

Response to James Danaher, Postmodern Hermeneutics and the Reconstruction of the Christian Mind

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Keywords: Objectivity, language, postmodernity, concepts, reality, truth, knowledge, relationship, culture

Prof. Danaher's article is a most unusual 'take' on the hermeneutical process – reminding us very helpfully that our lives are inescapably *linguistic*, that we ourselves bestow meaning on the words we hear and use, and that inevitably therefore 'objectivity' is a hard goal to achieve in any area of life, and *particularly* in the most important area of all, the knowledge of God. I'm sure he won't mind if the following comments are largely critical because inevitably, in discussions like this, we work from areas of agreement and common understanding into areas of difference and exploration. In fact, that is the central message of his paper!

Postmodernism

I don't think that the hermeneutics he describes is essentially 'post-modern'. The fundamental points he

makes about linguistics have been around since Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the last century. It was he who first explored the connection between words and concepts and refused to identify the two, and made the point about the arbitrary nature of the linguistics signs we use. In relation to a conceptual field like colour, or disease, Saussure argued that words define themselves mutually within the field, so that the semantic gap between words is more significant than the actual range which each covers. We are chiefly interested, for instance, in identifying the *differences between* 'mauve', 'lilac', 'purple' and 'aubergine' – and in fact the meaning of each is determined by the existence of these other members of the same linguistic field. But of course – as Prof. Danaher says – the fact that we have lots of 'colour' words in English (as opposed to ancient Greek, for instance, which had very few) says nothing about the actual structure of the light-

spectrum.

Saussure also covered what Prof. Danaher calls 'personal' concepts. In fact this flowed from Saussure's basic point about the arbitrary connection between concepts and linguistic 'units'. Yes, as children grow, they become *inculturated* into the way in which their language-group uses words: and beyond this they gradually develop the capacity to *conceptualize* the world. Language is vital in enabling this capacity, not just through 'labelling' more abstract things like 'goodness', 'truth' and 'God', but also through story-telling and more 'poetic' or 'metaphorical' uses of language, which create connections from the known into the unknown. At this more abstract level, the 'paradigmatic' (Saussure's term) or 'connotative' qualities of language become more significant: words don't just 'mean' what the dictionary says they should, but they take on board a whole range of nuances and connotations because of their *associations* for us. Prof. Danaher gives the simple example of the special connotations that 'water' holds for him, because of childhood memories. This feature of language is even clearer in the case of terms like 'goodness' or 'love', for such words will inevitably have different connotations for each of us, depending on our experiences and ideological commitments. Christians, for instance, will usually fill out their meaning with Scriptural ideas as well as with experiences of church, and of family.

But all this is quite compatible with biblical Christianity, as Prof. Danaher shows. However, it's not 'postmodern'. *Postmodernism* typically takes a further step, and denies all fixity or 'absoluteness' about the world, full stop. So there is no possibility of regarding one construction of the world as more valid, or 'truer', than another. Not just language, but the whole conceptual world, including 'God' or whatever might be so described, is in a state of constant flux; and 'reality' (whatever that is) rests not beyond but *in* the language we use. So all we can do, like children in a linguistic playground, is *play* with words, having fun with them, letting them bounce off each other, swinging around them and sliding from one to another, wrestling with each other happily and pre-occupied in our own little world.

But that is *not* compatible with biblical Christianity. There is something fundamentally 'modern' about Christianity – that is, its affirmation of absolute truth – and unless we qualify the meaning of the word quite drastically (but why not?!), we can't call *biblical* hermeneutics 'postmodern'.

And if there is something inescapably 'modern' about our view of God – namely, that he *really exists!* – there will in all likelihood be something 'modern' about our hermeneutics, as well: but more of that below!

Theology

Prof. Danaher rightly emphasizes that the goal of

everything we do, in studying the Scriptures and doing theology, is *to get to know God* (or rather, as he powerfully puts it, *to be known by God*). Of course! It's terrible that we lose sight of this glorious purpose. But his notion of what it means to know God seems strangely limited, to me. He confines it to grasping 'God's conceptual understanding' of things, and bases his critique of the language of Scripture on the limitations of all language adequately to convey God's 'concepts'. It seems as though, for Prof. Danaher, to know God is ultimately to find the most appropriate language to express 'his concepts', which we grasp with full (if possible) understanding. But I think it is not difficult to show that 'the knowledge of God' is not a wholly or chiefly *cognitive* thing, in the Bible. Prof. Danaher himself points to the wider dimensions when he rightly notes that, in Matthew 7:23, 'I never knew you' points to avoidance of the kind of 'personal intimacy' illustrated by sexual intercourse. But *this* kind of intimacy is far from merely cognitive! Like wife and husband, we 'know' and love God ultimately as he knows us, not with our mind only, but also with body, heart and soul (cf. Matthew 22:37).

In any case I think Prof. Danaher shows himself ill-at-ease with his own argument, for he uses a powerful metaphor, that of *impregnation*, to express the way in which God 'implants' his word in us. He draws this metaphor directly from his reflection on love, basing it on Ephesians 5:29. 'Impregnation' is a very different kind of 'sowing' from that which Jesus has in mind in Matthew 13! And it points to a very different kind of knowing from that which is suggested by the 'sowing' = preaching of the word of God. *Impregnated seed* cannot be snatched away by the Devil or choked by thorns. Perhaps for this reason, impregnation is not a *Scriptural* metaphor for the work of the Holy Spirit in imparting understanding to us, nor in imparting regeneration or new birth – even though we might think it would flow naturally from the notion of believers as 'children of God'.

The nearest we get is in James 1:21, where James tells us to 'rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls' (NRSV). But it is interesting (a) that the 'implanted word' has to be 'welcomed' or 'received': though already 'implanted', it could be ignored or forgotten, like the man and his face in the following verse (James 1:22f); (b) that the 'receiving' of this word does not just change the *mind*, but will affect all our behaviour; and (c) that this metaphor of the 'implantation' of the word is horticultural, rather than biological. Even though James writes about the new birth three verses earlier (1:18), 'he gave us birth by the word of truth', this birth does not *result from* the impregnation = implantation of the word into us. James actually uses a *female* image in 1:21, so that 'the word of truth' functions as the *mid-wife*, in the metaphor. God doesn't squirt his word into us, but brings us to birth 'by' it, and then calls us to 'receive' it and obey it, like the soil in the pot that com-

mits itself to receiving, and serving, the seedling on our kitchen window-sill.

Although Paul certainly emphasizes the importance of the mind in our human make-up – so that it plays a crucial role both in our fallenness (Romans 1:18-32) and in our sanctification (Romans 12:1-21) – yet he does not treat our *cognitions* as the vital issue in both. Unlike Plato, he does not separate the mind from the body and treat the former as vital and the latter as dispensable in knowing the truth. For Plato, the true ‘philosopher’ is the one who can fully and truly ‘contemplate’ the ‘forms’, the *realities* that lie behind all the *instances* that we see around us. Prof. Danaher’s analysis of how we come to know God owes a lot to Plato, I think. He writes about how we form our ‘concepts’ out of the ‘sets of instances’ which Scripture provides for us. But this is not what Paul means by the ‘renewal of the mind’ in Romans 12:1-2. There, it is not so much *cognition* as *volition* which is uppermost in Paul’s mind (!). The renewal of our minds means that we ‘test and approve’ (NIV) God’s will – that is, (a) we *discover* God’s will by believing the story of his ‘mercies’, and realizing that it calls us to a completely different life-style and set of norms from that which the world promotes; and then (b) we *approve, accept and apply* God’s will to ourselves, by sacrificing our *bodies* to him in imitation of Jesus. Paul then spells out the conceptual, moral and relational consequences of this complete reorientation, in Romans 12:3ff.

The fundamental ‘category’, we could perhaps say, is not cognitive but *relational*. We get to know God not by replicating his concepts in our minds, but by bearing the image of his Son in our bodies – understanding our bodies as the vehicles of our life, communication and obedience in this world.

Scripture

Prof. Danaher rightly attacks the view (associated with the old ‘Biblical Theology’ movement) that somehow ancient Hebrew and *koine* Greek (and their respective cultures) had been fitted by God as especially suitable vehicles of his word. James Barr attacked this view also, in his justly famous *Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961). And Barr attacked it for the same reason, that the connection between words and concepts cannot be sustained. So to this extent I say ‘Yes and Amen!’ to Prof. Danaher. Yes, indeed, there is nothing especially suitable about Hebrew and Greek to convey truth about God (or, as he puts it, to ‘express God’s concepts’). And praise God for that: it would introduce severe divisions into the Body of Christ, if languages differed in the effectiveness with which they could express God’s truth.

But I have three important qualifications to introduce into my approval for Prof. Danaher’s approach!

Firstly, although he rejects the connection between words and concepts, his further comments seem to

rescind this rejection and reinstate the connection. He suggests that some words may be ‘closer’ to God’s ‘concepts’ than others, but that the problem is that we don’t know which. So, while Hebrew and Greek as a *whole* are not specially fitted to communicate divine truths, certain Hebrew and Greek words (or English or French words) *may* be specially ‘close’. But because we can’t tell which, we are left inductively to build up our perception of ‘God’s concepts’ from all the ‘instances’ of Scripture.

The implication seems to be clear: we are seeking, in our own language and for our culture, *the words* which will better or best encapsulate God’s ‘concepts’. Granted that there is a ‘personal’ element to all conceptualisation, as Prof. Danaher recognizes, nonetheless this seems to be the implication of his approach. But this is fundamentally to undermine the basic case he has asserted against the particular status or capacity of biblical Hebrew and Greek. If that case is right, then *no* words have a greater capacity than others to help us conceptualise divine truth, on the ground of their ‘closeness’ to ‘God’s intentional meaning’.

We need to connect this comment with the view expressed above about the basis of our knowledge of God. It lies not in our conceptual or cognitive capacities but in a full-orbed embracing of his will, involving but not exclusively located in our minds. The words of Scripture therefore, and their *meaning for us*, need to resonate with an experience of living in the will of God, of walking with Christ in worship and love, suffering and service, and *thus* we will grow into an appreciation of their full meaning. I think, for instance, of the Greek words associated with the Pauline ‘concept’ of justification – not just the ‘righteousness’ words (*dikaiousune* and friends), but also ‘faith’, ‘grace’ and ‘sin’. I would hate to believe that only those who can *conceptualize* (i.e. cognitively grasp, and express in their own language) these complex terms and their theological interrelation, can truly enter the experience of justification. I don’t think Prof. Danaher would want to say this, but it seems to be implied by his view that the knowledge of God is cognitive, and that our grasping of ‘God’s concepts’ is tightly related to our linguistic abilities.

Secondly, I would like to register an objection to the view that Scripture is simply a source of ‘concepts’, rather than a display of the *story* of God’s saving faithfulness, including illustrations of positive and negative response, of estrangement and reconciliation. It is not that certain Scriptural *words* may be closer than others to divine truth, but rather that certain Scriptural *characters* are. Or rather, to state it more fully, we see in the complex interrelationships of God and his people, of covenant and obedience and disobedience and promise and divine action, a wonderful pattern of *closeness* and *distance* to and from him. And, of course, supremely in Jesus we see one who lives in fellowship with God and who *speaks* from him. To regard Scripture as a bare source of ‘concepts’ about God is to impoverish it greatly. The events and people of

Scripture were, of course, fully embedded in their cultures and language communities – no less than we are. But the means of bridging this gap, I suggest, is not primarily the *conceptualization* of their experience – turning it into words which can leap across the centuries – but it is the shared experience of the knowledge of God which enables their words to become ours. Only so can the Psalms or the hymns of Revelation become living vehicles for our worship today.

And thirdly, if the *story* is the vital focus of Scriptural revelation, then we won't indulge in playful (postmodern) juggling with the words of Scripture, but we will take very seriously the *historical rootedness* of the text, and our need responsibly to understand it first in

its original context, so as then faithfully to hear it again in ours. Here hermeneutics (I argue!) is inescapably *modern* in its insistence that, whatever the vagaries of our current understanding, *it is possible to misinterpret* biblical texts and we need to train ourselves not to do so! I am not accusing Prof. Danaher of misinterpretation: I merely comment that 'postmodern hermeneutics', if it is truly postmodern, will not permit the historical origins and setting of our biblical texts to exercise any kind of control over their interpretation. But that is surely essential.

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