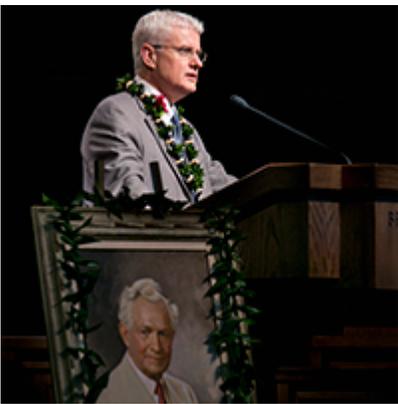# Shadows, Curtains, and a Shiny Canoe... to Consider (earnestly) the Uncertainty of Meaning

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As an undergraduate student I possessed skeptical optimism; I was skeptical of the common knowledge I used to frame and make sense of the world. But I was also optimistic that with effort, rigor, and a willingness to relook, I would come to understand the truth, whether scientific, humanistic, or religious. In many ways I held a Wizard of Oz kind of view; that by setting aside my comfort with the known, and mitigating my fear of the unknown, I would pull back the curtain to find that what I took to be real was an orchestration of something else (maybe even a self-interested Wizard who sought to keep me from the truth). I sensed then, that if I could peer behind the curtain of my reality, or penetrate through the world as I knew it, I would find new worlds of discovery, thought, understanding, and certainty. With puerile confidence I drank deeply from all subjects–every discipline had seized upon a piece of the territory of truth, had sought to map it, and if I pursued it with exactitude for how it framed its questions, methodologically tracked its datum, and analytically argued its conclusion, I would pull back the curtain of my ignorance ever more.

Two events during these early collegiate years led me to rearticulate my emerging confidence. One of these events took me back in time, to explore in the bin of the past an argument about being and knowing, and the other took me across space to another culture and language with its sense making.

First, let me take you back to when I was enrolled in an honors philosophy class. We were reading from Plato's great classic, The Republic. Like so many beginning students we gave an effusive amount of time to his "Allegory of the Cave," that wonderful hypothetical depiction of prisoners chained in a dark cave facing the back wall. This represents the only life they know. Behind them a fire burns on a ledge. Between the fire and the prisoners people walk on a wall-lined path carrying vases, statues and other artifacts on their heads. The prisoners see the shadows on the wall, and mistake them for reality. Then one day guards release a prisoner from his chains and force him to look at the "true" source of the shadows. At first the fire pains his eyes; he prefers the deception of the shadows. He is then led little by little past the images that cast the silhouettes, through the dark hall of the cave, and eventually out into the light. Again blinded, he looks to the shadows cast by the trees and rocks, then he looks at these objects, and ultimately to the sun which illuminates all things.

I recognized quickly that this was an allegory of enlightenment and it resonated with me. Plato, through the voice of Socrates, was asking me, nearly 2400 years later, to acknowledge the shadows that I had taken for truth, to pull back the curtain even further. This was the optimism to which I aspired. Through further reading of Plato I came to understand that this was not simply a poetic parable for learning, but that it captured his ontology (a theory of being) and epistemology (a theory of knowing). He postulated a hierarchy of being with a visible world of particular objects and images below an intelligible world of concepts and ideal forms. The things of the world were simply "shadows" of the really real, and I could only obtain the interminable truths through the exercise of pure reason. That particular things lacked veracity made some sense to me; these ephemeral and changing things were not the higher truth, but instead, imitations of it. For instance, if I grind a piece of chalk it into dust, the persisting form of a piece of chalk, its essence, is not destroyed, only that particular piece of chalk. I can recreate another in the same form. Or, to give more than a banal example, when a relative of mine died, the form of a human being did not die with him, he had only been an instance, a token of a universal type. Because the truth remains intangible and independent of a changing world, I was satisfied for a time with Plato's idealism (it harmonized with my Mormon lay understanding of unchanging truth). At last I was brought back to a materialist grounding through Plato's student Aristotle, who contended that such eternal forms are not separated from things in the world, but embedded in them. The essence of a piece of chalk, or a human being, does not exist separate from particular pieces of chalk or persons, but is contained in their form and matter.

As a young student I was intrigued and dubious about Plato's vision of reality. I could see his point, but I was also relieved by Aristotle's rebuttal; I was a young Mormon who championed the principle of "eternal law," and intelligences that act independent in spaces in which God has placed them. I also celebrated the material creation and the unexpected combination of spirit and matter that has so offended most Christian theologians ever since Joseph Smith articulated it–he implicitly questioned their merger of Plato's idealism with Christian theology. But there was something else lurking behind Plato's allegory that I found unsettling, that the shadows on the wall were not simply a mistaken understanding that could be easily rectified through reason, but there was a oblique problem that lay within the relationship between images and shadows; there was a recurring space between a sign of a thing (the shadow) and what it represented. I sensed that even if I could arrive at that object casting the shadow on the wall, I would see it too as an image or sign of something else, and that in turn this something else may stand for something else in an infinite regression. It was this distance between a sign and what was represented that brought me up short. Plato was on to something, just not what he thought, that we may only be dealing with representations, or at least, what we take something to mean is always represented, and not presented in an unmediated form.

Now let me take you to the second event in my young adult life that engendered a rethinking on my part. When I was twenty I was called to serve in the Micronesia Guam Mission, and sent to the Marshall Islands where I remained for the duration of my service.   Because of the variety of languages spoken in the mission we were

appointed to learn the language to which we were assigned upon our arrival. When I entered the Marshall Islands I set about trying to make sense of the language. Listening to speakers run on with words that seemed like whole sentences, I created long lists of vocabulary words I wrote on cards stuffed into my pockets. Whenever I thought I detected an identifiable word I hurriedly wrote it down. My Samoan companion had very little to offer in terms of English translation, and besides, he had only been there a few months before me. And when I asked the Marshallese they would define a word by words I had not yet learned, so it felt like a vicious and endless chain of meanings. And learning a vocabulary was the easiest part; unpacking a grammar that operated on rules fully alien to English presented the greater obstacle. And as for pronunciation? I will just say that my mouth and tongue were participating in a new set of calisthenics wherein I discovered a whole new set of muscles I knew not I possessed. Ultimately, either the Marshallese pretended to understand, or I achieved some margin of semantic overlap with them.

My challenging, but immensely rewarding journey into the Marshallese language returned me to my disquiet with Plato. There in those islands, thousands of miles away from Greece, millennia removed in time, and culturally separated by clearly different traditions, I revisited the challenges of representation and meaning. I did not just learn a new lexicon, syntax, or phonology, I realized I was peering into a different thought world, which made sense on its own terms, where there was an alternative way of representing reality as cogent as any. It was both an exercise in cross-cultural humility and an opportunity to pull back the curtain, but I would not find a singular truth lying behind it, only an additional set of shadows.

Because I was sent to a village with my Samoan companion to essentially open it to the preaching of the gospel, and because there was not really anywhere else to go at that point, I remained in one village for nearly my entire mission. I could tract the entire village in two days. So what was I to do with hundreds of other days? Well, I sought for ways to provide service and became an attentive listener seeking to present the gospel in ways that would make sense. Obviously the canned stories provided in those days as part of our missionary materials about a farmer sowing seeds for wheat and beets, or an example of a family living in an inner city residing on the 8th story of an apartment would fall flat. So I improvised with stories about fishermen, the flight patterns of indigenous birds, and planting coconuts. In order to learn how to make stories make sense I listened to how the Marshallese tell stories. I had heard many individuals refer to a mythological trickster, who caused all kinds of mischief, but he also brought many good things including fire, fishing techniques, house construction and procreation. One day while helping an old man work on his house, he rehearsed to me a series of tales about the trickster. One story relates how the trickster coveted the sleek and fast sailing canoe of his older brother, the chief of the village. So he carved and crafted his own canoe, but instead of using the trunk of a breadfruit tree, a buoyant wood, he used the timber of the ironwood tree, a heavy wood that cannot float, although it can be polished to a beautiful hue and luster. After completing the canoe he placed it on the reef of the inner lagoon, so that it appeared to be floating. His brother, seeing the beautiful shiny boat, requested an exchange, to trade his sleek canoe for the trickster's handsome, shiny one. They hastily made the swap, and the trickster launched out with his brother's canoe, quickly sailing out across the lagoon. His brother then tried to launch the shiny canoe–it immediately sank. A great chase ensued, and the trickster escaped with the "true" canoe.

This simple episode of the Marshallese trickster got me thinking again about the shadows on Plato's cave (but not too much, I had more important things to do like proclaiming the gospel). Some ideas, especially stories, just retain a way of lingering. They have staying power. And we will find it best to attend to them. For instance, the story of the Atonement of Christ and the First Vision cannot be left alone. We can try to ignore these stories, to even deny them, but they cannot be forgotten, they will keep coming back until we confront them head on. So to a much less consequential degree, the story about the Marshallese trickster's shiny canoe just kept coming back. I returned to thinking about it after my mission. It somehow leaked into Plato's allegory and made me wonder again about the shadows on the wall. I reflected on this story of a "real" canoe that actually floats, and a "false" canoe, which does express something real at one level because in the event narrated it is seen; it exists as

a thing, but it is not what it appears to be. A Marshallese canoe is also a cultural symbol; it stands for chiefly authority and has within its parts representations of the structural principle of matrilineality and the complementariness of gender. It also elicits an intertextual link to another story. Tellers relate how the canoe sail was provided by a primal female deity to one of her honorable sons for his obedience. As reward she also bestowed upon him the title of the first high chief of all the islands. The canoe also supplied the primary vehicle that links all the islanders into a web of socio-economic ties and serves an essential role in a culture centered in maritime subsistence. So a canoe embodies a utilitarian artifact, that if made and used appropriately, it will be functionally efficacious, and it also designates something culturally true, symbolizing much about the social and moral order of the people. Then the trickster comes along, faking this most important symbol and practical object. He blurs the boundary between the real and not real. He also brings something more clearly into focus; by making a fake canoe and stealing the functionally and culturally salient one, the trickster highlights the most significant dimensions of the culture by offering a half truth (it is a canoe, it just doesn't float – this is not too unlike Lucifer in the garden of Eden proclaiming that Adam and Eve would not die but would be as the gods). By exploiting uncertainty and deception, some truths are best expressed in a paradoxical representation. In this story so far removed from Plato's cave, historically, culturally and geographically, the problem of representation that he raises comes into view again, that the shadows on the wall do not represent what they seem to represent. Plato, through a rational allegory, and the Marshallese, through a traditional tale, may have detected the same problem with meaning.

So there you go, ever since my early college days I have been asking this question about representation, meaning, and reality, about epistemology (how and what we know) and ontology (existence or being). Can I really be certain about the meaning of anything? I required some tools to think this through better. Like Socrates I professed my ignorance, and knew that my sense making came up short.

I need to explore why this discussion provides more than just an obscure rumination of this individual mind. The consequences of this problem implicate not only our grandest ideas about truth, whether religious, political, scientific or cultural, but our everyday understandings, choices and practical actions. To unpack this riddle I wish to briefly outline the work of three great thinkers. One was a Swiss linguist, a second an American pragmatic philosopher-mathematician, and a third a French literary philosopher.

First, the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure posited a description of language that inverted all of our assumptions, and continues to challenge how we commonly think about language. Until Saussure, most people thought of language (and I dare say a good share of you here today continue to think this way) as a process of naming. This naïve realism assumes that words simply mirror the external world–that words primarily label things. So all we need to do is identify a one-to-one correspondence between a word and what it refers to. True, in most language vocabularies the majority of the words consist of nouns, but then most of these words refer to abstract concepts rather than physical objects. Proper nouns do take a direct referent, but even these may prove less specific than we may suppose. For instance, "President Wheelwright at what date?" "President Wheelwright in his role as president of this university or president of his mission?" or even, "Whose President Wheelwright?" (His wife's? His Children's? His former colleagues'? His superiors'? His faculty's?)   With language, a sign does not indicate a particular thing; instead it denotes a kind of thing. Most of us on this campus have experienced trying to communicate with someone who does not share our language, and we recognize the limits of our understanding if we could only point to things nearby. You can't point to "history," "cultural ideas," or "my opinion." Most words in any language exist at a high level of abstraction and refer to broad classes of things (the idea of a building, a person, a day) or recurring actions. And then there are all those function words (only, under, and, to, of, etc.). The marvel of language also lies in its ability to label imaginary things (a Gollum, a unicorn) and abstract concepts (justice, beauty, and even the idea of truth). We also recognize there is much more to language than its simple referentiality; it emotes, it connotes, it gets social business done. The wonder of learning a new language lies in the alternative window it provides on how we

may categorize the world, and how our languages do not neatly correspond to each other. Anyone who has had the experience of translation understands this principle keenly. The value of studying language is not simply for its communicative function, but what it offers us in learning how to think through alternative modes of categorizing and framing the world.

Okay, now how does the linguist Saussure re-problematize meaning? He argued that meaning depends on the relations of sounds and words to each other within a system. Individual words and sounds carry no significance alone, but only in their relationship to other words and sounds, and thus, meaning is dependent upon differences, or the contrast between sounds and words. Fundamentally then, linguistic signs are determined by what they are not. For example, we recognize no semantic value to the pronoun "I" without "you, he, she, they, etc." The word "I" takes on meaning because it is not these other pronouns. Only in contrasts do we find meaning at all. There is no meaning in singularity, but only in plurality. Now for a linguist sounds too are based on contrast; sounds in combination with other sounds make words, and only the juxtaposition of sounds create meaning in a given language. For instance, the sound "k" in English has no meaning by itself, but in combination with "k (c)" + "a" + "t" we have a furry feline creature. But if I make a simple substitution in the sequence by using the "h" sound to initiate the combination then I signal a change in meaning to "hat", an object we wear on our heads. It is the alternation of two paired sounds in contrast to each other that signals a shift in meaning. To confuse this minimal difference may lead me to place my family pet on my head. These simple examples only illustrate at a most basic level how language and meaning are built on differences.

Words constituted through the combination of sounds are not the things they represent, but are signs composed of sounds (or visual signs if we are dealing with the orthography of a writing system) that then create mental concepts in our minds. Saussure proposed that a linguistic sign consists of both a Signifier and Signified. The signifier identifies an audio component (or written component) and the signified, the mental concept. So when I say the word "tree" you each form a different concept with a degree of overlap of that leafy-trunk-living-foliage object. The relationship of linguistic signs to external reality establishes what Saussure called signification, but that was not his primary concern; instead he wanted to understand the relationship between the signifier and signified, and how signs relate to each other in a language system. Now how may this relate to the shadows on the wall, or the problem of representation? If we can communicate without any immediate connection to things in the world through the use of signs, and if the signifier is not the signified, or that a sound or written signifier corresponds to something separate from what it refers to, then we find ourselves twice removed from certainty when working with the representations language provides. We are once removed since when communicating the signifier stands separate from the signified (the audio sound or written image is not the mental concept formed in our heads), and second, we are removed again because the sign as a whole stands separate from the external reality it signifies (the word for tree is not the tree standing out there in the world but a sign of it).

Let me illustrate this quandary of distance between a sign and what it refers to through a playful and roguish manipulation of visual and verbal signs. The Belgian surrealist artist, Rene Magritte, painted "The Treachery of Images." At first glance the painting appears cliché and facile; it presents a realistic depiction of a smoker's pipe. However, the included text, "This is not a pipe," seems perverse or even irrational. We would expect a caption to label accurately that depicted, as if "naming" the object, similar to what we may find in a children's or a second language book. But what does this linguistic negation do to the meaning of the painting? The key, it seems to me, resides in the word "this," and what it may refer to. "This" pipe (painted image of a pipe) is not a pipe – since it is a representation of a pipe and not the actual object. Or, "this" painting is not a pipe, it is a painting. Or how about, "this" sentence is not a pipe, but written words about something not being a pipe. Or, even, "this" this (the word this) is not a pipe – but a word referring to a pipe proximate at hand. This mischievous painting brings to our attention that signs are not what they represent—such shadows and curtains play with ambiguity and uncertainty in meaning.

With this distance between signifiers and signifieds, or references to that referenced, we face two challenging realities with language: First, the use of any signifier creates a range of mental concepts. For example, when I spoke the word tree there was likely a great number of mental concepts created in this audience depending on your personal, environmental and cultural experiences. Some may have envisioned a deciduous tree, others an evergreen, or perhaps a palm tree, and many other variations. Thus, in my use of the word tree we recognize multiplicity in the meanings generated. And this is only at the denotative level, or most literal meaning, since there are also the connotations we generate through personal, social and cultural uses of this one term. Does the tree conjure up thoughts of subsistence, decoration, celebration, seasons and their attendant feelings, routines, places, and landscapes, or perhaps the crucifixion, or how trees may connote life (tree of life), fecundity, or the passage of time and epochal ages, a genealogy, the tranquility of the agrarian, or possibly a resource to be exploited for domicile or profit? And on and on we could go. The meaning of a word is never in its simple reference but variable within the context of its use by its users.

The second challenge that language and meaning presents, and perhaps the least intuitive and most demanding, is that linguistic signs are arbitrary; no necessary relationship adheres between the signifier and signified, or the sign as a whole and what it refers to. Let me reiterate: there is no necessary, intrinsic, direct, or inevitable relationship between the signifier and signified or the sign to an external object. Let's return to the word "tree." There is no reason at all that the combination of the sounds t+r+i (ee)" should stand for the mental concept created in your minds, or that thing growing outside we could go point to. This is really obvious, but not automatically understood. Of course different languages will use different words to refer to this same object. It may be árbol, shu, la'au, wijke. In fact we could use any combination of sounds to convey this meaning. In each language these references have taken shape through convention or tradition without conscious motivation, and we internalize the signs and what they refer to, if we did not, we could not communicate in that particular language. If then, linguistic signs are arbitrary and multiple in meaning, then our communications become a little more messy than we may suppose, and the shadows on the wall and what they represent through language can never be fixed or certain. And if this is true, then language does not so much reflect reality, but in part actively constitutes it. We can use language to say both what is in the world and what is not. And since we come to know the world through whatever language we are born into, then perhaps it could be argued that language determines reality (or at least what we take to be real) as much as reality our language.

Okay–is there not something still out there to which words and signs, or the shadows on the wall actually refer to? Given that we occupy the thought world of our languages, what do we know of the world and can we find any connection between the shadows on the wall cast by our languages and what exists out there? It was the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who went beyond the abstractions of Saussure's study of language to expand our understanding of signs, to reconnect signs to that which they represent. Peirce was a pragmatist philosopher and logician who sought to rearticulate the materiality of the sign, or how sounds, written words, or any physical medium function to elicit interpretive responses. Moreover, he characterized many other kinds of signs that are neither verbal nor written, but carry a great deal of meaning as we engage with our environments and cultures.

Peirce wished to be more exacting about how signs come to mean anything at all by purposefully directing his attention to what Saussure neglected: the object beyond the sign itself, which for him may be abstract thoughts that lead to action grounded in the material world of social relations. He in effect offered an alternative to Saussure's dyad of the signifier to the signified and the sign's relationship to external reality, and bent it back into a triangle to reconnect the sign to what it represents. He identified the sign, something close to Saussure's signifier, but not necessarily the same thing because for Peirce the sign demonstrates something that stands for something to someone, either verbal or non-verbal. The interpretant comes close to the signified, but it involves more a matter of interpretation. For Peirce meaning arises in the interpretation; it does not exist independently.

What he does clearly underscore includes the "object" or referent. The object may be something material in the world, but it is not restricted to this since even abstract ideas and fictional characters can be referenced through language or other sign systems such as mathematics (the signs manipulated by a mathematician are not the real world or universe, but conceptual representations of it). In sum, each dimension of meaning conditions the others (the arrows go both ways) to indicate that signs create effects on our minds, our experience with things in the world also affect our interpretation of the sign (remember our different mental concepts of a tree from our various experiences), and the relationship between the sign and objects, or that represented by the sign, can come in a variety of modes.

Peirce identified three key relational modes between signs and what they signify: the symbol, icon, and index (his terminologies are specific to his framework and not how these terms are more popularly used). With the first sign, the symbol, the relationship between a sign and its object is fundamentally arbitrary and learned. This typifies the world of language as we have already explored in which the sounds and written signs of a language are arbitrary, particular to a given language. But we can identify non-linguistic symbols as well, such as color (Is red the sign of danger or goodness, or white the sign of purity or death? It all depends on which culture). The second sign mode he identified exemplifies the icon wherein the relationship between the object and sign is based on resemblance and similarity. The standard examples of this sign mode include photographs, coins, effigies, realistic art, maps, and soundtracks. They are not what they represent, but look like or sound like them in some way or to some degree. Verbal icons may be reported speech (John said, "I'm not going."), onomatopoeia, parallelism, metaphors, or in a sense all speech since we do not create our own language but repeat it, or as the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin stated, "Our mouths are filled with the words of others." The third sign mode for Peirce describes the index, or a relationship established through contact or contiguity such as natural symbols like smoke, odors, flavors, the budding of flowers, medical symptoms, or measuring instruments, a knock on a door, a phone ringing, the index finger, a ring, clothing, a language accent and so forth. By contact or association, the index retains meaning by directing our attention to the object. This mode of the sign is the least arbitrary, even though stylization of indexes and conventions of use may indicate how culturally specific they tend to be. All the sign modes may be present in any sign, and illustrate how signs become multifunctional as they communicate meaning.

My purpose in rehearsing in a rudimentary way the thinking of Peirce illustrates again, that while we cannot dismiss the world, we remain enmeshed in a world of signs we interpret, the natural and conventional, and that these signs are not what they represent.

My third great thinker, the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, returned to a problem inherent in Saussure's model of language wherein all signs carry meaning by not being other signs (remember the list of pronouns?). Only through the contrast and difference to other signs does a word signal meaning. If this is the case, then for Derrida, every sign involves every other sign in a language. Therefore, meaning is never fully present in a given word but is indefinitely deferred. In other words, the full meaning of a word depends on all the other words that define it, and these other words are defined with additional words too, and so on and so on. This is really not a hard concept to understand. Just open a dictionary to get the definition of a word. The definition will be composed of several words to define the meaning of the word sought. But these words too must be defined, and may require us to look up more words that will be defined by additional words and so forth. Or take another example that comes clear enough when our children challenge us as they acquire language. When I told one of my children to stop being obtuse she retorted, "What does obtuse mean?" When I explained it meant, "Thickheaded" or "insensitive," she rejoined again, "what does thickheaded mean?" When I responded "simple-mined," she again asked, "...." – you get the point; there could be no end to this game. The meanings of words depend on a series of relationships to other words (this was my experience learning the Marshallese language). Here again we face a series of shadows; we do not directly deal with a singular value but remain removed from any final meaning or certainty.

Not only did Derrida recognize this deferral of significance, but he maintained that all words supply a surplus of meaning, and only by the context in which we use the word can we even approach which meaning is being evoked. As Donald Palmer illustrates with the word "Dog" in English, "it can be used to distinguish between domestic canines, on the one hand, and wolves, jackals, and foxes on the other, or it can include these animals. It can designate the male canine, as opposed to the female, or can include both. It can also refer to 'any of various animals resembling a dog.' It can designate a 'despicable man or youth,' an 'ugly, boring, or crude girl or woman,' or anybody in general, as in 'a happy dog,' It can refer to feet, or to 'something worthless or of extremely poor quality.' It's also the name of 'any of various mechanical devices for gripping or holding something,' or it is a sausage (hot dog), or the object of ruin (to go to the dogs), or of unhappiness (a dog's life), or as a verb, it can mean to track with hostile intent, and so on and so on.' And here we are only dealing with a single word. The uncertainty of meaning is compounded as we consider whole passages and complete discourses! But uncertainty can also enrich us when we use signs for a range of expressions such as metaphors, metonyms, ironies, and other poetic devices that draw us to the beautiful and inspiring. Much meaning is also carried in the form of expression, not just in semantic reference. For instance, when I say, "I love you," these words convey that "I", the speaking subject, has a deep affection for "you," the object of this affection. But if I say it this way, (use sarcastic tone), "I love you," my sarcastic tone actually negates the literal meaning, to even mean the opposite. Satire and sarcasm manifest again how meaning is shifty and manifold.

So here we are, with an apparent conundrum, that the very thing that facilitates communication, language and signs, actually presents stumbling blocks to certainty with meaning. And the very tool by which we make all of our rational arguments and articulate our everyday opinions is riddled with slippage and ambiguity. It is amazing that we communicate at all and find a margin of overlap for understanding each other. But we do communicate despite this messiness; we get pragmatic things accomplished, achieve a degree of continuity when we offer religious, scientific, political or philosophical statements, rehearse experiences, or explain complicated procedures. Nonetheless, we also recognize that language and signs often just come up short, unable to express with certainty how we feel, capture our experiences, or illustrate the truth we grope to comprehend. This study of signs and meaning tests the veracity of rational statements, and our most strongly held assertions and opinions. And more importantly for those of us here, how do we as believers address uncertainty?

As a telestial people we find ourselves separated from the throne, so to speak; we reside not in the presence of

"The Word" that was "in the beginning." We do not apprehend divinity directly (the only exception to this would be those numinous experiences of the prophets). We recognize that our thoughts are not His thoughts, and that only through the Spirit, for it "speaks the truth and lieth not," do we come to know "things as they really are," and may even speak with the "tongue of angels." Perhaps one of the greatest consequences of The Fall centers in how we find ourselves caught in a world of signs that continually multiply, with the attendant confusion and uncertainty. The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco captures this predicament when he proposed that if anything, a sign can be used to lie, if for no other reason than it is not what it represents. Many of the vicissitudes of mortality result from this inherent potential for deception in meaning. My how the Adversary has exploited this semiotic potential! So we are left here with representations of God, unable to approach Him as an immediate, observable presence. We grope to eliminate this distance. We have received His word, but we are left to the multiplicity of interpretations of that word, and we continually confront the shadows, rather than the unmediated truth of God. These words, these representations, are not the truth or God, but signs that stand for these veritable realities. But perhaps this gives a greater salience to faith– "faith...is the evidence of things not seen." We carry on with the evidence, signs that we read, and not that which we would know directly. Certain icons, such as quoting His words, or indexes manifest by His creations, or the feelings and thoughts attending the Spirit may come close, but we are still only and always dealing with signs. And yet the Saussurean principle of difference resonates with gospel truth; there "must needs be" opposition or contrasts, otherwise there would be "neither sense nor insensibility." And as we understand further from Father Lehi, if this were not so "all things must be compound into one," and that would be the end of existence, since "all things must have vanished away." We linger, stuck right in the middle of a world of contrasts that makes things so, but in which we also find ourselves at a distance from the divine. This ontological problem, being separated from the Inexpressible Truth, is perchance only transcended through that "unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost." That the "joy unspeakable" is so hard to put into words is because it cannot truly be put into words. And when we try we know we lose something; our representations of the experience of truth and joy through the Holy Ghost come up abysmally short in capturing the unmediated and thrilling moment with presence, with the reality of God.

I have often thought that when the Savior appeared to the peoples of the Americas, when he ministered to the children, and these babes opened their mouths to utter marvelous things, and also when the disciples were filled with the Holy Ghost to see and hear "unspeakable things," that it was not just because they were prohibited, but they were forbidden because any language that could be used would not capture the presence and power of that occasion. This experience was duplicated when the disciples were "caught up into heaven and heard unspeakable things." They were again forbidden to speak them, and, "neither was it given unto them power that they could utter the things which they saw and heard." I suspect it was not so much that they were not permitted to utter, but they did not hold the power within them due to their language to capture the reality and presence which they directly apprehended. I can only conjecture: Through the Holy Ghost the distance between the signifier and signified collapses, and we no longer face mediation or representation of things, but the ineffable God becomes a sign that stands for Himself. For sure, He will represent other things once we seek to make sense of Him, and He becomes part of our personal, cultural, and historical contexts of meaning. Nonetheless, it is in that moment when we are no longer dealing with shadows that we throw back the curtain, or more appropriately for us, we pass through the veil, to enter a presence, not of a manipulating wizard, but a divinity, an ostensive fullness without reference other than Himself.

We of all religious people know that our everyday language and understanding do not accurately represent the divine, but by means of symbols and signs offered through the ordinances of the Melchizedek priesthood we gain perspective on the "mysteries," "knowledge," and "power of Godliness." Indeed, without these sacred rites these things "are not manifest to men in the flesh." These symbols and signs stand for something; they are good to think with, and through the Spirit of Truth we feel our way along the walls of our own caves, whether those provided by our cultures or histories, until we are no longer separated from the great "I Am", or "That Which Is." These rites offer the faithful canoe if you will (not the shiny sinking one), that can transport us beyond the

"prison house of language" and our incarceration in the scaffolding of representation.

So forgive me this little journey as I work through my cave of understanding, as I seek to more purposefully approach the problem of representation presented to me in stories about shadows and a shiny canoe so long ago. The conundrum of meaning presented by Plato, a Marshallese trickster, and three modern thinkers has been for me humbling; I welcome the opportunity to approach the uncertainty of meaning as a riddle to be solved rather than a terrifying impasse. I try to be patient and seek understanding with the rhetoric of certainty when others make political, religious, or philosophical declarations with much confidence, and I give thanks for "the unspeakable gift" that narrows the distance between me and the veracity of Presence, a union that resolves difference and multiplicity so "that we may be one," however that works out, and despite my limitations to capture it in words. Such things are difficult to utter.