

## Mammon, Shabbos and Truth ... Oh! and Science

(Lecture to the Association for Science & Culture, April 2000)

My intellectual origins are — at least in part — with the progeny of a curious Central European tribe, one that followed the lead of the *Hexenmeister* of Vienna, the Good Doctor Sigmund Freud. Of late, these tribefolk have been viewed in the Academy as lacking both: (1) the rigors necessary for the inclusion of their findings in the Sciences and (2) an acceptable *Weltanschauung* that would permit their entree into the equally hallowed — and betimes politicized — Halls of Culture. With my professional affiliation with Psychoanalysis having been confessed, I offer a **cautionary tale** about language that may impact on our willingness to use such notions as Culture, Science, Scientific Method and the like as if they were well-defined constructs. My intent is not to proffer a critique against any specified model of scientific rationality but against the manner in which any such model is likely to be used to separate out from the body of “good thinking about the observable” a privileged subset, which is designated Capital-S-Science or Capital-T-Truth. I shall examine occurrences of a process by which constructs may become reified and neutered of earlier intent by a curious linguistic/semantic procedure in which verbs may be transmuted into nouns or common nouns reformulated as proper nouns or as foreign words — sometimes by processes associated with the evolution of usage and other times by translators who may or may not have an agenda. In each such examined case, I shall suggest that this process witnesses movement away from humility and towards rigidity, orthodoxy or expostulatory hubris. In any case, a number of such occurrences will be focused upon though I shall begin with a curiosity surrounding the use of the English word I. Not so very long ago, a woman who had suffered damaging abuses at the hands of an alcoholic father and a colluding mother queried at the beginning of one of our meetings: Do you know who I am? I sat quietly in my reveries, as I fascinated about this question posed by a grandmother and clinician who was no philosophaster prone to asking adolescent questions. Still, after the many years during which she regularly occasioned my office, wasn't it so that I knew her well? But what could it mean for **me** to know who **she** is? Do I know who **I** am? Is there an **I** to know or an **I** to be known? I thought of Felix Klein's acceptance speech for a chair in Mathematics, his Erlanger Programme, in which he defined a Geometry as the study of the invariants of a certain class of objects under the motions of a given set of transformations. Was there, perhaps, a Geometry of the Soul — something that might allow us to locate what invariants there might be that permit us to arise each morning believing that we are as and who we were before rest we sought the prior evening? The belief or hope for this was apparent, perchance, in the English capitalizing of the word I. She hadn't said: Do you know **me!** and I hadn't thought to ask: Do I know her? Perhaps, I thought, the choice to capitalize announces some such belief that ... what we are trying to denote by **I** has some unalterable integrity, something that renders it a unity. Perhaps. In any case, I shall not return to the problem of I but leave it as a starting point for **you** — and I — to ponder as we but note that capitalizing a noun or pronoun, making it Proper, may well be a powerful action — something not to be taken lightly. I turn then, to the first of the four instances that I shall discuss, that of mammon.

## Mammon -- ממון

The preparers of the many versions of the Christian Bible were not averse to allowing themselves license in translation — as translators are wont to do. Among the most obvious examples is the rendering of *Thou shall not murder* as *Thou shall not kill* — though there can be no doubt of the Sixth Commandment's intent: Lo sirtzach -- לא תרצח has a univocal meaning ... and that meaning relates directly to a prohibition of wanton murder and not to generic killing. Our interest, today, turns to the common refusal to translate the late Hebrew and Aramaic ממון (mammon) that appears in Matthew (6:24) and, but for one altered word and several additional verses, appears identically in Luke (16:13):

No one (No servant, in Luke) can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.

The Nazarene's intent, transparently, was to denounce the worship of lucre = ממון (mammon). By transposing this common noun, by giving it the specificity of the narrower field of application — that which falls to a proper or to an untranslated noun, as in the cited Revised Standard Version of the King James Bibles — readers of the text are left to imagine that a choice is being highlighted either to worship God-the-Father or to worship Mammon, as if Mammon were some local idol, like Ba'al, perhaps, rather than the universal source for temptation, power, abuse and greed that Jesus decried. And so we see Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, having us believe what Nicholas de Lyra (commenting on the passage in Luke) averred: *Mammon est nomen daemolis*, Mammon is the name of an evil spirit, as he reports:

Mammon, the least erected spirit that fell  
From heaven; for ev'n in heaven his looks and thoughts  
Were always downward bent, admiring more  
The riches of heaven's pavement, trodden gold,  
Than aught divine or holy else enjoyed in vision beatific.  
— Milton, *Paradise Lost* (line 679).

A similar personification is notable in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto II, st. 11):

Maidens, like moths are ever caught by glare,  
And Mammon wins his way where Seraphs might despair!

When scriptural translators chose not to translate ממון (mammon), this common Babylonian-exile and Hebrew word for money, they effectively neutered the Galilean's

admonition against idolizing riches, against wealth-worship, by thus-making scripture resonate with proscriptions against another transgression, against the worship of strange Gods. Changing a common into a proper noun or special untranslated form is a powerful deed, we again note. Once this had been accomplished — we might argue — the churches of the world might feel more comfortable in building their spires higher than Babel's and in casting their chalices out of gold and sacred stones — so long, that is, as buildings and sacraments were nominally set aside for God-the-Father. So much for evil spirits and so much for the choices we make as translators!

## שבת(Shabbos)

It is to the linguistic fate that befell the prescription for sacred restings to which I shall now turn in more detail. With God's days of rest, we see a neutering by substitution of the notion of rest and all that might entail with a proper noun. The original meaning of שבת(Shabbos) must be assumed to relate to ceasing and desisting, as we see in the first usage by scripture of the root verb of שבת(Shabbos) (Genesis 2:2):

וישבת ביום השביעי מכל מלאכתו אשר עשה

And He **rested/desisted** on the seventh day from all the work which He had done.

Allow me to continue with a selection of the forty-odd Old Testament citations that mention שבת(Shabbos) or its related forms in order to impart some flavor to its central positioning in Scripture. I shall render שבת (Shabbos) as restfulness or with the present participle forms resting or restings — perhaps, the word *ataraxia* will come to mind for those of you who find the Greek more comfortable. In those cases where שבת(Shabbos) is typically translated as the proper noun Sabbath, I shall parenthetically list that translation, as well as my own. It should be noted that it is not until Exodus that the root word for שבת(Shabbos) is used even as a present participle that may be mistranslated as the proper noun Sabbath; the Seventh Day, throughout the Creation saga, is referred to generically as יום השביעי (yom ha'shvi'i), the Seventh Day. In Exodus, as just noted, we do begin to see the mentioned participle form, as in:

ושמרו בני ישראל את השבת  
לעשות את השבת לדרתם ברית עולם

And the Children of Israel cherished **the restfulness**  
to facilitate this **resting** in all their generations, an eternal covenant. (Ex 31:17)

[And the Children of Israel guarded the **Sabbath**,  
to do the **Sabbath** in all their generations, an eternal covenant]

Here, and in the subsequent examples, while translators have chosen to render שבת (Shabbos) as the proper noun, Sabbath, שבת(Shabbos), as claimed above, carried the

form and meaning of the present participle — still, linguistically connected, that is, to the predicate forms.

This is the case in the following instances:

אך את שבתתי תשמרו כי אות הוא ביני וביניכם לדרתיכם  
אני יהוה מקדשכם לדעת כי

Aye! **My restings** shall you cherish, for they are a symbol between you and Me for your progeny to know that I am the God who sanctifies you. (Ex 31:13)

[Aye! **My Sabbaths** shall you guard, for they are a symbol between you and Me for your progeny to know that I am God who sanctifies you.]

ששת ימים יעשה מלאכה וביום השביעי  
שבת שבתון קדש ליהוה

Six days shall all labor be done. And on the seventh day?  
**A resting of restfulness** sacred for God. (Ex 31:15)

[Six days shall all labor be done. And on the seventh day?  
**A Sabbath of Sabbaths** sacred for God.]

Similarly, in the following verses:

ששת ימים תעשה מלאכה וביום השביעי  
שבת שבתון מקרא קדש כל מלאכה לא תעשו  
שבת הוא ליהוה בכל מושבתכם

Six days shall work be done and on the Seventh Day?  
a **Restfulness** of **Restings**, a designated sanctified moment, all work shall you not do,  
a **restfulness** in honor of God in all of your **dwelling-(resting-)places**. (Lev 23:3)

[Six days shall work be done and on the Seventh Day  
a **Sabbath** of **Sabbaths**, a designated sanctified moment, all work shall you not do,  
a **Sabbath** it is in honor of God in all of your dwelling-places.]

את שבתתי תשמרו ומקדשי תיראו אני יהוה

My **restings** shall you cherish and my places of sanctity shall you fear, I am God. (Lev 19:30)

[My **Sabbaths** shall you guard and my places of sanctity shall you fear, I am God.]

Often, in fact, we see the predicate form of שבת(Shabbos) side by side with the day listed as יום השביעי(yom ha'shvi'i), the Seventh Day, rendering unlikely the alternative translation:

ששת ימים תעשה מעשיך וביום השביעי  
תשבת למען ינוח שורך וחמרך וינפש בן אמתך והגר

Six days shall you do deeds and on the seventh day  
**you shall rest** so that your ox and your donkey may feel comfort and the child of your  
she-servant and the visitor may be refreshed. (Ex 23:12)

or:

ששת ימים תעבד וביום השביעי  
תשבת בחריש ובקציר תשבת

Six days shall you labor and on the seventh day  
**shall you rest**; from plowing and harvesting **shall you rest!** Exodus 34:21

But what, we might query, underlies this notion of restfulness so as to generate the multiplicity of refrains about guarding and cherishing שבת(Shabbos)? Why should this cherishing of a sacred resting echo three-score times and more in Holy Writ?

Allow me to continue with the following brief thoughts — borrowed, at least in spirit, from the homiletics of the XIXth Century German exegetist Sampson Raphael Hirsch and a previous work (Covitz, 1997, Chapter 5) where I have suggested that the Ethos of Genesis rests on a central proscription against Narcissism. Scripture (Exodus) chooses to counterpoise שבת(Shabbos) against the עגל(egel), the molten calf that moved a generation of worshippers to adore only that which might come under their own scrutiny and control. שבת(Shabbos) was to be different. שבת(Shabbos), restfulness, was to still the works of our mortal hands, to make them irrelevant; during these Restings, our very inactivity would fail to separate the braggart from the beggar, the sculptor from the grave-digger, and the philosopher from the fish-monger. In desisting from activity, all would present with their residual status as creations; on the seventh day all would cease aping the Creator — all would desist from activity and mock-creation. This seventh day would encompass זכר למעשה בראשית(zecher l'ma'aseh breishis), a remembrance that we are all creations. שבת(Shabbos) could then be taken to represent an open disclosure and confession: we are, all of us, creations and not creators ... like the crow and the dog, like the roo and the snail. שבת(Shabbos) would, then, be about what we share with each other; in this sense, it may be said that שבת(Shabbos), that ceasing our imitation of the Creator, is an ultimate form of humility. שבת(Shabbos) is more about similarities and less about differences.

By reifying this concept, however, and by refusing to accept this universal day of kinship-in-rest and offering-up, in its stead, a code and ritual of practice, we have neutered the restfulness of the seventh day and made it vacuous as we further weakened its message and replaced it with our attempts at — for yet another day of the week — pretending to the powers of the Creator. I would suggest that even in the Talmudic attempt to replace restfulness by a lengthy listing of proscriptions, there is implicit a purloining of Divine rights of creation! In any case, life, as we all know, now goes on during the Friday Sabbaths of the world of Islam and the Saturday and Sunday Sabbaths of the Judæo-Christian world. And like passing through some one-horse town, in most of our dwelling places, one passes through both Sabbath and Charity, nowadays, without noticing either.

This having been said, let me review my claims, thus far: by or together with linguistic processes rendering a reification and/or narrowing of focus, and just as the Western World has been able to dismiss the Galilean's agenda as it related to ממון or money, we have similarly dismissed the sanguine value of humble restfulness and now hold on only to certain accoutrements of שבת (Shabbos), of this notion of resting from all sort of labor.

### Truth (אמת ואמונה) & Science

“It is difficult even to attach a precise meaning to the term “scientific truth”.

Thus, the meaning of the word “truth” varies according to whether we deal with a fact of experience, a mathematical proposition, or a scientific theory.”

— Albert Einstein (Gelegenlichtes, 1929)

There are those who would have it that Science is about approximating the Truth or, said differently, that the goal of Science is to closely represent Truth. Along these lines, a curious datum may be relevant. The scholars who spent one half century (1878 of Queen Victoria's reign till they were presented in 1928 to George V) compiling their researches into the Oxford English Dictionary did their best to follow the mandates of the lexicographers' version of Occam's Razor. And so one sees the lion's share of entries having one to three proffered definitions. It may even please us to note how fortuitous it is that the word precision has but two definitions. Some of us, however, may be less pleased to note that science brandishes six quite lengthy definitions and truth a whopping fourteen definitions for the noun-form and five for the corresponding verb form, with these nineteen being in addition to the listings for truthful, truthfulness, truthy, truthlike ... and sundry adjectival kin! The statement, then, that 'a dominant aim of Science is to approximate the Truth' may well be too semantically **wobbly** with alternative meanings to, itself, be considered Scientific. Perhaps it is so, as Einstein fretted (Advances in Science, Vol. 2, No. 5, 1941), that:

"Perfection of means and confusion of goals seem — in my opinion — to characterize our age."

Our previous two examples of linguistic hanky-panky — in which the shift from common noun to proper noun (*lucre* to *Mammon*) or from predicate-near participle to reified and, therefore perhaps, disposable substantive (*sacred restings* to *Sabbath*) — those could be blamed on ancient translators or exegetal *wortmeisters*. This preoccupation with (capital T) Truth and (capital S) Science, however, must be attributed to the docents of the Scientific era. Yes! There are references to truth in Holy Writ, but they tend to be of two types: those that apply to a mandate to reporting honestly "what appears to be" ... and others that invoke Truth as a characteristic of the deity's "trustworthiness." I begin by offering-up several examples of the manner in which the absence of truth is represented, beginning with the ninth commandment:

לא תענה ברעך עד שקר

You shall not respond about your neighbor as a false witness. (Exodus 20:13)

Or, some passages later, in a rather lengthy presentation surrounding the twisting of reality, we see something similar (Exodus 23:1-2):

לא תשא שמע שוא אל תשת ירך עם רשע להיות עד חמס  
לא תהיה אחרי רבים לרעת ולא תענה על רב לנשת אחרי רבים להטת  
ודל לא תהדר בריבו

Do not accept a false report; do not extend your hand with the wicked to be a corrupt witness.

Do not include yourself with the majority for evil;  
and do not respond on a contentious matter — to pervert, after the majority to pervert;  
and do not (even) embellish (reality) for the poor in their dispute.

Scripture, goes so far, a few passages later, as to require us to deal realistically with the arguments brought forth by orphans with whose pains, perhaps, we all identify. There are two words that are usually translated as truth in Biblical Hebrew; the first, **אמונה** (Emanah), is but mentioned twice in the Pentateuch, with the first such occurrence relating to the trustworthiness of Moses' ability to keep his arm outstretched in the battle against the Amalakites and the second referring to the trustworthiness of God in Moses' song-like prayer at the close of his life:

ויהי ידיו אמונה עד בא השמש

And his hands were **true** until the coming of the sun (Exodus 17:12)  
and later:

הצור תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט  
אל אמונה ואין עול צדיק וישר הוא

The Rock! Perfect is his work, for all his paths are just.  
A God of **truth** and no iniquity! Righteous and straight is He. (Deut 32:4)

Truth, let me add, needed no expostulatory introduction in the Old Testament but was rather chiseled into the style of reporting assumed by the Writer, a style that permitted a full and open accounting of the flaws of the described heroes of the Biblical narrative. The other word, **אמת** (emes), that is usually translated as truth, also, carries the tone of realistic or reality based and not the sense of some weighty and universal truth: It appears only as follows:

אשר הנחני בדרך אמת

As you led me along a **true** path (Gen 24:48)

אנשי חיל יראי אלהים אנשי אמת שנאי בצע

Men of valor, God-fearing, men of **truth** hating deceit (Ex 18:21)

הנה אמת נכון הדבר נעשתה התועבה הזאת בקרבך

Behold! **True** and correct is the matter;  
this disgusting thing was done in your midst. (Deut 13:15)

והנה אמת נכון הדבר נעשתה התועבה הזאת בישראל

And behold! **True** and correct is the matter;  
this disgusting thing was done in Israel. (Deut 17:4)

ואם אמת היה הדבר הזה  
לא נמצאו בתולים לנערה

And if this matter be **true** (that)  
signs of virginity were not to be found for the young woman. (Deut 22:20)

Sometime or other a new notion of Truth appeared, leaving behind the eschewing of misrepresentation in reporting what it is that one believes one has observed (not bearing false witness, not embellishing even charitably, asserting one's beliefs, etc.). Somehow, there appeared an upper case Truth presuming to connote Absolutes about the Universe.

How unhumble! These absolutes, in turn, encapsulated an equally unhumble notion of Science — moving its meaning from one connoting solid argumentation, careful reporting of what one has done and equally careful presentations of what one believes that one has seen (from the Latin *scientia* — that which is known) to its upper case form, Science, loaded with power politics in the Academy and expostulations about the incontrovertible limits of allowable good thinking. How unhumble, again! I like to think that both Fisher and Niemann-Pearson (perhaps, arguably, the founders of modern statistical methods) in their 1930's models (I almost said earlier this Century) for statistical presentation and hypothesis testing were attempting to assist "thinkers" in structuring their work within a matrix of humility. By their methods, one uniformly refuses to reject a null hypothesis (the status quo position of previous generations or other cultures of thinkers), in spite of one's predilections to think alternatively, until such a time as one has powerfully supportive evidence (90% or 95% or 99%, depending on the consequences of guessing wrong!) for such a rejection. A humbling experience, fit to join those other two that we first examined: the relinquishing of the unbridled pursuit of power and *filthy-mammon* and the suspension of our weekday imitations of the Creator.

### **Conclusion: The Process**

In Freud's 1915 paper (SE 14:187 and elsewhere), he outlined the idiosyncratic functioning of the System Unconscious (system Ucs., in his usage). He noted

- exemption from mutual contradiction,
- primary process (mobility of cathexes [condensation and displacement]),
  - timelessness and
- replacement of external by psychical reality.

In the same paper, he suggested that the Unconscious is composed of action-images, what he called *vorstellungen* in his Viennese German (and his translator mistakenly, though intentionally, rendered as *ideas*.) These *vorstellungen* were, in turn, comprised of an action (a drive or *trieb* to Freud) and two objects .... one in the subjective/doing stance and the other in the objective/done-to stance. These actions were to Freud much like transitive verbs .... they always took an object, as we say in grammar, and they always had a subject. One of the implicit oddities, however, was that the roles for these objects were not yet definitively cast by the internal *Casting Director* (see, also, Freud's paper "A child is being beaten"). In either case, Freud postulated that feelings are birthed when one of these *vorstellungen* moves its way into our conscious awareness.

An example might be in order to demonstrate how such a *vorstellung* might easily distort a common relationship difficulty between two folk. A and B have agreed to meet at 5:00 PM at an agree-upon location. A is late and shows up rather peeved but cannot explain his irritation. Aha! In Unconscious thinking, A kept B waiting is indistinguishable -- in terms of its result -- from B kept A waiting. Its result? Annoyance, anger, peevishness. While Freud did not explicitly offer this conclusion, the feeling life of *anthropos* seems to

structure itself around the action part of the *vorstellung* which gives rise to a specific feeling.

The thoughts represented above in our discussion of Mammon, Shabbos and Truth and the manner in which the human mind tends to concretize or reify, are offered to suggest another method by which the Unconscious mind operates behind the scenes. In the above, I reasoned that we human animals tend to move -- in our thinking -- toward simple answers from the uncomfortably and maybe frighteningly variable questions that confront us as sentient animals:

- What is a righteous use of power and money?
  - How do we demonstrate our oneness as a species if we spend all our time mimicking the Creator?
    - Why do we assume that any one Truth is privileged over others?

If nothing else can be learned from the Unconscious, it is that *Life is Messy*.

Note: When this paper was first presented some 10 years ago in Frankford, KY (30 March 2000) at the Annual Meeting of the *Association for Science and Culture*, the discussion period that followed for nearly two hours was ferocious and just barely involved the author. Something, apparently, in this idea that the Unconscious tends to recast action words/ideas into Common Nouns and to reshape Common Nouns into Proper Nouns is disturbing.