

Ex nihilo

By Joel Page

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The grossly unfair cosmic intelligence that radiates through this story is the surest proof that a God who might not exist does not create us equally. What begins as a surrealist projection of a hypothetical image morphing into philosophical investigation gestates before our eyes into the poetry of metaphysics. All five of us emerged from 'Ex nihilo' with stars in our eyes and lumps in our throats. The prose is beyond...beyond...Quote: Sneeze, cough, laugh, scream, break your sentences in half and recombine them. This is the grammar of God.'*

Ex nihilo

At this point, scientific consensus holds that no one is speaking through the giant floating Lips that hover a mile and a half above the Gulf of Mexico. The Lips speak, of course; they speak a grammarless river of words, likely a precursor of Indo-Hittite. Most rigorous analysts, however, do not believe that anyone, any mind, chooses the words. Rather, the words (and perhaps the Lips) are nothing more than language itself.

There are three kinds of dissenting theories on this point, none of which I share. The first concerns the possibility of alien contact and posits that aliens project and control the Lips from afar. The second dissenting opinion is similar, but it imagines a human source: a hoax, or maybe a work of art. Aliens are the more attractive of the two projection theories, because it is impossible to know the extent of their technology, and hence impossible to rule them out entirely. Nonetheless, the following measures tend to disprove the two projection theories:

- The Argentine air force outfitted a turboprop cargo plane with a battery of sensors; it flew circles around the lips for 24 hours, yet it failed to detect any manner of incoming wave – x-, gamma, radio, UV – that might be animating the Lips.
- A daredevil flew up to the Lips by jetpack during a television special and kissed them; she reported that they are composed of solid matter, indistinguishable from any human lips she has previously kissed, save for their colossal size and facial detachment; this would seem to eliminate any suspicion that the lips are merely a projected image.
- The US Navy, in conjunction with a Chinese construction concern, succeeded in building a giant lead ball, attached to the seabed in the manner of an oil derrick; the ball surrounds the lips and blocks any signal that might be reaching them, yet the lips continue apace.

Now this compilation of evidence will not satisfy everyone. Conferences of respectable scientific opinion – not cranks – posit quantum mechanisms of matter transmission. These mechanisms might permit another species to create and animate the lips from a distance. And there is a certain logic in the alien transmission idea. If another species understood (somehow) that human beings speak with their lips, and wished to communicate, what better image to show us? Further, if they wanted to speak to all of us, why not use the first human language ever spoken?

But as I say, this is a dissenting view. The capacity to create objects in another galaxy is at this point conjectural. Indeed, maybe less than conjectural. One astrophysicist has convincingly argued that quantum entanglement is impossible absent prior physical proximity between the entangled particles. The number of particles in the lips, moreover, exceeds the number of particles that come from any one solar system in all but one in one million simulations of the Big Bang. So aliens, as I say, are a dissenting opinion.

The human source hypothesis also has its defenders. In its most plausible form, this hypothesis posits collusion between the trickster who animates the lips, on the one hand, and some combination of the Argentine Airforce, US Navy, and kissing daredevil. While the idea complies at least with the laws of physics, it wants utterly for social plausibility. No evidence has been offered for such a conspiracy, and no motive could explain the behavior of these parties to undertake one.

We turn then to a third explanation positing the existence of a speaker: that the lips are the voice of God, or of the world in toto, which is perhaps the same. The popular rejoinder to this hypothesis, aside from the traditional arguments for atheism, centers on the seeming inability of the lips to utter any sensible collection of words. Why would God speak to His creation if He did not wish to be understood? Last Thursday, the lips told us in Indo-Hittite:

fire mother the if if deep woods woods warfare into the cooking woods mother brother
sister brother sister bird run hungry run if kill wagon chewing mouth raining mouth
chewing if the the if into out void

And what manner of God would say such a thing?

I have to say that I find this line of rebuttal unpersuasive. Yes, the lips are senseless. But all the more Godly. Very little of what God would have to say would fit within human grammar -- our grammar arises primarily from mental organs with genetic basis. No less than our physical organs – tongue, lips, larynx – our mental organs limit what we can say. God, obviously, lacks such genetic limitations. Put another way, the words of the lips are not senseless, they are merely expressed in a grammar we do not share. Sneeze, cough, laugh, scream, break your sentences in half and recombine them. This is the grammar of God. And why shall we presume that God speaks for our benefit? When we pray to God, we speak usually for our own benefit. Why should we expect different of God, praying to us?

Nonetheless, I do not quite believe that God chooses to speak through the Lips, primarily because I believe in the non-existence of God. As I understand the concept, an existent God must meet two conditions: it must be infinite, and it must be a creator. These conditions contradict each other. The nature of a creator is to pre-exist the created, which implies necessarily that the creator is, at some moment of its existence, less than infinite. Creation, in other words, is addition, but one cannot add to the infinite.

One might seek to bypass this problem by cutting God in half, defining it as either an infinity that did not create the world, or as a creator who is less than infinite. The first possibility does little to solve the theory's problem. Infinity cannot speak, lest it cease to become what does not speak, and hence become less than everything.

A creator, on the other hand, may well speak, but it speaks no less through the Lips than through the rest of creation, at once. And this reduces the hypothesis of a Godly speaker very nearly to the trivial.¹

So, the consensus of rigorous analysts does not believe the words to have a speaker. There is, I should say, one piece of evidence that is very often cited in support of the dissenting views: it does not appear that the lips speak when no one listens to them. Of course, and as with the hypothesis of alien technology, or of a refrigerator light, this cannot be known or excluded with perfect certainty. But when the US Navy built a platform around the lips, it installed a continuous video camera to monitor them. During a period of three days, a storm surrounded the platform, and the feed died. Upon restoration, the lips picked up in the middle of the last word – indeed, within the last syllable – that they had begun pronouncing before the truncation.

From this, advocates of the dissenting views reason that the words must have a speaker. The decision to stop, they argue, implies a will. But to my mind, this does not show that the lips have a speaker. To the contrary, it seems to prove that the words are pure language and nothing more. Because while language may very well exist without a speaker – think of words that appear in the mind, unbidden, unspoken and ex nihilo – it cannot exist without a listener. Speak words to no one -- you have heard them. Think them – you have heard them. But no word has ever existed that has never been uttered. If they are not heard, they are not words. And so with the lips – they are language itself, and must necessarily discontinue while we cease to hear.

And this is the essence of the scientific consensus: that no one is speaking through the Lips, that the words are a pure emission of language, perhaps the source of our own, by way of some prehistoric visit to or from the Savannah.

I will tell you my view now. I have told you little of myself, so perhaps you won't be interested. I am to you probably little more than the lips – speech emerging uninvited from a black space. But maybe that is better – if you know the speaker, you have likely already decided what they mean to say before you hear it. I, by contrast, am unknown to you, so you may hear me.

In my view, the words emitted by the Lips are indeed the voice of God. Further, they have no speaker. Some readers will perceive a contradiction here. There is none. God is absence. If God is an

¹ This, indeed, is very close to the conclusion of certain Jewish traditionalists. On the authority of Genesis 1:1, they regard the words spoken by the Lips as God itself. One popular objection is of Spinozan inspiration: God cannot be the Words of the Lips, the objection goes, because it is everywhere, while the Words of the Lips emerge from a single point in the Gulf of Mexico. An effective rejoinder cites the work of a team of computer scientists, seismic recorders, linguists and mathematicians, who uploaded a set of naturally occurring kinetic data from the New Madrid fault line. That team translated kinetic expressions at random into the letters of each known language, and calculated a 51% chance that the fault line would emit – in some system of seismic translation – a cognizable sentence in some human language, most likely Korean. From this, the traditionalists reason that the Words of the Lips are God, but not all of God. The world is language, speaking incessantly from every point in every conceivable language, and in millions more beyond conception.

infinite creator, He cannot exist, because a creator cannot be infinite. Indeed, if God is merely an infinite being, He cannot exist, because the world is manifestly not composed of every possibility. Nor can there be any being which has created the world in its entirety, because He cannot pre-exist Himself. It follows that there is no God, and from this that God is nothing. And from the evidence that nothing is speaking the words that come from the Lips, it follows further that the words are the voice of God.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This one just sort of came to me.

I was on a plane trying to type something else, something about the ubiquity of language, something more like the footnote, about the possibility of language without a speaker or a thought without a thinker. But that was hard, so I wrote this.

Influences: Borges, Katie Chase, China Melville, Eco and Chandler.

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