Ali Rabbani
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Structuring the Human Mind

Etienne Bonnot De Condillac writes in <u>An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge</u> that "in order to develop the real cause of the progress of the imagination, contemplation and memory, we must inquire what assistance these operations derive from the use of signs" (51). Condillac speculates that the senses, used to recognize signs, lead to reflection and thought (Condillac 13). Therefore, Condillac, along with many other philosophers argue that human thought cannot exist without the use of signs. Condillac defines signs as "those which we have chosen ourselves, and bear only an arbitrary relation to our ideas" (51).

Ferdinand de Saussure agrees with Condillac's argument:

"Psychologically, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed that were it not for signs, we should be incapable of differentiating any two ideas in a clear and constant way. In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure" (110).

Through the analysis of the previous quote, it will become apparent that Saussure's argument both (1) proves to be correct and (2) creates several implications about the essence of man.

First of all, Saussure states, "in the language itself, there are only differences" (118). Jonathan Culler takes the argument a step further in <u>Saussure</u>: "Saussure argues that meaning is 'diacritical' or differential, based on differences between terms and not on intrinsic properties of terms themselves, his claim concerns not language only but the general human process in which mind creates meaning by distinguishing" (59). The differences allow one to differentiate between signs, therefore offering a clear way to

structure thought. One may create a thought through the linear construction of signs, forming a chain. The chain, composed of distinct signs, creates a unique concept (Saussure, 70). Thus, signs add structure to human thought, a quality that Saussure refers to as shape. Saussure asserts that without signs, thought is a "shapeless mass." Before the human mind has access to signs, there is no way to structure thought and differentiate one thing from another. The human mind's structure doesn't become determinate until language is introduced, illustrating the last line of Saussure's statement. Several implications may be drawn from these concepts.

The first implication one may draw from Saussure's argument is that personal thought is controlled by language. Thus, one could argue that Saussure does not agree with the concept of personal identity due to the nature of language. Assuming that the thought process cannot occur without language, one must note that all individuals in a certain social community are governed by the same structure (language) when creating a thought. Personal thought, then, is nothing more than putting together what has already been constructed by the linguistic structure. Although one must keep in mind that although linguistic structure has already constructed every thought, the combinations are infinite. A person producing a thought using a certain language has control over what combination of signs they choose out of the infinite, in order to produce a specific thought. That control allows the nature of personal thought to be that of free choice and individuality.

Another implication one may draw from Saussure's argument is that before linguistic structure, human's lacked reality (Torres, 02/08). Surely, one would argue that matter existed before humans and therefore before language. However, one

must realize that without linguistic structure, humans have no means of comprehending reality. Without the ability to process thought, one certainly could not process the concept of reality. Therefore, before linguistic structure, humans had no reality other than the chaotic state of their minds (Saussure, 110). One might argue that even without thought, humans possess senses that allow them to process the world around them. However, without linguistic structure, the human mind has no means of comprehending input from the senses, making the world around them insignificant. The idea that language constructs reality provides a further implication. Noting that different languages express different concepts that cannot be translated (Culler, 21), one must assert that different social communities possess different realities. Saussure's argument's insinuation of no pre-existing human reality relates to the notion that the sign is arbitrary (Saussure, 68). Signs have no pre-existing correlation with the ideas they represent, supporting the conception that language creates a reality. Thus, Saussure's argument draws implications on the limitations of reality.

Ferdinand de Saussure's argument that without signs, "our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass" provides a new perspective on life. Although difficult to accept, Saussure shows language limits human thought. Furthermore, Saussure illustrates the extent of dependence humans have on language. Without language, humans would have no recognition of the world around them; no reality. Saussure explains that humans are born without intrinsic structure of the mind. Perhaps Saussure's Course in General Linguistics had influence on what would become existential philosophy. The main principle of existentialism being "existence before essence" complies with Saussure's argument and even seems to be derived from it.

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