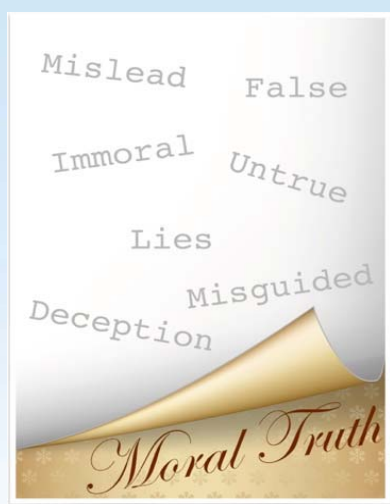




Language — Veiling or Unveiling Moral Truth?

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To sanction or encourage certain wrongful actions, it is often necessary to manipulate language. The plain meaning of words can get in the way of convincing others they should tolerate or participate in wrongdoing, or otherwise embrace situations of evil or injustice. Verbal obfuscation becomes necessary to veil evident moral truths.

A recently-published book by Laura Fabrycky, the wife of a U.S. diplomat in Berlin, offers insight into this phenomenon during the Nazi regime. Fabrycky served for several years as a tour guide to the house of anti-Nazi dissident and Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Fabrycky describes how bewildered she was coming across a seemingly mundane bureaucratic memorandum in an exhibition catalogue. Only after reading it through several times did its meaning begin to "coalesce with nauseating clarity." She continues:

It concerned vehicles...that the Nazis designed to kill people—Jewish people, mostly. These mobile units killed through asphyxiation. Nazis loaded Jewish people into them, filled the vehicles with carbon monoxide, and then emptied the dead from the killing machines. Whoever

wrote the memo, however, used language to tap dance, delicately, almost soothingly, around the subject at hand to obscure the heavy murderous footfall of its horrific realities....The quicksand sentences swallowed more than they said; these ear-ticklers softened the blow that plain and direct speech would easily level on human conscience.

The careful hijacking of language by purveyors of wrongdoing described by Fabrycky is a widely-deployed tactic in the battle for the soul of every culture. The phenomenon is especially prevalent when discussing bioethical situations in which the human person and the human body are systematically violated, often under the aegis of the medical profession and the health sciences.

A current example can be found in the April 2020 issue of the "Mayo Clinic Proceedings" in an article entitled, "Fertility Preservation for Transgender Individuals: A Review." The problem of fertility preservation in transgender individuals, of course, arises precisely because physicians carry out interventions that deliberately disrupt and suppress

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healthy hormonal physiology and mutilate healthy sexual anatomy to the point that properly functioning fertility may be permanently lost.

The authors consequently attempt to identify ways to “salvage” fertility while carrying out, or in the wake of, direct medical attacks on the human body. Throughout the article, the destructive interventions are carefully veiled by the almost compulsive use of jargon such as “gender-affirming hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgery.” Such euphemisms obscure the fact that the procedures, while affirming subjective gender feelings, most decidedly do not affirm objective biology.

The article would read quite differently if such phrases were replaced by “biology-opposing” surgery or “biology-denying” hormone therapy. Similarly, if one were to replace “gender-affirming” with the more accurate “fertility-denying” or “fertility-destroying” therapy, the moral implications and objections surrounding these “treatments” would come into much clearer focus. The use of tap-dancing and ear-tickling language, however, veils the reality of unethical medicine directed against the human person.

Similar tap-dancing is evident in the morally problematic world of infertility treatments and *in vitro* fertilization. As David Dodge notes in his 2014 *New York Times* article,

Fertility clinics, in particular, have mastered the art of sperm donor doublespeak.” Instead of the clinic’s staff “greeting me with, ‘This way, please, to the masturbation room,’ ...at my scheduled ‘donation time,’ a technician guides me to the ‘collection room,’ points out my various ‘entertainment options,’ and hands me a sterile cup for my ‘specimen.’ I realize all this veiled terminology is supposed to make the process less awkward for me. Somehow, though, it just makes things worse.

Msgr. William Smith, the late and renowned moral theologian at New York’s Dunwoody Seminary, once quipped that had society been courageous enough years ago to speak frankly about the issue of contraception, it would have termed it “life prevention” rather than “birth control.” That would have led to a much different social dialogue re-

garding the ethical and medical harms of contraception. It would be hard to imagine husbands asking their wives the question, “Honey, did you remember to pick up the Life Prevention Pills at the pharmacy today?”

During the Covid-19 pandemic, verbal gymnastics have also been evident in media headlines like, “Abortion Services Unavailable During the Lockdown,” or “Texas Clinics Resume Abortion Services.” Abortion, of course, is never a “service,” but rather a lethal disservice for every pre-born human victim it ensnares. The moral nausea caused by such direct acts of killing almost demands linguistic recasting to tickle our ears and assuage our consciences.

Fabrycky’s provocative encounter with the Nazi memo led her to conclude that “even language has a morality, or immorality, in whether it discloses or seals off facts and responsible thought, in whether it serves the truth or lies.... Language often does our thinking for us. We take in words and phrases like air, and this ambient language forms our thoughts without ever stimulating our minds to interrogate them.”

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