

# And the Word Became Flesh

## A Response to Björn Larsson

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It is both a pleasure and a challenge to respond to Björn Larsson's lecture on the word that was in the beginning and his theory of human beings as *homo symbolicus*. I appreciate his reflections on the problem of reducing human beings to an object for the scientific mind, and I do sympathize with his concern for human freedom as well as his thoughts on *homo symbolicus*. But my contribution here shall be to make some critical comments on the way he understands human beings as *homo symbolicus* in the second part of his article. I shall — in short — plead for a more extensive use of the Gospel of John in an attempt to understand human beings as *homo symbolicus*. My purpose is to make Larsson refine some of his theses in his work on a theory of *homo symbolicus* in light of the importance he himself places on the Gospel of John.

### In the Beginning was the Symbol

Larsson takes as a kind of starting point, the very first lines from the Gospel of John: «In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And God was the word.» From this he suggests, as a hypothesis that «human beings *became* humans when they invented or discovered — or received as a gift from God — the word, that is language» (p. 7).<sup>1</sup> The word constitutes the world of human beings. But this is not any word, but the discovery that one word could be used to stand for any other thing in the process of human communication. Thus, symbolic representation was discovered or invented (Larsson seems somehow to draw on both these acts, one more

passive and one more active). A word, like «banana» could be said to stand for the banana-thing, and thus it was possible to represent a banana without any banana actually being present. Larsson then goes on to suggest a voluntaristic account of how this discovery was made, namely, through a kind of arbitrary agreement about what particular word should be said to stand for (or represent) a particular thing in its absence. This is an important discovery, says Larsson, since, and I quote from his article, «human beings had to decide *together* what should be counted *as* a symbol for something else» (p. 8). My doubts about Larsson's account starts here.

I do understand that this is a fictional account of what happened «in the beginning» and that it thus has a certain heuristic value in that it could give us a plausible but not necessarily historically true explanation of how human beings became humane beings. But the problem is that this theory presupposes several things. To start with, it presupposes that the would-be human beings are already elaborate language-users. To come to an agreement about how to use a word is a quite complex linguistic action. To presuppose, however fictionally, that these language-users had access to a language that works as a language except that there are no symbolic representations in it, is quite extraordinary. Larsson's proto-humans seem to, in practice, use a very modern distinction between literal and metaphorical language. There was a *literal* beginning, before the symbolic representation was inaugurated.

Larsson's second suggestion about the consequence of the discovery of symbolic representation shows the same qualities, namely, that

<sup>1</sup> All references to Larsson are from his article «In the Beginning was the Word».

«the perceived reality was divided in two, one reality which was perceived with the senses and one reality which was that of the symbols used in symbolic representation» (p. 8). Sense perceptions could show us what was evident, and this, it seems to me, implies that there is a symbolically unmediated relation to at least part of what counts as reality. Symbols, on the other hand, give us the possibility to talk about things independent of their immediate presence in our sense perceptions. Now, this distinction between un-mediated sense perceptions and symbolically mediated talk about things reinforces the impression that Larsson's indirect distinction between literal and metaphorical language. (If one follows Larsson's theory that human beings became human through their discovery or invention of the symbol, must one not conclude that empirical scientists, in contrast to us working in the human sciences, are, *qua* scientists, proto-human, at best, due to their methods of observation?)

Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, stated that «man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end».<sup>2</sup> One consequence of Foucault's dismissal of a particular kind of human sciences with a particular notion of what constitutes human beings, their «subjectivity», is that human beings become symbolic beings in a more radical way than in at least some parts of Larsson's account suggests. As human beings we are entangled in discourses and social institutions to the degree that there is no «before», neither in the sense of an independently existing physical reality that is given, unmediated, to the senses, nor in the sense that it would be possible to imagine, however fictionally, either a «decision» to «invent» a symbolic representation, or a pure «discovery» of symbolic representation.

To postulate, as Larsson undoubtedly does, that language has a human, not divine origin, is not as unproblematic as it first seems, as already Plato showed in his dialogue *Cratylus*. But let me leave this interesting topic aside and instead turn to a question actualised by the Gospel of

John, the question of how to conceive the relation between physical reality and language.

## A Word Made Flesh

I think that Larsson's view on the difference between the physical and the symbolic order of the world is a bit too neat. The reason for this distinction that he wants to make might be that he is trying to avoid a relativistic or idealistic standpoint, but the consequence is that his position tends toward a kind of naïve realism. «The simple fact,» he claims, «that one thing is made to stand in another thing's stead leaves physical reality as it is. Physical reality, one could say, does not change because we start to talk about it or because we can start to imagine new realities. What happens is rather that reality is extended» (p. 9). So this symbolic extension leaves physical reality as it is. The symbolic or linguistic reality, the new realm, is, as Larsson puts it in what must be referred to as a figure of speech, «situated in our heads» (p. 9). I do not doubt the ability of language to distance us from what we take for reality, but together with, among many other philosophers and theologians, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, I would suggest that reality, including physical reality, is always already symbolically mediated, and thus physical reality could not be equated with reality as such. To learn a new language, or to let a new use of a language broaden your horizon, does not leave reality, not even physical reality, as it is. This does not necessarily mean that there is no reality as such, but it could mean, as Žižek suggests, that reality is not as ontologically «finished» as a notion of an unchanging physical reality suggests. According to Žižek, «the only way really to account for the status of freedom is to assert *the ontological incompleteness of <reality> itself*: there is <reality> only in so far as there is an ontological gap, a crack, at its very heart».<sup>3</sup> Much the same thing could be said, I believe, from a theological perspective.

But what would have happened if Larsson had quoted some lines a bit further down in the

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, London 1991, p. 387.

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*. Verso books, London/New York 2001, p. 174.

prologue from the Gospel of John, for instance 1:14: «The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us»? Perhaps this verse could suggest a way to move towards a more radical symbolic theory of the human being. This verse suggests that the word does not just exist in a realm beside physical reality or in extension of reality, but that the word actually became flesh. In other words, *words*, or at least one word, do exist embodied, incarnated so that this word does not only exist «situated in our heads». Many contemporary philosophers and theologians have tried to think this through, but among these the most prominent and influential, must probably be said to be Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his work *Phenomenology of Perception* from 1945. (He revised his own philosophy in his posthumously published work *The Visible and the Invisible* from 1964, but this need not concern us here). Just let me take a brief look at Merleau-Ponty's conception of language in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

According to Merleau-Ponty language (linguistic signs) is neither purely conventional or naturally given. Conventional signs that are the result of a previous agreement presupposes an already ongoing human communication. This does not mean that there is some kind of «similarity» between words and things, but that words express the emotional essence of things. I take this to mean that words express the essence of the existence of things in relation to human existence. Human beings «sing» the world before they try to explain it through conventional signs.<sup>4</sup> The primary function of language is to orient human beings in their life-world, not to create a correspondence between words and things.<sup>5</sup> Language constitutes the world in which human beings understand their existence, and thus Merleau-Ponty can suggest that speech and gesture transfigures the human body, at the same time that it is the human body who talks and gestures.<sup>6</sup> Physical reality is not left intact by language, and thus, in a sense, one could say that a human body is a linguistic body as long as it is

not a cadaver. Language creates all sorts of possibilities for bodily existence, even though language always exists through and between bodies.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of language is parallel to his idea of how human beings relate to the world. First of all, the world is not an object for a human subjectivity. Human beings exist in and through the world, and any relation that puts human beings as spectators outside of the world, is an abstraction from the world that human beings live. He writes: «The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible.»<sup>7</sup>

My point here, and the point that I would like to draw from Merleau-Ponty, is that one of the main functions of language is to transfigure reality, including physical reality. For Merleau-Ponty, this means, for instance, that the meaning of the physical human body is derived from the phenomenal human body in a radical sense, so that it is indeed hard to know what it would mean to speak of a physical body independent of this phenomenal body. In other words, I would like to suggest that it would be fruitful, in a theory of the human being, to study the *intertwining*, the *chiasm*, between the literal and the symbolic, between physical reality and language, because that would mean another version of the notion of *homo symbolicus*. My own guess is that the symbolic is primary and actually *produces* the literal, but that would take some while to argue.

Let me then finish by saying that what I have been trying to suggest is simply that Björn Larsson the novelist is primary, and Björn Larsson the theorist is secondary. First, there is a world given for human beings through a creative act. Then there is reflection upon this world through human sciences as well as natural sciences. There is no world, at least not in an interesting way for us human beings, before the symbol. The symbol is primary, but this is no mere abstract, disembodied word, but a word made flesh. Of course, there is the remaining question to ask, namely, *why* did the word become flesh? But that question, which also could be put to the Gospel of John, has to wait for another occasion.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge, London 1992, p. 187.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.