



Issue Three

Joining the Dots between Language and Power

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Pieper, Josef, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, trans. Lothar Krauth).

The great German and Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper (1904–1997) was a master of that rarely deployed literary genre among German philosophers: the clear, brief, expository essay. Furthermore, as a true disciple of his master St Thomas Aquinas, Pieper’s writings are always works of synthesis—the exposition of classical and ancient wisdom (particularly that of Plato) and its integration with that of St Thomas—invariably in response to the perennial difficulties and temptations of the modern age. Pieper’s *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* (*Mißbrauch der Sprache, Mißbrauch der Macht*, originally published in 1974), a slim 40-page volume of his simple and lucid prose, is a beautiful example of this succinct form to which Pieper consistently resorted throughout his career. Forty-six years on, in our age of 24-hour news and social media, it stands as arguably the most historically pertinent of all his brief, philosophical expositions.

Pieper revisits Plato’s great adversary—the invidious and subtle art of sophistry—and considers why, of the manifold dangers and threats to the soul, this particular foe absorbed so much of Plato’s energy. Sophistry was regarded by him to be the ultimate “nightmare”: the craft most deserving of our fear and condemnation. For Plato, the dangers of sophistry lay in two areas: the elemental and metaphysically basic character of its assault; and the seductive, authoritative allure of its practitioners.

As regards the first of these, Pieper alerts us to the fact that the sophists strived to manipulate and corrupt not some specialised or particular sphere, nor one accidental to human life, but rather to undermine the very medium “that sustains the common existence of the human spirit

as such”. As he shows, this sustaining medium is nothing but the humble instrument of human language and words, those fragile means by which humankind signifies reality and thus audibly conveys and entrusts truth *to the other*. As signifying instruments, then, Pieper helps us to recognize that the purpose of words is to provide a secure bridge between the audience and the reality to which the speaker is giving utterance. Indeed, as Pieper shows, words are not the reality itself but, rather, the means by which this or that aspect of reality is communicated, made known, made discernible, incarnated, for us. Therefore, as both Plato and Pieper insist, the correct deployment of words as truth and reality-bearing signs is no trivial matter. Its character is something profoundly *existential*. The mortal danger of sophistry is due, according to Pieper, to the profundity of the level at which the sophist attacks: a level most fundamental to human living and indeed to any possibility for human interaction or intelligible discourse. Such is the basic and primary purpose of words that, as Pieper points out: “If the word becomes corrupted, human existence itself will not remain unaffected and untainted”.

The sophist’s endeavour, then, is to deploy words in a way that is directly opposed to their purpose, namely, to *mislead* rather than to convey reality honestly and faithfully. And this, as Pieper observes, constitutes a fundamental betrayal of trust and an assault upon that which is most essential to human, rational existence. But as he points out, historically, this vice has always been the temptation and weapon of the most intellectually refined thinkers and speakers. That such a basic undermining be achieved by means of refinement and subtlety—those with “exceptional awareness of linguistic nuances and utmost formal intelligence”—is a paradox that invests the deception with an attractive and compelling sense of intellectual authority. For Pieper, this is the consistent character that unites the sophists across the centuries. To the learned itinerant intellectuals of ancient Athens, the great state propagandas of the twentieth century, and the phenomenon of mass advertising, we can now add, in our own day, the emergence of mass social ‘orthodoxies’ propagated through social media and vast, technological empires. In all its guises, the phenomenon of sophistry is persuasive and seductive: the deployment of human language at the service of a willed, *a priori* ideology has been, throughout human history, sustained with exquisite skill and by the allure of apparent moral and intellectual superiority. It amounts to, in Pieper’s words, the construction of a “pseudo-authority” ordered towards effecting and maintaining a state of “mental bondage” in its audience.

Pieper, of course, lived through such a phenomenon. The process of the corruption of words and their deployment for deception occurred with dazzling success in 1930s Germany by means of the diabolical brilliance of Joseph Goebbels. But whether as an instrument of National Socialism or some other ideology of our own times, for the sophist, the purpose of language is to be an instrument at the service of power and domination. Gradually, in all cases, “public discourse becomes detached from the notions of truth and reality”, and thus “creates ... an atmosphere of epidemic proneness and vulnerability to the reign of the tyrant”. The consequences upon the audience, whether in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, or any other era, is the same: an infantilised, uncritical, morbidly docile culture “where people not only are unable to find out about the truth but also become unable even to *search* for the truth because they are satisfied with a fictitious reality created by design through the abuse of language”.

As Pieper shows, however subtle and ‘sophisticated’ the process, the betrayal of communication by the corruption of the word is always and everywhere an act of spiritual violence—“an

instrument of rape”. Recent history testifies to that which Pieper witnessed: the intellectual violation is typically sustained by intimidation and tends to culminate in physical violence. “The degradation ... of man through man, alarmingly evident in the acts of physical violence committed by all tyrannies (concentration camps, torture), has its beginning, certainly much less alarmingly, at that almost imperceptible moment when the word loses its dignity”.

Undoubtedly, Pieper’s reflection, inspired by what he calls the “Platonic nightmare”, possesses, to use his own words, “an alarming contemporary relevance”. But perhaps even Josef Pieper, writing in 1974, could not realise the full extent of the truth of that assertion. Of all his profound expositions of the perennial questions of human history, this one has a sober and prophetic resonance for us. In an era of ‘total media’, historically unprecedented in its volume and reach, serving to cultivate what Arnold Gehlen described as “a fundamental ignorance, created by technology and nourished by information”, this essay of a great and wise Catholic philosopher most urgently deserves our renewed attention.

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