of thinking, animate has to be understood as a larger notion than just living, one that can subsume these new distinctions.

And now, in addition, 'animate' is no longer a fixed property of the object, but a property of the relationship, judgement of the speaker: off-res newcomer vs Alex in Mikmaq.

Now let's get rid of the notion of pronoun altogether, because this is a part of the verb now.

sentence = *kissing* (animates involved)

NOUNS: Get rid of almost all of these; Sakej says can talk all day long in Mikmaq without saying a single noun. Boggling! Just a snapshot of the flux, not to be trusted.

And nouns are not needed to make complete or grammatical sentences either. In English if we see a flashing in the distance we must say something like "The light flashed." But what, really, is the difference between the flashing and the light? None, except our own language tells us so, and forces us to create a fictitious substance, light, to do the flashing. In the Hopi language of the southwest, a single word rehpi means the same thing, but it just says "flashed".

VERBS: Without nouns or pronouns or even articles (a/the) or prepositions (by/at/under), all we have left is verbs. A word is a sentence. kissed (animate, reciprocal) -- not really sure who started it now. In this new language we're moving into, things can be more ambiguous without nouns to tie things down.

And when I say verbs, I mean REAL verbs, not the kind we call copula: am, is, was, were, be. Most languages of the world do not use copulas, but are forced to use real verbs instead.

Verbs still carry the time element, except it's not time as we know it. I believe I mentioned the River of Time in the Fall Q. Diff for Greeks -- backed up. Past ahead, future behind. Let's use that and ditch the river, make it all inside of us.

MANIFEST -- past and present, everything in front of our eyes, open to sensory exploration, experience. **MANIFESTING** or **UNMANIFEST**: in our minds, hearts, the future. Potentiality working its way out into the manifest realm. Can also call this **FACTIVE** and **NON-FACTIVE**, or **OBJECTIVE/SUBJECTIVE**. kissing (animates, reciprocal, manifest). A little more ambiguous now.

NOT ARBITRARY -- like ASL, anyone know? Consciously attempts to capture the rhythms and vibrations of reality. Mikmaq trees as verbs. Meaningful fit between word and world, so arbitrary is a cultural choice, not universal.

NAMING -- not arbitrary with people's names either. We saw this a couple of years ago in a first-rate movie: Dances with Wolves (not the dances), Stands with Fist. These make sense now as headless verb phrases.

4. We have now moved from the familiar English landscape by incremental change to smack-dab in the middle of the Cheyenne language. See what your painting or musical score or sculpture looks like, and let's now look at the notion of God.

a. As you can see, in a language like this God couldn't be anything else BUT a verb, a process, a relationship, with no form and no gender but animate (an attitude), experienced in both the manifest/-ing realms, and named in a non-arbitrary manner

b. Chickasaw -- Ababinili -- dwells above

c. Cheyenne -- ma?heo?o, large animate mystery, and ma?heono, spirits of directions; o?o/ono both animate plural markers. Great Mysteriousing => a noun -- The Great Spirit

5. Now close your eyes and visualize, hear and feel God as an agentless verb. What came up for you? (audience) [wind?]

6. Now if something as important as God can be a verb instead of a noun in Native American languages, so can everything else.

a. There are some important implications to this. first, think about logic. A simple syllogism goes: All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal. Now if you aren't forced to use nouns in order to make complete sentences, then there must be kinds of logic that don't need nouns. Except they would be hard to explain in English because we need nouns! And if you get rid of copulas as well, which as I said most languages don't have anyway, then logic itself, and reasoning, must be totally different in different languages. Logic grows out of the grammar of each language, so there is just simply NO universal human logic.

b. Second, let's think about health and our bodies. Our society and its institutions, perhaps especially the medical institution, are driven by nouns. Most of our diseases are nouns, which we most often HAVE: I have a headache, a stomach ache, acne, cancer, mumps, measles, etc., etc. Each of these can also be seen as a verb or process instead of a 'thing', but to talk about them in this way is weird at first: I'm headaching, stomach-aching, acneing, cancering, mumpsing, measlesing. But what a difference: now these are not things you have, but processes your body is going through, which you have more control over than if it's a 'thing' that has nothing intrinsically to do with you. As you can tell by now, there could be other medical systems which exploit the verb-consciousness around dis-easing, not feeling at ease, which we usually automatically reject because of our addiction to nouns, thinking the world doesn't make any sense without them.

[Reader: Can you get the flow from this? Does it work for you? Some of the people I've presented this to have told me that in theological terms, what this is doing is explicating in a natural way what Whitehead was so painfully trying to explain about process theology.]
