

Editorial | *Communicating Ideas*

In recent years, a cottage industry has grown up around identifying, describing, and offering solutions to the problem of polarization in American social and political life.¹ Whether and how much the problem is unique to or especially pronounced in twenty-first century America vis-à-vis any other time and place remains debatable, but that there is much “talking past each other” in contemporary public discourse is so obvious as to be indisputable.

It is no original contribution to the discussion to point out that the use of language plays a critically important role. Spoken or written language is of course the medium by which most communication occurs, and language is inherently unstable, culture-bound, and socially constructed. To this extent, it must be conceded that perfect communication of thought or concept from one person to another is unachievable. There is a theological dimension to the problem: The Apostles’ ability at Pentecost to preach to a diverse multitude of auditors who each “heard them speaking in his own language”² was an undoing of the cacophony introduced at the Tower of Babel, but it was an extraordinary event, temporary and incomplete. The incapacity to communicate fluently with each other remains an obstacle in human relations, even among those who purportedly speak the same language.

Overcoming the hurdles to communication within and across different languages remains a worthy and necessary aim, nonetheless. Editors, translators, linguists, and philosophers of language are among the laborers in this vineyard. They share (or should share) the goal of making the exchange of ideas more seamless, of bringing about a fuller communion of human persons who are striving to understand each other.

One small piece of this gargantuan and unending task—and one close to the heart of this journal—is promoting clearer dialogue among academic fields and between theology and economics in particular. Thus a large portion of this issue of the journal is rightly concerned with bringing greater clarity to various important concepts and terms in the field of economics, with special concern shown to how those concepts are understood by theologians. One might think that, by this late date in the history of Western intellectual life, concepts so central to both economics and social ethics as “wealth” and “self-interest” might have been settled and definitions widely accepted by all involved. Our symposium contributors demonstrate otherwise.

The project of clarifying language is thus both ongoing and of long standing. Our *Status Quaestionis* author, Jaime Balmes, contributed to the same kind of project in the nineteenth century with his analysis of value. “Here we have one of those words that everyone uses and no one defines,” Balmes writes. “[T]he greater the ignorance of its true meaning and the carelessness with which it is employed, the more difficult it is to use correctly.” Yet debates about the meaning and nature of value continue, and a symposium contributor might well have chosen this key term as the subject of a description of confusion and equivocation in modern economics.

Reaching agreement on the usage of terminology is only the first step toward reaching agreement on issues of public import. It has to be conceded that, even if we are able to achieve some success and communicate effectively, disagreements will remain. Why then take such pains to clarify meaning? Because Francis Bacon was correct when he said that “truth emerges more readily from error than confusion.”³ If our goal is to foment partisan warfare, cultural strife, and tribalism, then by all means, we should proceed to cast words about carelessly, heedless of the way they might be interpreted by others. If, however, we wish to find the truth (or at least come nearer to it) and, in the process, to lead others toward it, then careful listening to others and lucidity in our own use of language are imperative.

—Kevin Schmiesing, Executive Editor

Notes

1. Among the many examples from various perspectives, some key texts are Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012); and Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
2. Acts 2:6, RSVCE.
3. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, Aphorisms 2.20, in idem, *The Metaphysical and Physical Works of Lord Bacon*, ed. Joseph Devey (London: Bell and Daldy, 1872), 477.