

Words With No Real Meaning

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
-John 1:1

John 1:1 is one of the most popular verses among Christians. Christians visualize something like an image out of a Michelangelo painting of a bearded man with raised arms watching an amorphous cloud take the shape of the universe. That verse was authored by a first century priest who wrote what he believed. It was written at a time when words were thought to have magic powers. Though it didn't happen, nothing biological prevents anyone from imagining it happened. Religion stands out as the earliest evidence we have of the confusion between words perceived to have real meaning when they have no real meaning.

There is much to praise about language. Surely one of the great biological differences between humans and other animals is our voice box. Without it, communication would be limited to grunts and groans. Without it we would still be living a primitive existence in tribal colonies, still hunting and gathering for food.

Over time, the utterances from our voice box evolved from roughly 40 sounds into thousands of complex languages with millions of words. The development of verbal and written language enables us to register our thoughts and actions, to communicate between generations, express complex ideas, learn from the past and build on it. Alas, it is easy to get lost in this labyrinth of words without being conscious of it.

The classical Greek myth about Theseus and the Minotaur monster exemplifies the solution. When Theseus entered the Labyrinth to rescue King Mino's daughter, Ariadne, he tied a golden thread to the entrance. After penetrating deep inside the Labyrinth, killing the monster and rescuing the princess, he found his way out by rewinding the ball of golden thread.

The golden thread is to Theseus what word logic is to realists. Perhaps 20% of what we know comes by direct experience; the remaining 80% comes indirectly from human sources through words. Word logic guides us through the labyrinth of language, keeping our mental golden thread connected to reality. Our objective is to apply words with the same reliability as if they came from direct experience.

Let's start with the self-evident premise that anything that can be imagined can be symbolized with words. Some words represent physical objects and places. Some words represent abstractions like values. Some words represent fictional things assuming their creator presents them as fictional. But what about when we use words that we think represent real things when in fact they represent fictional things? This word fallacy is more common than realized.

There are negative consequences to not being conscious of how meaningless words get mistaken for meaningful words. They galvanize our biases and actions towards issues that have no solution. They instill fear, helplessness and insecurity. They motivate us to seek refuge from a power stronger than us. There are other forms of organization that thrive on word confusion, but on the whole, religious and political organizations have risen to the top of social pecking order because of this fallacy. For convenience, let's call them non-words. For this special case, I've coined a word for their practitioners: imaginists.

What distinguishes a word from a non-word?

Our mental calculations are only as good as the information we feed ourselves. The scientific method has earned the reputation as the most efficient means of describing the universe in which we live. The scientific method teaches that precision in thought and action necessitates precision in the way we apply words. We don't have to be scientists to apply the same methodology to everyday life.

- Words are to physics what non-words are to metaphysics.
- Words refer to concrete things, things that exist. Non-words refer to abstractions, things that do not represent anything in reality.
- Words describe things and concepts as they were, or are or will be. Non-words refer to things as they would have been, should have been or should be.
- Words aim for accurate definitions so the logic that follows is accurate. Non-words exist solely in the mind of the speaker and the evaluations that follow.
- Words are necessarily found in science and capitalism. Non-words are common to religion and politics.
- The words of science and capitalism are relatively new in human history, roughly 400 years. The non-words of religion and politics have been with us since prehistory.
- Words differentiate: they aim to distinguish relevant differences. Non-words integrate: they group entities according to similarity.
- Words classify collective entities like state, nationality, race, religion and gender as types. Non-words classify collective entities as if they had a single life form.
- Words communicate a common meaning between speaker and listener. Non-words have different meaning between speaker and listener.
- Words are context sensitive. That is they are understood from the speaker's frame of reference. Non-words are taken literally and redefined subjectively.
- Words are necessarily for problem solving. Non-words lead to problems.
- Words are time sensitive. What is true in one time frame may not be true in another time frame. Non-words don't adjust for time.
- The words "is" and "are" define identities, as in: mice are members of the rodent family. They transform into non-words when the entities don't have identical qualities, as in: men are mice. The confusion is in not recognizing the metaphor.
- Abstractions like "truth" and "justice" are words when they are attributed as a belief of an actual person. They are non-words when they have no real source.
- Lazy speech is common everyday dialogue. As an example, one must be cognizant that "I am an American" means "I am one person who lives in a territory called America." Convenient terms transform into non-words when an imaginitive believes that when saying "I am an American," he feels as bonded to the label as he does to his mother.
- The phrase "I am" can lead to confusion between words and non-words. Case in point: A realistic judge would interpret the law as it was meant to be interpreted by its legislators. An imaginitive judge would think "I am the law" justifies interpreting the law as he sees fit.
- Words demonstrate cognizance of cause and effect. Non-words do not.
- Words have predictive value. Non-words do not.
- Using the idea of a map as a metaphor for words, it is through words by which we map the world around us. We use words to navigate reality. Non-words lead nowhere because they don't represent anything that can be found in reality.

What are the differences between realists and imaginitives?

To realists, reality is the standard of truth, not what others think. Realists do not become emotionally attached to group labels. They think for themselves according to principles of logic and reason that keep them grounded to reality. Like every other individual, they realize that they feel like no one else; think like no one else; have unique values; have a unique name; have unique physical features; have a genetic heritage and live within a political boundary. They think as sovereign individuals not bound to conform to what group members do. Conversely, they think of others as unique individuals in a world of sovereign individuals, but pay attention to how others relate to groups.

Realists have faith in what is known. They have no qualms about saying, "I don't know" when they don't know. They are conscious of identifying things as they are and try not to superimpose what they want them to be. Realists are ready to doubt. They are always curious, always willing to learn. When things don't turn out as they expect, they alter their thinking to fit the new circumstances. They feel no personal threat at being wrong because their goal is to refine their understanding of reality as accurately as possible. This is what it means to think objectively.

To imaginists, what others think is the standard of truth, not the absoluteness of reality. Imaginists tend to become attached to group labels. Thinking as an individual is not comfortable for them: it brings feelings of isolation; of being lost in a world they have a hard time understanding. They are not curious; learning that takes them in different directions takes more effort than they are willing to expend. Thinking in terms of groups reduces the number of variables they have to deal with. Leadership is important to imaginists whether they are a leaders or followers. As followers, it is easier to conform to the social conventions of the group and its leaders. As leaders, it brings a feeling of power to have others to believe in them and sacrifice for them. It is the ultimate endorsement they are right.

Imaginists have faith in what is unknown. They have an emotional attachment to non-words. They identify with non-words to such a degree that they perceive an affront to their favorite non-words as a personal attack. When they are confronted by facts that go against their beliefs, their reaction is to deny they are wrong. Rather than correct their logic, they'll look for rationales to justify their beliefs. Imaginists are inclined to attach non-words to unknowns and define non-words so they bring emotional comfort. Imaginists are willing to believe. When the impulse is strong enough to force others to conform to what they believe and because they are not curious, imaginists are not cognizant or sensitive to the harms they create. This is what it means to think subjectively.

This is not to say that any of us are perfectly realist or imaginist. Generally, realists are orientated towards physical reality and the beliefs and actions of individuals as part of the physical landscape. Imaginists perceive in terms of groups and absorb the non-words of the groups to which they attach themselves to. Perhaps it is a genetic legacy from our tribal past.

When one doesn't have expertise in the subject matter

There are non-words lurking in almost every topic, even science. Non-words on topics where we have no education can be hard to recognize. A little bit of skepticism in unfamiliar territory makes for a healthy tripwire. I can recommend some clues which should arouse skepticism.

- But suspicious of authority. People in authoritarian positions are typically attracted to power. The more power you cede to them, the less control they have over your personal affairs. The less control you have over personal affairs, the more likely authority will act against you in ways that might not be perceptible.
- Be suspicious of bogeymen, especially when the parties who promote the bogeymen have a solution - them.
- Watch for shifts in word meaning. Does a word mean the same to you as it does to the speaker?
- Ask who benefits?
- Follow the money.
- Self serving arguments follow a linear path, stopping short where the imaginist wants to focus. Look beyond and follow an argument to its logical conclusion by considering as many unstated effects of proposed remedies as you can think of.
- Do not ignore human psychology. People react differently when confronted with similar problems. Imaginists have a hard time with this, expecting people to act the same way according to their class.
- Hold on to your wallet when you are told more money and more power solves problems that have festered for years and decades.

- Run in the other direction when authorities tell you they need more power and stricter enforcement.
- Be on guard when you confront someone who perceives a challenge to their ideas as a personal attack.
- It is human to err. It is also human to rationalize errors when one can't accept the thought of being wrong.
- When an authority refuses to admit mistakes, they are likely to keep making the same mistakes with different packaging.
- The law of unintended consequences has a cause: the failure to consider the unseen effects of an action.
- Do not be tolerant of authority failures anymore than if an auto company sold you a lemon.
- Words that apply to collectives, like society, nation, community are metaphors for individuals within a particular boundary. They become non-words when a collective is thought of as a single being.
- Reality has no conscience and no sympathy for theology, ideology, fantasy and wishful thinking.
- Unless there is a direct attack on a nation, war justifies a violent means to an imaginary end.
- Be contemptuous of threats of Armageddon and saviors, real or imaginary.

It pays to be just skeptical enough to ask questions when something doesn't make sense to you. If you don't want to think for yourself, others will do your thinking for you. If you don't take responsibility for your life, there are always others who are eager to take responsibility away from you. When authoritarians control your mind, they control you. What they gain is what you lose; there is no compensation. Because religion and politics are at the top of the social pecking order, we'll look there for some examples of non-words. If this section invokes a negative reaction, it is probably because you have an emotional attachment to non-words. There will be none of that here.

Religion

The fact that a majority believes something for thousands of years does not prove a truth. It's a story that predates every religions. The god(s) are mad at humankind for one reason or another. Do what the priests say and the god(s) will be nice to you. Ignore the priests and some horrible punishment awaits you. To the degree you follow their dictates; it is the priest class to whom you are obeying.

Afterlife

The most indisputable medical fact of life is that death is absolute. No warm body; no life. No life; no consciousness.

Bible

The Bible contains a collection of hearsay, superstitions and tribal myths. The case for being the word of God comes from a long tradition of belief because it is what others in the past believed.

God

It is impossible to describe anything without some kind of observation. It is as much an exercise in imagination to say there is one god who takes in interest in personal affairs as to say there are countless gods controlling every aspect of life. Before the advent of science, the belief in god(s) was commonplace as a way of explaining the unseen forces of nature.

Heaven and Hell

No one knows where were they are. If they don't know where they are, how can they know they exist?

Theology

The complete lack of evidence to support the existence of a god requires professional apologists. They have a rationale for every challenge to religious doctrine.

Satan

Satan is Christianity's best friend. Organized religion could not justify itself without an imaginary enemy.

Sin

It means something bad. How does it transfer from generation to generation? How do the priests know? The dogma of sin comes from what psychologists call projection: when a person projects his thoughts as the voice of the unseen being called God.

Politics

The history of human society is replete with wars and persecutions from every form of body politic, from ancient kingdoms to medieval city-states to modern nation-states. The sad fact is that while citizens have faith in their government to protect their person and property, their government is the worst violator and their most dangerous enemy. The widespread application of non-words has much to do with the problem. Certainly, societies need a system of common standards and a means of enforcing them. What that system might be and how it can be tamed is beyond my prescience. The best anyone can do is to be alert to the dangers and take steps to be out of harms way, and maybe find ways to profit.

Because the polity is perceived as a protector, it needs fear and insecurity to create demand for its services. Every day the media contains news of some threatening crises: There are too many people. We're running out of energy. Beware of the coming Ice Age. Beware of climate over-heating. Muslims are out to get us. The Chinese hate us. The Russians hate us. The whole world hates us. Expect the Chicken Flu this winter. We're due for a pandemic. Don't forget to take your shots. An asteroid is going to hit earth, etc. etc. Politics is a business like any other business. Protecting citizens from every imaginable danger is expensive. If you have to know what it costs, you can't afford it. And that is why the costs are kept hidden from you, and why your take home wages buy less and less each week.

The State

The State is the secular equivalent of God. People expect the State to protect them against almost anything as if it was omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent. It is none of those. It has power only in the sense that it has a monopoly on force. Otherwise it is composed of individuals just as capable of making mistakes as anyone else, What makes it dangerous is that officials cannot be held responsible for morally criminal acts, as long as they are legal. When people say government should take care of their needs, they are in effect advocating force against the person and property of others. When the vast majority of citizens think the same way it become a game of neighbor stealing from neighbor through the force of government.

Society, community, nation, state

The people have only one thing in common, they live within the same borders. They probably have a common culture and language, but we go astray when we apply a single set of values to the collective. Such as the commonly heard question: what is best for society? Ask each person within that collective and you'll get a different answer. There is no objective solution.

Citizen

No government can survive for long without popular support and passive acceptance. To do that, the State must inculcate its citizens with myths so they identify with the State. By identifying with the State, citizens are more willing to sacrifice to the demands of the ruling class as if their sacrifices benefited people they care about. The state imposes an unwritten social contract on every citizen: in exchange for protection, every citizen must follow the rules. Unfortunately, the ruling class ignore the contracts when it suits their purpose.

Ideology

What is ideal is not realistic. Because ideologies are problematic, they are the means of justifying the State.

Two worlds

This chart from [People in Quandaries](#) by Wendell Johnson compares the differences between scientific and unscientific orientation.

BASIC FEATURES OF PRESCIENTIFIC ORIENTATION	BASIC FEATURES OF SCIENTIFIC ORIENTATION
1. Fundamental notion of the static character of reality. A static reality involves essential constancy (there is nothing new under the sun). Main attention is given to similarities; differences are minimized or ignored. Consequently, the individual is not especially important except as he represents a type.	1. Fundamental notion of the process character of reality. A process reality gives rise to a never-ending series of differences. As much or more attention is paid, therefore, to differences as to similarities. As one important consequence, the individual is regarded as an individual, not merely as an example of a type.
2. Rigidity, or conservatism, the tendency to maintain established beliefs and habits regardless of changing conditions is fostered by these basic notions of static constancies. Thus, traditions are cherished, and the authority of age and precedence is extolled, seldom challenged; experimentation is discouraged. The Old Man is honored and obeyed. As a result of all this, individual infantilism and social retardation are fostered.	2. Adaptability, a readiness to change as changing conditions require, is fostered by these basic notions of process differences. Thus there is a tendency to challenge authority systematically; to experiment, to test traditional beliefs and costumes against actual observation and experience. The Old Man is respected but evaluated critically. As a result of all this, individual and social maturity is stimulated.
3. The basic method of problem solving, which we call authoritarian, involves mainly the practice of abiding by advice obtained from some vested authority, such as a parent, teacher, priest, or judge. Authority sometimes resides also in a book or code of rules. The pronouncements of such authority are not to be revised. This authoritarian method works in practice to maintain unchanged the traditional beliefs, customs, and rules of conduct. If problems are not solved, they are "explained" in terms of "fate," or "nature," or the "supernatural"; and toward the language used in	3. The basic method of problem solving, which we call scientific, consists of four main steps; (a) the asking of questions that direct one's (b) observations so as to (c) answer the questions clearly in such a way as to test one's beliefs or assumptions, (d) which are revised accordingly. Of these four steps, three (a, c, and d) involve mainly the use of language. This scientific method works in practice toward the continual improvement of specific techniques, refinements of beliefs, and "modernization" of customs and rules of conduct. If problems are not solved, new

such "explanations" there is a dominant attitude that is naïve and unreflective.	theories and methods are not solved, new theories and methods are devised to solve them.
4. The language of a prescientific orientation is designed to control behavior by virtue of the vested authority it represents. If it is not clear, a properly appointed authority will interpret it, and his interpretation is to be believed. The validity of authoritarian pronouncements is not to be questioned. Statements of assumptions and statements of fact tend to be regarded as the same.	The language of a scientific orientation is designed to be factually meaningful, directly or indirectly, and clear and valid. It is intended to satisfy two important tests: "What do you mean?" and "How do you know?" Moreover, assumptions are sharply differentiated from statement of fact.
5. Prescientific language tends to make for questions that are frequently vague and quite often meaningless factually. Attempts to answer such questions give rise to misunderstandings and disagreements, to misinformation and misleading theories, with the result that predictability and foresight are achieved slowly or not at all, and individual and social maladjustments are thereby fostered.	5. Scientific language is orientated around factually clear, answerable questions. Vague or meaningless questions are abandoned as being misdirective of human energy. On the principle that terminology of the question determines the terminology of the answer, only clearly stated questions are tolerated. Because of this, mutual misunderstanding and agreement are facilitated, predictability and foresight are improved steadily, and individual and social adjustment is thereby fostered.
6. In a prescientific orientation, the natural process of projection is carried out unconsciously (relative lack of "to-me-ness"). It is realized only vaguely, or not at all, that every statement conveys information about the speaker as well as information about whatever the speaker may seem to talk about; and the degree of self-reference is largely ignored in evaluating the statement's factual significance.	6. In a scientific orientation, the natural process of projection is carried out with a high degree of awareness (consciousness of projection, or "to-me-ness"). It is realized that every statement conveys information about the speaker as well as information about whatever the speaker may seem to be talking about; and the degree of self-reference is reckoned in evaluating the statement's factual significance.
7. In a prescientific orientation, there is a marked tendency to speak as though with the voice of another (ventriloquizing). For example, the voice of The Law is not recognized as the voice of the Judge himself. The speaker tends to ventriloquize both unconsciously and deliberately (as in the planned use of "ethical proof"). Only the more artful and deliberate ventriloquizers seem to realize that, after all, it is their own evaluations that they are expressing.	7. In a scientific orientation, there is little or no tendency to speak as though with the voice of another (ventriloquizing). For example, the voice of The Law is recognized as the voice of the Judge himself. The speaker tends not to ventriloquize either unconsciously or deliberately; he realized that what he expresses are his own evaluations-even though he may quote another man's words.

8. Accurate prediction, or foresight, is not a particularly well-recognized objective in a prescientific orientation. At least, theories and specific statements are not evaluated primarily in terms of their usefulness in making predictions. In a prescientific orientation there are, strictly speaking, no scientific submicroscopic theories; they are, rather, beliefs regarding the "supernatural." These tend not to be changed, because they are considered not as theories but as statements of fact. Faith in these beliefs and obedience to the authority that represents them-obedience expressed by participation in prescribed rituals, for example-are prized as the means of control over natural and human events.

8. Accurate prediction, or foresight, is a clearly recognized objective in a scientific orientation. Theories and specific statements are evaluated primarily in terms of their usefulness in making predictions. The value of a scientific submicroscopic theory (such as molecular theory of matter) lies in the accuracy of the predictions which it makes possible. Changes in such theories, as also in theories that do not clearly involve submicroscopic constructs, are made in the interests of more adequate prediction. Theories of high predictive value are prized as the means of control over natural and human events.

Last Words

Our time and energy is limited. Why waste it on words with no real meaning. Wouldn't it be better to spend it on what has direct importance to us: our lover, our family, friends, acquaintances, pets, our job and whatever other relationships, objects and activities that add value to life? As a general rule, any organization that has more people than you can know is an abstraction.

Within the span of this page, I've only touched on the topic, leaving details that could be expanded for better understanding. Hopefully, I've stimulated enough interest for you to pursue further study and practice in the art of accurate language. A wealth of resources can be found at [General Semantics](#), the people who deserve the credit for leading the way. There is an excellent introductory text: [Drive Yourself Sane: Using the Uncommon Sense of General Semantics](#).