On the Virtues of Holding Your Tongue

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"Signs have dissolved into her hands," writes Talal Asad in describing the way the skilled pianist has learned to play fluidly without need of a musical score (404). Asad here is highlighting an aspect of learning and embodied practice, one that will be recognizable to those familiar with his oeuvre. Yet, its familiarity aside, this image of signs dissolving, of words fading into bodies, remains striking. Describing embodied practices in an earlier essay, he notes that, with repetition, "the language guiding practice becomes redundant."[1] As one learns a skill, an activity, words lose their necessity, are left to wither away, perhaps, from lack of purpose. It is as if the arc of language, for Asad, was always bending toward silence. This figure of the "dissolution of language" appears with consistency (if in various guises) across Asad's writings, though perhaps nowhere more so than in his present essay on Wittgenstein and religion. Asad's reading of the philosopher reveals a strong convergence in their two styles of inquiry, a shared sensibility for the limits of language and the virtues of silence.[2] While Wittgenstein's invocations of silence are well-known, and have led some scholars to ascribe a mystical element to his thinking,[3] Asad's own concern with (or perhaps an ethical preference for) the circumscription or abatement of words deserves closer attention, particularly for the pronounced role it plays in his thinking about embodiment and human forms of life.

Three moments from Asad's reflection on Wittgenstein and religion will serve. The first moment: When a practitioner of a tradition is confronted with a critical challenge to that tradition, Asad asks, "Can I not refuse to speak *in this moment* in its defense, and instead resume my ordinary life? And if I can, why is that 'irrational'?" (412). There is something very ordinary and familiar in this act of refusing to respond to the provocations of an insistent critic.[4] And yet, Asad's question, at the same time, is profoundly unsettling, even scandalous, as if suggesting that, in refusing to speak, I was abandoning the one narrow path upon which I could

CRITICAL TIMES | 3:3 | DECEMBER 2020
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redeem my life, ensure its legitimacy and value. The scandal of the question highlights the extent to which we remain captivated by an image of life as insufficient to itself and therefore requiring a scaffolding of argumentation and rational defense.[5] Our domination by this image, Asad suggests, our compliance with its demand to speak in defense of the rationality of our tradition, pulls us away from our ordinary lives, disconnects us from our valued form of life. A cautious silence, a slower response, is needed to do justice to the temporalities of embodied life, its sedimented patterns of relationship, with its "practices extended, taught, and grasped over time" (412). Following Wittgenstein, we should not "reify reason," abstracting it out from our daily lives and then turning it against ourselves. Asad's question—"Can I refuse to speak?"—occurs against a particular background: the historical event of European colonialism and the conceptual site of modernity more generally. The demand to respond, for which he invites us to hesitate, is integral to the conscripting force of secular-modern power, by which forms of life are undermined and remade in accordance with the demands of modern society. It is in this context that Asad will bring us back repeatedly to the possibility of "using and being used by language," certainly, but even more of "choosing silence and stillness over verbalization" (409).

The second moment: Posing the question "What constitutes a faithful attitude to the Qurʾan?" (419), Asad offers us two opposing answers put forth by medieval Muslim theologians and philosophers, scholarly positions often labeled by Western academics as "rationalist" and "traditionalist." For the rationalists, the presence of what appear to be contradictory statements in the Qurʾan (for example, anthropomorphic images of God in some verses juxtaposed with claims to his unrepresentability in others) necessitates a philosophical intervention through which such contradictions can be explained and resolved. A metaphorical reading of the divine text provides a (theoretical) solution. The answer, we might say, takes the form of a proliferation of words outside acts of devotional life. For the traditionalists, in contrast, God's "words should be understood in the way he has uttered them" (419) and not by means of an interpretive practice invented by scholars. "Traditionalists do not reject *reasoning*; what they reject is the notion that the Qurʾan must be an object of an abstract faculty called 'reason' in order to make sense" (421). Instead of explanation and philosophical clarification, the traditionalists emphasize audition and recitation, practices through which the words of the divine text can be "grasped as passional means for articulating and shaping one's life in unconditional surrender to God (*Islām*)" (421).

Asad's reframing of this key debate within medieval Islamic scholarship is groundbreaking, finally putting to rest (one would hope) the bogeyman of "literalism" that has long haunted the field of Qurʾanic studies. In the discourse of the traditionalists, Asad uncovers not just an object of analysis but a sensibility to language

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and ethical life that, in certain aspects, could be called Wittgensteinian. Instead of folding language over the divine text, adding an interpretive layer to bring it into accord with reason, the traditionalists restrain the proliferation of words, privileging listening and recitation. Instead of abstracting from revelation to find an adequate "faithful response," they incorporate the words practically, as they encounter or hear them, into their own passional makeup, into their own capacities of ethical and devotional response. In doing so, they fortify the attitudes and affects undergirding collective existence: "Not only do the human passions of security (*amāna*), loyalty, integrity, and faithfulness give the human relations of friendship and love their strength, they also provide the means of grasping and building on relations with the divine, through the formation of virtuous character" (421).

Borrowing a Wittgensteinian formulation, we might say that the practice of the traditionalists is to bring words back from their philosophical and metaphysical uses to their home in ordinary language, in this case, to the ordinary practices of audition and reciting. For Asad, this return to ordinary language is first and foremost a return to an embodied form of life, one characterized by the temporalities of learning, by the inertia of sedimented relationships, by the tenacity of passional attachments. Speech anchored in such an embodied life, consonant with its temporalities and vulnerabilities, should not (again, borrowing from Wittgenstein) "go on holiday," should not stray too far from the form of life that it sustains. In both Wittgenstein and Asad there is an anti-Prometheanism rooted in a view of life more attuned to its fragility than its durability. Note, Asad's view here should not be read as a rejection of the rationalist solution but rather a reframing of the questions through which we approach it.

An early expression of the analytical sensibility underlying Asad's discussion of these two contrasting views of divine language can be found in his 1983 critique of Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach to the study of religion (later published in *Genealogies of Religion* [1993]). Asad writes, "Symbols, as I said, call for interpretation, and even as interpretive criteria are extended, so interpretations can be multiplied. Disciplinary practices, on the other hand, cannot be varied so easily, because learning to develop moral capabilities is not the same thing as learning to invent representations."[6] This comment comes at the end of an essay exploring a set of shifts within anthropological conceptions of ritual (though also within European society more broadly) that eventually culminate in what Asad will summarize as "the transformation of heterogeneous life (acting and being acted upon) into readable text."[7] Through this transformation that ushers in secular modernity, life splits from itself, or rather, becomes conceptually detached from its form, which, as a representation, as a readable text, can be made the object of interpretive intervention, calculative reasoning, and strategies of power.[8] This capacity for interpretations (once dis-embedded from ethical life) to be multiplied without limit will

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feature prominently in Asad's subsequent analysis of secular power. The very evasiveness of the secular—a concept "best pursued through its shadows," as Asad notes elsewhere—stems in part from this capacity.[9]

The third moment: In the context of elaborating certain aspects of Ibn Taymiyya's concept of faith, Asad cites a passage from Wittgenstein's notes on the topic of religious belief. The philosopher writes, "Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don't mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the 'existence of this being,' but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him" (424). The existence of God in the life of the religious adherent, Wittgenstein suggests, does not rest on knowledge (or belief) but on certain kinds of experience. While linguistic practices are essential to the articulation of experience, such as the experience of suffering, that experience does not require interpretation ("conjecture") but faithful response, an alteration in one's life. In his own work, Asad has pioneered an exploration into this relation of experience to "religious" forms of life through the notion of the "experienced (taught) body," an idea he first elaborates in a discussion of Marcel Mauss's essay on body techniques. Mauss's work, he argued in this essay on the concept of ritual, opened up the possibility of "inquiring into the ways in which embodied practices (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience. The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies. 'Consciousness' becomes a dependent concept."[10]

"Consciousness," we might say, dissolves into hands, or rather, becomes an aspect of what Asad designates in this current essay as the "ensouled body": namely, the potentiality to feel and act, "the living ability to act intentionally in the indefinite web of life" (407). One might read this downgrading of consciousness by Asad as a question of proportion: as the senses and the body acquire complexity and sophistication in his account of the way historically grounded human capacities are learned, the role left to consciousness (and language)—as a scaffolding that can be gradually taken away as mastery is achieved—diminishes. But this reading, correct in some ways, fails to express the more radical challenge to the cogito in Asad's thought.

One way we might begin to flesh out this challenge can be found in Daniel Heller-Roazen's exceptional book, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*, a study of Aristotle's doctrine of perception (*aisthesis*) and its transformations and recuperations across European and Arabic intellectual history. The Greeks of the classical age, as Heller-Roazen reminds us, spoke very little of "consciousness" in the way that term has come to be understood today, but spoke quite a lot about the senses. When they did speak of awareness and self-awareness, they used a vari-

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ety of terms linguistically related, not to reason, but to capacities of perception, and frequently, to what they called "sensation."[11] One of the terms that scholars have often identified as an antecedent to our notion of consciousness is what Aristotle called the "common sense," an additional sensory mode through which the five more commonly recognized senses were unified and coordinated, and one that, in Aristotle's description of the faculties of the soul, enabled sentient beings to sense they are alive.[12] However, instead of framing Aristotle's "common sense" as an anticipation of the modern cogito, Heller-Roazen's analysis moves in a contrary direction. He provocatively asks, "What if the activities of awareness and self-awareness attributed to the modern faculty were forms not of cognition but rather, as Aristotle maintained, of sensation? What if consciousness were, in short, a variety of tact and contact in the literal sense, 'an inner touch,' as the Stoics are reported to have said of the 'common sense,' 'by which we perceive ourselves?'"[13]

I think that Asad's "ensouled body," this potentiality to feel and act, is an inheritor of the common sense, that "sense of sensing by which we find ourselves, like the existential cat of the empty night, consigned, before and beyond consciousness, to the omnipresent 'life . . . through which and to which' all animals come, 'without ever knowing how.'"[14] Language must find its home, I read Asad to suggest, within this tactile territory, this space of "acting and being acted upon." When cognitive activity is cut off from this perceptual substrate that gives it unity and order, when language is unmoored from any anchor in the experience of a determinant living being, the ethics of our collective life—founded in "the deep awareness of human limitation and dependence" (430)—crumbles.

What might such a collapse look like? How can the experience of linguistically articulated self-awareness be unmoored from the activities of living? To get an idea of this, one need look no further than the nineteenth-century psychiatric literature on the condition—diagnosed with increasing frequency toward the century's end—known as "depersonalization." This diagnosis grouped together a wide range of symptoms, all having to do with a certain loss of feeling, a disconnection from one's perceptions, or, as many patients reported, with an awareness of perception decoupled from any sense of who was perceiving. Heller-Roazen provides us with the following observation on such "depersonalization phenomena":

> Cartesian consciousness, too, now appears in a new form, at once verified and carried to an extreme. With the discovery of those "doubting" people who do not feel that they feel and do not feel that they even are, one may at last point to subjects who reason, in purity, without sensing that they do so; one may indicate the incontrovertible evidence of cogitating beings who think that they exist even—or especially—when they cannot be said, with any rigor, to sense it.[15]

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It is hard to imagine a clearer statement of the experience of a "disensouled body," one whose words have not only failed to "dissolve into hands," but have forgotten what hands are entirely.

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Notes

1. Asad, "Thinking About Tradition," 166.
2. Judith Genova characterizes Wittgenstein's style of philosophy in a language quite close to Asad's: "Its goal is pure performance in that once it completes its job, to change the way of seeing, it ought to self-destruct. Words ought to *dissolve* into the attitudes and actions from which they came. They are, in the strictest sense of the word, 'deeds'" (*Wittgenstein*, 129; italics added).
3. See, for example, Tyler's *Return of the Mystical*.
4. For a rather different perspective on the value of "refusal" in postcolonial contexts, see Audra Simpson's insightful essay "On Ethnographic Refusal."
5. In a phrase cited by Asad elsewhere in the essay, Wittgenstein questions the primacy attributed to knowing over doing. "For why," he asks, "should the language-game rest on some kind of knowledge?" (*On Certainty*, §477).
6. Asad, *Genealogies*, 79.
7. Asad, *Genealogies*, 79.
8. My reading of this aspect of Asad's work has been shaped, in significant ways, by the work of Aaron Eldridge. In an unpublished paper, Eldridge notes that the "promise of release from form, I argue, is in fact the very supercessionary logic of secularity."
9. I discuss this "evasiveness" of the secular in my essay, "Is There a Secular Body?"
10. Asad, *Genealogies*, 77.
11. Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 22.
12. Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 34–41.
13. Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 40. While Aristotle recognized touch as one of the five senses, he saw it as bearing a unique power, one that enabled all of the senses. As Heller-Roazen notes, "Tactile power seems to shelter within it the possibility of all the others that follow it in the development and progressive differentiation of the power of the sensitive soul. For to the extent that all five senses operate in a medium and so by means of contact, 'they all,' as Aristotle writes in the last chapter of the *De Anima*, 'sense by touch'" (*Inner Touch*, 30).
14. On "sense of sensing," see Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 19. As Wittgenstein says, and Asad quotes: "Does a cat *know* that a mouse exists?" (432n16).
15. Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 287.

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