

HOW THE HERD MIND THREATENS ACADEMIA

MAY 2024 \$4.25

new
oxford
review



PIETER VREE
RATZINGER THE RESTRAINER?

Bob Filoramo
A SUPERBLOOM IN AN ARID DESERT

RANDALL B. SMITH
JUNKSPACE: OUR POLITICIZED LINGUISTICS

RANDALL B. SMITH

JUNKSPACE: THE EMPTY SLOGANS OF OUR POLITICIZED LINGUISTIC REGIME

Modern media commentary is chockful of imputed intentions, nearly all bad. Rarely, if ever, are opponents perceived as honest interlocutors arguing in good faith who are sadly mistaken in certain premises or conclusions. No, given the self-evidence of “our” side’s arguments and the righteousness of “our” cause, opponents must be either fools or scoundrels — and probably both.

It is not merely the *fact* of disagreement between different groups that should disturb us — disagreements of a certain sort are essential to any functioning democracy and can be a sign of its health and vitality — but the *tone* of the disagreements and the increasing lack of basic civility that

make attempts to work through disagreements nearly impossible. Expressing offense or indignation at someone else’s words has become the default mode of discourse.

Why is good will so often lacking? Or why does it disappear so quickly? Consider this problem: Although the order we would normally expect to follow in an argument is to begin with the evidence, adduce valid arguments, and then draw reasonable conclusions, what we sense in ourselves, and thus suspect in others, is that the conclusions came first, after which we searched around for some “arguments” or perhaps cherry-picked some “evidence” to support our view.

It is for these reasons, according to the eminent philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, that one of the characteristic features of contemporary moral protest is the “unmasking” of the so-called arguments of one’s opponents, which are taken to be made in bad faith. “They don’t really believe their own arguments,” is the common charge; “they are just *saying* that to cover their greed.” Or, “What’s really going on here is their dedication to” — take your pick — “bleeding-heart liberalism,” “wealth and privilege,” “the status quo,” or the ultimate dialogue-stopper, “racism.” In this way, what might have been a serious argument devolves into a series of *ad hominem* attacks, the goal of which is not to prove that one’s opponent’s

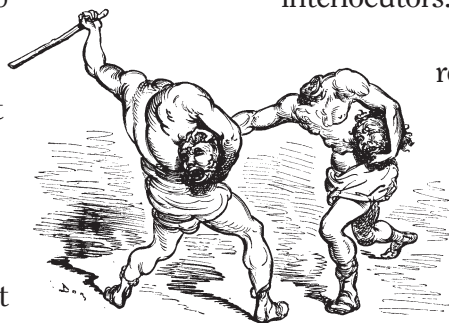
Randall B. Smith is a Full Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. He is the author of several books, including *Reading the Sermons of Thomas Aquinas: A Beginner’s Guide* (Emmaus Road Publishing), *Aquinas, Bonaventure and the Scholastic Culture of Medieval Paris* (Cambridge University Press), and, most recently, *From Here to Eternity: Reflections on Death, Immortality, and the Resurrection of the Body* (Emmaus Road Publishing).

arguments are wrong but that he is using them to further his self-interests or to buttress his biases. If this is the case, then what we call “arguments” are really cover for a will-to-power. Our opponents are never merely mistaken; they are hiding a deeper and more sinister motive. Their arguments are “hypocritical” and “dishonest,” their presentation of the facts “deceptive” and “misleading,” their accusations “biased,” their charges “trumped up,” and their presentation of the issues “deceitful.”

Ours is a culture of media-savvy citizens who specialize in seeing through the illusory claims of their opponents, but never their own. The weaker one’s case, the louder the shouting and the more dismissive the tone of address toward one’s opponents. Rather than a common search for the truth, with each side correcting the other’s flaws and addressing areas not yet fully considered, discussions in the public square have become more like a children’s mud fight than the rational discourse America’s founders hoped would characterize our civic life.

Unfortunately, the tendency of the news media is not to calm these shrill voices but to amplify them for their entertainment and, therefore, commercial value. Rarely is it the moderate, reasonable interlocutors who get maximum screen time; rather, it is the most radical partisans.

As media theorist Neil Postman argued in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), the “news” business has turned information into a commodity for sale, and “we increasingly live in a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment.” And not merely any entertainment, but the sort that appeals to those between the ages of 18 and 35. This is the group most often targeted by marketers as a “key demographic” because they spend substantial sums on consumer items they believe will help them fashion a certain identity or persona. In other words, this is the group most susceptible to advertising. Thus, not only has the news become a commodity to be marketed, it must be marketable to this specific demographic group, which also happens to be the key audience for professional wrestling. It is not without reason, therefore, that most



of what passes for political discourse is the verbal equivalent of a *WWE SmackDown*. “Deep down we don’t care if our daily news is entirely authentic,” writes John Sommerville in *How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society* (1999), “as long as it is entertaining, like professional wrestling.”

Originally, the Internet held out the promise of a deeper engagement with important issues. It makes research easier and more available to more people and allows greater access to a variety of perspectives. Yet the promise of the Internet does not often match the reality. Rather than broadening outlooks and sources of information, the Internet provides virtual refuges for partisan groups to sequester themselves more effectively from their opponents’ views and concerns. Internet algorithms tend to show users the information and arguments *their* side considers relevant, and they are presented with even more of the shrill dismissal of the other side’s motives. A popular sign reads: “Drink coffee: Do stupid things faster with more energy.” Perhaps there should be one that reads: “The Internet: Spread bad ideas faster and more effectively.”

Rather than countering this trend by redoubling their efforts at fairness and dispassionate dialogue, those in the mainstream media ape the Internet’s tendencies in an effort to attract and maintain viewers and thereby sustain ratings and cash flow.

These developments have given rise to “virtual mobs.” French sociologist Gustave Le Bon, in his seminal *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), warned about the dangerous characteristics of the “mob mentality.” Among the distinctive features of a crowd, Le Bon lists “impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, and the exaggeration of the sentiments.” Crowds are less patient, less open to reason, less careful in their judgments, and more prone to emotional excesses than a small group of interlocutors. Welcome to modern media.

The founders of the American republic recognized the danger of mobs and the mob mentality and tried to discipline public discourse within forums that enforced civility and order. We have lost that wisdom and discipline. Even fake stories based on dubious evidence can spread

across the Internet in minutes. Personal pictures or an offhand comment made in an unguarded moment can “go viral” and cause untold damage to individuals and their family and friends. The number of “views” a story garners says nothing about its truth.

The way to counter fake stories and information is not to insist that there is no such thing as *true* stories and *true* information but to be open to the corrective power of the truth.

Unfortunately, truth is the very thing a society mired in moral relativism denies for itself. What do people who are sincerely convinced of the injustices they are fighting do then? As there is no way of reaching a rational agreement, partisans must resort to self-assertive shrillness and impassioned emotional appeals to secure their point in the public consciousness. Take the “debate” over tax-funded welfare. Those in favor raise the stakes by claiming that their opponents are trying to “eradicate the poor.” Those opposed respond that the first group is trying to “punish those who work hard.” The first group says the second is “racist,” as the poor are often minorities. The second group replies that the first are a bunch of “socialists” who are trying to make minorities “slaves” of the government.

If we had only current modern American political discourse from which to judge, there would be an abundance of evidence to support the view known as “emotivism,” the basic thesis of which is that all moral statements are *nothing but* expressions of a person’s emotions, attitudes, or feelings. If emotivism is true, then interlocutors have no other recourse than to get people to “feel” the way they do as strongly as they do. The problem is that the other side is also trying to get people to feel as strongly as *they* do. The result is what is often called an “emotionally charged debate,” which is what nearly *every* debate has become, most of which are less debates than dueling attempts to emotionally manipulate listeners.

For these reasons, MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), emotivism “entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations.” Why? To be “non-manipulative,” he argues, involves offering “what I take to be good reasons for acting in one way rather than another,” and to leave it to the listeners to “evaluate those

reasons.” It is, he says, “to be unwilling to influence another except by reasons which that other...judges to be good.” I lay out my reasons honestly and forthrightly, and then I trust that you are a reasonable enough person — as reasonable as I am — that I can say, “Now you decide.” If you were to disagree, I would invite you to give me your reasons, and we would thereby begin an honest and open dialogue.

If emotivism is true, “this distinction is illusory,” says MacIntyre. “For if there are no impersonal, objective criteria for me to appeal to, then my laying out arguments based on what were framed as ‘impersonal criteria’ (and not merely my own biases and prejudices) was nothing but a ruse, if even an unconscious one. The result is an inherent instability, if not at the heart of my convictions, then at least in the discontinuity between my convictions and my words — between my stated reasons for my position and my inner knowledge that these reasons have little or nothing to do with what I am demanding of others.”

The rupture between argument and demands becomes unmistakable when the old slogans and narratives are no longer convincing even to those who repeat them. At this point, moral argument has been replaced by a dangerously illusory simulacrum, and political discourse has decayed into the rote phrases of partisan ideology. This causes more and more people to become cynical about *all* such verbiage, with the result that we no longer share a language with which to communicate — much less solve — real problems. If every opponent is a “Hitler,” how will I be able to alert people when a *real* Hitler comes along? If every problem is a “crisis,” how will I designate a true crisis from all the false ones I insisted on before?

In his famous essay “Power of the Powerless” (1978), Czech dissident Václav Havel proposed the example of a greengrocer in a communist country forced to display a sign in his shop window with the slogan, “Workers of the world, unite!” Is the greengrocer “genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world?” asks Havel. “Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals?” Not at all. The sign is an expression of an ideology. And ideology, declares Havel, is a “specious way of relating to the world,” one that offers

men “the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them.” The lie is that the sign expresses concern for workers when what it really represents is submission to the ruling authority.

“It is an excuse that everyone can use, from the greengrocer, who conceals his fear of losing his job behind an alleged interest in the unification of the workers of the world, to the highest functionary, whose interest in staying in power can be cloaked in phrases about service to the working class,” Havel explains. Sadly, the reality the words are meant to signify becomes less important than the expression of solidarity with a reigning ideology. For many Americans, “the poor,” “the working class,” and “minorities” are no longer concrete realities; they are elements of slogans devoid of concrete meaning. What the slogans represent are acceptance of the authority of elite opinion-makers and the desire to be accepted by the “in-crowd.”

Contemporary architect Rem Koolhaas coined the term *junk-space* to describe the “new flamboyant, flexible, forgettable face of architecture.” So, too, might we describe the modern media landscape. What we have is ideological posturing that is at once “flamboyant” (made for the gladiatorial arena of dueling television soundbites), “flexible” (ready to change on a dime to fit the mood of the crowd), and “forgettable” (we are not meant to remember a person’s positions or promises from last year or even last week).

Postmodernist French thinker Jean Baudrillard has suggested that in modern society a simulacrum can become “hyperreal,” that is, more real to many people than reality itself, as, for example, when pictures of the *Mona Lisa* that have become so ubiquitous become “more real” than the original painting itself — so much so that when people see the actual painting, some will say, “That doesn’t look like the *Mona Lisa*,” although it is the *Mona Lisa*.

Likewise, the ideological slogans bandied about in the junkspace of the modern media are a simulacrum of rational discourse. Sloganeering is often mistaken for argumentation. It provides a “semblance of rationality, but not its reality,” MacIntyre

argues. It is precisely the “mock rationality of the debate” that “conceals the arbitrariness of the will and power at work.”

Indeed, today’s debates are often not about some *thing* or any *thing* but are merely posturing to show which side of the partisan dividing line the interlocutors are on. “The poor” aren’t actual people *I know* and about whom I am concerned enough to sacrifice my time or money, any more than “the workers of the world” were real individuals to the communist bureaucrat who would have punished the greengrocer for failing to display the sign of his loyalty to party ideology.

Instead of serving as instruments for expressing truth and sharing needed information about reality, words have become, under this new po-

“One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end.... Political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one’s own habits.”

— George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

liticized linguistic regime, little more than avatars: ephemeral entities to be manipulated in the pursuit of power. Postmodernists enjoy unmasking the idealism of others as fanciful delusions, without stopping to wonder whether there might be a price to pay for the “games” they play — a price paid by the poor and disadvantaged they claim to be serving. Have these constantly shifting language codes helped alleviate poverty or reduce oppression? No. The game is a therapeutic exercise for its players, not a program for actual progress.

In response to these contemporary challenges, too many American Christians prefer to tweak the nose of their church in the direction they desire, embracing the ideology and slogans of their preferred partisan group rather than forming themselves in fidelity to the teachings of their church and

its moral traditions. When this happens, Christians do not heal society's divisions; they simply mirror them, and in their own way, worsen them. It adds little to the moral substance of a debate over a policy, about which interlocutors of good will can disagree, for one side to claim that the other is "un-Christian" or doing something "abhorrent to God." What it does is make an already difficult conversation more difficult.

What, then, are Christians to do? Given society's current linguistic confusions, we can render a great service by doing what we can, as T.S. Eliot once urged us, to "purify the dialect of the tribe." Christians, after all, have a long acquaintance with *the Word* and words: reading them, interpreting them, being guided by them, and sorting true from false accounts. Christians understand that words are meant to be instruments of truth, of the being and goodness of *what is*. As reality is a creation of the Word, so words should be a mirror of reality and an instrument of the Goodness and Love that created it.

This is not to say that Christians must take sides or force a particular understanding of words like *justice* or *peace*. Rather, society would be better served by recognizing the different understandings of these terms and how they affect disagreements.

Consider the confusions we face today when people hear the message that we need a "just" economic system that does more to help the poor. If we begin with the notion that "justice" means I get to keep what I earn, then it is entirely possible to derive from this premise the conclusion that taxes should be kept low. If we begin with the notion that "justice" means the goods of society should be spread equally among all members, then it is entirely possible to derive from that premise the conclusion that taxes should be raised.

Terrible misunderstandings result when those arguing about what is "just" do not realize that they are using the term in different ways — indeed, in ways that are mutually contradictory. What one side calls "just" is precisely what the other side would describe as "unjust." If Silicon Valley execs get to keep all their billions, some people would protest this as "unjust." If the government taxes those billionaires and uses the proceeds to support recently arrived illegal immigrants, others would call *this* "unjust." Both groups use the same word, but with entirely different meanings.

A further difficulty arises when we find in ourselves *both* notions of "justice" operating independently, so that, in some moments and some circumstances, we desire to keep what we earn, but in others are convinced that the goods of society should be spread around "more justly." The result is often the conviction not that *I* should do more but that "the rich" (meaning those who make more money than I do) should do more to help the poor.

When a discussion about justice for the poor reaches the conclusion that "rich people should do more," this may well be true, but the conclusion is not entirely helpful if the interlocutors haven't a clear idea (a) what they mean by "the poor" (are people who can't afford rent but own large-screen TVs "poor"?), (b) what they mean by "rich" (are people making \$200,000 per year, who say they can't afford everything they really need, "rich"?), or (c) what they mean by "justice" (should people keep what they earn or share it with others equally?).

The necessary task, then, is to help clarify the terms of the debate to help both sides deliberate more clearly about something they think they're discussing but really aren't. Christians can't solve all of society's problems, but clarifying words, insisting on their correspondence to reality, and helping to purify the dialect of the tribe is something we have the resources to do, and it is something society desperately needs.

Havel's answer to the problem posed by the totalitarian system of ideological control was what he described as "living in the truth." The struggle has to begin, he believed, by calling things by their right names and by telling the truth. This, too, is where it must begin with us.

But discerning the truth is not always as easy as we wish it would be. It is something, as Havel's phrase suggests, we must *live in*. If we are to live in the truth, we must strive to *know* the truth — not just *my* truth, or the truths thrown around by *my* side, but *the* truth. There is no better way of getting at the truth than by testing our arguments against the best arguments of our opponents. I often wonder at people who set up a straw man only to burn it and then declare victory. How much better to have faced our opponent at his strongest and to have convinced him by the wisdom of our arguments. It is perhaps even better to have learned from him the

places where our argument was the weakest. Best of all would be for both parties to have guided one another a step closer to the truth of things.

To live in the truth, we must *want* the truth. And that means doing what we can to get at the reality hidden behind the empty slogans of contemporary partisan ideology. We must avoid resorting to euphemisms or vague categories that obscure the truth rather than reveal it. And we must fight

against the common tendency to allow a disjunction between our words and their true meanings.

If we want things like peace and justice, then they'd better be more than mere slogans with which to beat our opponents over the head. Peace and justice begin with how we treat our opponents and with our resolve to listen carefully, judge fairly, and speak charitably — especially to and about those with whom we disagree. ■