

At the Foot of Babel: Derrida, St. Paul, and a Question of Translation

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“Lust or Contract, love’s rivals, are not attentive to the other”
– Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*

Abstract

For as long as language has been of interest to philosophers, so has translation. Over the course of the 20th century, sustained focus on matters of language inevitably brought translation to the fore. As a normative conception of translation emerged, so too did its critics, chief among them Jacques Derrida. This essay proposes to re-examine Derrida's critique of the normative conception of language through an analysis of his essay, "Des Tours de Babel." Two prominent themes emerge in this essay: the proper name and the law. I argue that Derrida ultimately cannot escape a law-based conception of language, and therefore fails to see the extent of the damage done by law, given its dominating tendencies. I will then argue, using resources found in St. Paul's writings, that a full critique of the law as the basis for translation enables us to see a fundamentally new picture of language, one in which the non-violent apprehension of linguistic difference becomes a real possibility, instead of the shadow of a promise.

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1. Introduction

So long as language has been of interest to philosophers, so too has translation. This is especially true as regards the development of continental philosophy over the course of the 20th century, as sustained attention to language and the way it discloses the world to us, as well as issues of language and difference, crystallised. If it is true that language discloses the world, then it seemed only logical to say that different languages would render different worlds. Questions thought to be relevant first to linguistics, such as the structure of sentences in certain families of languages, became substantively interesting as philosophical issues.

As such, a normative theory of translation developed alongside predominant and colloquial understandings of language. This normative theory takes translation to be the process by which one language is transposed into another, where the attempt is focused on the replication of meaning between languages. For example, when one translates the word “stone” into French, the end result would be “pierre.” Under this conception of translation, it is assumed that nothing is lost in this transaction. That is, there is a particular correspondence between the two words and the object they are oriented towards. The words *mean* the same thing. In the example, that object laying on the ground is, in English, a rock, and in French, a pierre. The object does not change, though the descriptive is in another language. Meaning is thus transposed purely and smoothly; the passage between languages is fluid and unremarkable. The direct correspondence between the descriptors is indicative of the success of the translation. The words are successful on the grounds that, though they are different signs, they signify the same object.

Further, translation is understood as a task that one fulfils in particular instances. Language is consequently understood as a tool deployed by individuals, just as it is thought to have a neutral and objective nature. Mistranslations can then be chalked up to mistake by the

individual, rather than a problem inherent to the language or process itself. Such an individual understanding of the work language does necessarily involve other suppositions about the nature of language, namely, that it is static, neutral, and descriptive. That is, language is here not constitutive of the natural world but is instead utilised to describe it. The success of one's use of language is thus thought to be evaluated on the grounds of the success it has in obtaining a correspondence with the reality the individual attempts to represent. Consequently, the work of translation attempts to make a similar correspondence between the descriptive representations employed in one language and transpose it to another.

But in what sense is this possible? In what sense can there be both worlds disclosed in and through language *and* an absolute transparency between languages, a descriptive account of language itself? It is this difficulty that Jacques Derrida attempts to think through in his essay, "Des Tours de Babel."¹ Derrida approaches the problem through an analysis of the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-9). The Genesis story is one in which a nomadic community attempts to construct a universal language for themselves. *Qua* universal language, the attempt at Babel represents for Derrida an attempt to achieve a stability and transparency that is antithetical to natural language as such. A universal language would remove all contingencies and dependencies on people and bodies for its communicability; it would, in a sense, be purified. But natural language does not function this way, Derrida argues. More is at stake in the attempt to construct the tower than just sheer transparency. As we will see, it is the very heart of natural language is on the line.

The first portion of this thesis is dedicated to exploring the implications of Derrida's argument by paying particular attention to the themes of the proper name and the law. Derrida

¹ Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours de Babel." In *Acts of Religion*, 104-133. Routledge, 2002.

begins his analytic focus with the moment in which God descends to Babel and gives his name, a proper name. For Derrida, the proper name marks an inherent instability at the core of all languages. In giving the proper name, God also gives a law of translation, which is meant to cover and stabilise the instability the proper name invokes. Derrida argues further that law as the basis of translation reverberates to the very basis of language itself. That is, in identifying law as the operative necessity for translation to occur, Derrida also invokes the language of contract and property that are concurrent with the introduction of law as such. As we will see, the law is set out to allow translation to occur by allowing the clear delineation of languages on the grounds of their essential properties. Languages are defined, then, insofar as they are essentially different and, consequently, opposed. As essentially different domains, they require a law to litigate between them, to enforce the contract that becomes the ground of translation.

Insofar as translation is viewed on a contractual basis, as the mediation of languages through the law, we cannot help but adopt the concurrent proprietary understanding of language: that a language is only a language insofar as it has unique and essential properties that differentiate it from other languages and their domains. But such an invocation necessitates, Derrida argues, that translation be an impossible possibility. That is, the contract requires a zero-sum understanding of translation where what is gained by one language is lost by the other, and vice versa. Translation as the pure transmission between languages is thus always put off, always far away from its instantiation. Translation is, on this view, somewhat aporetic, existing only insofar as it is impossible for it to come to fruition. As will be shown below, to invoke law and everything that follows it is to doom translation to failure.

This is not, I contend, a satisfactory schema for the tensions and questions posed by translation. In order to surmount the impasse Derrida's analysis bequeaths, we must, I think,

reconceive the grounds of translation apart from the law. It is precisely the contractual understanding of language, I argue, that forces an oppositional structure to translation and a zero-sum, violent relationship between languages. The second portion of this thesis is dedicated to an exploration of an alternative to this basis of translation, and thus a non-proprietary understanding of language, with the help of St. Paul. I propose a reading of Paul that provides the resources both for thinking through the ramifications of the law and for providing the groundwork to question a lawful conception of translation as such. To question the law as the centrepiece of translation requires a new ethical conception of translation, of its function, and of the relationship between languages.

The second portion proceeds in two parts. First, I explore Paul's view of the condemning effects of the law and apply it to translation. Second, I further an alternative view that attempts to think language without contract. With a somewhat peculiar reading of Paul, I argue that it is possible to think of languages as existing in non-contractual relations, where the affinity between them can truly be shown only through the non-violent acknowledgment and recognition of linguistic differences.

In Derrida's account, we already see a move towards this, but his account remains bound by the ethical notion of law and the proprietary considerations that are necessarily involved in that conception. With Paul, we gain license to question not only the law's function, but its place in the discourse of translation at all. So positioned, language can be rethought by placing translation on different conceptual grounds and rendering a reading of Babel in which the proper name is a moment of grace, rather than the imposition of the law. In a sense, the proper name is a gift.

Having set the stage for the movements of this thesis, we turn now to Derrida and Babel, seeking a preliminary account of the law and the contractual, proprietary terrain it entails.

2. Babel's Tension: Derrida and the Proprietary Conception of Language

As noted in the introduction, Derrida's essay takes up the normative conception of translation by examining the tensions in the Genesis narrative of the Tower of Babel. The normative conception of language, on my account, figures language to be like a tool. Language is often conceived as a stable entity, one of the many resources people have for expressing their experiences in the world. A symbol of this vision of language is that of the dictionary. The dictionary is a self-enclosed text containing, supposedly, all the words in the language. As a symbol, one can stack dictionaries for different languages on top or next to each other, providing one with myriad options to select from. The languages themselves are stationary, growing only in the regular addition of words each year. Systematised by letter and labelled by part of speech, the language is understood as a whole, an entity in and of itself that grows not because it is incomplete but because as a system it is capable of taking on new words within itself.

On this conception of language, the ideal of translation is that of the dual-language dictionary (to be clear, this is not Derrida's term). What one finds in a dictionary of this kind is a one-to-one correspondence between words, a direct correspondence both of object and of meaning. Every word in one language has another that means the same thing, it is supposed. Thus, the story of the normative understanding of translation is one in which the process of translation is self-effacing: there is no remainder when a word is translated from one language to the next. This conception thus treats each word uniquely, each signifier as having one object it signifies. One could, then, take each name, apply the appropriate grammatical rules governing

the system, and produce a perfectly adequate translation, meaning and all intact. In effect, this conception of language and translation treats each word as a proper name.

The proper name, which Derrida occasionally uses interchangeably with ‘proper noun,’ is a central feature of his essay. The proper name, Derrida argues, ought to play a unique function in language because of its purported use. Proper names are meant to function as pure signifiers of a singular being. That is, they are to have a direct and irreducible connection to the object they name. There is an effectively inalienable relation between the two. Take, for example, my name: David. When someone calls me David, I know they are referring to me. David bears a singular relation to me, insofar as I am not named anything else (notwithstanding my middle and last names).

The proper name becomes a centerpiece of Derrida’s focus because of the instability he identifies within it. By instability, Derrida refers to the fact that there is no pure signification of the “proper name.” That is, there is no singular “David” that the word refers to. The name will always waver between the objects it is meant to purely designate. In the case of “David,” the mention of it immediately conjures images of the Michelangelo statue of the same name, or of my classmate in 12th grade English. Even the phrase “of the same name” belies the underlying truth that proper names do not signify anything ‘properly.’ It is this instability, this prevarication hidden in the application of the name itself, that Derrida focuses on.

What, then, if the proper name cannot do what it is meant to do? That is, what happens if the proper name *is* replaceable, if its singular content is no longer singular? This is the question Derrida pursues in the later portions of the essay. As we will see, due to its supposed function of pure signification, the proper name is meant further to delineate the distinctions between languages themselves. That is, the proper name is key to understanding the fundamental

characteristics of each language, their ‘properties.’ Without such a determination, Derrida implies, we cannot successfully see the boundaries of languages. We cannot say, that is, that this or that sentence is English or French, because without properties, it is impossible to say what language is what. Thus it is the case that for Derrida the very nature of language is at stake, hidden in the complexities of the proper name.

Derrida takes this to be quite a distinctive problem. For him, languages are always moving, always fluid, always growing and interacting, its borders constantly remarked. But he wants to maintain the integrity of languages in their specificity. That is, he is concerned with how we can maintain a fluid, growing conception of language while also remaining cognisant and appreciative of their differences. If the proper name does not function as it is supposed, as I have described, then, Derrida argues, there must be something in place whose purposes is to maintain the integrity—the singularity—of languages themselves. That is, Derrida notes the instability of the proper name, but does not want this to devolve into an absolute undifferentiability between languages. He still wants to be able to say “c’est en français” and “this is in English” while retaining that these are in fact in and of distinct languages. Derrida argues that the deep instability inherent in the normative understanding of translation begets a law that is meant to stabilise it.

Derrida’s analysis of the proper name leads him to the conclusion that the only way translation can function on the normative conception is if the instabilities of language are stabilised by a law. This marks a significant move in his discussion of Babel, as this turn forces Derrida to consider language within the particular terms of the law. The law, as he conceives, is not a literal legal institution or code, but rather a concept on which this particular conception of language is enabled. Derrida discovers in the proper name that the law is the requisite stabilising

function that the normative conception of translation lies on. Derrida discusses the law as a kind of a priori ground for languages as such. The law is not necessarily always immediately present, but it, for Derrida, allows translation to go forward, though, as we will see, it inevitably fails.

The law is what holds the fact that translation occurs and the fact that it is never adequate together. Derrida takes it that translation does occur; in everyday life, translation is constantly happening. One might say it is the very life of language. But, Derrida insists, this ease with which we assume the normative conception functions is but a self-effacing process in which the real problems of translation are hidden, problems like the domain of particular languages and the uniqueness of languages as such. When one attempts to translate, for example, a word but struggles to find its counterpart in another language, it is the tension of that struggle that the law illuminates *and* covers. The law of translation, as we will see, shows that translation is possible, while at the same moment hiding the real stakes of translation. It thus covers the instability it is meant to stabilise by

Derrida task in “Des Tours de Babel” is to unsettle the normative picture of language. Through an examination of Babel, Derrida attempts to reveal the inherent tensions in a stationary conception of language and translation. Or rather, his work reveals the inherent tensions in this picture of language, as well as what is required for it to function. However, the invocation of the law as the determining factor in the conception of language brings with it certain assumptions about the nature of linguistic interaction as well. Further, the law also bears particular proprietary concepts of language that ultimately hinder Derrida’s wish to make translation a possibility, albeit an impossible one. The dictionary picture of language requires more to sustain it than its self-effacing notion of translation would lead us to assume.

The purpose of this section is to first give an analysis of Derrida's argument about the proper name, and from there to determine the relation between the proper name and the imposition of the law of translation. In highlighting the proprietary claims about language that Derrida takes to be derivative of the normative conception of language, we can further understand why translation is, for Derrida, impossible. The language of possibility, the question of translation's feasibility, we will see, is due not only to the law of translation, but to a contractual understanding of language as such. Our analysis of the proper name will reveal the instability at the centre of language and call into question the nature of properties as markers of language.

A. *The Giving of the (Proper) Name*

Derrida's analysis of Babel begins with a citation of a particular translation, that of Chouraqui:

YHWH says: / 'Yes! A single people, a single lip for all: / that is what they begin to do! ... / Come! Let us descend! Let us confound their lips, / man will no longer understand the lip of his neighbor. / YHWH disperses them from here over the face of all the earth. / They cease to build the city. / Over which he proclaims his name: Bavel, Confusion...²

The normative conception of language requires that proper names are pure signifiers. From the get-go, however, Derrida points out that the name given, the proper name does not stand alone. "Bavel" is placed directly alongside "Confusion," which, as Derrida notes, shows that Bavel is in need of explanation. The "apposition and capitalisation" of "Confusion" immediately throws Babel's place as a proper noun into question.³ Though it is a proper name, a pure signifier to a single being, it already is not just juxtaposed with a conceptual generality ("confusion") but is translated as such. Within the text, Babel *qua* proper noun does not signify purely; it shows

² Derrida 107-108. His reasoning in choosing this particular translation shows clearly his assumptions about the task he thinks is laid out for him.

³ Ibid 109

itself to be translatable, a quality that by rule applies only to common names, common nouns, that which is circulated.

The form of the translation that Babel undergoes is an elision of signification, the movement between a proper name signifying a single being and a common noun with general conceptual applicability. Rather than strictly signifying, which is to say not *meaning*, Babel is re-marked, and this re-marking applies to “confusion” as well. For Derrida, re-marking is the process in which every time a word is said, it picks up new associations; it is altered. For Derrida, re-marking is the moment of reproduction without sameness. But this is not supposed to apply to the proper name. The proper name is not re-markable. But as the juxtaposition in Chouraqui’s translation shows, Babel presents a case to the contrary.

Babel, Derrida writes, thus enacts a chain reaction within the language itself. The fact of it having a common noun equivalent changes the nature of the common noun itself. That is, the common noun must, in order for the proper name to be intelligible, take on the function of a descriptive proper name. The result is that the distinction between proper and common is no longer fruitful. Derrida notes that this is very dangerous territory, for “understanding is no longer possible when there are only proper names, and understanding is no longer possible when there are no longer proper names.”⁴ The elision of signification Derrida identifies is the instability discussed in the introduction to this section. What is occurring in this elision is the loosening of the very coherence of the language itself precisely because the properties of the language now resist definition.

The purpose of a proper name, though, is not reducible to a function of pure signification or the understanding proffered within a language. Derrida articulates a third purpose for the

⁴ Ibid 105

proper name: the delineation of the essential properties of a language. For Derrida, a proper name as a pure signifier is meant to show the language's essential properties in virtue of its pure signifying function. Because proper names are supposed to be untranslatable, they are supposed to show exactly what points of a language cannot change without changing the very nature of the language itself. For example, the name "Michael" is untranslatable on the normative conception because the object it signifies is found within the bounds of that language. The name "Michael" does not equally refer to the same object as "Miguel," or vice versa. Thus, the object purely designated by "Michael" is within the bounds of that language. That a language can successfully designate an object purely—that is, totally—means that whatever the language, a certain property of it is expressed in that designation. This is what is meant when Derrida writes that proper names "[make] the language possible."⁵ This is a serious point for Derrida. He exerts a noticeable amount of energy into clarifying this point. To make the point clearer even within a language, Derrida inquires into the difference between "Pierre" and "pierre." If one attempts to translate "pierre," one can sufficiently translate it as "rock" or "stone." That is, the translation of "pierre" works with meaning, insofar as the meaning of the object designated by "pierre" is replicable in another language. However, "Peter," Derrida writes, "in this sense is not a *translation of Pierre*, any more than *Londres* is a translation of 'London.'"⁶ In the case of "pierre" one seeks to transfer simply the object signified, to name the generality in another language, where the content of the claim does not differ. But proper names are irreplaceable, and as such, they are central to understanding, on this conception, what makes a language distinct, and what gives it the property of being a language as such.

⁵ Ibid 109

⁶ Ibid 110

A language cannot be a language if it does not have proper names, Derrida insists. And yet, ‘David,’ ‘Pierre,’ and ‘Miguel’ each do not have singular significations. If the proper name functions to designate the essential properties of a language, the lack of singular signification poses a problem. Proper names are meant to delineate the essential properties. As such, they mark the borders of and between particular languages. They mark the boundaries within which particular languages are operative. The limit of language, then, is not only what it can express within itself, but moreover what actually is the proper domain of any particular language at all. Proper names ought, on the view Derrida analyses, to delimit where languages touch each other at all. Whereas “Pierre” does not obtain of any meaning and is, in this sense, untranslatable. But at the same time, the lesson of Babel is that “Pierre” cannot function as a pure signifier. “Pierre” is molded by “pierre,” and vice versa. The very marking “Pierre” seeks to do requires of it *qua* proper name to become what it is not. The normative conception of translation, that is, has at its centre a deep tension. The operation of translation, shown most strikingly in “Babel, Confusion,” causes an intralinguistic conceptual equivalence. This movement between “Pierre” and “pierre” calls into question the very boundaries—defined only insofar as proper names reveal essential properties—of language because of the appeal one makes to its semantic equivalent in order to be interpreted within language.

This is the abiding instability at the centre of what Derrida calls the “Babelian performance.” Languages, on the normative conception, must have essential properties, and yet the very markers meant to reveal such properties cannot function without belying their reliance on conceptual generalities and semantic equivalents to mean anything at all. The proper name finds itself wanting to function as an essential property, but essential properties are determined already within the bounds they delineate. Without the borders, so to speak, the proper name

cannot do what it is meant to do. The instability of the proper name is crystallised. The need for a stabilising force is clear.⁷

B. *The Law*

The proper name, displayed so forcefully in Babel, poses the problem of translation because it exists in a realm of undecidability. Its immediate translation within its original language makes such that the question of what kind of property it is, or how it delineates the properties of the language for which it is the fence, rather unclear. What the language is and

⁷ An interesting theme arises here that we do not have the space to explore in adequate detail: what the effects of a successfully constructed tower would have for those who construct it. A brief note is necessary here. The construction of the tower is an attempt, Derrida says, to make a name for oneself. To make a name for oneself carries a two-fold meaning. The first is an attempt to choose one's own narrative. That is, to make a name for oneself is to write one's own history. Writing one's own history in essence allows one to remove oneself from the discursive lineage, from the "scene of genealogical indebtedness" into which one is born. The second is quite literally to craft a new name. That is, it functions to place oneself not within language, but to carve out a place for oneself outside of the realm of language. If language deals with property, then to be placed on the edge, or to transcend language altogether, one would require a name that is in fact not given. Such a name must be unique and not found in the languages in which one is enmeshed. It must be a pure and true proper name. To create a name for oneself is to create a language over which one has control of the properties and property as such of the language. With Derrida we can say that because language is marked at its edges by proper names, the creation of a proper name for oneself would constitute a person in control of meaning because they are in control of language. They would be, in the classically metaphysical sense, self-determined and self-sufficient. To be given a proper name is to be in placed within a specific genealogy, and thus to be responsible for particular things and to particular people. To *make* a proper name is to not just abdicate such responsibilities. Rather, it is to erase the very notion of responsibility as such. This is the thrust, Derrida says, of the effort to construct the Tower of Babel. That abdication tells us something more about the attempt to create a name for oneself. The correlative to the erasure of responsibility is an absolute right to property. That is, the attempt to construct the tower is an attempt to erase the bounds and distinctions between language, and thus to be able to lay claim to all of them. The determination of property becomes the precise domain of the one in the process of constructing the tower. Further, the universal language would be capable of "translating itself by itself" (Derrida 118). This absolute transparency of this language testifies to its capacity to lay claim to all of language. In its transparency to itself—its ability to grow and give meaning without borrowing concepts or terminology from elsewhere—it is capable of dictating the property and properties of the whole world. Derrida writes that in the attempt to make a name for themselves, "the Semites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify simultaneously a colonial violence (since they would thus universalize their idiom)" (Derrida 111). The coloniality of the construction of the tower pertains to the determination of property. If a universal language is constructed, then the differentiation between languages (and thus the difference between peoples as such) can be fundamentally ignored and tossed out for the sake of "a peaceful transparency of the human community" (Derrida 111). This universality is not a universality that acknowledges difference, but rather one that, for Derrida, runs rampant against difference. For an elaboration on notions of property and their pertinence to colonial projects, see Carole Pateman's "The Settler Contract" in Pateman, Carole, and Charles Mills. *Contract and Domination*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007. Pateman looks at the writings around the time of colonization in America and Australia to understand how, given the principles of the philosophy of the time, the colonizers were able to justify their occupation of land that was already inhabited by native peoples. They were able to do so by declaring it *terra nullius*, which, from their perspective, gave them access to the land as property.

what its capabilities are, which are essential considerations in the work of translation, are blurred. The proper name is meant to stand as an essential property, yet its status as an essential property is determined already from within the bounds it is meant to delineate. It must appropriate from within the language in order to count as a part of that language.

We are, I think, meant to infer that the construction of Babel would have meant the end of differentiation between languages. That is, the tower would have dispensed with the need for translation. There would be no distinction between languages; any language could have spoken of the same thing and nothing would be lost or gained. But the instability of the proper name requires a certain force to rectify it, to make translation possible within a conception of language dictated in terms of property. A law is required that litigates the properties of language and stabilises their relations. But there is a cost: the law must have at its origin a contractual understanding of language itself.

What would the constructed tower have meant? It would, I think, have dispensed with the need for translation. It would have meant understanding without proper names, content with exchangeable and interlocking signs. It would resemble, in some sense, a mathematical language.⁸ However, because Babel is an attempt to construct a *natural* language, the proper name prevaricates, establishing the need for a law. If a proper name functioned as it claims to, there would be no need for a law, as law serves only as a stabilising force to the instability inherent in language.

Proper names are necessary for the delineation of a language *as* a distinct language. They thus fundamentally declare the possibility of a language's intelligibility on the whole. But they

⁸ My thanks to Professor Danielle Macbeth for making this point clear to me. For a detailed discussion on the prospect of a mathematical language and its radically different nature and purpose from natural language, see Macbeth, Danielle. *Realizing Reason: A Narrative of Truth and Knowing*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. See particularly chapters 6-8.

only do this insofar as they introduce questions of property to be litigated.⁹ How this litigation works, how the law functions and on what grounds it does, is one of Derrida's central questions. The demand for the law is, he notes, "formulated...through the form [of the text]."¹⁰ That is, the law of translation ultimately functions on the basis of a form-content distinction in language. Translation, by law, is posited as a work of form. The distinction of form and content allows Derrida to avoid questions of the replication of meaning. The entirety of the law rests on this possibility, on this fundamental distinction. Derrida writes, "this system of oppositions [between form and content] is indispensable to this law [of translation] ...because only [the distinction between form and substance] allows...acknowledgment of some originality in the translation."¹¹ That translation is of form signifies that the law is further determined not by meaning or intent but by properties and property – content is not at issue, the damages cannot be named unless the boundaries are determined. This is precisely the function of form. And this is precisely why Derrida notes that "[the system] of oppositions is indispensable to this law." The law cannot function if this dichotomy is not in place. The law cannot litigate the boundaries of language and the properties of individual languages without this almost primordial distinction. In the same way that languages cannot exist without proper names as their signposts, the law cannot proceed from the language—and function as it ought—without the formal distinction.

However, if the law proceeds from the proper name, from the demand and instability at the centre of language(s), and further relies on the system of oppositions between original and translated, then an understanding of translation that is undergirded by such a law can only be understood in terms of a conception of language that is determined by notions of competition and

⁹ The etymological link between "proper" and "property" is indicative of the work the proper noun plays in Derrida's schema.

¹⁰ Derrida 116

¹¹ Ibid 127

territory. The law's function is to stabilise linguistic relations, but it can only do so with this consequent view of language itself. That is, insofar as law seeks to stabilise, it must necessarily place languages in contractual relation. The contract supposes to place languages in relation with one another, but only insofar as it separates and distinguishes them. Contract is the key consequence of the law that assumes the differentiating role as a supplement to the proper name. The rub, however, of this contact between languages that were previously understood to be standing alone is that in their contact the contract must constantly be renegotiated. This is true at least insofar as translation is considered on the grounds of a navigation between properties of languages. The contract, derivative and necessitated by the law, properly defines the languages, giving them perimeters from which translation can occur. The crossing of the boundary, the negotiation of the contract, is the practice of translation, on this account.

Language is dependent, then, on law and contract to litigate its properties and thus sufficiently define its borders such that it can engage in the negotiation of translation. When language is conceived in terms of properties, it is always in tension with others. In fact, Derrida configures this tension in terms of a "double-bind,"¹² a kind of irreducible bond that is the result of a proprietary conception of language. The demand passes, but only in the play of languages that constantly shifts and renegotiates the contract of translation itself. And because the contract is in flux at every identifiable moment, the parties at stake are themselves in flux as well. To what effect? It is no longer clear where the contract begins and where it ends, where translation begins and where it ends, and where the parties at stake—both proper name and not—begin and end.

¹² Ibid 118

The Picture Thus Far

As it stands, Derrida's turn towards a notion of translation as the "holy growth of language" (a term he borrows from Walter Benjamin's influential essay, "The Task of the Translator") is in stark tension with his commitments to a notion of translation based in law. There are, as it were, competing sets of commitments about the nature and function of both language and translation that are incompatible, that doom the latter to failure as it occurs in every instance. Derrida's analysis yields a law that is in place to mitigate the effects of the instability of the proper name. The law is set to allow languages to be adequately determined in terms of essential properties such that translation can occur, despite the proper name's tendency to elide into the common noun. With this law and contract in place, a notion of property arises to determine precisely what can and cannot be traded in the zero-sum game that is translation by law. Language, we see, is thoroughly determined by notions of property.

There is, then, no fundamental equivalence or even primordial relationship between languages. They cannot strive to say the same thing or describe the same concept. Any communication between languages must pass through an appropriation or re-marking of it before it can be expressed in another language elsewhere. At this point of expression, the concept can no longer adequately be said to be the same because the essential properties that give it rise are not matched or mirrored or even positively conceived by or in the domain of another language.

But there are problems with the property understanding of translation. First, there is a stepwise, logical problem in the proffered understanding of translation. Namely, the law cannot define what gives it rise. That is, the law, which proceeds from the proper name on the edge of language, can only retroactively determine the properties of the language it is meant to preserve and defend. Second, there is an ethical question concerning the tensions inherent in a property

conception, issues of domination and colonization. As we will see below, to posit translation in terms of property is to posit a violent and dominating relationship between languages, a relationship that pushes against any notion of affinity. The re-marking that Derrida sees as an exhibition of the affinity of languages cannot be contractually determined; re-marking will always exceed the bounds and dictates of the law. Every time a word is re-marked, the relations between languages change with the languages themselves. The instability of language determined early in Derrida's presentation of Babel is witness to this. But Derrida does not go far enough. The real danger, I argue, lies in the notion of law and property itself.

3. Against Contract, Against Law, Against Property: St. Paul on Translation

As I have attempted to show, Derrida's conception of translation as requiring a law has very real dangers for the concurrent notion of language it requires. But further exploration of just how deep the effects of the law go is required in order to see the full picture of the strict impossibility of translation under this vision. For this, we turn to St. Paul. No writer has more vehemently admonished legal conceptions—of the moral life and of language—than Paul. In order to understand why the law of translation is condemnatory full-stop, we must understand what the law brings into consideration for the translator. That is, the law puts a stop to translation (though Derrida conceives of this 'stop' as the impossible possibility of translation) in such a way that the position of the translator is intolerable to bear. For Derrida, if not explicitly noted in his work, then implicit in the premises of the law, translation must be a zero-sum game: the gains of one language are the losses of another in the perpetual proprietary battle that is the negotiation of contract. That is to say that the movement of re-marking, especially within a

particular language, always brings with it a constitutive loss by reforming and reformulating again the contract that had been in place.

The contractual, lawful understanding of translation, existing in the space of the impossible possibility, witnessing to its own viability, requires more than simply an argument against contract, precisely because in contract languages are bound to be defined in terms of their essential properties. Thus we must reconceive from the foundations upwards our notion of translation in terms not dictated by law. On a certain reading of Paul, I argue that we find such resources. Paul's central, preoccupying theme that he constantly returns to is the notion of law. It should be noted here that Paul has often been interpreted as thinking strictly about the Jewish Law, Torah, as opposed to the Gospel of Christian grace. However, I read Paul as thinking about the law in general, law as such, with particular credence given to the context of both Roman juridical practice and Jewish religious traditions, in both of which he is thoroughly steeped. I am not alone in this reading. In his book, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul: On Justice*, Theodore Jennings writes, "I take it as axiomatic that Paul is concerned with the law as such, with justice as such, with gift or grace as such."¹³ Readings that too heavily emphasise the former have often participated in the long, shameful tradition of Christian anti-Semitism. But that is not the only concern. Paul is most often captured not by the particulars of the Jewish law, but in the function of law as such. The Jewish law typically occupies the place of exemplar, just as Paul invokes certain Roman political language in his discussions of politics and justice as such. The particular instances of law and its application serve to highlight the universal function of law, especially as it works to delineate, draw borders, and apprehend practices. To be sure, this is a definite *misreading* of Paul, an abstraction from his context. But it is a purposeful one, one that I believe

¹³ Jennings, Theodore W. *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul: On Justice*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006

is particularly helpful in illuminating the dilemma facing those who inherit Derrida's conceptual world. In just the same movement, this reading does Paul justice, is in a sense still faithful to him—to his impulse—insofar as it is attentive not to the particulars of Paul's rhetoric, but to the nuances and ideological moves he makes. Law as such, I maintain, is Paul's central concern.

An analysis of Paul forces us to consider the fundamental question at the core of this thesis: why is it that translation, and by consequence language, must be posed in terms of contract and law? To move towards an answer, we first turn to the condemnation Paul identifies so forcefully in the law.

A. The Status of the Law in Paul's Thought

Paul's general sentiment towards the law can be characterised by one statement: "for through the law, full knowledge of sin" (Romans 3.20).¹⁴ Sin obviously carries heavy theological connotations, but as regards our argument—an analysis of the law as such—we need not take a theological perspective. Instead, when viewed from the perspective of translation, sin can be understood as both a fault in an instance and a general rule or principle of inadequacy given the suppositions. The former accounts for genuine missteps in translation on the individual level. A case of this type of sin would be a digression from a standard conjugation or an erroneous reading of a word or phrase in the text. The latter is more profound for our concerns, as it points towards a more general causative effect of the law. As a principle of failure, sin stands in for the perpetual inadequacy of a translation when conceived on the grounds of law. That is, sin fills the gap between what would be perfect transparency between languages, and the contractual translation rendered. It stands as a limit: translations can only go so far in the attempts, on legal grounds, to reach the communicability of the original in a new language. The

¹⁴ All New Testament translations are from Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.

law's relation to sin, that is, is that the law reveals the gap, the absolute distance between original and translated, that is opened in any attempt to fulfil the law.

Any effort, Paul seems to be saying, to yield even an approximate translation, is doomed to failure insofar as it will yield a different kind of knowledge, that of insufficiency. That is, the structure of Paul's sentence suggests that the law reveals knowledge of a particular kind, namely, that of the gap. The law does not give any other form of knowledge for Paul besides the knowledge that what one has done will never measure up to what has come before. Every work after the original, the symbol the law holds up as a reminder of the goal of this concept of translation, is subsidiary, inadequate, and downright unable to accomplish what it wishes. Derrida makes a point that appears on first glance to be similar in nature when he claims that translation under the law will always put off adequacy because the law, and its parallel contract, function to preserve that which deploys it, namely, language considered in terms of property. A gap will always exist between the fulfilment and the project of doing. But for Derrida, what Paul would call an originary moment of violence is a positive reminder of the "impossible possibility" of translation.

Paul, instead, understands the gap in a different way. As already indicated, he sees it as not just a failing but an actual result, a regular by-product, of the law's enacting. Further, inherent in the acknowledgement of the law is an acknowledgment of the contract and proprietary relations it brings into being. That is, for Paul, the attempt to enact the law's demand reveals further the nature of the demand and the contractual relations it enforces. Not only is something of the actual result determined by the law, namely its inadequacy, but the contract is revealed for what it is. As Paul continues, "for I did not even know about covetousness except that the Law said, 'you shall not covet'" (Romans 7.7). Covetousness serves as an example for

the substantial point Paul makes here. That is, the very action on which the law's fulfilment is predicated can only but reveal the action as sinful, in the sense described above. Paul does not know precisely that which he is obliged to do by the law, until the law is in place to reveal it as such a requisite fulfilment. At that point, the law cannot be fulfilled; the language of inadequacy has already entered the frame.

Through the law, and especially through the attempt to fulfil the law, the language of fundamental failure and inability creep onto the scene. Here is Paul's turn away from Derrida: the contractual relations that proceed from the law are shown to be not problematic in themselves, but rather in how they function as exhibitors of the law. It is not unjust to have a set of contractual relations as such, though the case is being made here that it does not suffice as grounds for translation. Instead, what is revealed is that the law, as a law of translation, functions to disclose the precise impossibility of translation *qua* task. Thus, where Derrida notes that translation witness its own possibility, albeit an impossible one, Paul pivots and says that all the law leaves is impossibility. No space, no gap in which to entertain an aporetic vision of translation, just impossibility disclosed by the law itself. The law itself gives only knowledge of sin—and sin is categorically not a mutation or restitution of the original text. Whereas the Derridean understanding shows an impossible possibility, the Pauline view reveals the law as a mechanism of sheer impossibility, on both the level of the individual and the collective.

As noted above, I read in Paul the resources for a different approach, a different basis on which to lay translation. This approach comes out of a particular tension he identifies within the law as it pertains to the task of the translator. In a rather convoluted but critical passage, Paul writes:

Because I do not know what it is that I accomplish; because what I wish, this I do not do; instead what I hate, I do. But so long as I do not do this, what I wish, I am in agreement

with the law—that it is good...for I know that in me...dwells nothing good; for it is present for me to will, but not to accomplish the good; for [under the law] I do not do the good I wish; instead the evil I do not wish, this I do. But if what I do not wish, this I do, then no longer am I operating, but rather the sin that dwells within me. Thus I discover the law that, when I am desirous of doing the good, the evil presents itself to me.
(Romans 7.15-22)

This passage has long been understood as a problem of the individual will and of the need for personal or alleviation from the burden of moral obligation. But a far more interesting problem is at work here that shows Paul recognising Derrida's claim about impossibility as well as showing the tensions inherent in the lawful perspective itself. The first sentence is strikingly clear: what Paul wishes to achieve, he does not do, but rather he brings about the ends he hates. For a translator, this is quite a condemning position to hold. If, the logic goes, one attempts to bring about a good result in translation, according to the law only a bad result will come. Paul's conviction here highlights the fundamentally mistaken claim that an action under 'lawful' circumstances could produce an end adequate to the demands of the law. Perhaps even further, translation considered on the grounds of something one could, or even ought to, *accomplish* in a concrete fashion (to produce a work the goal of which would be absolute transparency between original and translated) is a fallible option. It is in the action of translation, specifically the action of translation as a verifiable accomplishment, that we can see the problem Paul is grappling with.

The larger forces with which Paul is grappling in the above passage are, I take it, law and contract, and the summary effects they have on both the work of translation and the existential position of the translator. Contract follows law wherever it goes. As such, it is just as present to the reader of that passage as Paul's obvious torment. "For I know that in me...dwells nothing good," Paul laments, "for it is present for me to will, but not to accomplish the good; for [under the law] I do not do the good I wish." It is not for lack of effort that Paul fails; in fact, it is not

for *lack* of anything. It is instead the very place of the law that causes Paul to fall short. Under this auspice, Paul can then make what appears to be a very odd claim: “so long as I do not do this [translation], what I wish, I am in agreement with the Law—that it is good.” It is only by not fulfilling the law, by ignoring the very action it calls for, that Paul is able to recognise it as good. Paradoxically, it is the very non-participation in the fulfilment of the law’s commandments—the neglect of the contract—that allows the law to be conceived positively. The law calls for action, demands that its terms be met, but action invalidates the standing of the law as a particular arrangement that can accomplish what it sets out to do.

For Paul, the frustration of this paradox is made quite clear. For all his worthiest attempts, he cannot fulfil the law; only by resting from its demands can he possibly conceive it as good.¹⁵ The law is not only an inhibitor that undergirds an impossibility, but it is also a precise argument for a stable conception of language, with all the apparatuses that would require. The Derridean analysis maintains that the essential structure of language, the way it is understood and apprehended, is through property and properties. English is said to have the particular property of x, while Mandarin Chinese is said to have the particular property y. For Derrida, the act of translation is a constant renegotiation of these properties and what they tell us about the individual languages as such. The stakes in this form of translation are always high. On a Pauline view, this renegotiation of the contract, the place of the law, does not open the door to a fruitful vision of translation; rather, the Derridean case puts to death the very possibility of non-

¹⁵ The question of what precisely it is that Paul sees as “good” in the Law from the perspective of non-fulfilment is up for debate. However, I think it is perhaps that in adopting this ‘disinterested’ position one can recognise what role the law is actually playing, namely the stabilising function discussed in the earlier section of this paper. The stabilising work of the law can only be considered good when it is seen on the whole, that is, where the contractual relationships between languages is apparent.

contractual understanding of language. It is under the contract that languages are defined in terms of their essential properties.

The contract places languages in relation with each other, but in so doing the contract between languages defines each of them as distinct, singular, separate entities that only touch because the contract is in place. Thus, the contract actually has the effect of atrophying the languages, of putting them to death, in Derrida's words. In Galatians 3.21, Paul writes of the law in precisely those terms. "If a law had been given that was capable of imparting life, righteousness really would have come from the law," Paul notes. It is clear that as far as Paul is concerned the law cannot give life at all, much less to languages. Reading this passage as pertaining to translation, it becomes evident that the Law's effects are so profound in their contractual proceedings that the languages do not actually result in any form of growth. The language of contract, insofar as it places language into relations with one another, also retroactively determines their properties in such a way that it concretises the language, drawing up firm borders and making it clear that growth will come only at a violent expense. This is not a sufficient notion of translation for us, much less for Paul. The very thing the contract promised to do on Derrida's reading—to engender the "holy growth of language"—proves to do the opposite. What is said in Romans of Paul's efforts to produce the good under the law is true also for the law and contract in themselves. They cannot produce what is promised, much less what is needed. A lawful account is, on a Pauline reading, not only inadequate, but fully inhibitory. Such a conception of language does not need tweaking; it needs deliverance.¹⁶

¹⁶ Paul notes that this is true not only for the law but for those who are involved in the law's functioning, those who have a stake in the nature of language itself (which is to say, in a way, everyone). He expresses the existential anxiety of the translator under the weight of the law: "I am a man in torment—who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7.24)

B. Faithful Relations, Loving Appreciation: A Basic Outline of the Structural Componentry of a Pauline view of Translation

The law under a Pauline interpretation is given an entirely new veneer. With Paul's help, I argue, we can now see precisely the way in which law and the pursuant contract do not witness even an impossible possibility, but only impossibility. Derrida's argument, when examined closely, relies on a notion of contract that ultimately cannot deliver a fruitful relation between languages, precisely because doing so atomizes them in terms of their essential properties. The retroactive determination of language as a proprietary subject compels translation to death, rather than life or growth. Having given an analysis of why this is the case, we need at minimum a summary alternative to the problems of a contractual understanding of language that resists the absolute individuating effects of the law. In a rather cold sense, the law's concern is with the determination of properties, not the apprehension, appreciation, or evaluation of the other. The law turns a cold shoulder to the stakes of language that dare go beyond essential properties.

If law cannot be the basis for the relations between languages, Derrida's notions of affinity and kinship need to be rethought. That is, how one understands the network of languages, both formally and structurally, needs to be given a new basis. This requires, further, that a corollary argument of the conditions of language be offered as well. Because language is mediated by law in Derrida, law also becomes the formal structure through which language is apprehended. But in order for translation to work on new grounds, structures are required for a language's intelligibility, especially to itself. Paul offers resources for thinking through a new set of conditions that do not require a contractual basis. The two primary conditions for a Pauline account of the intelligibility of languages in translation are faith and love.

As regards faith, the term immediately conjures certain ‘irrational’ connotations. However, for Paul faith has no such connection to the irrational, but instead plays the primary role of enabling the circulation of language. Of faith’s relation to language, Paul writes, “having the same spirit of faithfulness—in keeping with the scripture: ‘I had faith, therefore I spoke’—we both have faith and thus also speak” (2 Corinthians 4.13). Faith is a shared enterprise, a communal structure in which one comes to inhabit the movements of language. To “have faith” therefore is not to own a particular kind of property or to have an object over which one holds exclusive rights. Such conceptions of faith must inevitably invoke the law to support them. Rather, faith is a relational communal project in which the language spoken, written, and circulated among the people is apprehended. It is in virtue of faith that language functions, Paul is quick to note. It is through the shared language of the community that the individual’s relationship to and mediation through language becomes clear. Faith allows such discoveries to occur. As such, faith provides the first step in engaging language(s) beyond an economics of work and debt, of law and contract, of promise and fulfilment.

Faith cannot, however, stand alone. It is not unilaterally enough to sustain a non-contractual account. It can just as easily turn to an egalitarian sentimentalism about language that inevitably devolves to a depreciation of difference and calls for the universal, calls Paul in particular insists must be resisted. The dangers of such calls are explicit in Babel’s construction. As far as Paul is concerned, the problems of faith on its own can be resolved through a development of the notion of love. As regards translation, love in particular is the mediating factor that makes it possible. Paul observes:

If I speak in the tongues of human beings and of angels, but do not have love, I have become resounding brass and a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophecy and know all the mysteries and all the knowledge, and if I have all faith, of such a sort as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1 Corinthians 13.1-2)

Love's function here is not to determine the properties of various modes of communication and thus make them "sound right." Love's concern is, rather, with the relationship of the translator to the work of translation. With a non-contractual understanding of language in place, the people on the other side of the work of translation become visible to the translator. Whereas faith provided the grounds for an engagement of language beyond the level of the individual, love provides for the interaction between different communities on a linguistic level. Languages, Derrida is right to insist, are always in relation, growing and developing alongside each other and because of each other. Love facilitates this in a manner that is capable of non-violently apprehending difference, both in language and in people. Even with the substantial power of with, the power to "remove mountains," translation requires love because a movement of re-marking that speaks only to one particular linguistic community cannot give an adequate basis for translation. If a challenge is to be mounted against the lawful conception of language, then love is required to give shape to faith and guide it towards peaceable, non-dominating relationships between languages.

4. Re-reading Babel: A Conclusion

The accounts of faith and love above are, admittedly, quite brief, but they are meant to indicate a possible direction one might take if one were to continue in a Pauline critique of the law and wanted to offer a substantive alternative. Paul does not have a systematic account of language, but what can be drawn from his occasional musings on the subject is that there is in fact a possibility, so to speak, *after* law. The unity of faith and love provide the potential for an understanding of language that does not have at its core an essential negotiation of property, while simultaneously resisting the dominating structure of law deduced from Derrida's account.

Through faith and love, translation can be rethought free of proprietary notions of language. But this is not an easy or idyllic scene. The moral language of law is so overtly dominant in ethics that it is sometimes considered to be the natural position to hold. But in reality, law is a condition, one that a non-violent understanding of translation, and thus language, can help to combat. For this to occur, faith and love must be continually operative within formative communities if the language of law is to be resisted. The law is no more natural than, say, the notion that language is a descriptive tool but ultimately is not ancillary to human experience. But this is not an easy thing to move past.

In providing what I take to be a possible schematic for a structural account of translation, grounded in faith and love, one can see that such an account witnesses to the possibility of an alternative to the dominant mode of linguistic interaction precisely by questioning the suppositions on which such a “dictionary” conception of language rests. Translation by way of faith and love is formed as a constant struggle against the lawful conception of language.

The account of the law that Paul gives leaves us with considerable resources for rethinking the narrative of Babel, for imagining it against (or without) the proprietary notions of language to which Derrida remains indebted. Derrida is correct, however, to recognise the colonising and dominating attempt Babel’s construction constitutes. The question Paul prepares us to ask is whether the giving of the proper name necessarily begets the law. If translation is conceived on the grounds of faith and love, we can emphatically say: no! The giving of the proper name does reveal instability at the core of language; but this is precisely the very gift of language: that it is *not* static, that it *does* grow, that it *is* re-marked constantly. Through faith and love as the basis for a new model of translation, languages and their differences can be acknowledged and recognised without recourse to law. The possibility of translation then lies in

the non-violent apprehension of linguistic differences not as a zero-sum game but as true mutual growth, as the promise of a more fecund language on every re-marking.

In his essay, Derrida notes that translation is the promise of the “reconciliation of languages.”¹⁷ Without an adequate basis for translation beyond contract, however, this reconciliation will always be put off, the promise never “reached, touched, or trodden by translation.”¹⁸ It is only with a Pauline gaze that we can see this fundamental tension inherent in a promise based in law. The structures of faith and love free us to finally see that translation is not a problem of property, but a question of beauty and growth, of the very life of language that no law can codify. Accordingly, we can proclaim with Paul that “the holy growth of languages” is upon us.

¹⁷ Derrida 130

¹⁸ Ibid 123