



Telling Lies

2020 - ISSUE THREE





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Pronouns, Ordinary People, and the War over Reality

ANTHONY ESOLEN

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Do not dismiss the pronominal wars as nonsense or assume that its warriors are merely daft.

Many years ago, the great British neurologist Oliver Sacks, a man with a flair for subtle observations and the clear prose to describe them, wrote a book about strange cases of mental confusion he had encountered. Its title seizes your attention instantly: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

The title was no joke, nor was the man in question blind. His eyes registered the colors and the contours of his wife, but his mind had lost the capacity to interpret the messages correctly. The poor woman had to endure having her husband grasp her head with both hands as if to lift her and place her atop his head. Today, however, Dr. Sacks's title might not pass muster before the captains of the current sexual and linguistic guard. Let me grasp their preferred title with both hands: *The Adult Human Being Who Was Biologically Male but of As Yet Undetermined Sexual Preference and Sexual Identity Who Mistook His or Her or Zis or Xer Committed Life Partner Who Was Biologically Female but Also of As Yet Undetermined Sexual Preference and Sexual Identity for a Hat*.

The sane reader will note that the only clear item in that sentence is the hat. The sane reader will also note that, of the two madmen, the man who mistakes his wife for a hat is as clear in the head as a sunny day by comparison with a person who could conceive of that new and "improved" title. At least the man who mistakes his wife for a hat still knows what a man is and what a wife is, though he is unclear about *where* she or his hat might be. But the person who thinks himself into believing that we cannot tell from ordinary observation who is a man and who is a woman is mad in a special sense. The first madman's reason is struggling in the fog. The second madman's reason is gasping for breath, because the second madman himself is throttling it.

Actually, the second madman is doing something even worse than that. What exactly he is doing I will explain shortly. First, let me assert that the first madman is the more truly social of the two. The first madman, after all, assumes that everybody else in the world knows what wives and hats are, and when he speaks about them he takes for granted this common knowledge. Indeed, only common knowledge of objective reality can make language possible. If I say to you, "I tripped on a rock on my way to the school this morning," you will know what I am talking about, because you know what a rock is and what it is like to trip on one. The statement is not ambiguous. You will not wonder whether the rock was a promontory like Gibraltar, or a fortress like the Masada. You will not wonder whether my trip involved the inhaling or venous injection of hallucinogenic chemicals. You will not wonder whether I was talking about a school of fish in the Mediterranean Sea. You will also not wonder whether "rock" meant "cat" or "Napoleon" or "n-dimensional pyramid," depending upon my peculiar and idiosyncratic linguistic preferences, or upon my idiosyncratic view of reality. Language is not language unless it is

communal, and it cannot be communal unless it can refer, quickly and clearly, to the things in front of our noses: to husbands and wives and hats.

Sex: The First Thing We Notice and the Last Thing We Forget

Now, sex is the first thing we notice about someone, and the last thing we forget. It's easy to see why this should be so. It cannot possibly be to any living thing's advantage to be confused about male and female. As it is, sex is far more strongly marked upon the human body than it is upon the bodies of dogs or cats or horses or many of the species of birds. A man's face is not like a woman's face. A woman's voice is not like a man's voice, even when the woman is Greer Garson and the man is Frankie Valli. A man's shoulders do not look like a woman's shoulders, and a woman's hips do not look like a man's hips. Men and women differ down to their very hair, as anyone can perceive who looks at a woman's smooth chin or a man's bald pate.

Ordinary and healthy people love that it is so, and on those exceedingly rare occasions when you cannot determine someone's sex from a glance or from one moment on the telephone—and some people will go through their entire lives without a single such experience—we feel that it is strange and disconcerting, just as we would feel if we were in the presence of someone who was born without arms. We are not talking about a mere statistical norm here, but about what is paradigmatically human.

To pretend, therefore, that *we do not know* what we immediately and urgently perceive is to do violence at once to human nature, language, the possibility of a shared life, and the intellect's capacity to apprehend reality. If I cannot say, "There is a man walking down the street," then it is hard to see how I can make any reliable judgment about anything at all that bears on human existence. If I cannot say, "Joey is going to grow up to be a fine man someday," then what in life is left to talk about? Everything else is *less certain* than sex. We may disagree about whether President Eisenhower was a good leader of men, a loyal husband and father, or a pious Christian; but if we cannot agree that President Eisenhower was *a man*, then speech itself is but sound and fury, signifying nothing. Or, rather, speech collapses into action, and reason lies prone before appetite. Speech delivers the bribes and threats of people who want what they want and do not care overmuch how they get it.

Microaggressions Warrant Microattention

And here I return to what the second madman is doing. Or madwoman: it is more commonly *she* who is demanding that people undergo pronominal lobotomies. She says that she wants all people to feel "safe" and comfortable, regardless of their sexual identity. That is not true. What she wants is that ordinary people should feel *uncomfortable*. She wants to rob them of their ordinary perceptions. She sows the field of conversation with mines, glad if ordinary people learn to tiptoe around them, but much gladder still when they fail and blow themselves up, because that provides her with the opportunity for more "education," which means a more aggressive campaign against our common grasp of objective reality and our ability to communicate with ease what we see.

Here is the connection between the multiplication of pronouns and the efforts to suppress truths about sex. The inventors of such ugly and meaningless collocations as "xe" and "zir" do not want to enrich the language, and they do not want us to probe more deeply and sensitively into the realities of male and female. They want to impoverish the language and to prevent us from acknowledging things about men and women that even little children perceive.

This is the sort of thing—and maybe the only sort of thing—that can really be called a "microaggression." If there is a burr in my shoe, I do not make a federal case of it, suing my neighbor for not mowing his grass. I take off my shoe, get rid of the burr, and go about my business. If somebody says to me, "Italy never produced a mathematician worthy of the name," I think of the Fibonacci family,

roll my eyes, and go back to reading my book. Microaggressions warrant microattention: the elephant need not go on a stampede on account of the flea.

But this microaggression is like the deliberate injection of carcinogenic RNA into the healthy cells of the mind. It would infect common sense with confusion and madness. It would render people incapable of obvious judgments: so that you cannot say that Laurie is “strong for a girl” because she can do fifteen unmodified pushups, or that little Mike needs a father in his life, or that every culture known to man has celebrated the union of man and woman in marriage. And that prompts the question: why should anybody *want to do this to other people? Cui bono?*

What Ordinary People Get Right

The first answer is that the confusion redounds to the benefit of the self-confused, who get to compel other people to play along with their idiosyncratic dreams of unreality. Elwood P. Dowd not only has his invisible friend, the six-foot-tall rabbit named **Harvey**, but will take you to court unless you shake Harvey’s hand and register Harvey in at the hotel. Harvey must be your friend too, or else. Christian bakers who have retained their hold on reality can tell us what will happen to you if you say, “But there is no Harvey here, nor will I pretend that there is.”

The second answer is that ideological rent-seekers benefit. I am thinking especially of certain college professors, directors of the hideously named “human resources,” compliance lawyers, federal bureaucrats, and captains of monofarm diversity. They sow the mines and then sell you a map to the field. They poison one well, station a surveillance team around the others, and force you to drink from theirs—levying severe fines on you if you try to dip your pitcher into healthy water. They seek confusion and confrontation, because those bring them money and power.

But the third answer, I think, brings us nearest to the heart of the issue. The sexual revolution always has been a war waged against the ordinary family, against the ordinary ways of men and women and children. The moral law as regards sex is meant to protect that family from threats without and within: from the pseudo-marriage that is fornication, from the betrayal of marriage that is adultery, from the rickets and scurvy of impure habits, and from the mockery of the marital act that is sodomy. If a man’s home was his castle, then the walls round that castle were his people’s understanding of the moral law and the customs that gave the law vigor and force. Who then would benefit by riddling the walls with holes? All people who could not, because of their own failings and vices, enjoy the good of family life; all people who saw the family as the great opponent in the way of their statist ambitions; all rebels against Nature and Nature’s God, who would be happier to see a man leave his wife and children to take up with another man than to see a young woman turn away from the hothouse of a lesbian relationship to become a wife and mother after the ordinary way of nature.

Ordinary people get many things wrong, but they are not motivated by hatred of reality. They are too *ordinary* for that: too happily bound to the order of things. They see boys playing baseball in a field, and it cheers them up. They see girls chatting on the porch as they paint pictures, and it cheers them up. They *like* reality. They like boys and girls, men and women. They can imagine wanting to tear down a building because it is useless or ugly or dangerous. They cannot imagine wanting to tear down a building because it is beautiful. They cannot imagine anyone else wanting to do such a thing, either.

I am here to tell all such admirably ordinary people: broaden your imaginations. Do not dismiss the pronominal wars as nonsense. Do not assume that the warriors are merely daft. Do not mistake the pale horse and its rider for snowflakes or mittens or bunnies or anything else that is soft and inoffensive and trivial. The pale horse and its rider aim to destroy.

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“Positive” Atheism and the Falsification of Language

CARLO LANCELOTTI

Several authors have discussed the [falsification of language by totalitarian regimes](#) in their writings—e.g. George Orwell, Czesław Miłosz, Friedrich von Hayek, Victor Klemperer. Their analyses are typically quite perceptive, but descriptive. They generally present the totalitarian manipulation of language as a convenient political tool, as an expression of systematic political malice. Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989) took a different approach, and studied the philosophical origins of this phenomenon. He argues that the world views of twentieth-century totalitarian movements *forced* them to systematically falsify political language. He also contends that the problem has a larger scope and can arise in political situations that are usually not regarded as totalitarian, including our own “technocratic” and “affluent” society. To briefly discuss his analysis, it will be helpful to start from Marxism, which Del Noce regards as the philosophical prototype of much of modern secular politics.

In his first and best known book, *The Problem of Atheism*[1] Del Noce describes Marx’s philosophy as an early example of “positive” or “constructive” atheism. Unlike the atheists of the Enlightenment, Marx does not care to disprove that there is a God. His program is, instead, to erase the very *question* of God through social transformation. Since God is an “alienated image” which humanity creates of itself under oppression, the problem of God will simply vanish when oppression will disappear and humankind will, so to speak, “re-divinize” itself. The core presupposition of Marxian atheism is the affirmation of man’s radical independence and self-sufficiency, and the negation of God is to be achieved *practically*, through the liberation of man. Therefore, politics assumes an absolute, literally “religious” value, and becomes “true philosophy.”

This “elevation of politics to the language of philosophy”[2] goes hand in hand with the rejection of the traditional idea that all people share in a universal rationality. Marx is radically anti-Platonic because the idea of the *Logos* already contains an aspect of *transcendence*. This is a general feature of positive atheism: “the essential adversary of the great atheists of the nineteenth century ... is not Christianity *per se*, but Platonism as the philosophy of Truth in itself and Goodness in itself, understood to be absolutes to which man is subordinate; or more precisely Platonism and Christianity united by an unbreakable bond.”[3] Thus, the elimination of the question of God by positive atheism coincides with the reduction of reason to purely instrumental reason, to man’s tool to achieve domination over nature and political liberation.

However, if politics is the fulfillment of rationality, how can Marxism justify itself—in what sense is it *true*? Moreover, if there is no given, universal moral order—and thus no objective human rights, no idea of “justice”—what principles can direct political action? The criterion that proves the truth of Marxism and directs its political expression can only be the *direction of history*. Since positive atheism rules out *a priori* the possibility of justifying itself on the basis of eternally valid philosophical truths, it must always present itself as the inevitable result of a historical process. Accordingly, “the ultimate criterion of judgment about philosophies can only concern their progressive or reactionary

character.”[4] And since positive atheism does not recognize any universal moral order, it must rely on the assumption that the historical process is marching towards *liberation*. Then, the ensuing practical postulate is that whatever promotes the process of liberation is right, and whatever hinders it is wrong.

According to Del Noce, this “ethics of the direction of history” is the reason why Marx’s positive atheism is destined to drift toward totalitarianism and the falsification of language. Whereas in the traditional vision right and wrong are revealed to all human beings by their conscience (the *locus* in which the individual participates in the transcendent), the direction of history is not really an object of *persuasion*. Rather, it is typically “discovered” by intellectuals, by “gnostics” who are able to decipher the mechanism of historical development. By denying an ideal common ground recognizable by everybody, the Marxist outlook inevitably separates an intellectual and political elite (the Party, in Leninist terms) from the majority of the population which can only be the subject of propaganda. In order to reach the masses, the ethics of the direction of history must inevitably conceal itself behind a language that evokes traditional moral concepts that make no sense from a rigorous Marxist standpoint. For example, critics of Communism in the 20th century routinely observed that Communist propaganda would use words like “justice,” “peace” and “democracy” that could be interpreted *morally* by the masses, while party leaders and intellectuals upheld a historically materialist vision in which those same words were essentially meaningless (in fact, Marx himself had already mocked them as “Romantic Socialism”). A related feature of the ethics of the direction of history is its “peculiar unity of radical amorality and most radical hyper-moralism.”[5] Amorality because ethical claims are just reflections of social conditions and have no permanent validity; hyper-moralism because everything is justified for the sake of the revolution.

Now, Del Noce thinks that this “unfolding” of positive atheism—into instrumental reason, an ethics of the direction of history and the totalitarian falsification of language—is a general modern philosophical pattern, which found its first expression in Marxism but has a broader significance. It does not need to be tied to Marx’s socio-economic analysis, nor to his particular interpretation of the direction of history (as a dialectical process driven by the struggle among classes, which will culminate in a total revolution that will usher in a completely new world, etc). In fact, Del Noce thinks that the technocratic and progressive secular culture that gradually became dominant among the Western *intelligentsia* after World War II is also a form of positive atheism. It is not Marxist, but is tied to Marxism by a complex relationship, because it developed during the Cold War as a response to Communism. It understood itself as a return to the world view of the Enlightenment, because it exalted scientific progress, individual autonomy, globalization, secularization, etc. However, it was an Enlightenment *after Marx* because it broadly accepted the Marxian critiques of metaphysics, of religion, of the family, of natural law and so on. It separated out the materialistic and relativistic side of Marxism and used it to undermine the dialectic and revolutionary side.[6]

The result was a sort of hybrid culture,[7] which combined Enlightenment and Marxist elements in a radically positivist and secular world view, in which the social sciences took a dominant role replacing philosophy and religion. Del Noce variously calls it “Occidentalism” or “sociologism” or “progressivism.” But he maintains that this new culture is still a form of positive atheism, still embraces the ethics of the direction of history, and still is essentially totalitarian, although in a “softer” and subtler way. As a result, it is also bound to falsify language, but in a different way than earlier forms of totalitarianism.

Because this new positive atheism interprets the direction of history in terms of technological progress, material well-being, and individual autonomy, its falsification of language takes a *philanthropic flavor*: “today’s sociologism repeats the philanthropic language of its predecessors—freedom, justice, welfare,

tolerance—in the form of ‘declarations of rights.’ But, on the other hand, how could we not notice that these declarations of rights accompany a constant process of dehumanization?”[8] The dehumanization is due to the materialistic scientism of the affluent society, which leads to “absolute reification, complete falsification of both inter-personal relationships and language, complete falsification of education and culture, at the service of a ruling elite which looks exactly like the one Saint-Simon theorized.”[9] The effective negation of any ideal dimension,

of the True in itself and the Good in itself ... moves, ultimately, toward complete falsification of language, toward the rule of systematically organized mendacity. For instance, people never talked so much about altruism, universal love, and so on. However, can one really love a “thing”? Is not love always directed toward another subject with his personal individuality? Does it not aim at grasping his irreducible reality? But what if such personal individuality is dissolved?[10]

This is clearly manifested, Del Noce says, by the way in which contemporary “culture industry” manipulates the masses into accepting moral evaluations (about sexuality, work, society) whose metaphysical premises (materialism, positivism, individualism) are left unspoken.

As a consequence of these unspoken metaphysical presuppositions, economic value becomes absolutely dominant in the modern affluent society. Everything becomes “an object of trade” so that “paradoxically, the total rejection of tradition coincides with the appearance of the bourgeois spirit in its purest form, in the sense that never before the extension of the *homo oeconomicus* and the abolition of ethics for economics had gone so far.”[11] At the same time, the Marxist idea of liberation becomes completely individualistic. The emphasis shifts from liberation from poverty to liberation from traditional authoritarian structures, and in particular from sexual repression. In this process, the revolutionary rhetoric is put to the service of a “liberal” mindset. However, the full benefits of the technological and sexual revolution are enjoyed by a relatively small elite:

these enormous technical instruments are controlled by a very small number of powerful people, in whom after the collapse of the traditional ideals ... what remains is the libido dominandi Despite the fiction of democracy ... for the great majority of men there is no other option than being reduced to parts of the productive process, without any common values shared by the leaders and the subordinates.[12]

This situation leads to a new and more radical linguistic mystification, because the elite calls itself *progressive* but is actually deeply *conservative*, in the sense of preserving at all costs the economic, academic and political institutions that support the *status quo*. “The contradiction between conservatism and revolution within the progressive position leads to a process of falsification of language, which is the foundation of every aspect of today’s situation, both of the crisis of democracy and of moral disintegration.”[13] In fact, the verbal exaltation of democracy conceals the fact that, in the absence of any common ideal ground real political debate is impossible, and effective political power shifts to bureaucracies and to the judiciary.

It should be noted that whereas the technocratic society adopts the scientific and relativistic side of Marxism, the dialectic and revolutionary side does not disappear, but continues as pure political activism, as an irrational rebellion against existing reality. The affluent society periodically generates protest movements which generally fail to call into question its deeper philosophical assumptions, and thus remain politically ineffective. In fact, they end up strengthening technocratic progressivism, which co-opts them and uses them to further destroy the traditional structures that resist it. Real social powers (large corporations, the culture industry, the administrative state) welcome and embrace these forms of activism precisely because they pose no threat to the “system,” even though they constantly

claim to be fighting it. The powers-that-be understand well the usefulness of redirecting the unhappiness of the masses against “Fascism” or other (for now) largely fictional enemies.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize Del Noce’s crucial claim that these contradictions and falsifications are aspects of the unfolding of positive atheism. His analysis points also to the Achilles’ heel of this type of atheism: it can only sustain itself through what Eric Voegelin called the “prohibition of questions,”[14] namely questions about the nature of humanity, and more generally philosophical and religious questions. These questions must be excluded *a priori* from public discourse, because they are incompatible with the fundamental assumption of human self-sufficiency.

At its final stage, atheism becomes aware of being a “revolt against God” which cannot present itself “in terms of truth” ... and therefore must make recourse to the “prohibition of questions.” It must then go on and destroy the experience that shows man’s dependence, and finally attempt to build “another reality” as a secular projection of the religious “other reality.” Allegedly, in this new reality the problems linked to man’s “dependence” will disappear. [15]

In this situation, one cannot fight the falsification of language with generic moral appeals to “sincerity.” One needs to criticize the “original” lie, which is the negation of the experience of dependence, of humanity’s “fallen state,” of religious questions. The goal should be to help unaware positive atheists (who are many) realize that the ideological affirmation of human self-sufficiency—and the consequent denials of the ideal/religious dimension, and of the “limits” of politics—is the source of a process of de-humanization and social disintegration which is taking place in front of their own eyes.

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[1] Augusto Del Noce, *Il problema dell’ateismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964). An English translation is expected to be published by McGill-Queen’s University Press as early as 2021.

[2] *Ibid.*, 249.

[3] Augusto Del Noce, *Tramonto o eclissi dei valori tradizionali?* (Milan: Rusconi, 1971), 162.

[4] *Ibid.*, 161.

[5] *Ibid.*, 163.

[6] On the affluent society as a form of “objectivized Marxism,” see Del Noce’s essay “Note sull’irreligione occidentale” [Notes on Western irreligion] in *Il Problema dell’ateismo*, 293–333.

[7] On this topic I take the liberty to cite my own essay “Augusto Del Noce on Marx’s Abolition of Human Nature” in *Communio* 46.3–4 (Fall-Winter 2019): 566–584.

[8] Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 149.

[9] Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 129–30.

Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825) was a French political and social thinker who first theorized an industrial society ruled by technicians, managers and businesspeople.

[10] *Ibid.*, 126–27.

[11] Del Noce, *Tramonto o eclissi*, 232.

[12] *Ibid.*, 171.

[13] Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 104.

[14] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1997).

[15] Del Noce, *Tramonto o eclissi*, 175.

Man and Woman: A Text to be Interpreted

MARGUERITE A. PEETERS

The following article is the entry on "Semantics" from the Dizionario su Sesso, Amore e Fecondità [Dictionary of Sex, Love and Fecundity], edited by J. Noriega and R and I. Ecochard (Siena: Cantagalli, 2019), 854-857. Translated by Veronica Brown.

From its origins up to its present-day extensions, the sexual revolution has used language for subversive ends, in particular, to negate and deconstruct the reality-truth about man and woman, manipulate the masses, take power and transform societies. It is therefore closely tied to the semantic revolution that has separated words from their clear and universal content and makes language a space of free interpretation. The sexual revolution and the semantic revolution have gone hand in hand with the cultural revolution that has made the West slide towards postmodernism.

The "freedom to choose" is the lynchpin of the postmodern ethical system. It is acquired through a process of "liberation" from the norms of reason, of the voice of conscience, of true human love, of reality, of what is, so that the individual can "freely" determine himself, as if he were not bound by the natural and eternal law written on his heart, and as if he were the absolute master of his existence.

Language has been the tool of the postmodern negation or "deconstruction" (Derrida), the weapon against transcendental truths. Thus, for example, Richard Rorty reduces "truth" to the following concepts: "To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no statements there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human language, and that human languages are human creations." [1] In order for the individual not to be bound by his or her word and be able to escape any moral or personal commitment at any time, postmoderns have broken the relationship between signifier and meaning, thus causing semantic slippages that they believe to be potentially "infinite." Signifiers have become processes of perpetual change and words have acquired meanings that are often conflicting or contradictory. Reality, having become a "text to be interpreted," reduced to a "text," is "liquified". Let us remember the well-known phrase of Derrida: "There is nothing outside the text." [2]

Postmodernity wants to be tolerant and celebrates the "diversity" of interpretations. In reality, it has triggered a cultural power struggle that takes place precisely from within language, and those who lead it seek to impose their ideological program on everyone. The will to not clearly define words, in order to allow the individual to choose his own interpretation at every moment, is strategic and manipulative.

Pursuing the same deconstructivist objectives of the sexual revolution, the semantic revolution has found a privileged field of application. Here, it has manifested itself in diverse and complex ways. Cut off from their universally human content, some words like love, freedom, equality, fraternity, compassion, dignity, happiness, choice, conscience, family, rights, have linked themselves to an individualistic and hedonistic perspective: their meaning has become irrevocably *ambivalent*. Beginning in the '60s, a plethora of new expressions have rapidly appeared as slogans or cultural norms, such as "free love," "the right to choose," "ownership of one's body," "wanted baby," "liberation of woman," "voluntary termination of a pregnancy." Some words have replaced others in everyday language: reproduction (a term found in the vocabulary of Margaret Sanger, foundress of the

International Planned Parenthood Federation) for procreation, *gender* for sex, partner for spouse, “couples and individuals” or “families” for family, contract or equality for complementarity, for example. Lastly, certain terms like truth, obedience, virginity, purity, chastity, continence, fidelity, reason, heart, law, authority, have been marginalized or even banished by the new semantic system.

With *gender*, the semantic revolution has passed from the freedom to choose one’s own interpretation of words to that of choosing, *through language*, one’s “gender” and sexual orientation. Judith Butler, leader of the *gender* theorists, takes up John Langshaw Austin’s concept of *performative utterances* to affirm that gender is not what one *is* but what one *says* and *does*: “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.”[3] More than thirty years prior, John Money had already defined gender roles as “all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman.”[4]

From the deconstruction of God’s design on man and woman through language, revolutionaries have moved on to the reconstruction of human identity through performative language. They have given themselves the illusion of being able to recreate themselves *ex nihilo* by their word. Their efforts obviously bring them only to what David Halperin rightly defined as “an identity without an essence.”[5]

It is with his word that God creates—draws out of nothing: “God said: ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light” (Gen 1:3). The performative language takes up again the biblical Hebrew *dāvār*, that expresses the word in act, that is act and the word at the same time. The *dāvār* of God is final, efficacious, and fecund: the word of God always does what it says. Saint John, in the prologue to his gospel, tells us that the Word through which “all things were made” is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the Christ. It makes us understand the christic and filial dimension of the logos. The devil, on the other hand, cannot create anything by himself. He can only negate and try to destroy what is. His use of language is negatory and deceitful. The semantic revolution, in particular in the present aspect of *gender*, manifests the anti-son who sets himself up as God, the anti-Logos, the anti-Christ.

In the years following the fall of the Berlin wall, a *new world language*, made up of thousands of expressions, was imposed during the period that saw the organization of important international conferences of the United Nations, whose purpose was to establish the standards of international cooperation in the 21st century. We can cite, by way of example, expressions like: sustainable development, good governance, quality of life for everyone, cultural diversity, partnership, awareness-raising campaigns, participatory democracy, best practices, indicators of progress. This semantic system is already globalized all the way to the local level but is very scarcely recognized as such. The analysis shows its link with postmodern ethics, which appears in particular in the deliberate and strategic absence of a clear definition of its components—their “liquid” nature.

Many of the expressions of the new language transform the goals of the Western sexual revolution into global political norms. Let us think, for example, of the gender perspective, sexual and reproductive health, reproductive rights, the equality of the sexes, comprehensive sexual education, the full range of contraceptives, services protected by confidentiality, safe abortion, universal access... Reproductive health is a typical example of the manipulative character of the new global semantic system. Since its adoption at the Cairo conference of 1994, this paradigm, whose signifier suggests the opposite of what it wants to implement, has deceived governments and peoples in developing countries. Its real agenda includes the universal access to modern contraceptives, safe abortions, and a purely technical and morally perverse sexual education.

Global governance has taken on a normative character with which peoples and governments have

largely aligned themselves since the end of the Cold War. Thus the cultural impact, already immeasurable in the West, of a deconstructivist semantic and sexual revolution is spreading to the ends of the earth. The extent and depth of these phenomena are still far from clear.

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[1] Richard Rorty, "The contingency of language," *London Review of Books* 8, no. 7 (17 April 1986): 3–6.

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Hollow Words, Shallow Politics

EWA THOMPSON

By the end of Sophocles' *Antigone* both the daughters and sons of Oedipus by Jocasta are dead, their tragedy presented starkly as a grim reminder that human beings are but specks of dust in the hands of the gods and that the gods may impose curses from which there is no escape.[1] But the *Antigone* is also a play about politics. King Creon's motivation is political. He does not so much care about the gods as he wants his country to remain stable under his rule. This means that his enemies must be punished and discredited, even if that enemy should prove to be his own nephew.

Today, we no longer believe in the curses of the gods, but presumably many of us still believe in God, and therefore in the stability of concepts such as right and wrong. We believe that every area of our lives and human activity is open to divine scrutiny, and that this therefore includes our politics. However, if there is one segment of human activity from which the very mention of God—except perhaps in the most formulaic way—has been excised, it is politics.

The *Antigone* presents the struggle between those realities and laws that transcend man, and those that merely strive to preserve the well-being of society. The *gravitas* of the play resides in this tragic struggle. When compared to Sophocles' drama, our contemporary political debates look rather depthless. The radical absence of "metaphysical lining" in twenty-first-century politics leaves language weightless; words float around in a haphazard way. This weightlessness of political language means that anyone can twist the meaning of words to their liking, they can remove and add words, bury old meanings, and assign new meanings that are meant to deceive and confuse.

In the fictitious world of George Orwell's *1984*, people are forced to forget the old meaning of words and learn new ones. Those who resist are simply done away with. These new meanings of words are assigned by a small group of people who wield total power over the rest. In the real world of today's America, where the First Amendment is the law of the land, such a course of events is obviously impossible, but there are still ways of forcing people into accepting new interpretations and thereby limiting citizens in their political choices. In both journalistic and academic parlance, there is now an expectation that one use a specific set of terms to describe societal and international affairs. Among this current set are "positive" terms such as "democracy," "reproductive rights," "diversity," "multiculturalism," "equality," "social justice," "LGBTQ+," and "Black Lives Matter." [2] The collection of "negative" terms is longer and includes words such as "fascism," "nationalism," "populism," "inequality," "racism," "autocracy," "white privilege," "discrimination," and, last but not least, "hate speech" and "hate crimes," with the latter carrying a whiff of Orwell's "thought crimes."

Few public persons dare to declare sympathy for any of the concepts in the "negative" group for fear of losing their position as professionals of good standing. Therefore, it has become a ritual to speak of governments that do not enthusiastically embrace or enact the first group of terms in society as "fascist," "racist," or "hateful." Actions and ideologies that promote the first and abhor the second are classified in public discourse as "good," while the opposites are, to borrow an Orwellian term, "ungood." Words such as "patriotism" and "liberty" are now seldom used, while Hitler and Victor Orban are equally called "fascists" even though Hitler was a National Socialist and his Nazi party was by no means a duplicate of General Francisco Franco's fascism or Orban's prime ministership of

Hungary. Just as T.S. Eliot once wrote about “hollow men,” one can also speak of “hollow words,” words whose “updated” meanings have lost their ancient connection to anything permanent, and which now serve an ideological purpose rather than striving for accurate description.

Among the most seriously abused words in the contemporary discourse about politics is “democracy.” In *Democracy in America* (1840), Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw the malleability of this term, warning that “democratic nations show a more ardent and enduring love of equality than of liberty.” He feared that a love of equality could assume gigantic proportions and eventually destroy both democracy and liberty. In his time, “democracy” had a stable meaning because public discourse was still anchored in permanent things. But de Tocqueville foresaw the possibility of uncoupling language from transcendence, and rightly noted that “democracy” would be among the victims of such uncoupling. A quick example is that of [Guy Verhofstadt](#), one of the chief ideologues of the European far left, who in August 2020 called the European Union a “full blown democracy.” But the EU is administered by the European Commission, an unelected body, so how can one call this arrangement democratic?

The semantics of “democracy” has become wobbly, with the word being used to express a variety of views from neo-Marxist to conservative. Most frequently, it has been used by ideologues who pour their own new content into the term and hope that readers and listeners will not notice. “Democracy” is thus now associated with the suppression of nationhood and Christianity, and the promotion of sexual minorities and social diversity. Here are two significant examples.

In August 2020, the people of Belarus, a small nation sandwiched between Russia and Poland, went on strike over a contested presidential election. Belarus is the last bastion of *homo sovieticus* and the last surviving instance of the destructive subjugation of Eastern and Central Europe by Moscow. The strike soon transformed into huge demonstrations in virtually every city, but what became increasingly clear was that the falsified election was only a pretext; in fact, Belarusians wanted freedom from Moscow’s domination.

So how did international media and politicians respond to this event? The media declared that the Belarusians were demonstrating for “democracy.” On August 5, 2020, the Atlantic Council posted an article titled “[From Dictatorship to Democracy](#),” from which we learn that the current president, Alexander Lukashenko, is an authoritarian “strongman” opposed to the “democratic awakening” taking place in the country. We are further told that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the main opposition leader, and her supporters want “a peaceful transition to democracy” and that her rallies have become a “focal point for the country’s democratic opposition.” Similarly, CBS News put out the title “Pro-democracy Protests Grow in Belarus After Disputed Election,” while social media displayed videos titled “Meet the Women who Lead the Fight for Democracy in Belarus.” An [Associated Press](#) article (reprinted in the New York Times on August 19, 2020) announced that “EU Backs Belarus Pro-democracy Rallies, Rejects Poll Results.” Meanwhile, [Carl Bildt](#), co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations, said in his statement to the press: “The turnout in Minsk today for the manifestation for democracy looks absolutely massive.”

But the Belarusians were not asking for “democracy,” they were calling for “freedom.” What the invocation of “democracy” leaves untouched is the elephant in the room: the military occupation of Belarus by Russia. “Belarus will be free,” said noted Belarusian journalist [Franak Viačorka](#), just as Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė spoke of “freedom for Belarus.” On October 12, 2020 a demonstration of [Belarusian retirees](#) demanded “Freedom for our children!” while previous protest [banners created by Belarusian women](#) featured the words “liberty” and “freedom,” rather than democracy. All of this is not because Belarusians are anti-democratic, but because their principal goal is

the liberation of their nation from Moscow's tutelage. They assume that everything else, including democracy, will follow. Ever since the USSR's subjugation of Eastern Europe, Western journalists and politicians have pretended not to hear this language, they prefer not to hear the word "liberty." Much safer is the word "democracy," a term whose meaning can be tweaked according to the *Weltanschauung* of the speaker.

A similar situation existed forty years ago, when the Solidarity labor union in Poland transformed itself into a movement for freedom from Soviet-imposed communism. At that time, Adam Michnik, a prominent neo-Marxist, attempted to persuade Polish society and the West that Solidarity was fighting not for freedom, but democracy. He convinced many in the West that Solidarity wanted diversity and social change, rather than liberty and Christian morality. His books and articles promoted "democracy" as the alleged goal of the workers' union, and as one of the few Poles who had access to the *New York Times*, his views—presented as those of the Solidarity movement—gained widespread circulation among left-leaning intellectuals in the United States. In an article published on March 25, 2007, Michnik described the then priorities of the Solidarity movement thus:

Democracy instead of dictatorship, pluralism instead of monopoly, law instead of lawlessness, freedom of the press instead of censorship, diversity instead of conformity, open borders instead of barbed wire, tolerance instead of a reigning ideology.

This is why Solidarity was first met with sympathetic approval by the American media and intellectual establishment. But when it became clear that the Polish people valued Catholicism and liberty more than social change, Solidarity's heirs began to be criticized, until they were finally declared unacceptable and even "on the road to fascism." Michnik's efforts are a classic example of mixing apples and oranges and misleading the reader. Once the then-ruling coalition in Poland was understood as holding conservative views similar to those Solidarity had advanced in the 1980s, Michnik was quick to call it "populist" saying that even "populism can assume the shape of nostalgic post-Communism or anti-Communism with a Bolshevik face."

Neo-Marxists were among the first to start manipulating the language of politics, throwing invectives such as "populist," "fascist," and "Bolshevik" at conservatives whose adherence to tradition they despised, and applying the word "democracy" to political entities that promoted social change, diversity, and exorbitant concentration on sexuality. The entire process of freeing East Central Europe from communism was mendaciously presented in many Western texts as an example of what the neo-Marxists wanted to see. Then, when it became clear that what people wanted was personal liberty and freedom for their respective nations, neo-Marxists began to claim that the people and their leaders were not "democratic" and were instead embracing populism and fascism. Alongside Polish Solidarity, the treatment of Hungary's Fidesz party is an example of how freedom-loving Hungarians were first cheered for their efforts to defeat communism, and then scolded for their alleged adherence to fascism. This battle is now going on in the European Parliament and EU administration in Brussels.

The appropriation of the word "democracy" to promote the goals of neo-Marxism is important because virtually all peoples who have tried, successfully or not, to free themselves from another country's military occupation define themselves as fighting for freedom and liberty. For them, democracy is an attribute of freedom, a self-understood attribute of a society where everyone has the right to vote in elections that are not rigged. Freedom is the goal; democracy is a byproduct. But the left-leaning intellectuals have long unhinged the word "democracy" from its Tocquevillian definition. This free-floating word has been invoked by tyrants and statesmen, by free people and by those enslaved. After World War II nearly every country has chosen to describe itself as democratic. One of the most

oppressive countries in Europe was called the “*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*.”

The hollowing-out of the word “democracy” goes hand in hand with the contemporary use of the word “fascism.” Neo-Marxists and their non-Marxist followers promote social change, but the proletariat is no longer viewed as the engine of this change. This has switched places with sexual and racial minorities. Workers are now blue-collar “white supremacists.” Anyone who opposes this new meaning of “democracy” (as a system where sexual and racial minorities are foregrounded) is a “fascist” or “nationalist.” Cambridge professor Priyamvada Gopal thus called British conservatives celebrating victory over German Nazism as “right-wingers” and “fascists,” even though it was fascism they were condemning.[3] After a man was killed during the riots in Portland on August 2020, a woman speaker said “**we are not sad that a fascist is dead.**” Needless to say, the use of the word has little to do with the phenomenon of fascism in Italy or Spain before World War II.[4]

In the same vein, Polish Catholic attempts to oppose premature introduction of sexuality lessons in elementary schools are described by neo-Marxist media as “nationalistic.” On the very same day that Professor Gopal accused fellow Britishers of being fascists, [Yahoo News](#) announced that “Polish Nationalists and LGBT Activists Face Off in Warsaw.” It seems that in the opinion of the neo-Marxist commentators, opposition to premature sexualization of children means that one is a nationalist.

The use of such words as “hate speech” and “hate crime” in today’s political and social exchanges goes hand in hand with the hollowness of the words described above. It is remarkable how many terms of our public discourse came from Orwell’s *1984*: “thought police,” “hate crime,” “thought crime,” “newspeak,” “memory hole,” “reproductive freedom.” In *1984*, those in power regularly organize “hate weeks,” during which citizens are ordered to express hate of the enemies of their country. The left-leaning ideologues have reversed this and accused those who oppose their agenda of “hate crimes.” This has even forced its way into U.S. legislation, which now contains the previously unknown category of “hate crime.” The assumption that the motivation of an action can be so irrevocably pinpointed cannot but infuriate those concerned, and thus the very mention of “hate crime” usually generates hate rather than assuaging it.

The imposition of new meanings on certain words is connected with the process of pushing aside other words, not in the radical way practiced in *1984*, but rather by making them appear in print less and less often. This is elimination in slow motion. Words and phrases like “patriotism,” “killing” the unborn, marital “fidelity,” “providence,” adherence to Christian “tradition” now seldom appear in academic and journalistic texts—and when they do, they are often given ironic undertones, as if being patriotic or faithful to one’s spouse was something a serious and mature human being should not entertain. On the other hand, we repeatedly hear words such as “transgender,” “bisexual,” or “reproductive rights,” and social imagination tends to follow printed and spoken suggestions.

The views of a good percentage of the population are now formed by the media rather than by religion, the study of philosophy, or conversations with wise grandmothers and grandfathers. In fact, it was the media who first succeeded to convince many that the meaning of words can and should be decided by those who write for the media.

Yet we occasionally read the ancients, and Sophocles’ *Antigone* remains one of the signposts of the civilization we claim to be a part of. The words pronounced by characters in this play are replete with stable meanings, there is no attempt to cheat the interlocutor by making them mean something invented by the speakers. While comparing the profound language of the *Antigone* to the language of today’s politics, one realizes that some degree of accommodation with transcendent values is necessary for politics to regain its dignity and truthfulness. The *Antigone* reminds us how far we have departed

from what made Western political systems last for millennia: a trust that words refer to stable meanings, and that discourse, rather than dazzling with new usages, strives for communicative clarity.

The meaning of words used to accrue gradually, their fullness depended on how long they had been in use and by whom. And all words had metaphysical lining. Expurgation of that lining from politics has resulted in a deterioration of public discourse. Now key words are thrown around by people who cannot tell fascism from Nazism, democracy from freedom, or adherence to the Ten Commandments from hate. It is not a question of a particular ideology taking over all interpretation and commentary. The lack of acknowledgment of a reality transcending the political order and unwillingness to find some kind of accommodation with that reality creates newspeak and robs high seriousness from the language of politics.

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[1] This article is a continuation of “The Great Amputation: Language in the Postmodern Era,” *Modern Age* 60.4 (Fall 2018): 40–51. Polish philosopher Dariusz Karłowicz (*Thebes-Smolensk-Warsaw* [Warsaw: Teologia Polityczna Press, 2020]) gave me the idea of using *Antigone* as a starting point in discussing politics.

[2] As a slogan, “Black Lives Matter” is of course acceptable, but not as a **global foundation** whose goal is to violently “build local power” and fight “white supremacy.”

[3] Priyamvada Gopal on Twitter, 16 August 2020: “British right-wingers are not anti-fascist, no matter how much they celebrate war victories. They are fascists.”

[4] Paul Gottfried, *Fascism: The Career of a Concept* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2017).

The War Against Death

JOHN WATERS

When I was growing up in a small West of Ireland town, where death was intermittent and highly visible, the response of the community to the demise of one of its number was always a process of absorption followed by a moving towards acceptance, and that this would occur relatively quickly when the deceased had been elderly and unwell, and more slowly when someone young and healthy had passed away. When an old person died, the idea that he or she had actually died *of* something was very much a secondary aspect. She had died. He was old. She had had a “good innings.” Only occasionally someone might inquire what she had died of, and this would almost always meet with vagueness. In a sense, it was unimportant. She had died, had been loved, would be buried on Tuesday. What was remembered was the life, personality, story of the deceased, not the reasons he or she had succumbed. The fact of death was an everyday matter. It was axiomatic. It was the will of God.

Death was met in some instances by a sense of shock, surprise, sorrow, occasionally something approaching incomprehension, but never—at the cultural level anyway—resistance. Communities expect their members to die. Individuals may rage against the death of a loved one, or the approach of their own demise, but healthy communities assent to death as a cost worth paying for life. The purpose of the mourning process among the immediate family and friends of the deceased was inevitably slower, but within the community the point was to absorb and move towards acceptance of what had happened, and this might take anything between a day and a month to achieve. After that the death became a fact of life.

This process, which I believe has been pretty universal for as long as humans have lived together, contrasts dramatically with what we have witnessed in the Western world over the past six months or so. Instead of meeting news of death with shock followed by sorrow, then moving towards acceptance, our cultures have constructed a kind of cartoon world around dying in which the phenomenon has been treated in each and every instance as though it had been avoidable, ought not to have happened, must be prevented from recurring in the same way to someone else. Instead of being treated as part of the normal attrition of life, the daily news of “new” deaths attributed to Covid-19 has been greeted by a kind of manufactured global shock, consternation, incomprehension and something akin to defiance. We have been “at war” with death. Each new Covid death, however questionably claimed or harvested, was treated as though it were another body recovered from the mountainside scene of a train crash. The numbers were crunched and recrunched, mounting all the time, like the numbers on a football scoreboard.

And we have known too, almost from the outset, that the numbers were being fraudulently gathered, with—virtually everywhere—every death *with* Covid being treated as a death *from* Covid, and every case of more than two symptoms being treated as proven without recourse to testing. Constant streams of propaganda about the deadliness of the disease were accompanied by an almost total shutting down of alternative perspectives. *No autopsies, real or figurative, were permitted.*

Covid-19 has made people, even young people, think about death to an extent they never thought about it before. We talk these days of little else. All conversations lead to implicit talk of death. This essentially materialist view of human reality does not reveal itself as something new, and yet it does

not appear to have happened before. The calamity of Covid-19, however you read it, has cut through all our established relationships with death and turned it into something more than itself. Death has been as though elevated beyond its normal station—as, depending on your disposition, comma or full point on earthly existence—and made into something ever-present in the midst of life. I met Christians who had long believed implicitly in the life everlasting and atheists who had laughed off death as simply an extinction, a no-longer-being-here, who were shivering in terror of Covid. Either—in both cases—they had been duping themselves and everyone else or something else was going on. Death had come to haunt us. But not the death that is the threshold of the portal to another existence, or even the edge of the abyss that atheism tells us we trip into at the end, but something greater or much worse, and, at the same time, something over which humankind was now affecting to claim dominion.

This was Death with a capital D, a Death that pursued us, morning till night, seeking to claim not merely our bodies and souls but our minds, all the days and hours of our lives. This was Death personified, kitted out in a shiny suit and sent stalking the streets in search of prey. This was Death at the hands of the Grim Reaper, Covid the Ripper, who might strike us at any hour. This was a Death that was somehow not intended for me or for you, but might still, by casual chance or spite, strike me or you rather than another.

And each one of us was, at the same time, potentially the killer of any other or number of others. We were as though suicide bombers, the virus strapped to our waists, walking around on the off-chance—in effect potential murderers of our fellow citizens and others.

Since we are a species more or less defined by the idea that we live for a time defined with approximate outer limits, and then die, the idea of “saving lives,” especially when accompanied by connotations of compulsion, is capable of leading us willy-nilly towards tyranny. Medicine had, for a long time, been seeking to postpone the moment of death, but still it had never occurred to anyone to seek to do so by eliminating the element of risk that accompanies every human action in the course of a day or a life. Life is risk, we had long recognized, and the more interesting, rewarding the life, the greater the risk. The contrary is almost as true: the less risk, the more mundane and humdrum the life.

In an address to the International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein in 1992, Nobel Laureate novelist and Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said:

Man has lost the sense of himself as a limited point in the universe, albeit one possessed of free will. He began to deem himself the center of his surroundings, adapting not himself to the world but the world to himself. And then, of course, the thought of death becomes unbearable: It is the extinction of the entire universe at a stroke.

The most immediate sense of something odd afoot in 2020 was the fact that we were talking about things in ways that assumed that life and death had fallen to man to propose and dispose of. The time of Covid has been a time in which man sought to intrude between the human and the “will of God” or “fear of God” (more or less the same thing) and jealously steal the attention of the human person from the absolute or glorious meaning of his own dying. From the outset of the Covid-19 crisis, it was noticeable that political and medical leaders were saying something we had not heard before in precisely such terms: that deaths of any kind, including if not especially the deaths of the very old, must be avoided at all costs to, among other things, human liberty.

The most relentlessly nagging thing about what was happening was that, once you begin to delve into the facts, almost nothing was as we were being told by official sources. The numbers of deaths alleged to have occurred from Covid-19 were nothing like what the official figures suggested. Even early on, the

methods of certifying such deaths were emerging deeply questionable. Most of the deaths occurred in care homes, of people of advanced age. Almost everywhere, **excess deaths showed no significant deviation from normative patterns**. Once you started to drill into it, the panic generated around COVID-19 seemed spurious in almost every respect.

These conditions were achieved by weeks and months of persistent, repetitive messaging wrapped up in terror mantras and veiled threats. They were achieved through the use of subtle and not so subtle use of neuro-linguistic programming and saturation coverage of an almost entirely falsified narrative to effect a form of mass hypnosis, which left only a small minority of Western populations unaffected. How these people escaped is itself something of a mystery, not to say a miracle. Perhaps, like me, many of them stopped reading, watching or listening to legacy media a long time ago, thus acquiring immunity to what is perhaps the true “virus”: the industrial mendacity of mainstream media.

There have been many voices out there of people seeking, with limited success, to overcome the effects of legacy media lying. These voices, which were all but totally excluded from mainstream debate, gave an entirely different version of events to that peddled by mainstream journalism. Their work is just a click or two away. They include Dr. Wolfgang Wodarg, Professor Sucharit Bhakdi, Professor Michael Levitt, Dr. Andrew Kaufman, Dr. Vernon Coleman, Dr. Scott Jensen, Professor Jay Bhattacharya, Professor John Ioannidis, Dr. Scott Atlas, Professor Sunetra Gupta, Dr. Dan Erickson, Dr. Artin Massihi, Lord Jonathan Sumption, the journalist Peter Hitchens, and many more.

On 4 October 2020, some of these and many other scientists and medical practitioners signed the **Great Barrington Declaration**, which expressed their “grave concerns” about the damaging effects of Covid-19 policies on physical and mental health, and called for a different approach, described as “Focused Protection.” By this they meant that those who are “at minimal risk of death” be permitted to live their lives normally to build up immunity through natural infection, “while better protecting those who are at highest risk.” This statement, signed by tens of thousands of epidemiologists and public health scientists, was immediately and continuingly censored by media outlets and social media operators.

One of the clearest and most comprehensive voices has been Professor Denis Rancourt, Ph.D., a multi-disciplinary scientist from Ontario, who has published more than 100 scientific papers on a variety of subjects, from the disciplines of physics, chemistry, geology, soil science, environmental science, bio-geochemistry, theoretical physics, alloy physics, magnetism, and planetary science. He is also, since 2014, a researcher with the Ontario Civil Liberties Association, a position in which he has conducted voluminous research into scientific issues that impact civil rights. Rancourt has been immersed in the Covid business for the past seven months. Using all-cause mortality to analyze the phenomenon of Covid-19, this being the method that is least susceptible to bias, Rancourt has conducted analyses of this data in France, Scandinavia, Canada and the United States, and discovered patterns common to all territories that had not been highlighted by anyone else. His investigations conclusively demonstrate that all-cause mortality in the winter of 2019/2020 was statistically in line with previous years. Covid-19, he found, is not a killer disease, and the attendant “pandemic” has not imposed a death burden in any way out of the ordinary.

At the same time, however, **Rancourt calls attention to what he calls the “Covid peak,”** immediately following the WHO declaration of the pandemic in March 2020. The Covid peak was a sharp spike in deaths that occurs across a range of countries, though not everywhere and is quite unlike any pattern that happens normatively. It is present in the data for several jurisdictions in Europe and the USA, displaying several unique characteristics: its sharpness, narrowness and remarkable symmetry compared to historical mortality peaks; its lateness in the infectious-season cycle, surging after week 11

of 2020, unprecedented for any large sharp-peak feature; the synchronicity of the onset of its surge, across entire continents; and the inconsistency of its manifestation across countries, even between adjoining territories. In short, it is an artificial spike in deaths arising from deaths caused prematurely due to the systems of residents being weakened by panic and stress, with some falling prey to viruses and other infections.

The data, he has concluded, show there was “no plague and a likely signature of mass homicide by government response.”

These “COVID peak” characteristics, and a review of the epidemiological history, and of relevant knowledge about viral respiratory diseases, lead me to postulate that the “COVID peak” results from an accelerated mass homicide of immune-vulnerable individuals, and individuals made more immune-vulnerable, by government and institutional actions, rather than being an epidemiological signature of a novel virus, irrespective of the degree to which the virus is novel from the perspective of viral speciation.

These circumstances came to bear primarily on care homes, ensuring that many people that were locked into these institutions between mid-March and mid-May would die from this particular seasonal virus, SARS-CoV-2, causing the respiratory disease Covid-19, though this was just one among many causes of death, usually co-morbidities that might have killed these people over the medium term. The virus itself, he says, is not more virulent than other viruses. The total winter burden deaths is not greater, but there is a signature of a sharp spike feature that lasts for three to five weeks, which, he says, “is extraordinarily rapid, never been seen before. And it happens very late in the winter burden season.”

This uniquely sharp peak, occurring as the flu season is tailing off, simultaneously in many different places across several continents, directly following the declaration of the pandemic by the WHO, left him in no doubt that “there was an acceleration of deaths of vulnerable people due to government responses.

So, the government response to that World Health Organization recommendation is what killed people, what accelerated the deaths. You can see that in the data, and you can also understand it in terms of how immune-vulnerable people are affected by these kinds of diseases.

Old people were essentially locked into nursing homes from about mid-March. The conditions could not have been more suited to creating enormous levels of psychological stress, an accelerant on respiratory conditions, a condition commonly afflicting the aged. The patients were locked into institutions devoid of fresh air and sunlight, deprived of the company and affection of their loved ones, in some cases, even when not subject to Do Not Resuscitate notices, denied medical treatment. They were also, as a result of agreements between politicians and church authorities, denied the ministrations of priest or chaplains. And every evening, many of them were subjected to the daily death toll delivered by hang-dog Covid tsars via the TV in the corners of their death cells.

But even all these deaths—a late spike compared to the norm—did not bring fatalities beyond the normative winter death burden and many of those who died were what epidemiologists call “dry tinder”—elderly people in the final months of life, with multiple co-morbidities, who had managed to survive the flu season of 2019/20, a remarkably low year for influenza deaths almost everywhere. Thus, the mission to “save lives” actually *cost* lives—whether by intention or neglect remains to be seen.

When people are left to die alone, without the touch of a loved one’s hand upon her brow, without

medical care, without the ministrations of a priest—how can the governing exercise be deemed “compassionate”? What we saw, generally speaking, was the mindless enforcement of unproven measures, without visible flexibility, without pity or dispensation or exemption. And this meant that the already threadbare strategy of universal lockdown—unproven, untested because never before attempted—was rendered even more pointless by deaths that could mostly have been avoided by a different, more reasoned approach, such as protecting the old and especially vulnerable and allowing healthy people to go about their lives and the virus to take its course in the normal way.

In achieving a balance with regard to options directed at the protecting of lives, there are multiple contingencies that must be accounted in the reckoning. There is no point in claiming to “save lives” if, in the longer run, your responses cost many more. A calculus of consequences is required, showing as far as possible the degree of loss of life to be expected on one route, rather than the other. Since predictability or experience is likely to be stronger in one case than another, and since the dangers of one set of options may be more distant as against another, it is wiser to err on the side of what is more certain and more imminent. But measures incorporating risk of greater damage as they continue should obviously be confined to the shortest possible term. Measures that constrict the life of a community are likely to have heavy costs, including costs in lives—poverty costs lives willy-nilly—and this calls for an essential and careful calculation before a gut-response to danger is yielded to.

It is clear that the reaction to Covid-19 has involved a radical perversion of received religious and philosophical understandings of the limits of human obligation to other humans in the matter of preventing their—in the long run—inevitable deaths. Clearly, such a perversion is capable of being put to malignant uses, and we may yet come to see how this obtained in the case of Covid-19.

The question of the individual—and by extension collective—responsibility to the protection of our fellow humans is elegantly set out by O. Carter Snead in his fine new book, *What It Means To Be Human* (Harvard University Press). Snead’s chief purpose is to seek an anthropological corrective to the foundations of American bioethics in the context of abortion, euthanasia and other ethical and legal conundrums of the present age. In this regard, he refers repeatedly to the problems posed by “expressive individualism” (after sociologist Robert Bellah and philosopher Charles Taylor) by which people are defined as atomized individual wills in which a subjective apprehension of reality and a self-invented sense of destiny are deemed the optimal conditions for human flourishing. In his reflections on the question of interpersonal obligation in the context of law, Snead’s book may help us also with the dilemmas posed by Covid-19.

Snead emphasizes that we are embodied beings, a factor which, he reminds us, calls for the augmentation of notions of human freedom, especially by understandings of the “vulnerability, mutual dependence, and finitude that result from our individual and shared lives.”

Living with others invites dependencies and debts from the outset: we owe these debts to our families, caregivers, friends, communities, civilization. We are fundamentally indebted beings, morally speaking at least—not free agents in any definitive or absolute sense. As Snead asserts, a culture predicated on expressive individualism is incapable of supporting such an understanding. The anthropology of expressive individualism is impoverished, he reminds us, as well as forgetful of the body, of human interdependence, of the consequent gifts received from and debts owed to others.

He elaborates:

[Expressive individualism] cannot give an intelligible account of the debt owed to those who kept us alive and taught us what we needed to thrive in the world. It cannot explain the role played by and

obligations incurred to others whose friendship and mutual calling to account led to the refinement and clarification of our own self-understanding. *A fortiori*, as a solely inward-looking anthropology, expressive individualism does not supply a justification for the payment of those debts in nonreciprocal and unconditional fashion to others who have nothing to offer us by way of recompense.

In short, expressive individualism lacks a principle of belonging capable of enabling a civilization, other than one that is centered on self-interestedness.

Quite clearly, our indebtedness to the vulnerable was not accounted in the beginning of the Covid-19 scare and it was afterwards impossible to correct the imbalance. Moreover, a different form of compassion—one directed at cocooning the old and most vulnerable—would almost certainly have gone further to achieving the stated objectives of political authorities, while allowing the more general welfare of the general public to remain unaffected. Hence, the treatment inevitably became worse than the disease. This response, though protectable by mantras of “saving lives,” was ultimately compassionate to neither the most vulnerable nor the broader population. It existed only at the level of virtue signal. It was a pretense that generated far more damage than almost any other conceivable approach, resulting in what Denis Rancourt described as a “mass homicide”. It remains to be seen whether this still unfolding catastrophe was initiated unintentionally or otherwise, and how culpability is to be attributed.

It would also be reassuring if the societal discussions that follow from these events were to show some capability to reflect the Christian, civilizational values forged over centuries concerning true “compassion” for the human situation— mortal, vulnerable, embedded in the mutualities of attachment, obligation and affection, destined to die and yet almost always desiring to live longer — rather than crude pieties fashioned to make the speaker appear “good” while removing him from the realm of true responsibility, this leading him to inflict on human persons and human culture great harms of differing, contradicting but, invariably, ultimately destructive kinds. There was a necessity to locate a position of human “handing over” by which the vulnerable might be protected, the unavoidable accepted, the worst avoided and the inevitable treated as such, and that position remained remote from all thinking and all decision-making, to the great detriment of just about everyone.

John Waters is a Thinker, Talker, and Writer. From the real source of religion to the infinite reach of rock ‘n’ roll; from the puzzle of the human “I” to the true meaning of money, John Waters speaks and writes about his exhilarating, totally original reflections on the meaning of life in the modern world. He began part-time work as a journalist in 1981, with Hot Press, Ireland’s leading rock ‘n’ roll magazine and went full-time in 1984, when he moved to Dublin. As a journalist, magazine editor and columnist, he has specialized in raising unpopular issues of public importance, including the repression of Famine memories and the denial of rights to fathers.

Resisting Soft Totalitarianism

GREGORY Y. GLAZOV

Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (Sentinel, 2020).

Rod Dreher wrote *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* after observing the consternation felt by Soviet Bloc émigrés at seeing Americans afraid to voice conservative opinions, whilst failing to recognize that these fears parallel those characterizing life under “hard totalitarianism.” Absent strict censorship, secret police, gulags, and material deprivation, the political and cultural scene appears quite different from Eastern bloc communism, but the situations are similar—a fact Americans would do well to recognize. The core parallel is the replacement of traditional Judeo-Christian or liberal conceptions of rights by a progressive creed that ties rights to group identity, revises history, and co-opts a powerful social media to control discourse, thought, movement, and commerce, resulting thereby in a “soft totalitarianism.” Applying Benedict XVI’s description of this dictatorial progressivism as manifesting “the spiritual power of the Antichrist” and invoking Solzhenitsyn’s message to “Live not by lies!” Dreher explores the nature of this beast (Part One) and the means to defeat it (Part Two).

Part One, “Understanding Soft Totalitarianism,” contains four chapters entitled “Kolaković the Prophet,” “Our Pre-Totalitarian Culture,” “Progressivism as Religion,” and “Capitalism, Woke and Watchful.” The first focuses on Fr. Kolaković, a Jesuit who in the Nazi era anticipated the Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia and established a virtual underground, Christ-centered spiritual family that ultimately ushered in the Prague Spring. It is in Kolaković’s genius for building up this family that Dreher finds the answer to the questions wrestled with in Part Two of his book. The remaining chapters present a synthesis of insights from a range of writers specializing in the nature of totalitarianism, the religious foundations of progressivism and “wokeness,” and the parallels between the factors which paved the way for the Marxist takeover of Russia and the reasons why “soft totalitarianism” may be expected to triumph in the West. Dreher highlights the link between Hannah Arendt’s claim that totalitarianism is rooted in loneliness catalyzed not just by economic and sociological but also sexual uprootedness, by “reading not Darwin but Marquis de Sade,” and James Billington’s contention that the conditions which led Russia to communism included the creation of a large, rootless urban underclass, the radicalization of privileged youth, famine and defeat in war, as well as “sexual adventurism, celebration of perversion, and all manner of sensuality.” Given this mix, the relevance of what happened in Russia to present day America is striking. The high rates of loneliness experienced by Millennials and Generation Z, the gravitation to Marxism shown by Social Justice Warriors, as well as the support given to these ideologies by political and social media elites all gain greater significance than when evaluated independently. Dreher doesn’t think the revolution is inevitable, but he thinks that the conditions are conducive to it. Noting the addition of further isolating factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine, he warns that the mix could become socially explosive, but does breathe a sigh of relief: “Thank God, we do not yet see any burning on the streets or actual revolution.”

Part Two contains six chapters: “Value Nothing More Than Truth” retells Václav Havel’s well-known story of the greengrocer who ceased participating in the ritual of spreading communist propaganda

and, by so doing, helped to spark a revolution, validating the Russian proverb: “One word of truth outweighs the whole world.” The chapter continues by drawing similar lessons from figures like Mária Wittner, a hero of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and lesser known resisters like Fr. Kirill Kaleda, who transformed the Butovo Firing Range into a national memorial for those executed by the NKVD. In “Cultivate Cultural Memory,” noting the growing falsification of communism’s crimes among American youth and the attention that dissidents draw to totalitarianism’s ambition to control human memory, Dreher identifies the key to resisting this ambition in Václav Benda’s injunction to create small fortresses of memory, chiefly the family, within a *parallel polis* of alternative social structures, which include underground universities that several Western academics, such as Sir Roger Scruton, Charles Taylor, and Jacques Derrida, helped to establish. “Families Are Resistance Cells” contrasts the loosening of family ties and commitment to marriage that leaves many Westerners refuge-less with the model of anti-totalitarian resistance based in the Christian family as illustrated by that of Václav and Kamila Benda. “Religion, the Bedrock of Resistance” surveys the sense of peace and meaning which religion gave to Christians who suffered imprisonment and torture, their spiritual exercises, prison ministry, *samizdat* literature, solidarity with liberals, and later appreciation by the Church (for example, via elevation to positions of servant-leadership in the Church, as illustrated by John Paul II’s making Ján Chryzostom Korec a cardinal, or via beatification and canonization, as illustrated by Benedict XVI’s beatification of Franz Jägerstätter). The final chapters, “Standing in Solidarity” and “The Gift of Suffering,” contend that the Western tendency to identify the good life as one free from suffering predisposes Westerners to manipulation by soft totalitarianism and that the key to resisting such an error is found in taking to heart stories of Christians who endured hardship under communism. For Dreher, the lives of Krcmery, Solzhenitsyn, Ogorodnikov, and Richard Wurmbrand, among others, testify to the sanctifying power of suffering. The conclusion, “Live Not by Lies,” emphasizes that the answers to life’s questions sought by Christians the world over are found in these stories: namely in their power to reveal that freedom and meaning are to be found not in therapeutic promises of entertainment, pleasure, and comfort, in a “Christianity without tears,” but in the acceptance of suffering as a gift by which one’s heart can be properly detached from these goods and fortified against the manipulation of soft totalitarianism that plays on our fear of loss.

My own parents were Russian dissidents. My father lost his job in the Russian Academy of Sciences for publicly protesting the invasion of Czechoslovakia. My mother, a professor at Moscow University, risked death by typing many *samizdat* works. We were secretly baptized by Fr. Alexander Men, a priest of Jewish origin and “Russia’s C. S. Lewis.” In the West, my father specialized in Russian history and literature, especially in the figure of Stalin and the writings of Dostoevsky, while my mother was devoted to exploring the links between the writings of the poet Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn, and Dante. Their recurrent bequest to us, their children, was to preserve a connection to Russia’s travails, and to understand that therein, in the testimony given to the triumph of the spirit in her history and literature lies a key to life’s meaning: to refusing the temptation to be manipulated by all kinds of fear. The resonance between this conviction and Dreher’s message could not be stronger.

The book confirms the prescience of concrete insights offered by Russia’s history and literature. The uncanny congruence between Soviet social justice cultism and that currently operating on college campuses is illustrated by Vladimir Voinovich’s *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, as recently detailed by [Cathy Young](#). That Marxism and progressivism are spread by the “guilt” felt by the children of privileged classes is foreshadowed by the nihilists of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*. Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* sketches out the idea that sexual debauchery catalyzes revolution via the discourses of Pyotr Verkhovensky and Shigalyov, an idea that Russians have named *shigalyovshina* after the latter character. Dostoevsky’s focus in this novel on revolutionaries prompted me to formulate several constructive critiques of Dreher’s arguments in ways that helped me both to

appreciate their inner coherence and to take the conversation further.

Dreher downplays the objection that revolution was foisted upon Russia via Lenin's cunning and bayonets and emphasizes instead the role of economic, sociological, intellectual, and cultural trends. On this score, the key to understanding history for him is not Plutarch's *Lives* but the social sciences, in which Dreher is well-steeped. But if totalitarianism owes more to toxic social trends than to evil revolutionaries, why should the antidote lie in good dissidents and martyrs? If good people can shape history in a positive direction, shouldn't one also allow that history can be shaped in a negative direction by evil people? In fact, it is not an either/or proposition, as Dreher's own identification of Father Kolaković as the prophetic model for his "manual" of resistance suggests. Both the inspiration of individual lives, like the Jesuit priest's, and the creation of strong social bonds, like Kolaković's spiritual families, matter.

As Dreher's sociological assumptions downplay the initiative of revolutionaries in the past, they also lead him to downplay it in the present. Consequently, Dreher passes over the question of whether Christians should support state resistance to such revolutionaries. Now, Dreher does not personally abjure such reliance. On Oct 27th, for example, in response to far-left activists at the University of Oregon who chained themselves on campus to demand the defunding of campus police, Dreher tweeted, "Cut the chains, arrest the kids, put them in jail, with haste, and no apologies." But the book offers no analogous proposals. The reason, I suspect, is that having diagnosed progressivism as a religion, Dreher wants Christians to understand and respond to it on a fundamental, theoretical level, not an immediately political one. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that Dreher's non-discussion of the ethics of Christian collaboration with the state in resisting hard and soft totalitarianism is at odds with Solzhenitsyn. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn lamented not taking recourse to arms to resist arrest. In his "Harvard Commencement Address," he admonished Western youth for refusing to resist communism by force. On returning to Russia, he became a Putin-supporting Pan-Slavist. Dreher does not take up these points, but they serve to indicate how complex the question of state power, revolutionary ideology, and the Christian responsibility to resist the latter by armed force is.

Another thorny issue arising from Dreher's appeal to Solzhenitsyn revolves around the amplitude with which Christians should proclaim suffering to be a gift. Varlam Shalamov, for example, survived more brutal conditions than Solzhenitsyn, knew how torture breaks the spirit, and retained his integrity, but, while frequently imbuing his own *Kolyma Tales* with a hidden Christian spirituality, he repudiated as unseemly Solzhenitsyn's declarations about the redemptive potential of suffering and what he perceived as his loud, Christian self-posturing. Fr. Dmitry Dudko, whom Dreher eulogizes for heroism, was broken by the KGB. This breaking does not negate his heroism but his tragic story, like that of many other dissidents, requires deeper reflection. Should the Church not negotiate at all with totalitarian powers to protect the faithful? Responding to this problem would illuminate controversies concerning Church relations with totalitarian regimes in the past, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Bloc, as well as present day ones, such as communist China. At the very least, Dreher's reflections indicate that ecclesiastics who develop these policies must engage and not bypass the wisdom, courage, and experience borne by the representatives of the underground church.

These select reflections are a token of thanks to Rod Dreher for drawing upon a wide range of social scientific, philosophical, and religious literature, as well as surviving living testimony, so as to elucidate, first, the clear parallels between the fearsome phenomena that catalyzed and characterized the hard totalitarisms of the past century and those attending the ascent of soft totalitarianism today, and, second, for making a concerted effort to honor the memory and voices of Eastern Bloc Christian dissidents and identify in their experience life-lessons that may help contemporary Christians

find the courage and strength to resist the manipulation of their spiritual commitments.

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Joining the Dots between Language and Power

TIMOTHY KELLY

Josef Pieper, *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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Giving My Word

ERIK VAN VERSEDAAL

Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response* (trans. Anne A. Davenport; New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

Few activities are more familiar to us than conversation. Many of our most elevated and most intimate experiences are mediated by an exchange of words. No wonder, then, that the art form that most directly represents the shape of events in a human life, the drama, consists of little else than interpersonal dialogue. The fact that conversation frames and carries so much of our daily life may well be the reason why we easily overlook the meaning of this most commonplace happening, why we forget to ask what our talk says about us and our way of being in the world.

In his 1992 *The Call and the Response* (*L'Appel et la réponse*), the phenomenologist Jean-Louis Chrétien offered a great service to thought by venturing a foray into this theme. Far from taking language for granted, Chrétien holds that man's power to name the world poetically lies at the center of his unique vocation as spirit-in-the-flesh. The labor of words cannot be a matter of indifference to us, since we always already find ourselves gifted for and sent into this task. Our speech, Chrétien observes, is principally a response, and our inner mandate to respond to reality sheds light on what it is to be a created person. This calling to give utterance to the world is, to be sure, preceded by what things enunciate about themselves in their self-enactment. Each substance's own manifested intelligibility offers, then, something like an appeal to man, who in perceiving the thing can know it, and in knowing it can speak it. But things can address us in this way first because we exist in a state of listening, that is, we are ordered in such a way as to receive what things show of themselves so we can return to them the name they cannot claim for themselves.

All speech is at bottom celebratory; by giving things our words, we magnify the beauty that first elicited us. Invoking Augustine, Chrétien writes: "If beauty is the very voice of things, the face-to-face encounter through which beauty grips us is not in its essence a speechless contemplation but a dialogue." If our speaking is foremost a dialogical response to the things we name, then it cannot be that things mean nothing before we give voice to them. Each substance receives its own significant wholeness first from the divine Logos of whom its own nature is an expression. Paul Claudel in the first of his *Five Odes* speaks of the poet's naming of things as a "repetition"—as a radical reenactment, that is, of God's creative deed. In this way, man's interpretation and articulation of the meaning of finite things is not only an answer to the compelling appeal they make to him. More than this, man's poetic recapitulation of creation is fundamentally sustained by the divine Word's invitation for him to enter into cooperative dialogue with God. Knowing the world is a form of conversation with things, and, as such, is already the beginning of prayer to the God whom all things confess merely by disclosing themselves. We thus come to ourselves always already addressed from without and from above. We are beheld and hailed by God from the beginning, and, as embodied persons, this address that holds us in being is mediated by our experience of fellow creatures.

Profoundly, Chrétien sees that we are not only disposed to offer a response *to* the world, but are constituted in our very being *as respondents*. The first call by which we are beckoned is God the Word's creation of us in our conception, and we see the power of this call, addressed to us so we may be, in the fact that we respond to it long before we are conscious that we exist having heard it. This is "the response that we ourselves are... a 'here I am' provoked by a 'come here.'" Our most basic answer to this original vocation occurs in all that we do and comes before any decision to adhere to it, though the whole effort of our lives is to learn to live out this stance most responsibly—which is to say, most generatively.

But if to be a person is to be given a voice to answer the love that summons us from the beginning, if then being is antiphonal, we can never so perfectly respond that the abiding divine call that precedes us would cease to exceed us infinitely. Fittingly, Chrétien does not view this essential belatedness of our word as tragic, but instead as the source of a perpetually-renewed adventure of praise: "the excess of the call relative to any possible response or to any act of hearing is precisely what parts my lips again and again in order that I may sing what shatters my voice." We are carried into this song, even as it is our own to sing. God promises himself to me so faithfully that he creates me not only for but into partnership with him, speaking his promise *in me* through the "immemorial yes that is uttered by my very being, by my very coming into existence, over each and every particular yes that I will have a chance to proffer in my life." Entrusted to ourselves, and hence existing most basically as respondents in a sacred conversation, we are nevertheless tasked with learning to return a true word, and even one to which we can freely be true forever. We are made finally to live out a vow for which we are wholly answerable.

If there is something in me that responds before I even recognize that I have heard a call, does that mean that there is a speaker deeper in me than my own speech? In the third part of the work, "The Other Voice," the author considers a range of philosophical voices on the presence of an "inner alterity" within the self. Is there a dialogue within me (a dialogue between me and myself) that is in some measure the wellspring of my dialogue with the world? Without deciding on this question, Chrétien gives us to think that the power to speak necessarily implies an openness to community that rests on a kind of intrapersonal community within the self.

In keeping with this, he appreciates not only that the word is born of our encounter with things, but that language is even the medium through which we come to understand the world at all. "We speak only for having been called, called by what there is to say, and yet we learn and hear what there is to say only in speech itself." As Aquinas recognized, our knowledge of reality is always verbal, at least in the form of the "inner word" or concept wherein our mind has received other substances. If language is present at the deepest sources of our understanding of the world, however, language can never belong merely to the individual, but is necessarily social. Ultimately, I conceive the world so that I can communicate my understanding to another, or learn from what another has to say, and thereby contemplate the world together with my like-minded interlocutor. The commonness of any given tongue suggests further to Chrétien that our own speech is in itself plurivocal, bearing within it the voices of all forebears and contemporaries which we cannot but repeat, translate, and answer. Language, he says, has a "choral character." In giving my word, as I do already in testifying to any truth, I representatively take a stand on behalf of those whose language I have inherited, but also speak for those to come. "I speak by answering, but my response endures only by calling other words that will answer it ... The response of others is the future of our speech, a future that is always already present." As Walt Whitman would have it, "I contain multitudes"—yes, but my own voice is for this reason also meant to find its place within the multitudes that make up the chorus of the great tradition, and, finally, within the multitudes that make up the eschatological chorus where the Church as one speaks her vow

everlastingly before her Bridegroom, where God's creative word of promise is consummately fulfilled.

This mutual presence of other voices within my own and my own voice within others is not only a mark of what it is to be spirit, but is rooted too in our natural embodiment. In the fourth and final section of the book, "Body and Touch," Chrétien turns his attention to how the flesh and its self-feeling signify our original belonging with others. "To feel oneself is not a beginning, but a response to the appeal made by a sensible that is other than myself and that elicits the exercise of my acts. I never start by saying 'I,' I start by being 'thou-ed' by the world." This body wherein my voice resonates bears in itself an intimation of my dialogical existence, my corporate membership in a community within which I can grow into my voice—by daring to promise myself. I thereby carry out my mission of responding to God, and do so together with and on behalf of everything whose appealing wholeness has moved me to know that God's ever-addressing Word is "living and active" (Heb 4:12).

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On Religious Freedom

AUGUSTO DEL NOCE

An interview with Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce appeared in the December 1987 issue of Litterae Communionis. The below translation appears here with permission.

Q. Professor, what are, in your opinion, the greatest obstacles to the realization of religious freedom in the West? In what sense is it the foundation of a lasting peace?

Del Noce: The first freedom, and the precondition of all others, is religious freedom because it is based on the principle that life can only be welcome as truth. Therefore, truth and freedom are related terms, and the primacy of truth is the foundation of freedom. Understanding this is extremely important, because it leads to a conclusion that people often (not to say generally) fail to recognize: whoever separates freedom from religion must fall into permissivism, which I think can be adequately defined precisely as freedom from religion. Permissivism is the anarchical, and at worst satanic, deformation of freedom that prevails in the West today.

Permissivism, which is the attitude that derives from the conception that separates and mutually opposes freedom and religion, is also the negation of the idea of peace. It is true that the opposite thesis, which links together [the] spirit of peace and instinctual freedom, has been widespread in recent years and still today keeps inspiring, at least to a large extent, the ideology of the Green parties. But this thesis is utterly baseless. Permissivism excludes the idea of morality, and in that respect it is an indirect proof of the necessary link between morality and religion. The idea of morality is tied with the idea of sacrifice, and this latter is tied with the distinction between a higher and a lower part of the soul, at least since Plato.

The permissivist rejection of morality leads to pure ego-centrism, to the realization of the *homo homini lupus*, of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. It is not by chance that today, among all the classics of politics, Hobbes is the most fashionable. It is true that today there is also the most imposing of all Leviathans, the atomic bomb. But if it has been enough, and probably will be enough, to prevent a world war, it is not true at all that the spirit of peace has increased. Just think of so many local wars, or of the indifference in rich countries (including Italy, today) towards the millions of people who starve to death, as a result of economic policies that also fall within the general category of war.

The phenomenon of permissivism—which, when considered in depth, has no historical precedents, at least in terms of how widespread it has become—clarifies (and this is a topic that ought to be carefully studied) the connection between freedom and religion, and conversely what happens when they are separated.

Q. Western societies formally respect religious freedom. However, the common mentality seems to be determined by secularism, namely the conception that views God as irrelevant to the concrete field of daily human interests. In what sense does this mentality constitute a threat to religious freedom?

Del Noce: I have often emphasized the qualitative difference, which manifests itself also in behavior and language, between the Western secularism of the past (and not even a very remote past) and the

secularism of today. I do not like to repeat myself, but the point is too important not to insist on it.

The common feature of the two secularisms is the confinement of religion to the private sphere, while professing the legal recognition of religious freedom. However, the old secularism talked about a common morality shared by Catholic and secular people; today's secularism talks about common values. It seems a purely terminological question, but it is not. "Moral" is a word that evokes the ideas of obligatoriness and duty, of accepting some sacrifice, of renouncing ego-centrism; on the contrary, "value" is what is instrumental for my realization. It is a term that arrived at ethics passing through economics, and which still maintains an utilitarian reference. When a secular person of the old kind told a Catholic "your religion is a private matter" he just implied that the believer's conviction about the existence of a supernatural reality is "his own business," inasmuch as it cannot be demonstrated, but this did not take away the recognition that for the believer this was a truth, and generally it underscored a substantial agreement about the commandments.

Everything changes when the truth is replaced by values. It is hard for "values" not to have the characters of multiplicity and subjectivity. What "has value" for my realization tends to replace the "true" and the "good" and their obligatory character. Religion's character as "truth" is somehow forgotten compared to its character of being "vitalizing." Everybody is free to resort to such vitalizer. It seems that nobody speaks against religion any more. Unlike in the East, in Western countries religion is the object of benevolent tolerance.

This apparent respect must not deceive us; the attitude of today's secularism is more dangerous than an open *kulturkampf*. It differs from it in this respect: religion is destined to die out; let us perform a slow euthanasia; in a quarter of a century the Catholic Church will be reduced to the size of an essentially harmless sect.

The powerful people of the past thought that religion was good for the commoners; it was their "opium." In the current age of consumerism, this function has been taken over by libertinism, which in ages past was the prerogative of certain privileged social classes. If we look closely, the spreading of pornography has no other motivations, and this explains why it is protected. In fact, already in Sorel we can find hints about this new type of "opium of the people."

Permeating daily life has always been essential to religion. I would say that re-affirming this has never been as important as today, when many Catholics not only forget it, but affirm as a matter of principle the full autonomy of politics and of all other worldly activities.

Q. The dominant culture in the West seems to have undermined the very foundations of religious life: the religious sense. What are the factors of this phenomenon?

Del Noce: The nineteenth century and the first half of our century had tried to replace transcendent religions including the most important one, Catholicism, with secular religions: the religion of Humanity, of Freedom. The most important example of a surrogate of religion was Marxism, but also, in their own way, Fascism and Nazism.

The great novelty, which already developed over those years and then exploded in the following decades, has been the secular abandonment of "surrogate religion." In what way? Religious revelation is the answer to a question that arises in the heart of man. The effort by today's secularism is no longer to fight against the answer, but to eliminate the questions. For example, if in reference to Marxism it still made sense to speak of a secularized gnosis, what is widespread today is scientific agnosticism.

Q. What are the responsibilities of the Catholic Church in the process of de-Christianization of society? Along what lines is a come-back possible?

Del Noce: The crucial point is the following: in the years after the Council, the modernistic positions that had already appeared at the beginning of the century, and that at that time had been condemned (we now see the truth of the attitude taken by the Church), have re-emerged in a form that propels their development. The fashionable sentence in the sixties was the “opening of the Church to the world,” that is, the reception of Marxist or secularist modern and contemporary history; and this precisely when Marxism and secularism already showed their character of crisis, which has become fully manifested in the years we are living—at least ideally, because at the practical level the networks of interests that secularism can mobilize is enormous. Regarding ways of coming back, there is no other answer except that the task of Catholics can only be that of digging deep in their ideal tradition, and of making visible and explicit its virtualities; and not of trying to adapt to positions that present themselves as opposite to them, even if these positions are attractive because of their flair of modernity.

The experience of modernization has already taken place, and we saw its results.

Augusto Del Noce (1910-1989) was a distinguished philosopher, political thinker, and public intellectual.

