Approaching the reality prior to language through language - Discussion with Shmuli - Transcript

This transcript was automatically generated and is not authoritative

Shiur Overview

Argument Flow Summary: Language, Universality, Convention, and the Limits of Words

---

1. Opening Frame: From Dogma to the Universal vs. Conventional Problem

The discussion picks up from the previous week's topic about **dogma**—the problem of transplanting philosophical conclusions from one culture to another without the underlying argumentative journey ("getting the destination without the journey"). During that prior conversation, a broader, related problem kept surfacing: **how to distinguish what is universal in language and thought from what is merely conventional** (culture- or language-specific). This becomes the central question for the current session.

---

2. The Core Question: Universal vs. Conventional in Language

Some elements of language—perhaps logic, or certain structural features—may be **universal**: differences between languages in expressing them are merely representational. Other differences between languages may be **genuinely conventional**, reflecting distinct conceptual frameworks rather than surface-level translation differences.

Reference to Al-Farabi (from a prior session): Al-Farabi warned that people confuse **grammatical differences** for **logical differences**, mistaking surface linguistic variation for deep conceptual divergence.

2a. Application to Religious/Scriptural Language

What is the "convention" of the Torah or religious texts? If all languages have some degree of convention, understanding the specific conventions of sacred language becomes a crucial starting point. Two distinct questions had been confused the previous week:

- (a) What are the **limits and universal features** of language as such?

- (b) What are the **differences between particular languages** (e.g., Greek vs. Hebrew)?

---

3. The Foundational Philosophical Claim: Thought Must Transcend Language

3a. The First Insight of Thought

If all we have is language in an absolute sense, genuine thought becomes impossible. An **immature or uninitiated thinker** is one who cannot abstract beyond his own language—who thinks that because Hebrew says *tov* and English says *good*, these are fundamentally different things. The capacity to recognize **the unity behind different words** (and conversely, that the **same word can mean different things**—equivocal terms) is the very starting point of philosophical thinking. The "intelligible"—the reality that thought is *about*—must exist **beyond** the particular words used to describe it.

3b. The Moon Example (Illustrative)

Hebrew: *yareach/levana*; English: *moon*; Aramaic: *sahara*; Latin: *luna*—all refer to **the same single moon**. It seems absurd to claim that when Jews point at the *levana* and non-Jews point at the *moon*, they are pointing at different things. Yet this seemingly obvious point is **not universally grasped**, especially when it comes to religious terminology, where people frequently fall into exactly this confusion.

---

4. The Opposite Error: Same Word ≠ Same Meaning

A **symmetrical mistake** runs in the opposite direction: just as some people wrongly insist different words must mean different things, others wrongly assume that **the same word always means the same thing**—particularly when applied across radically different domains (e.g., applying a term to God and to created things as though it carries identical meaning).

---

5. Rambam's Theory of Equivocal Terms (Moreh Nevuchim, Part I)

5a. The Strong Equivocation Theory

Maimonides insists that many words, when applied to God versus creatures, are **equivocal**—same syllables, but **completely different meanings** with **zero ontological/metaphysical connection** between the two uses. His framework is starkly binary: either a word means the same thing, or it doesn't. He does **not** employ a robust theory of **analogy** (a middle ground where terms share partial, proportional meaning). There may be "something missing" in this theory because of the absence of analogy.

Example: *yad* (hand) ascribed to God—the Rambam does not say it's "not a real thing"; he says the word *yad* has two wholly distinct meanings (exoteric and esoteric), and there is no true connection between them.

5b. [Side Note] Reader's Shock and the Kabbalists' Objection

First-time readers of the *Moreh* are often surprised that Part I is largely a **lexicon of synonyms and equivocal terms** rather than overt philosophy. The **Mekubalim's (Kabbalists') anger** at the Rambam originates precisely here: they read him as denying reality to terms like *yad* applied to God, when in fact he is making a linguistic-semantic claim about equivocation, not an ontological denial. The notion of **mashal (parable)** appears but is not developed into a full theory of analogy.

5c. Words as Pointers: The Rambam's Deeper Commitment

The Rambam holds that words have **no significance beyond being pointers to the things they point to**. His

focus is always on getting "behind the words" to the reality they reference. Many people feel the Rambam is "emptying" the holy text of meaning, though the Rambam himself insists on a double meaning where the surface reading is simply being read incorrectly.

5d. Application: Divine Names Have No Intrinsic Power

Divine names carry no power in themselves. The divine and divine activities have power, but the *words* (names) do not. Understanding does something, but understanding refers to reality, not to the word. This disturbs people who hold that God's name is holy—yet only what the name *signifies* has holiness, not the name itself.

[Side Digression] Student's Point on Cultural Weight of Terms

A student raises the point that people's attachment to divine names may stem from the accumulated cultural and dialogical weight those terms carry (e.g., "God" carries Western cultural resonance that "Shemavaya" does not). This is acknowledged, but cultural descriptive richness is not the same as holiness—it's a particularity, not a metaphysical property.

---

6. The Core Epistemological Problem: Access to Things Before/Without Words

6a. Framing the Problem

If things are not identical to words, do we have access to things before or independent of words?

- If there are **no things** (only words), the question doesn't arise—there's nothing beyond language to access.

- But if there **is** a difference between the thing and the word about it, a serious problem emerges about **human cognition, understanding, and insight**: since most thinking and communication happens through words, **how do we know our words are about anything real?**

- This is equivalent to asking: **Is reality accessible to us through words? Is the world intelligible?**

6b. Two Versions of the Same Question

1. **Do you know a thing before you have a word for it?** — In which case the word merely names pre-existing, ineffable knowledge. But then communication becomes problematic, because transmitting the word means potentially losing the thing.

2. **Does thought genuinely work through words?** — In which case words become "carriers" of their things, and language is constitutive of thought rather than merely descriptive.

[Side Contribution] Student's Proposed Three-Stage Model

A student suggests a distinction between:

- **Stage 1: Perception / the thing becoming known** — possibly pre-linguistic

- **Stage 2: Knowing it** — an intermediate phase where something is understood but not yet expressed

- **Stage 3: Expression / communication** — fitting knowledge into shareable, communal language

Many people mistakenly conflate the role of language in *thought* with its role in *perception*—assuming that if language is required for thought, it must also be required for perception. **Logic** may be the best example of something that operates in the intermediate phase: prior to linguistic expression but after perception, a kind of pre-verbal knowing.

6c. The Necessary Commitment Question

Does anyone who believes there are things behind words necessarily commit themselves to believing one can access things without words? Those on the **mystical side** of the tradition generally affirm both: that there are things beyond words (the things themselves), and that one can have access to those things without or beyond language.

---

7. The Universality of "Beyond Words" — Extending the Claim

If what we know is **not** identical to the words we use, then the same thing said in a different language would mean something different—which we don't believe. Therefore:

- **Everything known must be beyond words**, not just special mystical experiences.

- Understanding itself is the practice of noticing things that are beyond words and then putting them into words.

- This collapses the supposed distinction between philosophy and mysticism: if mysticism means "standing before reality itself," then **all thought** about anything intelligible must involve this same confrontation with reality prior to language.

---

8. The Dilemma: If Things Are Pre-Linguistic, What Are Words For?

If there must be a **pre-language confrontation** with reality, then what role do words play at all? Why not just "go around staring at the world" without language? Some people do advocate abandoning language on these grounds—but **that also seems wrong**, because words clearly do something: they **reveal** things, make them closer, clearer.

[Side Contribution] Language as Abstraction

Language performs abstraction of what's being thought. Every abstraction leaves something unabstracted. So language can describe aspects and attributes of a thing (e.g., calling something a "bottle" captures some but not all of what it is), even if it can never fully exhaust the thing.

Response — it's even worse than that: The claim isn't merely that language is incomplete or approximate. It's that **everything** must always be beyond words. And yet we obviously do use words, and words seem to do real cognitive work.

---

9. The Role of Naming: Proper Names as Primary Language

9a. The Moon Example Revisited

Looking at the moon without knowing it's called "the moon," a pre-linguistic person **did not see the moon**. The moon was there (reality didn't change), but the person didn't perceive it *as the moon*—as a distinct, trackable, intelligible entity.

[Side Digression] Borges-like Reference

A brief allusion to a society that outlawed proper names because everything is in flux and stable entities don't exist. In that framework, the moon would be described only as "the shining thing-ness" and "the high-ness"—and you would **not** see the moon as such.

9b. What Naming Does

- Naming **distinguishes** the moon from other white, high things in the sky.

- Naming makes it **trackable** and **intelligible**: once named, we can ask "What is the moon? How does it work? What causes it?"

- **Words show us things.** Things are ontologically prior to words, but words reveal the things to us. Words don't create new things; they disclose what's already there.

---

10. Socrates and the Search for Correct Words

Socrates was trying to find the **correct sentence** that describes fuzzy things (the good, ethics, the good life)—he was trying to **see the thing**, not just play word games. The common accusation against Socrates—that he ruined everything by making people doubt what they previously "knew"—misunderstands him. He believed that **having the correct words** for things is essential to seeing them properly.

Illustrative example — "Is Pluto a planet?": "Planet" names a kind of thing; whether Pluto fits that name is a substantive question with a **true answer**, not merely a linguistic convention. Giving something a proper name already partially answers what it is.

[Side Exchange] Words Carry Cultural/Historical Baggage

A student notes that calling something "a moon" already invokes a prior history of discussion and cultural association about "the high white thing that kept showing up every night." This is true but is a **more complicated** issue than what's being isolated here. The current question is more fundamental —**at what point does the shift occur** from raw confrontation with reality to linguistically mediated understanding?

---

11. Biblical Naming as the Paradigm Case

Genesis (Bereshit) and Rashi's commentary illustrate the primordial act of naming:

- God called the firmament (*rekia*, "the spreading out") *shemaim* (heaven/sky).

- God called the gathering of waters "sea."

- *Rekia* is not a proper name but a description ("the spreading out"); *shemaim* is the proper name assigned to it.

- This biblical account is the paradigmatic instance of the philosophical point: **naming transforms descriptive encounter into intelligible knowledge**.

---

12. The Reality of Conceptual Language

Essence exists before words, but understanding is mediated through naming. Words are not mere pointers—they do real cognitive work. However, the "name" that matters is not the particular word in a given language but the **definition or concept behind the name**. This leads to the claim that there is a **universal language of perceiving**, even though it always manifests through particular linguistic vehicles.

---

13. Do Specific Natural Languages Matter?

13a. The Translation Test

If the conceptual "word" (the form/concept of the moon) does real work in understanding, can the same be said about the **specific natural language** (English, Spanish, etc.) in which that concept is expressed? When you translate "moon" from English to Spanish, does the moon stop being the moon? Presumably not (assuming a good translation). Therefore, **English itself was not doing the essential work**. The particular language is not the real thing.

13b. Conclusion: One Universal Language Underlying All Languages

At the level of distinctions between natural languages, we revert to the "naïve" pointer theory: specific languages merely point at something. What is real is a **universal conceptual language**—the concepts or forms—which every natural language approximates. The particular words of any given language are accidental (arbitrary), but the conceptual content they convey is not.

13c. The Delivery Method vs. the Thing Known

The **delivery method** (perception, teaching, cultural register) always involves some degree of accident or specificity, yet it still allows the thing to be **known directly**. This connects to Socrates' midwife analogy: the transmission medium may eventually become superfluous once understanding is achieved.

13d. Partial Non-Significance Without Total Nihilism

Acknowledging that the **specific language** is non-significant does not commit one to saying **everything** is non-significant. The thing referred to is real; the particular words used are not "real" in the deep sense. The universal conceptual words are real; the particular linguistic instantiation is practically necessary (you can't speak without speaking *a* language) but not philosophically essential.

13e. Understanding a Language = Being Able to Translate It

Understanding a language essentially means being able to translate it. If someone claims to understand something but cannot translate it, they likely don't truly understand it or don't truly know one of the languages. This is offered as evidence that the content transcends any particular language.

[Side Digression] Critique of Claims About Untranslatable Concepts

Many people claim certain important concepts exist only in one language and cannot be translated—connecting to the previous week's discussion. This claim is incoherent: either the person doesn't fully command both languages, or they don't actually understand the concept. If someone says "I don't speak any language completely," that's an honest admission; but elevating it into a philosophical thesis ("this concept exists only in Language X") is rejected as nonsensical at this stage of the argument.

---

14. Application: The Holiness of Language (Lashon HaKodesh)

14a. The Question Posed

If language is merely a convention for understanding forms/concepts, what can a particular language uniquely contain? Does the notion of "holy words" or "holy names" refer to anything real?

14b. Rambam's Position: Holiness Is in the Message, Not the Medium

Lashon HaKodesh is holy because it lacks vulgar words. But this is a **definitional** claim, not an empirical one—languages are open systems; someone could always add vulgar words.

What Rambam means is that **holiness lies in the conceptual content (the form), not in the specific letters or sounds**. Therefore, Lashon HaKodesh could theoretically exist in Greek—if the content is properly conveyed, that would constitute holy language.

14c. Early Tannaitic View: Torah in All Languages

This interpretation aligns with an early Tannaitic position that the Torah in Greek is just as holy as the Torah in Hebrew. Rabban Shimon Gamliel's ruling that only Greek is acceptable for translation is presented as already a **limitation** of an earlier, broader view that the Torah was given in all languages. The crucial underlying assumption: these early authorities apparently believed that **nothing essential is lost in translation**—that translations can be fully adequate.

---

15. The Counter-Thought: Concepts Can Be Better or Worse

Recognizing a conceptual level (which lives through language) doesn't mean you lose access to reality. However, once you acknowledge this conceptual level, you must also acknowledge that there can be **multiple versions** of concepts—possibly multiple *correct* versions—and that some can be **better or worse** than others.

15a. Extended Illustration: The Seven Classical Planets

The traditional count of seven planets (the visible moving bodies in the sky) serves as a case study:

- Common claim: "It was *discovered* that there aren't seven planets." But this was **not a discovery about reality**—it was a **change in definition/conceptualization**.

- The classical definition (seven things visibly moving in the night sky) **remains true for what it was about**. Nothing in the base reality changed; Uranus was never seen with the naked eye in the relevant sense.

- What changed was the **concept** of "planet," not the underlying phenomena.

- One can argue the old concept was *bad* (e.g., "the Sun isn't really moving, we are"), but this is a critique of the **conceptualization**, not of the reality.

- Concepts can be evaluated as: correct/incorrect, better/worse, more complete/less complete.

[Side Digression] Planet Names and Divine Associations

Planets are still named after gods (Venus, Mars, etc.), and curiously **no one in monotheistic cultures has objected** to this. The Hebrew name "Ma'adim" (Mars) is essentially a translation of the same concept. This might encode a certain **understanding of what a planet is**—the name isn't just a label pointing at a light in the sky; it points to an **understanding** of the thing. In English, the divine associations are largely lost ("nobody really knows Venus is a goddess"), which may be why it causes no discomfort. This raises the question: **something important might be lost** when we stop calling things by names that encode deeper understandings.

---

16. "It's Just Semantics" Is Usually Wrong

When people dismiss a dispute as "just semantics," they are **usually wrong**—there is typically a real argument underneath, and people fail to see that words are talking about *things*.

16a. Key Distinction

- Changing the *name* of Pluto to "Plato" = genuinely semantic (a rose by any other name).

- Saying Pluto *is not a planet* = **not semantic**; it's a **conceptual** claim about what the category "planet" means and what belongs in it.

This is especially acute with **classifying terms** (e.g., "Is a banana a fruit?"). As long as one believes there is **some meaning** to categories—i.e., as long as one is not a radical conventionalist—then classification questions are **real questions**, not mere word games. The classification encodes real differences (how things grow, their biology, evolutionary history, etc.). Translating between languages doesn't change the concept, but **changing which concept a word encodes does matter**.

[Side Exchange] What Concepts Contain

A student suggests concepts contain "arguments and conclusions to those arguments." Hesitation: **arguments** are even more trivially connected to words than concepts are. Concepts may contain the **results** of arguments (conclusions, ways of organizing reality) but not necessarily the dialectical process itself. A concept is best described as a **way of organizing things**—a framework or categorization scheme.

---

17. Extended Example: The Word "God" and Conceptual Equivocation

17a. "God" (Capital G) as Encoding a Conceptual Argument

The word "God" (capital G) contains the argument/conclusion that there is only one God. Translating pagan/polytheistic deities with the word "God" is deeply **confusing** because polytheistic gods are not the same *kind of thing* as the monotheistic God. This creates a situation where the **debate between monotheists and pagans** is obscured—people end up talking past each other. Later monotheists sometimes resolve this by saying "what you call a god is really an angel"—but this introduces its own complications (angels exist too, intermediary beings, etc.).

[Sub-digression] Why Some Find Deistic/Aristotelian Ideas Appealing

People are drawn to stripped-down theological concepts partly because that's **what the word "God" already means** in modern Western usage—the maximally transcendent, singular being with no intermediaries.

17b. The Conceptual Content of "God"

The concept encoded in "God" (capital G, Western usage) organizes reality into: **created things** and **God**—two basic theological categories. No ancient polytheist thought in these categories, and possibly many ancient monotheists didn't either.

When this equivocation is pointed out, people hear an **extreme relativist** claim ("What is God anyway? What is anything?"). But the point is narrower: it's about recognizing a genuine **equivocation** in the word "God."

Proof: In the Bible, angels are called *Elohim*, which would translate as "God/gods" in English—but this is now a bad translation because the English word "God" has absorbed monotheistic conceptual content that excludes such usage.

---

18. Some Languages/Conceptual Frameworks May Be Better Than Others

18a. The "God" Example as a Case Study in Language Shaping Thought

Writing "God" with a capital letter, and using a language/framework in which "God" has no meaningful plural, **teaches the correct way to think**. A concept of "God" that even *accepts* a plural is already the wrong concept. Therefore, operating within a monotheistic linguistic frame (where "gods" is nonsensical) is the **correct** language to speak—not merely a convention, but one that orders thought properly.

If it's true that one *shouldn't* think about intermediary beings (as some versions of monotheism hold), then the English convention of writing "God" with a capital G and treating the word as having no plural **teaches the correct way to think**. A linguistic form of "God" that even *accepts* a plural is encoding the **wrong concept** of God. This leads to the broader claim that **some languages or conceptual-linguistic frameworks can be better than others** at encoding truth.

18b. Immediate Qualification: This Is Not About Natural Language

This "language" is **not** language in the sense of English vs. Yiddish vs. Greek. The same discussion—does the word "gods" make sense?—can be had in *every* natural language, including Greek (with "Theos"). So the argument about correct language is **not an argument for one particular natural language over another**.

There is **genuine skepticism** about whether there is an argument for a very particular *level* of language being uniquely correct. This remains unresolved: "I really don't know."

---

19. Revisiting Convention as Starting Point, Not Destination

What was established the previous week was **important but still entirely conventional**. The principle: you must begin from where you actually think—in your own language, your own inherited framework—rather than jumping straight to conclusions that already presuppose the correct language. But this means it **makes no difference** where you were born. Someone born elsewhere would need to do the same work, just starting from *their* conventions. The starting point is accidental; the process is universal.

Key implication: Convention is the *entry point*, not the *substance*. The philosophical work is the same regardless of linguistic origin.

[Side Digression] Language Acquisition and Convention

Language acquisition is always going to be conventional—it starts with brute, basic conventions and works toward more conceptually advanced understanding. This mirrors the point about **philosophical maturity**: you assimilate conventions first, then ascend.

[Sub-digression] Grammar and Reality

Whether grammatical categories (nouns/verbs, objects/actions) reflect **real** features of the world: "Is that a real thing? Nobody knows." Nearly all languages teach this distinction, which is suggestive but not conclusive. This is acknowledged as **outside the scope** of the current discussion.

---

20. The Universalist Implication

All good things (truths) are true for everyone, but not everyone *knows* them. The fact that truth is universal does not entail universal awareness of truth.

---

21. The Unresolved Problem: The Nature of Error

If truth is universal and language is (at some level) conventional, **where does a mistake occur?**

- Is the mistake made at the level of **conventional language** (misuse of terms)?

- Or is it a **misapprehension of reality itself**?

- And if the latter: **what allows** that misapprehension to take place?

This question is explicitly deferred: "I guess we'll find out another time." The topic is flagged as connected to **semiology and language** for future discussion.

---

22. Closing

The session ends with a brief meta-reflection—whether today's discussion clarified what was done the previous week. A participant notes that re-listening had revealed unresolved points. The conversation trails off without full resolution, but the overall arc is clear:

Convention → Universality → The Problem of Error. The discussion moves from the claim that thought must transcend particular language, through the thesis that words reveal rather than create reality, to the recognition that conceptual frameworks can be evaluated as better or worse, and finally to the open question: if truth is universal but mistakes happen, *at what level* do they occur—linguistic or ontological?

Full Transcript

Language, Thought, and the Problem of Equivocal Terms: A Discussion on Universal vs. Conventional Meaning in Religious Language

Chapter 1: Introduction – Bridging Last Week's Discussion on Dogma to Questions of Language

Student: Hey, hello, Shabbat shalom. So what's today's shiur [lesson] discussion?

Instructor: So I guess I had a few thoughts since last week and also chatting with some people about our conversation. So I remember also to talk about Rosh Hashanah [Jewish New Year] because it's Erev Rosh Hashanah [the eve of Rosh Hashanah].

Student: Yeah, yeah.

Instructor: I didn't think of the—I don't have the bridge perfectly, but I have a half a bridge.

Student: Okay.

Chapter 2: The Problem of Dogma Without Journey – Recap and Expansion

Instructor: So I think last week we were speaking about the issue of dogma. If you don't pick the—if you just take the results of a philosophical discussion in one culture and apply it to another one, you don't have that conversation to show your work. You have the journey—the destination without the journey.

But I think something that I realized I kept doing in the middle of our conversation was something a little broader, which is trying to figure out along the way what parts of language—the language that we use—are universal, meaning—and maybe this goes into what exactly the relationship is between language and thought—and then figuring out, okay, and then what are the conventional differences between different cultures and their languages.

The Central Question: Universal vs. Conventional Elements in Language

Instructor: So I think that ends up being part of the question. So there are some things that maybe we could even say logic or some other languages that are more universal. And we can understand clearly that the differences are just differences in how they're being represented in language. And then there are some things that seem to be more just conventional differences in language.

I think you mentioned something that Al-Farabi had mentioned about this last week, or a different—maybe it was a few weeks ago, when we were—I think way back when we had spoken about Al-Farabi saying that some people confuse the conventional differences for the—they confuse, maybe it was grammatical differences for logical differences or something like that.

Student: Okay, possible.

Instructor: Yeah, and then maybe how—I guess my bridge to it is all languages maybe having some degree of convention. What's the convention of the Torah [the Jewish Bible/Law], or whatever, I'd say religious books in general? And that's, I guess, maybe an interesting starting point for me, because I feel like I kept making that confusion last week.

Student: What confusion?

Instructor: Between when we speak about language broadly, like what are the limits of language, or what are the universal aspects of language versus the particular aspects of language, and confusing that with the differences between languages themselves.

Chapter 3: The Shared Foundation Beneath Different Languages

Instructor: So I think, yeah, when we talk about, let's say, Greek and Hebrew, right? Greek and Hebrew, they have all the differences, and we're trying to overcome those differences. But what underneath them is shared, I think, is also a question that maybe needs to be answered first.

Student: Right, so meaning, hmm. So in other words, let's say, let's start like this. Let me think.

The First Insight of Thought: Transcending One's Own Language

Student: If all we have is language, in an extreme way, in an absolute way, which seems to be what—yeah, I think what you were mentioning, I don't remember what the quote was, but this is something that many philosophers, ancient kind—yeah, no, there's no philosophers that say this explicitly. But the old kind of philosophy sees this insight as the first insight of thought, right?

Could I say an uninitiated person, an immature person, how we called it last week, is someone who thinks that his language is all there is, and therefore thinks that if in Hebrew they say *tov* [good], and in Greek—English they say "good," and in Greek they say *kalos* [beautiful/good] or something like that—those are different things, they're different words.

Like realizing the unity behind different words is—and vice versa, right? And sometimes the same word meaning different things, like equivocal words, right? That concept seems to be very traditionally accepted as, said to be traditionally, the starting point of thought. If you don't have thought that is free or beyond or above your language, then there can't be any thought at all, right?

Does that make sense, right?

Instructor: There are theories, yeah.

Student: There are, again, I think it's questionable what those, you know, so-called language—20th century language theories exactly mean, but there are theories that focus very much on there not being a way to break out of language in various different ways.

Instructor: Right.

The Traditional Position: Reality Beyond Words

Student: And I think that for the tradition, for the truth or something like that, that can't be the story. It has to be true. In other words, it's true that that's how people start to think. Like if you meet someone that says the same things you say, but in a different language. Right now we're talking in a very simple sense, right? He says literally "good" instead of *tov*, or something like that, or it says, you know, "God" instead of *Hashem* [the Name – a way of referring to God], or whatever, assuming that these are, you know, one-to-one translations. Like, there's a question, if there's such a thing as a one-to-one translation, that's part of the question. But assuming that, even assuming that it was, many people would not really recognize that. So less people that cannot abstract from language, that cannot go deeper or higher or beyond—three different metaphors.

Instructor: Does this go back to thought itself? Meaning, is this also the assumption that thought is comprised of language and not that language is a way of expressing thought or a way of formulating thought?

Student: That's what the other theory would say.

Instructor: Okay.

Student: Yeah, that's what you mean?

Instructor: No, meaning if language—if these are different words between different languages, that means that they don't represent something shared, right? The words are not shared, but the...

Student: Oh, the underlying...

Instructor: Oh, we're saying the first position assuming that they are shared.

Student: Yeah, yeah.

Instructor: We have...

Chapter 4: The Intelligible Reality Beyond Linguistic Differences

Student: I think that we start from there. Like, my discussion of such a thing would start from assuming that, I don't know if the thought is the correct term here, the reality, the thing the thought is about, right? The think thought, not my thought, but the think thought, right? The thought—what we in fancy words call the intelligible—has to be something beyond the words used to describe it.

Beyond, in other words, beyond the differences between different words that can be used to describe the same thing.

The Moon Example: One Reality, Many Names

Student: So, in Hebrew we say *yerach* [moon] or *levana* [moon], in English we say "moon," and in Aramaic we say *sahara* [moon], and in Latin we say "luna," and so on, and those are all the same thing. There's only one moon called by different names.

This is a very important insight to realize. I guess most people did not yet realize it. You have to realize that. I think it's something we should—I'm putting it here because it seems to be something—I'll show you where many people didn't realize there's something that's very annoying. And again, if we'll get to making this complicated, we'll see that maybe there's something behind what these kind of people are saying. But God, it seems dumb, but someone will tell you, well, when the Jews point at the moon—sorry, at the *levana*—and the goyim [non-Jews] pointing at the moon, they're not pointing at the same thing.

In other words, the word is talking about something else. It would seem to be dumb. I think most of us think that that's dumb. While when it comes to certain other things, especially religious terms, people seem to be very confused.

Chapter 5: The Opposite Error – Assuming Univocal Meaning Across Domains

Instructor: The other side of it—the confusion that when we say that the words mean the same thing when applied to God as when applied to created things—but it's making the same mistake in the opposite direction. It's attributing too much to the formulation that the word is the right—

Student: Exactly.

Instructor: I wonder if this would be correct, but if you look at it from the other side—

Rambam's Theory of Equivocal Terms

Student: I do see that, like, there's a big—there's a strong countercurrent to that, the whole first part of the *Moreh* [*Moreh Nevuchim* – The Guide for the Perplexed by Maimonides], because of the Rambam's [Maimonides'] very strong theory of equivocal terms, right? That the words don't mean the same thing, they seem to be the same words, the same syllables. They might even, like, have a family resemblance, might even be the same concept, might be an analogy.

The Rambam doesn't really use a theory of analogy. He has a very, like, strict difference theory, right? Where does that mean the same thing and where does that don't mean the same thing? He doesn't really have the kinds of analogy. In other words, that's not an explanation. There might be something missing in his theory.

The Shock of First-Time Readers: A Lexicon of Synonyms

Student: I feel like it's always a shocker for every first-time reader of the *Moreh*, when they open up the first thing and all they see is synonyms. How many is parable? There's a thing. There's something called the parable, which we don't know exactly. Maybe that's something like an analogy. He really doesn't think of that as the real description of the reality, of the structure of what's going on.

The Kabbalists' Objection: The Case of *Yad* (Hand)

Student: And what I'm saying is, and you could see that many people are very uncomfortable by this. And in a certain sense, the whole *Mekubalim* [Kabbalists] being angry at the Rambam starts from—the Rambam said that the *yad* [hand] ascribed to God is—the Rambam doesn't say it's not a real thing. People think the Rambam said it's not a real thing. The Rambam just says that the word *yad* has two meanings.

One is the exoteric meaning, one is the esoteric meaning, and those are equivocal terms, right? It's the same word with totally different meanings, and there is zero connection, zero true connection—like zero real ontological metaphysical connection—between the meaning of *yad* and the way we use it.

Language, Reality, and Knowledge: The Rambam's View on Words as Pointers to Things

Chapter 1: The Rambam's Position on Divine Names and the Problem of Linguistic Reference

The Rambam's View: Words Have No Power, Only What They Signify

Instructor: He doesn't believe that words have any significance besides being a pointer to the things that they point to. Not to the concepts, because concepts are something in between words and things, and we have to talk about that. But the only point is the thing. This is why the Rambam says, for example, it's not, maybe again, precise, there might be differences, but this is why the Rambam says that names of, divine names have no power. The divine has power, and the divine activities are, you know, his power. But divine names cannot have power because words do nothing. Understanding does something, but understanding is something that refers to reality, not to the word.

And again this is something that everyone is like, well, God's name is not holy, the thing that we make that you agree we're not allowed to destroy and erase and all of that, but it doesn't have any holiness. It's only about what it signifies. Only the thing that signifies has holiness. That strikes many people the wrong way, and I think that someone would say, yeah, that's because you're childish and you have not realized yet the difference between the finger and the moon, right?

Student: The point around the point D. Yeah. So, yeah.

Cultural Weight vs. Holiness: A Student's Observation

Instructor: Well, a lot of, I think some of the reason that people get disturbed by this is because there is, there are a lot of assumptions in the terms that we use. I mean, this sort of goes back to that dogmatic discussion from last week, which is, well, when we speak about a divine name of God, we assume that contains in it, I mean, contains in it would be a bad way of saying it, but it represents the culmination of a certain idea, or this term already is backed by a certain dialogue. I'm not saying that people necessarily mean this, but I think that's what people imply. That's why people feel attached to these terms, because God seems to carry a lot of the, we'll call it,

broader Western culture with it in a way that Shemavaya [Shemavaya: Aramaic term for "the Name of Heaven," a reverent way to refer to God] doesn't.

Student: Okay, very good. Right.

Instructor: So we're...

Student: But that's, again, a particularity, and it wouldn't give it holiness, it would just give it a certain better or more culturally descriptive reference point. But yeah, I agree that it's a mistake. I just think we're...

Instructor: Yes, yes. No, we are trying to think about this sect, the other side. That's what you asked, right? We first say that it can't be that things are identical to words. As great as words are, they're not identical to things. And definitely not having two names for the same thing doesn't make it into two things, and vice versa. Two different things having the same name doesn't make them into the same thing.

Chapter 2: The Fundamental Epistemological Problem—Do We Have Access to Things Before Words?

Framing the Core Question

Instructor: But the question is, wait, so now there's still a previous question, right? But now, there is a question here. Before we get to this question, the question that you asked first is, but does this mean that we have access to the things before the words? Right? This is the first question. Right? Assuming that there are things. If there are no things, then this question doesn't arise because there's just no things, there's only words. If there's no difference between, if the full meaning of the word Hashem [Hashem: literally "the Name," a common way to refer to God in Hebrew] or whatever is the word, then you can't have the question, does this give me access to the reality? Because that's all there is. Yes, you don't have to believe it that way, but that's a thing.

But if there is a difference between the thing and the word talking about it, now we have a very serious question, both about human cognition, human understanding, human insight. Since most of us generally think with words, understand things through words, at least communicate what we know about things through words, there's a big question. How do we know that our words are about anything? Which is a different version of the question of, is reality really accessible to us through words? In other words, is the world really intelligible?

Student: Right. There's an epistemology question underneath all of this, which is, yeah, yeah.

Two Versions of the Same Question

Instructor: That's the real question. And the question sort of can be said in both ways, and I think they're very similar questions. One is something like, so before you have a word for something, do you know it before the word? And the word is just naming the knowledge that you have of it, but knowledge is something ineffable, now ineffable not in a weird way, just in a literal sense, like it's there and the words are naming it, or in which case it's even hard to see how communication could work, because I cannot communicate to you the thing, I cannot communicate to you the word, which means the moment I do that, I lost the thing in some sense.

So then the other side of the same question would be, or does our thought really work through words, and therefore do words really grasp, so to speak? Do they become carriers of their things?

A Three-Stage Model: Perception, Knowledge, and Expression

Student: All right, which seems to be, I think that there is like, I always thought that there was some even further split that could be made between how a thing comes to be known and then once it's known how it comes to be, um, I guess the process of the knowledge becoming known and then after that reaching a point of expression. Like I think perception, I think a lot of people seem to think, which I always feel like, at least personally, is a mistake, is that if language is required for thought, then language is also required for perception, that things are perceived in their linguistic containers, or whatever you might call it, instead of language coming afterward as a way of giving expression to some idea that's understood.

And I think even that can be questioned. Maybe language, maybe the thing can come to be understood and then language is just a means of transmission or just building on that idea further. But I think like, yeah, I think that there's maybe three stages here. There's the stage of the thing becoming known. Then there's the stage of knowing it. Then there's a stage of, I guess, building on it or expressing it or trying to fit it into terms that can be shared and in a communal language, we'll call it that, particular language.

Logic as Pre-Linguistic Knowledge

Student: I think logic is the easiest thing to point to that can be pre-thought. Sometimes we think in logical... We might use particular language to just play out the logical scenario in our head, but logic does seem to be pre, like prior to even thought, and after perception. Logic is maybe the best word. I'm sure it's something that can describe that intermediate phase where something comes to be known before it comes to be expressible or effable or anything like that.

The Commitment Question: Things Beyond Words and Access Without Words

Instructor: Right, so like something like this, maybe. It can't be the case, or at least we're not working with the assumption that it's the case that everything is just words. That opens us to a problem which is, so, are you seeing, let's use the word seeing, are you seeing the thing before you name it, before you talk about it, before you even understand it conceptually, which seems, is that necessary? Let's try to ask this question. Is that necessary?

So does anyone who believes that there are things behind the words commit themselves to also believing that one has access to things without words, right? Now, you know, famously, everyone in the more mystical side of things thinks this, I think. Thinks both that words, that there are things beyond words, there are the things. And this, by the way, just to be clear, this means all things, right? You know, people like to pretend that some things are in the words. No, I mean, I guess you could say that. But if you really think about it, this means...

The Universality of "Beyond Words" and the Revelatory Function of Language

Everything Known Must Be Beyond Words

Instructor: Whether this is true of perception is another question. It might be true of that too, but we don't generally think of perception as occurring within language, within words. We generally think of that as below language, like a lower kind of knowledge. But if their point is that the thing

known, the intelligible, the intellect, whatever it is that we know when we know something, is not identical to the words in which we describe it, in which case it would have to be true also that saying it in a different language would mean something different, which we don't think, then that means that's something for everything.

For everything known must be beyond words, right? It's not like, this experience was beyond words. No, anything you ever understood was beyond words. Understanding is the practice of noticing things that are beyond words and then, I guess, putting them into words somehow. That is what understanding means.

And there isn't any real difference between this kind of philosophy and anything that people call mysticism in that sense. And if mysticism is like standing before reality itself, which is the reality which is the thing that we then talk about, seems like that's what it has to be for all kind of thought, for thought about anything, or anything that can be thought. Maybe not everything can be thought, maybe not everything is intelligible, but for everything, anything that can be thought, that has to be the case.

Student: Is this true? It would have to be the case that it can be confronted pre-language?

The Dilemma: What Are Words Doing?

Instructor: Yeah, well that's the question. I mean, again, I think here there is a question. Do we say that there has to be a moment of pre-language confrontation, beingness, or whatever words we call this? Or, in which case, then we have the question, so what is the words even doing at all? What are the words doing? Why are we trying to put things into words all the time? Why don't we just go around staring at the world and going, and it seems to be, and of course, there are people that think that, like, stop putting things into language, since this is true, and that also seems to be wrong, yeah, that also seems to be wrong, because it seems to be very obviously true that the words that we use do have something to do with revealing the thing and possibly showing them better to us, making them closer to us, making them clearer to us.

Student: I think also maybe something that I've noticed is a lot of people want to call something indescribable because any normal conventional language would have a very hard time using a short amount of words to explain it. Maybe you just need a lot of words.

Instructor: Yeah, we know, right.

Language as Abstraction

Student: So I think, to me, the purpose of language has to be doing some degree of abstraction of what's being thought. And with every abstraction, something is left unabstracted. So I think there's this partial part where we can say, okay, I see this in front of me. If I call it a bottle, it'll have some connotations maybe that are incorrect about it. It's not quite a bottle. It's a drinking bottle or something that would probably require more expression and maybe we'll never be able to fully encapsulate what this is with words. Really? I might not be able to exhaust what's in front of me with language, but it doesn't mean that language can't describe aspects of it or can't describe attributes.

Instructor: Well, what I'm trying to say is that it's even worse than that, because everything must always be beyond words. And obviously we do use words, and not only do we use words, we also think, I mean, we experience the fact...

Student: I think it's worse to think it as part of the larger community of things that are like it. Is that all of it?

Instructor: Because I would say that I would say that the noticing of things itself is at least helped by words.

The Moon Example: Proper Names as Primary Language

Instructor: So even the moon, even the moon, as long as it doesn't have a proper name and proper names are one very important thing we do, one of these, maybe like the primary instance of language, naming things, right? Because other kind, like descriptions and verbs are kind of different, but just the proper name are thing.

Looking at the moon without knowing that it's called the moon, not like that Ursula Le Guin story where it's like the shining thing-ness and the high-ness, because there was this society that outlawed proper names because everything is in flux and they don't exist. If you would have looked at the moon that way, you would not see the moon, in other words, the real moon. At least this is the presumption of the people that do believe in proper names, talking about being about something, an essence that's existing.

So you say, when you looked at the moon, like when some primordial man, imaginary person, pre-language, you know, before the linguistic revolution 100,000 years ago or whenever, looked at the moon, he did not see the moon. Obviously, the moon saw him, right? Meaning to say, the moon was there, nothing changed in the reality, or maybe he had a slightly different orbit or whatever, but nothing changed in the reality. But he didn't see the moon. This real thing we call the moon was shown to us by giving it a name and saying moon, or whatever they called it before.

Student: Distinguishing it from other white and high things.

Naming Makes Things Trackable and Intelligible

Instructor: Yeah, it gets distinguished, it becomes trackable, it becomes intelligible, right? We could now understand, we can now ask the question, okay, what is the moon? How does the moon work? What causes it to be the way it is? All kinds of understanding that we have about the moon which, but again, those understanding would be like attributes, but just...

Student: Because even the standing before the thing we call the moon seems to have been helped having a word for it. Like if I point and I go like this.

Instructor: This is again putting the language before the thinking or before the perception as a means of assimilating the information.

Student: Right, without saying that the language is all that there is. Like when we talk about the moon, we only talk about this word moon and not about the thing in the sky.

Instructor: But saying that it seems that words tell us about things in the sky. I mean, that's the normal description of what words are. They're about things, which is saying, yes, things are before words, but the words show us the things. They don't create some new thing. They show us the thing.

Socrates and the Search for Correct Words

Instructor: And therefore, you could say the philosophers like Socrates was going around and trying to find the correct sentence that describes a thing, usually something fuzzy like the good or ethics or the good life, is trying to see the thing.

He's not trying, people sometimes accuse Socrates of ruining everything because everyone knew what everything was before you started asking us the questions and now we don't know anything because you told us that this linguistic, like word, verbal intelligence is the most important thing and maybe it's not.

But I think that at least what he thought is that having the correct words for things, in other words, we could argue about this, right? This is the moon. No, well, it's not the moon. It's just a planet. We have, like, is Pluto a planet? That's a real argument in this theory. Like, a planet is this kind of thing. And we can have a real argument. Is this a planet or is it some asteroid? Is it a moon or is it a, I don't know, what is something else you would call it?

Student: Asteroid.

Instructor: Yeah, or is it just a rock, a shiny rock in the sky? Those are two different things. And there's a true answer to this question, and giving it a proper name moon already somewhat answers some of that question. Like, that's just a name moon, right? It's not one more shiny thing.

Student: Right, but I think this goes back to the conversation we had about words.

Instructor: Yeah, the fact that they do have a certain history or a certain family of association or a certain...

Student: Right, but this is before that. This is trying to isolate before that. Even when we call something a moon, we're referring to a certain prior argument or prior discussion that existed about this the high white thing that kept showing up in the sky every night.

Instructor: Right, but then I'm saying like when once you start talking about a culture and association you're much, like you're talking about something a lot more complicated than what I'm trying to talk about right now or you told me to talk about. This is, this is in some sense what I think the interesting question is, at what point the shift goes from being, right, you know, so this is, this is the right, so so this is the question.

Biblical Naming as the Paradigm Case

Instructor: Like we think that the naming of things, like the, like it says in *Bereshit* [Genesis], right? God called the *heaven heaven or whatever, the sky heaven. *Rekia Shemaim I don't know how I just ,[firmament/heaven :רקיע שמים] translated it. Anyways, yeah, the firmament, the spread out thing, he called sky, something like that, right? No, that's :רקיע] *literally what it was supposed to be saying. *Rekia is not a proper name. It's like the [firmament/expanse :שמים] *spreading out, and this was called *Shemaim .[heaven/sky

Student: Right, he called the abundance of water the sea.

Instructor: Yeah, exactly. And this has given us...

The Reality of Conceptual Language and the Question of Holy Language

The Universal Language of Concepts vs. Particular Languages

Recapitulation: Words Do Real Cognitive Work

Instructor: So the essence was there before the word, but we do not actually see it. There isn't like a raw seeing that's before words, or at least not a very good one. I guess there's maybe some question that's before that. The existence of the thing must be before the words, but the understanding is in the words, and that must be like a real stage, like a real thing. So it turns out that words are real things, they're not mere pointers, at least in the process of understanding, because the process of understanding is mediated by calling things names.

In other words, now, when we say names, we don't mean the Greek, Hebrew, English, Spanish name. I mean the naming, the definition behind the name, right, the idea of the name. But that would be a real thing, right? So I guess, and maybe this is just pressing it a little too much but the what we're saying here is that there is a universal language of perceiving even if it uses the—we'll call it the particular word, right?

Student: Very good.

Pressing the Question One Level Further: Do Specific Languages Matter?

Instructor: So now we have to ask this question. So now we can ask this a third level of the same question and say, okay, so you're telling me that the—right, let's call this the word moon, you might as well call it the form of the moon anyways—is doing real work here, right? Is telling us that there is a moon and what that moon that there is is. And now you ask me a question, okay, and you got to there by showing me that, you know, we're always going around naming things and defining things and it's not—there's a real thing that we're defining but it's not superfluous, this work like we do to understand the things clearer and better, and they become more present to us by understanding them.

Now you can say, okay, so why can't we ask the same question one step further and say, well, since no human being speaks universal-ish, everyone speaks English or something-ish, and not all languages have an ish for some reason. Anyways, then wouldn't you say that it's important to name the moon in English or in Spanish or in Italian-ish. Oh, sorry, also doesn't work. Anyways, in order to understand what the moon is and thus put the English language all the way up at the level of form, right?

The Translation Test: What Happens When We Translate?

Instructor: And then you obviously end up with this question of translations. And you say, well, yeah, that sounds okay, let's say. Let's follow that. And then you say, okay, but then when I translate the English into Spanish, does it stop being the moon? Are we seeing a different moon in Spanish than in English? And you say, probably not. Again, assuming the translation is good. So then it turns out the English wasn't doing anything. English isn't the real thing. There aren't really different languages. There's only one language, which all languages approximate.

So at the level of the distinction between languages, we go back to the earlier, more naive theory that says that languages just await a point at something. Or in other words, we're positing a kind of universal language called the concepts, understandings of things, again, you could say forms if you want, which is a universal language, which is, yes, it is said in an accidental way, like in a random way, by words that we use in each language, but everyone that uses the words in that language, nobody really thinks that it's the words in the language they use, although we do think that the words that were, the conceptual words, are real. Does that work?

The Delivery Method vs. The Thing Known

Student Reflection: Transmission and Direct Knowledge

Student: Right, it's funny because I always think of like, especially now with epistemology questions with computation and things like that. And there's, I think, what's maybe interesting about language, or I think, well, at least this conversation is making me realize about language is, yeah, the way it's made known and the way it's made known to a person by way of perception and the way it's made known to others through teaching and sharing of knowledge and things that are known is that the delivery method is always going to be some degree of accident or property of a certain specific reference and culture and register, but it still allows the thing to be known directly. It goes back to like Socrates' paradox with the midwife where we come to know the idea through maybe like a transmission that eventually becomes superfluous.

Acknowledging Partial Non-Significance Without Total Nihilism

Instructor: Maybe, yeah, maybe. Maybe like there's a degree of arbitrariness or like non-significance in the way in which we get to things, which acknowledging a degree of non-significance doesn't commit me to claiming that everything is non-significant, which again is something that people seem to think, because people are very bad at thinking. Like yeah, wait, if the specific language we're talking about isn't real, so nothing is real. No, no, the thing is real, just the words they use are not real. The words are real in the sense, again, in the universal sense of real words, not in the very, very particular sense of words. And then you say, yes, that level is not important. It's important practically because there aren't any other, there isn't a way to speak without speaking a specific language.

Understanding a Language Means Being Able to Translate It

Instructor: But I think that the point, like this one would say something something like this. The point of understanding a language is to get at the thing that the language is about, which is not the moon all the way at the top of this hierarchy, but this, the form of the moon, but the concept of the moon. And everyone agrees that understanding a language basically means being able to translate it, assuming that you know two languages. Nobody would say, well, I understand this, but I can't translate it. I think that that usually means you didn't know one of the languages or that you don't actually understand it. Does this make sense?

Unfortunately, we have a bunch of people that claim to not speak two languages, but can't actually translate a bunch of things that they consider important from one language to another. That's what we talked about last week. And again, if you say, okay, because I live in half of my life, I don't speak any language completely, that's fine. But if you make this into a real claim and you say, well, this is a concept that is only in that language, that, I think, doesn't make sense. Or at least, that's the argument at this stage.

Application: The Holiness of Language (Lashon HaKodesh)

The Question: What Can a Particular Language Uniquely Contain?

Instructor: Like, you have an important question here, which is, does it make sense? Which is, how important is it to preserve specific languages, even for the people that are carrying that language? Does it make any difference? What can a particular language contain? I mean, if we speak about, let's say, the concept of holy words and holy names and these things, to what extent is that really possible with what language actually is? What do we mean when we say that there's a Lashon HaKodesh [Lashon HaKodesh: the Holy Language, referring to Hebrew] or something like that? Does it refer to anything? If it's just a convention for understanding the form of things.

Rambam's Position: Holiness Is in the Message, Not the Medium

Instructor: Right, so one answer would be to say that the Kodesh [Kodesh: holiness] is not in the level of the words, but in the level of the things, the words, the concepts. Meaning, the concepts meaning, let's say we're talking about words that maybe refer to things, but with certain arguments already contained in that. This would be another step to add to that, right? But the first step would be to say, again, something like, someone like Rambam [Rambam: Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides, 12th-century Jewish philosopher] would say, Lashon HaKodesh is holy because, well, he says, because it doesn't have bad words in it, okay?

Now, couldn't someone just add bad words or something like that? Yeah, but that's, so he has a definitional understanding of what the holiness of a language is, not a factual understanding. He didn't really look in a dictionary and find that it doesn't have these words, or sort of did, but of course he understands that it's, you know, languages are not closed systems. You could always add a word and then it wouldn't be Lashon HaKodesh anymore, right? So what he's trying to get at is that the holiness lies in the message, not in the form. In the form, not in the particular instantiation of it.

Lashon HaKodesh Could Theoretically Exist in Greek

Instructor: So Lashon HaKodesh is not holy in the sense of using these specific Hebrew letters. In other words, you could have Lashon HaKodesh in Greek. And if you understand anything about what's going on, that would be Lashon HaKodesh.

Early Tannaitic View: Torah in All Languages

Instructor: And this definitely seems to have been what many early Tanayim [Tanayim: the rabbinic sages of the Mishnaic period, approximately 10-220 CE] thought, that the Torah in Greek is just as holy as the Torah in Hebrew.

Student: Should it be Rav Yassin?

Instructor: No, the Tanakham [Tanakham: likely referring to the Tannaim] and the Mishnah [Mishnah: the first major written collection of Jewish oral traditions], whoever. Rav Yassin is the one who says you can only translate it into Greek now? No, Rabban Shimon Gamliel [Rabban Shimon Gamliel: a leading sage of the Mishnaic period]. Yeah, Rabban Shimon Gamliel said only Greek, but he's already limiting the previous understanding that the Torah was given in all languages. We talked about this at different times. Things like that.

The Crucial Assumption: Nothing Essential Is Lost in Translation

Instructor: And now, I have to make this very clear. What that seems to assume is that there are not anything lacking in these translations. Others of course they know that—

Language, Concepts, and the Problem of Multiple Valid Frameworks

The Challenge: Multiple Correct Conceptualizations

Instructor: You don't lose anything. That's the thought. There can be a counter thought to this, which says, well, yes, but once you have told me that there's this level of concepts which necessarily lives through language, now you could see that there can be multiple versions, and maybe even multiple correct, in some sense, versions of the concepts. And some of them can be better than the others.

So again, to go back to my astronomy discussion, there is a traditional accounting of seven planets, and that has a certain definition, and people like saying, oh, it was discovered that there aren't seven planets, the Earth and the Sun is not a planet, and the Earth is a planet, and there are also more that we discovered, and all of that, but in a certain sense, that was not discovered. The definition was changed.

Okay, I'm not getting into this discussion directly right now, but the seven classical planets are literally the things you look up in the sky and see moving every night. Nothing about that changed. We still can't see anything else moving in the sky. We can do some fancy calculations and figure out that there's this planet called Uranus somewhere and so on, but nobody has ever seen it move or even seen it with the naked eye. Generally, maybe you could sort of see it, but you can't really see it moving and so on.

So, the classical definition is still true for what it was about, right? People can argue that it's a bad definition. This would be a fair argument. You say, well, when you say these are the seven moving things in the sky, the seven planets, you're saying that they are moving, and it turns out it's us that's moving, not the Sun, because we have proofs for this and arguments for this. So then your concept is wrong, not the reality, nothing changed in the reality. The base thing that we're talking about has not changed, or our understanding of it has not changed either. But our conceptualization of it has changed, and now we're not anymore seeing seven planets circling us. I mean, we literally do see them, but we don't understand them in that way.

And there can be arguments back and forth about this. Is this correct? Is this not correct? For which values of correct? Is it correct or not correct? So these can be different questions.

The Significance of Names: Planets as Divine Beings

If you see this as a language, and languages can encode things like this, like this is a planet, we call it such and such. Or in a more ancient sense, we call this Venus, which is a goddess. We call that Aphrodite or Venus, literally, right? We call this Mars, which is another god, and so on. And then you say, no, we don't call it Mars. We call it something else. Actually, we do still call it by the name of the god. But, and weirdly, nobody's ever had a problem with this, in the monotheistic context. I don't know why. There's even an attempt, like the Hebrew it's also ,[the Hebrew name for Mars :מאדים] name is Ma'adim .just a translation of Mars

So in any case, I don't know why that, again, I don't know, there might be a real, it might encode a certain understanding of what a planet is, and you say, well, of course, the word is just a pointing, yes, it's not just a pointing to that point that you see lighting up in the sky. It's pointing to an understanding of what that thing is. Now, that understanding can be right or wrong. Or it can even be not wrong, because most of these understandings are hard to say that they're wrong. It could be better or worse, or more complete and less complete.

And then you say, don't stop, for example, don't stop calling the planets by these names of divine things. There's something very important in the fact that we call them that way. And if you're going to just start calling them something else, you're gonna lose it or actually probably in English you've already lost it because nobody really knows that Venus is a goddess or something. It doesn't really mean anything to most people. That's probably why the Jews don't have any problem saying it. But, you know, all right, so that's the other side of this argument.

"It's Just Semantics" — Why This Dismissal Is Usually Wrong

Like when people have arguments and they say, oh, this boils down to semantics, the object then is to move beyond the semantic to the... Right, semantics, most of the time when people say it boils down to semantics, they're wrong. Most of the time there's a real argument and people don't understand that words are talking about things. It's obviously some association that you're uncomfortable with or some buried conclusion. Although it's not true that it's a semantic question.

Pluto is a planet. There's something called a planet, and we have to decide what that means for real. It might be less than a very relevant question to most people's lives, but it's a real question. It's not semantics. It's not like we can't change the name.

Student: Right, when you say it's conventional, it doesn't mean that it doesn't contain our own assumption. We can't solve it.

Instructor: So this is the difference. If we change the name of Pluto to Plato, sorry, or whatever, that would be semantics, because a rose would be a rose by any other name. But if we say it's not a planet, then that's not a question of a name, that's a concept.

Student: I think this is especially the case with classifying terms. So if you say a banana is not a fruit...

Instructor: Right.

Classification and Real Structure

Classification is the classical thing about this, and classification is trying to get at, again, if you are a normal person that believes in universals, if you're a weirdo that thinks that everything is convention and so on. But as long as you assume that there is some meaning to the fact that some things are fruits and some things are vegetables, right? And there is, because this is just encoding, this word is of course just a word, but it's encoding, like there's different ways they grow and different things that influence them and different, you know, evolution, if you say that, or whatever.

Then there's a real difference and it's a real question. And this doesn't change at all if you say it in English or in Spanish, or if you call it a different word, but it does change if you call it some words make a difference. Words that show concepts. And you could say...

Student: Arguments and conclusions to those arguments. That's what we mean by concepts.

Instructor: I'm not yet sure about arguments. Because arguments are even more trivially connected to words than concepts.

Student: Oh, when we say God, capital G, that contains certain arguments, namely that there's only one God, not two.

Instructor: Yeah, this is right, exactly.

The Problem of "God" — Conceptual Equivocation Across Traditions

My friend Antonio goes on about this, that how when we translate the pagan or polytheistic gods with the word God it's very confusing because they're not the kind of thing that monotheists believe the God is and this is why it's not clear to anyone what the debate between the monotheists and the pagans is anyways because like because the later of course people do that right and they say well what you call a God is really an angel okay so the capital G God in Western culture refers to a God with also with no intermediaries usually maybe okay then then there's a contradiction yeah but anyways then then there's also no angels and you shouldn't say Mech Nisrach [likely referring to angelic intermediaries] but of course there are angels.

Anyways, I think this is why people sometimes find those artistic [likely: deistic/Aristotelian] ideas appealing.

Student: Yeah, I get it because that's what we think already that the word God means.

Instructor: And that's again I don't think it's an argument because that's not telling you why you should think that. An argument is a why. There's a concept like there's a way of organizing things which says there's everything and then there's God, something like that. There's a conceptualization.

Student: Technical language though I would say is the result of it might be the result of an argument it might have been people going around arguing for this.

Instructor: But that's what I'm, I'm not saying it contains the dialectic like we said it might contain the, it contains the result of it. It contains the concept that says there is created things and there is God and that's the basic categories we should be thinking about when we think of theology, which of course no ancient polytheist thought of those categories and possibly many ancient monotheists didn't either.

The Difficulty of Communicating Conceptual Distinctions

And that's the thing that's so hard to get across to people, because when you say it, they think that you're making this extremely relativist point, like, what is a God anyways? What is anything anyways? No, I'm just telling you that you've got to realize the equivocation in the word God that has, of course in literally "gods" or :אלהים] the Bible, angels are called Elohim that's the proof, which in English would ,[""divine beings translate as God, but now it's a bad translation because you ?can't say God, so what do you say? So we're stuck, right

But anyways, this is the kind of problems that we have, and this is where you could claim that some languages are better. Like, maybe if it's true that it's not proper for a person to think about intermediary beings or whatever, which I guess some people think that's what monotheism means, then it's correct that we say the word God and we don't say, whatever, we write it with a capital, and all of this, because that teaches you the correct way, and to think, and to say, like, the kind of word God that even accepts a plural is the wrong kind of God to think of, that would be the argument, and therefore...

Language, Convention, and the Universal Nature of Truth: Concluding Reflections on Linguistic Frameworks and Philosophical Method

The "God" Example: Language as a Teacher of Correct Thought

Instructor: We write it with a capital and all of this because that teaches you the correct way and to think and to say, like, the kind of word God that even accepts a plural is the wrong kind of God to think of. Therefore, speaking in this language that really doesn't have a plural of God, because nobody understands what it means in the monotheistic frame, is the correct language to speak.

Of course, you'll notice this is not a language in the sense of English or Yiddish, because you could have the same discussion in basically every language, including Greek. There's Theo [θεός: Greek for "god"] and Theo is like this one. Deliberately, and in a way that orders them properly.

Student: Yeah, but again, this discussion is not about language.

Instructor: Right.

Student: A language in the sense of Yiddish and English. All these languages have the same question. Does the word gods make sense in them?

Instructor: So that's still not an argument for a very particular level of language. And I'm kind of skeptical right now that there is such an argument. I really don't know.

Revisiting Last Week's Discussion: Convention as Starting Point

Instructor: The thing that we did last week is important. But that's still entirely conventional. It's still saying that because you need to get the thoughts from where you started, don't start right away from the conclusions which are already giving you the language. You've got to start from how you think in your language.

But if you have, according to that, it still makes no difference if you've been born somewhere else to do the same exact thing. It's just a question of you have to do it in your way because of you being born there by chance, by whatever it is that's responsible for us in specific ways.

Language Acquisition and Philosophical Maturity

Student: I think it's also like interesting because a lot of the discussion around language especially like in contemporary linguistics seems to surround the question of how language is acquired but to me the acquisition of language is always just going to be the convention like it's like what you've mentioned about philosophical maturity the conventions are always going to be the assimilation of language always has to start with a very brute conventions dimensions and then work its way towards the higher or more conceptually advanced.

Instructor: But do you mean like even the more basic things like how a grammar works and things like that?

Student: Right, right. Yeah, somewhat, I guess. Probably outside the scope of realizing I'm creeping outside the scope of our...

Instructor: Right, because that's like, there are objects and actions in the world. We call them verbs and nouns. Is that a real thing? Nobody knows, right? Is that what language teaches you? Yes, basically all languages teach you that, besides for work as theoretical language.

Student: I think the implication is at least somewhat implied from...

Instructor: Yeah, I don't have patience, I'm tired now.

The Universality of Truth and the Problem of Knowledge

Student: That the implication is that all good things are true for everyone but not everyone knows like that doesn't mean that everyone knows the good things does this make any sense.

Instructor: Well I think this is also probably a bigger discussion of how mistakes come to happen in understanding and disagreements?

Student: Like if everything is, like what is a mistake or a disagreement that is zero sum when it comes to the course of the connection to the language?

Instructor: Some people are wrong.

Student: No, because it could be wrong in every language, too. I mean, what's the big deal?

The Nature and Location of Error

Student: Maybe the misunderstanding comes, at what point is this misunderstood? At what point is the mistake made? Is the mistake a mistake in conventional language? Is the mistake just a misapprehension of reality? And if so, what allows that misapprehension to take place?

Instructor: I guess we'll find out another time. Semology and language, yeah.

Closing

Instructor: Okay. That's the story for now.

Student: Yeah, until next time.

Instructor: Yeah, okay. Did it make clearer what we did last week?

Student: So I didn't clarify from last week some of the, at least for me, like I realized I was listening to it again.

Generated by Shiur Upload Automation