The Creation of Language and Language without Time: Metaphysics and Metapragmatics in Genesis 1

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Abstract

This essay makes two related arguments regarding the relation of the performative language of creation in Genesis 1 to temporality and to existence. The first explores how Biblical Hebrew constructs atemporal language in order to designate divine action that does not presuppose temporality through an under-researched device known as *grammatical aspect*. The second offers a new explanation why was language the instrument of creation *ex nihilo* to begin with. It argues that *fiat lux* should be understood as the instant of the metalinguistic creation of language itself. Together these claims suggest that standard readings of the Biblical creation narrative, especially when relying on translations that presuppose temporal categories in their grammatical forms and thus in their metaphysical commitments (as Germanic languages, such as English, do), fail to express the radical nature of the creation narrative – placing divine creation in time and telling, in essence, a flawed story. While offering primarily a linguistic argument, this essay also adds to the discussion of the relations between language and the metaphysical commitments of mimesis in general.

Keywords: Genesis; Biblical Hebrew; metalanguage; atemporality; mimesis; Bible translations; metapragmatics; linguistic performativity; grammatical aspect; aorist aspect; perfective aspect.

Preface

Language expresses action by the use of inflections, i.e. conjugated verbs. Because action requires time in order to occur, verbs maintain and typically express complex relations to temporal categories. This linguistic structure conforms to the metaphysical notion that existence in general, and thus action, is in time and requires time.

Denying that presupposition, this essay makes two related claims concerning the language of creation in Genesis 1. The first is that the language of mimesis representing Biblical creation must convey atemporality, because *fiat lux* occurred when time, and the other categories of existence, were not yet created. Hence such language as the KJV's "God *said*" is mistaken, using tense to place divine action in time and denying the radical nature of the Biblical narrative of creation *ex nihilo*. By contrast, in Biblical Hebrew (BH) atemporality is captured by usage of what linguists call *grammatical aspect*, a linguistic device separated from tense that marks characteristics of action such as temporal flaw (or lack thereof), consequentialness, repetitiveness, self-containment, etc. In particular, BH makes use of the so-called aorist (or perfective) aspect that in the relevant contexts designates as close as possible expression of atemporal "pure action." By and large, this is missed by Germanic languages, such as English, that contain no natural equivalent to the BH usage of the aorist aspect, relying much more on a richer tense system (BH contains only two properly defined tenses, requiring a more extensive use of aspect to express temporal categories).

The notion of grammatical aspect, although recognized already in Hellenic times, is a relative newcomer to modern linguistics. Its significance to metaphysical categories is increasingly gaining interest (Binnick 1991). The present essay applies aspectual analysis to Biblical language as well as attempts to advance the study of the relations between grammar and metaphysical commitments beyond formal definitions.

The second layer of this essay generalizes from the first to make a more general argument about the relations between language and creation. It revisits a familiar question: why was language the instrument of creation in Genesis 1 to begin with? Why does omnipotence require a mediating device – such as language – rather than simply act

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through a perfomative will? Using Occam's razor, it seems redundant to require any externalization in order to create through language the objects that language would subsequently (and consequently) be "about."

Something must be wrong with this picture, and it is: it looks to language only as a semiotic mediator, ignoring its performative force both in relation to "the world" and in relation to itself. Due to language's reflexivity (i.e. its metapragmatic application to itself), language and linguistic entities are the only phenomena that *must* be created linguistically. This is not a constraint on omnipotence as it is generated from the nature of language itself. The only explanation for the use of language in Genesis 1:3 then is that *Fiat lux* is the true instance of the creation not (only) of light, but of language.

1. "Pure Action" and Language without Time

Fiat Lux: the very first command uttered, the first language. But in what way "first" and why was it uttered? The language of Genesis 1:3: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר (KJV: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light,")[1] has traditionally posed difficulties for translators into any tense-language whose grammar is temporally infused, i.e. language that expresses action by implying the passage of time—and by presupposition, the existence of time.[2] For, as noted below, time belongs to the order of

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[1] See the appendix below for a partial list of alterative translations. Note that a common sentence structure in Biblical Hebrew is verb-subject-object ("Said God, etc.") The original text --Biblical Hebrew being a consonant system or abjad -- contains no vowels, nor punctuation such as quotation marks to signify a subordinate clause, and only since the early middle ages incorporates cantillation marks for unifying pronunciation.

[2] Certainly not all languages are said to be temporally infused in this sense. In one of the most famous texts in linguistic anthropology, Benjamin Lee Whorf claimed that,

> After long and careful study and analysis, the Hopi language is seen to contain
> no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly
> to what we call time, or to past, present, or future, or to enduring or lasting, or
> to motion as kinematic rather than dynamic (i.e. as a continuous translation in

things created, and cannot be presupposed in relation to creation, as descriptive (or generally mimetic) temporal language does. Already (in *Peri Hermeneias*) Aristotle observed that although their primary function was to denote action, tenses imply a temporal framework through which action takes place.[3] By contrast, this essay explores the conditions of linguistic expression (and later on, of linguistic performance) that allow, or entail, a certain set of meanings including the possibility of imagining a reality that allows for action without temporality. How can language about reality avoid metaphysical categories of existence, represent action that is free of space, time, and perhaps causation? This requires tracing a specific attribute of the Hebrew of Genesis 1 that linguists have called, since the 19th century, the "grammatical aspect" of propositions that govern (or "mark") temporal properties independently of tenses.

Grammatical aspect is a property of verbs that determines how the verb expresses temporal flow (or lack thereof) in the corresponding event, as well as other characteristics of action, such as repetitiveness, continuity, consequentialness, etc. Aspect is distinct from tense and grammatical aspects do not strictly correlate to tenses, although specific tenses my typically express certain grammatical aspects (e.g., the English tense present continuous tends to express a progressive aspect; indeed some linguists regard the present

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space and time rather than as an exhibition of dynamic effort in a certain process) or that even refer to space in such a way as to exclude that element of extension or existence that we call time, and so by implication leave a residue that could be referred to as time. Hence, the Hopi language contains no reference to time, either explicit or implicit.

Whorf 1950: 67.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic and epistemological relativity has come under serious criticism from several quarters, including Chomskyan linguists according to whom "the past few decades' work in generative grammar has shown us that the differences among human languages are superficial at best… even on the surface Hopi [has] a temporal system." Ludlow 1999: xiii (a fascinating work that is indispensible for any account of mimetic and expressive temporal relations between language and reality.) Putting Whorf's claim that language expresses contingent metaphysical commitments on its head, so to speak, Ludlow argues that both the structure and semantics of natural language provide independent insights into metaphysical truths.

[3] See, e.g., *De int.* 16a 20, 16b 6; *Poetics* 1457a 10, 14.

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continuous chiefly as an aspect marker, since tense-wise it substitutes for the simple present). In English, grammatical aspect is not morphologically signified by any single grammatical unit, leading to a relative paucity of research and recognition.

A further parsing, sometimes ignored in English, is between aspect and *Aktionsart* (roughly, "manner of action" in German) which expresses a lexicalization of semantic meaning and is an inherent property of a verb or more generally, an inherent property of an eventuality (e.g. the event's self-contained or consequential nature: "sneeze" v. "build," or temporal continuation, "sneeze" v. "play"). Aktionsart is thus generally invariant, whereas grammatical aspect is a shiftable property of the verb form.[4]

In order to express action without time—namely, render a valid representation of creation *ex nihilo* in Genesis 1 (below I briefly defend this interpretation on the creation narrative) —BH uses what linguists term the *aorist* or perfective aspect; in this context, the aorist gets as close as possible to expressing "pure action" in a relative metaphysical vacuum, allowing talking of the world without expressing metaphysical categories that the world presupposes, such as temporality.[5] The "aboutness" relation of language to world here excludes time.[6] Failing to respond to this linguistic property in our reading of the text, or

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[4] See Vendler 1959. As an aside, I am not altogether sure how Aktionsart holds up in cases where verbs shift their aspectuality in performative mode (the "to say" of Genesis is still an "accomplishment" according to Vendler's classification but its consequential character is different than that of a "to say" that produces merely a "saying," as opposed to effecting the physical or metaphysical world. See generally Verkuyl 1993.

[5] Grammatical aspects have been studied more and more as of late, to a degree following paths set by Jakobson 1980. Recent works helpful in preparation of the present work include Ludlow 1999, Binnick, 2006, Comrie 1976, Smith 1991 and Tatevosov 2002, among others.

[6] For a critique of word-world "aboutness" relations see White (1992: 229 et seq.), proceeding from the insight that,

> There is a world of talk, and the world beyond talk,' I seem to say; the relation between them is that the first is "about" the other. But… there may be important continuities among these three practices that the formula "talk about" obscures or denies.

to replicate it in translation, is a hermeneutic error that misses the salient nature of the event that language attempts to represent, namely the radical nature of creation in Genesis not merely from chaos but *ex nihilo*, a creation not just in the sense of organizing primordial matter or putting things into forms and orders (although Genesis 1 tells of this as well), but *a creation of the very categories of reality and of the possibility of existence* itself, applied to anything other than the divine singularity. For by definition, the categorical and transcendental uniqueness of the monotheistic deity renders it impossible to infer from its existence the possibility of the existence of anything else. From the fact that God exists nothing else concerning the possibility of existence follows.

BH uses an aorist grammatical aspect that allows the possibility of denoting action without temporal commitments, or denote an object without ascribing to it temporal existence, and thus "talking without time." The aorist (or "perfective") aspect is, admittedly, one of the least explored and understood in modern aspectual analysis. While interpreted in different ways, what renders it so unique is its ability to denote "pure" action as linguistic expression may, within a system of tenses and inflections. While the aorist aspect is common in Greek and Slavic languages—the Septuagint uses εἶπεν for וַיֹּאמֶר, which is in the indicative aorist active 3rd person singular—it is uncommon in Germanic languages. What it allows BH to do is to represent action narratively yet without temporal commitments: וַיֹּאמֶר and וַיְהִי in Genesis 1:3 do not imply, respectively, action in time or existence in time, while by contrast the corresponding conjugated verbs "said" and "was" do imply action in time and existence in time, respectively. As noted, unlike other narratives of creation, Genesis is radical in that not merely things or orders of things were created but the categories of existence themselves, including time.[7] Time certainly belongs to the order of things created (Aquinas states the

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See also Yovel 2000.

[7] Unlike what Leibnitz has called "necessary and eternal truths," those that consist of "God's own understanding" (e.g., those known to us in the forms of logical rules of inference -- the law or contradiction, $\sim(p \cdot \sim p)$, or the postulate of identity, $p = p$; see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* FP 45:2.) These certainly do not include time. In Ariew and Gerber's splendid translation,

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common notion that nothing in existence, save God, is necessary, *Summa Theologica* FP 44:1, 46:1). We are not told of the creation of time directly, but the narrative's incompleteness should imply no metaphysical presuppositions. The fact remains that in BH, the story of the creation of light is atemporal; in English it is temporal, as if God acts within time, as if time were a necessary category of reality, a category of omnipotence rather than a product of its action. The KJV and following versions (with one exception, discussed below) construct a creation narrative that misses its own radical nature.

A fallacy that should be avoided is to imply, as the creation narrative progresses, temporality from mere sequentiality. Creation was not temporal, even if it was sequential. In post-genesis reality, things can occur before and after each other because there is time to sustain this relation. Yet the notion of sequentiality itself is an atemporal structure, as exemplified by well-ordered analytical sequences (e.g. natural and ordinal numbers) or even by the arbitrariness of lexical ordering (e.g. an alphabet). Time is a medium that allows for sequentiality, but it is not a constituent of the structure of sequentiality.

Bereshit [Genesis] Rabbah 1:15 emphasizes that although the text reads "…created the heavens and the earth," creation was simultaneous. Of course: "and" is a purely linguistic sign and has no correspondent in reality. There occurred a creation of heavens; there occurred a creation of earth. Combining them as two sequential instances is a linguistic performance. It produces a narrative, not a claim about the presence or necessity of time for multiple action.

2. Uses of the Aorist Aspect in other Temporal/Theological Contexts

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Furthermore, in order to explain a bit more distinctly how temporal, contingent, or physical truths arise from eternal, essential or metaphysical truths, we must first acknowledge that since something rather than nothing exists, there is a certain urge for existence or (so to speak) a straining toward existence in possible things or in possibility or essence itself; in a word, essence in and of itself strives for existence.

Leibnitz 1989: 150.

Several authors ascribe special significance to the usage of the aorist aspect in understanding the relations between action and time in other instances in scripture. In particular, I wish to pick up from Joseph A. Burgess' assertion that the aorist is used to denote action that, although completed in the past and thus does appear as "lingering" or "continuous," maintains a sense in which a certain consequent condition is not merely constantly present but in a deeper sense is timeless, omnipresent. His example is baptism, in obvious contrast to birth (Hagan 1994: 123). Likewise, Grant O. Osborne shows how the usage of the aorist aspect in Ephesians ("made us alive," "made to sit," "raised up,") obscures the past-present distinction for similar purposes (1994: 154).[8]

Naming is sometimes like this (here I generally follow Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*). Consider the naming of Abraham and Sarah's son. "יצחק" ("Yitzhak") is sometimes said to indicate Sarah's laughter upon hearing the annunciation of her imminent pregnancy at an advanced age (Genesis 17: 17-19, 21:1-7); sources sometime translate it as "he (or she) has laughed;" a leading authority, Martin Noth, suggests that Yitzhak is short for Yitzhakel, "God laughs" (1928: 210). Grammatically, however, יצחק, from the root צ.ח.ק, is in the single masculine future tense, which makes no sense in relation to Sarah nor to any past event in the story. Read as timeless, however, it makes perfect sense: the incredulity and thankfulness associated with Isaac's birth are not time-dependent, not past or present, but perpetual—codified in his name (Isaac was the only Biblical patriarch whose name was not changed or amended during his lifetime).[9] This conforms perfectly with Burgess' notion of language that transcends any temporal signification while

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[8] Many, perhaps even most scholarly discussions of the role of the aorist aspect in scripture deal with Greek texts or with Greek translations of the Hebrew, sometimes without recourse to the original. See, e.g., Stephen Ahearne-Kroll 2006: 301.

[9] This of course is not an attempt at a scientific exploration of the etymology of "Yitzhak" by any measure. It may have been a common name or one denoting something else entirely, which subsequent commentators purposely ignored. This is not uncommon: commenting on the origin of the name "Tiberias," Talmudists who wished to disassociate it from its historical link to the resented Roman emperor Tiberius, associated it with Eretz Yisrael's "tabur" (epicenter or core, either physical or mystical), manipulating the phonetic similarity. *Babylonian Talmud*, 1 Megilla 6:1.

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avoiding abstraction. Naming and baptism are concrete (speech)-acts, but their relation to time is, as far as their nature goes, arbitrary.[10]

John Paul Heil, in his very helpful *Rhetorical Role of Scripture in 1 Corinthians*, analyzes the rhetorical rather than descriptive functions of the aorist, citing previous work on the usage of hortatory aorist subjunctive, "let us bear," rather than the future indicative "we will bear" (Heil 2005: 234 citing Lincoln 1981: 50–55, commenting on 1 Cor. 15:49). Heil notes how the aorist serves distinctive rhetorical functions and voices precisely because it places action outside of normal parameters (e.g. a "prophetic aorist," Lambrecht 1990: 149). In reading 1 Corinthians on the background of Deuteronomy, Heil stresses nonspecific space/time/origin implied by usage of the aorist aspect.[11] There are other examples,[12] as well as criticism of such aspectual analysis.[13]

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[10] Popular sayings capture this in usages whose frequent iteration has come to shadow grammatical peculiarities: for instance, the proverb "he who laughs last, laughs best" or any number of its variations (as in John Masefield's *The Widow in the Bye Street*: "In this life he laughs longest who laughs last." 1912: 66.) It goes back to Isaac: the Hebrew phrase is "laughs he who laughs last, צוחק מי שצוחק אחרון."

[11] According to Heil,

  The perfect tense, "it is written," that is, "it has been and still is written," is used to introduce the primary quote of Deut 25:4 from the law of Moses in 9:9, while the aorist tense, "it was written," is used to extend the primary quote with a secondary quote of unspecified origin in 9:10. Fee's [reference omitted-JY] objection against a scriptural quote in 9:10, "Nowhere else does Paul use the aorist passive as an introductory formula to a quotation," fails to recognize the *gezera shava* [analogy – JY] and that the aorist is merely extending the initial and primary scriptural quotation introduced, as normally in Paul, with the perfect."

  Idem at p. 125 (Greek terminology omitted).

[12] Comparing similar language from 1 Peter and the Psalms and somewhat reflecting Osborn's insight, Karen H. Jobes claims that the shift from imperative to aorist in similar texts is necessary for ascribing to certain subjects a perpetual religious disposition:

  There are two differences between 1 Pet 2:3 and OG Ps 33:9, and both are clearly the deliberate decision of the author of the epistle. The imperative mood of…"taste!," is changed to an aorist indicative,…"you tasted," because the

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3. The Metalinguistic Creation of Language

In previous work (Yovel 2001) I have dealt with the performative, rather than the grammatical nature of the language of creation in Genesis 1, but did not adequately explain why יְהִי אוֹר, "Let there be light," *had* to be an act of linguistic utterance. Revisiting the puzzle should prove valuable here, because generally the perfect, rather than aorist aspect is considered appropriate for expressing performativity or consequential language. Genesis presents an exception in this respect too.

As noted by others, what is curious about the Biblical creation narrative is that language was instrumental in it at all. Divine omnipotence and divine transcendence are the radical presuppositions of Genesis. God certainly could have created by simply *willing*, as his will is executory; the use of language, then, requires an explanation in terms specific to the act, or process, of creation.[14]

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author of 1 Peter is using the quotation to ground the exhortation that the epistle's Christian readers, who have already tasted the goodness of the Lord, should crave pure spiritual milk as newborn babies.

Jobes 2006: 319.

[13] Notably Robert P. Gordon (in criticizing a tradition that traces the uses of the aorist in Greek Bible translations for purposes of dating the origin), notes that

The aorist occurs very commonly in the Old Greek… That all historic presents are taken to represent the Old Greek or Lucianic traditions does not require as corollary that aorists are indicative [of further grammatical implications - JY] (though the position may well be different in the case of a key recurrent verb).

Gordon 2006: 215n.

[14] Other models abound: any comparative study would identify creation myths that range from the *deus faber* model of creation (the creator as crafter, builder etc.—a manipulator of matter, as in, e.g., the *Kallevala*) to such opposite extremes as the so-called "Thinking Woman" who creates by mere thought, a "kind of silent logos who brings everything into existence." (Leeming 2010: 34; see also Weigle 1987 and more generally, Eliade 1996.) My concern, however, is not comparative or anthropological,

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Medieval *Midrash* saw the linguistic creation of the world as a sign of divine power—where man must labor, God need only speak—yet that hardly answers the question why action was required at all for an omnipotent and executory will (*Midrash Tehillim* 18: 26, (Braude 1959: 257). Presumably, the original relation between the creator and creation should require no mediation, certainly no semiotic mediation. The answer must then reflect the presumption and be in terms of necessity, not of contingency: an account of the relation between creator and creation that necessitates language. Instead of looking to the creator and ask "why must he create with language?" we should look to creation and ask "what is it about creation that necessarily requires language?" The answer -- quite obvious once the correct question is formed -- emerges not from the quality of omnipotence nor from the general metaphysical properties of creation, but from those of language itself – more precisely, the dependence of language on metalanguage. That relation is performative: metalanguage is not just "about" language, it *forms* it. It is, moreover, the only way to form language. Unlike anything else reported in the Genesis creation narrative, language is reflexive. Other things could be created through pure executory will: God has, after all, "made…the two great lights," Genesis 1:16, and no one seems particularly interested in knowing precisely how. Language is different. It must be its own instrument.

The reason this was generally overlooked may have to do with what JL Austin (1962, 1979) called the "descriptive fallacy," the general notion according to which language is primarily "about" things that are not linguistic; that language is, in a sense, not part of the world in which it operates (or "performs"). יְהִי־אוֹר -- the action of uttering "Let there be light" -- meant infusing creation with language, creating language *in* the world, as opposed to regarding language as a symbolic or ideaistic system that exists and operates parallel to the world. This is another vindication of sorts of Austin's (and the later Wittgenstein's) rejection of a view of language as "mirroring" or offering representational "pictures" of the world, as opposed to operating within and as part of it (Wittgenstein famously opens his *Philosophical Investigations* with a scathing critique of

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but philosophical and theological: I wish to study the relation between creator and creation in the first monotheistic text.

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the "picture theory" of language that he himself helped forming in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ascribing its source to Augustine, for whom the meaning of a word was the object for which it stood, maintaining an "aboutness" relation between names and things.)

Austin's point bears emphasizing, since it goes against certain engrained notions about language and its relation to the world. The Augustinian view – according to Wittgenstein at least – would be that the words making up *fiat lux*, being the names of the things they denote (Watson 1982), could have been created prior to, and independent of, any actual utterance or articulation. This is a "semantico-referential" paradigm of language, that sees language as made of meaning-units (i.e., words, "light") that refer to things that are not words (i.e., things, light); words can be "put to use" performatively, but their meanings are independent of usage.

By contrast, my claim is that in "Let there be light" God created language beyond merely grammar and a lexicon of signifiers (i.e., such words as "light" and "be"), but language as a performative medium, the very mode of linguistic performativity, including reflexive performance. Linguistic reflexivity means that only through doing something with words can the possibility of doing things with words be created. His "baptismal reference-fixing" (Putnam 1973, 1975, Kripke 1980, Burge 1979) in Genesis 1:5, when he "called the light day, and the darkness He called night" was possible because language was performative since two verses earlier. When Adam helped shoulder the naming of creation (Genesis 2:20) he partook in language's performativity: things got names through the performance of naming, and no other way is possible. Contra Augustine, names do not "belong" to the things they denote but to language ("light" is not a property of light but of the English language), an insight that all language speakers manifest even when not consciously aware of it (Mertz & Yovel 2010).

The answer to the conundrum about God's use of language in the act of creation is that he used metalanguage: it lies not in the nature of omnipotence or any inherent limitation on it, but in the nature of language itself.

4. Performativity, Normativity, Convention

There are additional constraints that must be met for linguistic action to work. Above I discuss the metalinguistic constraint (i.e. the need to create language by language). Reading Genesis 1:3 in light of speech act theory – especially as developed by JL Austin, when it was not yet termed that – provides insights into both divine creation and performative language in general. These are supplemented by two further constraints that may be termed the justificatory and the communicative constraints.

If יְהִי־אוֹר was the first act of creation *tout court*, the first act of normative creation followed closely behind. When God communicates to Adam and Eve that "from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" (Genesis 1:17, NAV), what is this act? If language were only a descriptive (or "locutionary") system, the only way to understand this speech act would be as either a conditioned causal prediction of sanction, or as a threat (close cousins, if not identical). This, in essence, is how the legal philosopher John Austin (and, to a lesser degree, Hans Kelsen) thought of norms in general: as threats of sanction (or other commensurate outcomes such as invalidity etc.), i.e. causal predictions intended to induce action. Such a view of language and of norms misses what HLA Hart (1961) famously termed the "internal" point of view of law or its *justificatory* constraint: the act does not merely threaten sanction, it justifies it. Eating of the trees becomes prohibited not through the threat of sanction but through its communication *qua* something prohibited. While the threat accompanies the prohibition, it does not constitute it; the prohibition—created by performative language, as opposed to the predictive causal language of threat—is the justification for the ensuing sanction. Otherwise no notion of sin or transgression would be possible.

Is there any other constraint on divine performative language, one perhaps shared with non-divine agents? Although both linguistic and metalinguistic performativity are available to all language users, the divine use of performative language appears to differ from human use in one respect. According to JL Austin's influential model, the successful use of performative language depends on meeting social conventions that

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Austin termed "procedures" or "felicity conditions": pragmatically, one can only promise, order, request, marry etc. through the application of language within an appropriate social medium (there is nothing in the semantics of "Could you pass the salt?" to construe it as an imperative rather than an interrogative, yet pragmatically the phrase is easily identified, Récanati 1980). According to JL Austin, language is not independently operative, it does not operate merely by virtue of what it says; it is not the *meaning* of words that renders utterances performative but their operation in a social medium that recognizes and allows them to operate as such. Speech act theory is thus a theory of social action as much as it is a theory of language.

God, ostensibly at least, does not operate in any medium, social or otherwise. In performing with language God could not have followed presupposed felicity conditions, since those are not rules of language but social conditions for successful performance. Nevertheless, even the divine creation of a norm, as analyzed above, faces a communicative constraint. The only way for God to create a prohibition to serve as a justification for future sanction (e.g., prohibit Adam and Eve from consuming the fruit of certain trees) would be through communicating it. God could not simply *will* a prohibition. Communication is performative: it constitutes the norm. the argument, to clarify, is not ethical. It is not that punishing without warning would be unjust; it is that without establishing the norm through communicating it, no ensuing punishment is possible at all. Whatever sanction or harm may come to Adam and Eve following the consumption of the fruit of the tree of knowledge could not amount to punishment where no norm was established, and thus no behavioral injunction could be transgressed. God could harm them, but that could not be by way of punishment.

Austin's notion that felicity conditions are presupposed by speech acts has been widely and correctly criticized, inter alia for lack of metapragmatic insight (Silverstein 1993, Derrida 1977). We obviously create new ways to perform by language—such as promising or asking or requiring—as we go along the everyday business of using language, even when such performance cannot be ascribed to satisfying presupposed sets of felicity conditions. In Genesis 1:3, no words for "be" or "light" existed prior to the performance itself; nor did the very notion of linguistic performativity. It thus cannot be said that God succeeded in creating light because he successfully met the conditions of

doing things with language. The point, however, is that there is no linguistic singularity here (unlike the metaphysical singularity of creation). Creating language through language is not the work of omnipotence but of metalanguage, whoever the speaker is. The communicative and justificatory constraints apply even under condition of radical creation.

5. Literal Translation and Predication without Existence

I wish now to turn to the tribulations of English translators of Genesis 1:3, particularly those that are conscious of language's metaphysical commitments -- in this case, temporal ones. One heroic effort stands out. In 1862, Robert Young (1822-1888), a Scottish autodidact and publisher from Edinburgh, has published *The Holy Bible, Consisting of the Old and New Covenants; Translated according to the Letter and Idioms of the Original Languages* otherwise known as *Young's Literal Translation* (Young 1862). Young recognized that grammatically correct English simply cannot overcome the problem of representing atemporality. Shunning temporal inflections, he produced this grammatically mistaken yet intelligible translation of Genesis 1:3 "And God saith, 'Let light be;' and light is." Lacking a proper tense system to denote atemporality, Young attempts to imitate the aorist aspect through *not* conjugating the verb. The preface to his "Literal Translation" reveals an awareness to the relation between the grammatical and the metaphysical, quit similar to the one argued for above:

> If a translation gives a *present tense* when the original gives a *past*, or a *past* when it has a *present*; a *perfect* for a *future*, or a *future* for a *perfect*; an *a* for a *the*, or a *the* for an *a*; an *imperative* for a *subjunctive*, or a *subjunctive* for an *imperative*; a *verb* for a *noun*, or a *noun* for a *verb*, it is clear that verbal inspiration is as much overlooked as if it had no existence. THE WORD OF GOD IS MADE VOID BY THE TRADITIONS OF MEN. [Emphases in the original.][15]

Young was not the sole contemporary to wrestle so with language. JB Rotherham's *Emphasised Bible* or EBR (sic., Rotherham 1902), a project began in the 1860s (Dewey

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[15] Preface to the first edition, 7th paragraph. See Friedman 2002.

:134), offers an imperative, dramatized version to Genesis 1:3, as if light in some Platonic or otherwise ideaistic sense could be addressed prior to actual existence: "And God said -- Light, be, And light was."[16] The question of temporality is not addressed. As *Young's* makes clear, temporally-saturated language can only with great difficulty and artificiality be made to express action without time (the *User's Guide to Bible Translations* protests, a little harshly perhaps, that Young's "method of translating Hebrew tenses makes his Old Testament in places virtually unreadable (Dewey 2004: 134.)"[17] Young uses the English present tense to expresses the Hebrew aorist aspect of such verbs as וַיֹּאמֶר not because "present" is necessarily atemporal, but for lack of a better mode for expressing "action pure and simple," devoid of the metaphysical implications of verb conjugations. Young was likely inspired by Hebrew that, as remarked above, even today uses the atemporal present participle for the present tense.

Another possibility would be to use the infinitive, i.e. "and light be" (this was lately suggested by Mary Phil Korsak).[18] Instead, Young sticks to grammatical "presentism" in his strive to express atemporal action or existence (the aorist aspect of ויהי) in further verses, such as Genesis 1:5: "And God calleth to the light 'Day,' … and there is an evening, and there is a morning — day one."

Predication rather than inflection makes Genesis 1:2 an especially interesting case as it discusses reality prior to creation, הָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ (KJV: "the earth was without

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[16] Dewey protests the "utter incomprehensibility" of parts of the EBR, although this does not seem to characterize the quoted verse.

[17] One may always trust Anthony Burgess to seize on opportunities for exploring linguistic oddities. The first chapter of his brilliant *Enderby's Dark Lady* discusses the translation project of the KJV and Shakespeare's fictional (and even then, marginal) contribution to it. A fictional Ben Jonson mocks a "literal" version considered for Genesis 1:1: "In the initialities of the mondial entities the Omnicompetent fabricated the celestial and terrene quiddities (Burgess 1984: 25)."

[18] Her website, http://www.maryphilkorsak.com/1workshop.html offers this formula instead of a more traditional rendering in her otherwise innovative translation, Korsak 1993). See also EBR (Rotherham 1902).

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form, and void.").[19] Translation here fails to communicate both the radical nature of pre-creation and utter nothingness, using "was," an inflection of the linking verb "to be," for linking subject and predicate. Regarding the second failure, this may be metaphysically sound, although Korsak retains "tohu-bohu," presumably under the assumption that the term's meaning became irrecoverable. Incidentally, modern Hebrew uses תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ "tohu va-vohu" for "chaos," which is clearly something entirely different. Chaos is a state of affairs of radical disorder; תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ, however, while certainly not identical with "nothingness," is *a lack of a state of affairs* and thus of any possibility of linguistic predication, a form (or lack thereof) of reality to which language cannot relate.

Could utter nothingness be denoted by a language based on "to be" as a linking verb? Hebrew, in fact, does not require this: where English requires an assertion of existence on the linguistic level in such phrases as "it is hot," with the pronoun "it" functioning as an impersonal designation for reality (or "the situation,") Hebrew allows such well formed phrases as *"חם"* ("hot") with no copula or linking verb for predication (this is called a "nominal phrase" or "nominal clause" where the predicate does not contain a verb, a structure common in Hebrew but not in Germanic languages—such as English—where copulas such as "is" indicate the use of the noun-phrase as predicate). By asserting that something חם, "hot," with no copula, rather than "it [is hot]" the Hebrew proposition does not commit to the existence of anything, hot or otherwise. Likewise, the aorist aspect of וַיֹּאמֶר does not imply action in time, but allows for denoting a state of affairs that is tenable under conditions where some of whose categories were not ("yet") formed. Because what we are looking at here is a grammatical aspect of the verb rather than tense, this does not mean that וַיֹּאמֶר is always atemporal; as explained above, while tense may be an aspect marker, the same conjugation may mark other aspects as well. The determination is sometimes contextual.

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[19] Compare Jeremiah 4:22 where תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ, although it can be perceived and is thus not nothingness, is an extreme description, going all the way to the virtual undoing of creation (there is no light in the sky, mountains collapse, etc.)

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6. Conclusion

Language struggles when attempting to express action outside the categories of existence because those categories define us and by consequence, the language that we use. But in the narrative of radical creation these categories themselves are gradually created, and action without time does not violate any postulate that omnipotence cannot overcome.[20] Initially, there "was" no time for verbs to be conjugated in reference to, and yet "it"—reality—was already intelligible and linguistically describable. Language itself—the possibility of linguistic expression and performance—was being created *by and through* the act of articulation; the performance was metapragmatic in the sense of creating the conditions of performance even as it was performing (Silverstein 1993).

Unlike in JL Austin's account of performative language, radical creation recognizes neither temporal, nor causal, nor logical primacy of any "felicity conditions" over actual performance (Austin 1962). In mundane contexts, too, language features simultaneous performances due to its multifunctionalism ("I promise to come on time" is both locutionary and illocutionary—it both describes an action and performs it). This means that the same utterance must fulfill different functions through a single articulation and an undifferentiated morphological unit.[21] Whether human language lent this capacity to the

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[20] Unlike, according to Leibnitz, the law of contradiction and other "necessary truths," discussed above.

[21] E.g., in the utterance "I promise to show up" I both describe what I do (locutionary act) and do it, i.e. promise (illocutionary act). This is a point worth a brief digression, since several influential philosophers, chiefly John Searle (building on work by H Paul Grice) insist that the latter depends on the former, i.e. it is the felicitous representation of my intention to promise (that I shall show up) that accounts for the performative act of promising. This is of course not the place to evaluate the role of intentionality in performance; I wish only to point out that, at the price of reducing performance to conventionalism, there is no special role to intentions in Austin's account of illocutionary utterances, and I allow myself to remain on the level of separating the two rather than claiming for a causal relation between the two "acts." In other words, in Searle's theory performativity is contingent upon meaning while I see the two as

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language of creation or the other way around is a meaningless poser. At issue is the nature of language itself, any way we frame the relation between human and divine uses of it.[22] Language, being what it is, had to be created using its own means, the creation being immanent, self-contained (which is perhaps the most Spinozist, as well as the most linguistically-technical interpretation of "In the beginning was the word" of John 1:1.) In the Biblical narrative, language was metalinguistically created prior to time -- in fact, on the reading of Genesis 1 offered here, prior to anything else.

Appendix

This is a very partial selection:

Geneva Study Bible (1560): "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." *Douay-Rheims Bible* (1609): "And God said: Be light made. And light was made." *Webster's Bible Translation* (1833): "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." *English Revised Version* (1885): "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." *Darby's Bible* (1890): "And God said, Let there be light. And there was light." *American Standard Version* (1901): "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." *The Emphasised (sic.) Bible* (1902): "And God said - Light, be, And light was." *Revised Standard Version* (1952) and *New International Version* (1978): "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." *New American Standard Bible* (1971): "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." *New International Version* (1984): "And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." *New American Standard Bible* (1995): "Then God said, "Let there be light." and there was light." *God's Word Translation* (1995): "Then God said, "Let there be light!" So there was light." *English Standard Version* (2001): "And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." *New Living Translation* (2007): "Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." *World English Bible* (n.d): "God said, "Let there be light," and there was light."

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separate linguistic dimensions, requiring no a-priori relation between performance and such thick concepts as meaning or intentionality (contra Searle 1989).

[22] See Eco 1995.

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For *Young's Literal Translation* (1862) see above.

Vulgate: "dixitque Deus fiat lux et facta est lux."

Septuagint: "καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός γενηθήτω φῶς καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς."

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