Language, Self, and Business Ethics

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Contemporary discussions of business ethics rarely address the topic of language and its importance in ethics. The Christian tradition of Augustine and Aquinas argues for an intimate link between language and the self, between what we say and who we are. But in the modern world, we find a deep divide between language and self, a divide that manifests itself in much business discourse—especially in phenomena like "spin" and the use of language as a means of controlling others. This divide itself is not new, but it is the result of large social forces going back for centuries. Recovering the Augustinian and Thomistic tradition can show us a way to close the divide, by reminding us of how central language is to the sort of people we are.

Introduction

Language has been one of the most discussed topics in twentieth-century philosophy and psychology, yet it is rarely addressed in the field of business ethics. Of course, general prohibitions against lying and fraud do exist, and the ethical codes for professional communicators' associations (such as the Public Relations Society of America and the Society for Technical Communication) call for language to be used "responsibly." But such prohibitions and codes offer little concrete guidance in a world in which statement has become spin, and the line between truth and fantasy is increasingly blurred. Much of the humor in the hugely popular *Dilbert* comic strip is based on the sort of gross abuse of ordinary language that has become routine in modern business environments; such humor is a necessary release for the many modern employees who see their business environment as plagued by deceit, suspicion, and mutual mistrust between management and employees. This widespread situation suggests that we need to reconsider the importance of language in our ethical lives. To do this, we need to recover a view of language that has been largely lost or neglected in the twentieth century: We need to reconsider the relationship between language and the self, between what we say and what we are.

Theological Aspects of Language

To get at this relationship, we must first turn to some theological and

philosophical considerations before moving on to the case of business itself. The Christian tradition is rich in discussions of the moral aspects of language, with the foundational text being the prologue to the gospel of John. John's intense and poetic description of Jesus as the Word made flesh should also be our starting point. John hearkens back to the creation story in Genesis, where God spoke creation into being. For God, word and act are one; it is in saying "Let there be light" that light is created. The prologue to John's gospel recalls this profound identification of word and act in God, and goes further to identify the Word with Jesus, whose incarnation in human flesh is John's primary theme. The passage (1:1-2) has elicited an immense amount of commentary over the centuries, but it consists of relatively simple, straightforward statements:

> In the beginning was the Word,
> And the Word was with God,
> And the Word was God.
> He was in the beginning with God.
> All things came to be through him,
> And without him nothing came to be.

The Word—incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth—is identified with God. The Word is not an instrument God used for creation, but rather, *is* God. The implications of this passage are many, particularly for Catholic theology's gradual elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity. Augustine's *On the Trinity* is among the earliest and most thorough works devoted to understanding this fundamental mystery, and also to a related question that is crucial for us as humans: If God is to be understood as Trinity, and we are made "in the image of God," is there somehow a Trinity-like aspect to our selves? It may be presumptuous to speak of "understanding" the Trinity,[1] but in coming to a clearer idea of it, we also are brought to a clearer understanding of ourselves, and along the way come to some important insights about language.

The fundamental question for us—as it was for Augustine and later for Aquinas—is how the persons of the Trinity are related: How can the Word, or the Son, both be God and yet be separate from God? How can God be in heaven while the Son and the Holy Spirit are among us on earth? Augustine meditated on the idea that the Son "proceeds" from the Father, and Aquinas developed the concept of *processio* more fully. The concept of procession becomes a critical one: The Word/Son does not leave the Father and become separate, but rather, proceeds from Him. Both Augustine and Aquinas see an analogy here with the human mind: Just as the Word was with God, so we have within us an inner

word of the heart or mind (*verbum mentis*) that proceeds from us yet remains part of us. Augustine put it thus:

> For our word is so made in some way into an articulate sound of the body, by assuming that articulate sound by which it may be manifested to men's senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men's senses. And as our word becomes an articulate sound, yet is not changed into one; so the Word of God became flesh, but far be it from us to say he was changed into flesh.[2]

Aquinas analyzes this concept of procession in the *Summa Theologiae*, and describes it as an intelligible emanation (*emanatio intelligibilis*): the procession of the inner word is intelligence in action, a procession of knowledge from knowledge. It is subject to no natural laws imposed from the outside, and thus it is a phenomenon quite unlike ordinary natural phenomena, and an important aspect of what it is to be human. Bernard Lonergan sums up the Thomistic/ Augustinian views and emphasizes the connection between the human and the divine:

> … the human mind is an image, and not a mere vestige of the Blessed Trinity because its processions are intelligible in a manner that is essentially different from, that transcends, the passive, specific, imposed intelligibility of other natural processes … we may say that the inner word is rational, not indeed with the derived rationality of discourse, of reasoning from premises to conclusions, but with the basic and essential rationality of rational consciousness....[3]

Lonergan goes on to show how, for Aquinas, understanding a thing and uttering the inner word are simultaneous;[4] the *verbum mentis* and the fundamental act of the intellect are one. And this point is not theological or metaphysical dogma but psychological fact, based on a rational examination of human mental operations.[5] Aquinas's extensive discussion of the inner word, which, in turn, builds upon Augustine's earlier thinking on the subject, goes further into the basic questions of epistemology, of how we come to knowledge of truth. For Augustine (as for Plato), truth is separate from us, outside us, but Aquinas finds it to be within us, a created "intellectual light" within us, what Lonergan summarizes as a "participation, a resultant, a similitude, an impression of the first and eternal light and truth."[6] For Plato and Augustine, knowing involves a duality, a confrontation between subject and object, but for Aquinas, knowing is an act of the mind and an identity with the truth.[7] This identity is accomplished through the "inner word," in analogy with the relationship

between the Father and the Word. For us, love proceeds from this inner word, in analogy with the love that proceeds from the Father.

Without going further into the subtleties and the complications involved in these ideas—and there are many—this sketch can serve as a fundamental premise for us. Through examining the inner word, we can see how we are made in the image of God, and we can infer that this inner word is thus something of sacral value. Our inner word is, in a very real sense, our bond with God. What is the relationship between this inner word and the words we speak, hear, write, and read? The two sorts of words are not identical but intimately related: A truth I try to speak or write is an expression of the truth apprehended by my intellect; the outer word is an expression of the inner, and the outer word is caused by the inner. There is a two-level analogy to be stressed here. First, the procession of truth within our understanding, from the inner light God placed within us, is analogous to the procession of the Son or Word from the Father. Second, the expression of that inner word through speech or writing is itself an analogy to that inner procession. All things, the mystics tell us, lead up to God, and language does so quite pointedly.

A profoundly human (as opposed to theological) implication of all this lies in the relationship of language to the self. My inner word is my understanding; understanding is the natural act of the mind. Mind is the essential characteristic of rational creatures. It is virtually impossible to separate a person's mind from that person's self. Mind and self are not wholly identical, but they are so closely united that for most of us, our minds define who we are. Now, our outer (spoken or written) word is the expression of that essential self. This is not a peculiar concept to most of us. Expressions of praise such as "he is a man of his word" reflect the idea; a person of integrity is one who makes no differentiation between word and act. When word and act are united, the person is integral or whole. The idea that how we speak reveals our inner selves is not new, either: "Style is the man," said Buffon; and Ben Jonson put it concretely: "Speak, that I may see thee."

Divide Between Language and Self in Modern Philosophy

Given the solid grounding of this idea—that language and self are intimately related—both in the Thomistic tradition and in popular wisdom, it is surprising to find it largely ignored or discarded in modern philosophical discussions. Although language has become the primary topic of Anglo-American philosophy in our century, rarely has much of that discussion touched upon language and self—the general tendency of Anglo-American philosophy has been to view language as a sort of mechanism whose complex semantics are the real

focus. The result has been an array of highly technical treatments of semantics, and a gradual movement away from the larger philosophical issues that every human faces. Indeed, those issues are reduced to being problems of language rather than problems concerning external, discoverable truths about human existence.[8] Continental European philosophy, from Husserl and Heidegger, to contemporary thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, has not abandoned the larger questions but has often led to pessimistic conclusions and metaphysical cul-de-sacs, particularly with regard to the relationship between self and language.

If the Anglo-American School emptied language of its moral content and ignored the relationship between language and self, the European one has recognized the great power of language but has seen it as a constricting, negative power. The highly influential neo-Freudian Jacques Lacan, for instance, held that language acquisition is the basis for a profound rupture between the self and the world.[9] When the child recognizes that its babble is not understood by mature speakers and is somehow wrong, the child experiences a sense of alienation based in language itself. Lacan was no Thomist, but if he were, we could say that for him, the child is born with an "inner word" that experience proves to be false; something deep within the child's self is thereby damaged. The outer word—language—is the human mind's great enemy. Language acquisition is thus in a way a reenactment of the Fall, replayed within the heart of every individual.

Lacan's suspicion of language is only deepened in the equally influential work of Derrida, who sees language as a sort of prison from which there is no escape. Far from being an expression of the self, language is a malevolent force that alienates us from the self and from the world. Derrida's approach to language, known as *deconstruction* (the word has become popular, to the point where it is widely misused today to mean little more than "analysis"), aims to demonstrate that language does not and cannot relate us to reality but only to itself; language is like a black hole, inexorably swallowing everything in its path, leaving us nothing but absence and cold traces of what we once thought to be meaning.[10] Both Derrida and Lacan recognize the immense power of language, but for both of them—and their numerous followers—language is a treacherous thing. With modern philosophy, then, whether among the Anglo-Americans or the Europeans, we are a long way from the common-sense tradition of seeing language as expression of self, and even further from the Christian tradition of seeing it as reflective of our relationship to God.

Abuses of Language

There is no doubt that language can be abused, that it can reflect a ruptured self and a broken or forgotten relationship with God, and to the extent that Lacan and Derrida make us reflect on this sad reality, their lessons are salutary ones. The trouble arises when we take their diagnoses of the problem as the whole truth. For if language is merely an external force for control, why should I not make use of it to my advantage? Why should I not produce a fine-sounding ethics statement for my corporation, if it might bring me more business? Why should I not lie to my employees or to my superiors, if doing so might bring me some advancement? Why should I not use this powerful tool as an instrument to bring me closer to whatever ends I have in mind? Indeed, we see language used in just this way every day. A particularly unpleasant example comes from the world of American politics. In 1994 the Republican party distributed a memo to its candidates across the country, titled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control." In it, candidates were urged to give thought to the "mechanism" of language. Two sets of highly emotive terms were presented: the first was a list of words to use in contrasting oneself with one's opponent, and the second was a list of (redundantly enough) "Optimistic Positive Governing Words" to use in describing one's own candidacy. A sample from the first list will give the flavor:

> Often we search for words to help us define our opponents. Sometimes we are hesitant to use contrast. Remember that creating a difference helps you. These are powerful words that can create a clear and easily understood contrast. Apply these to the opponent, their record, proposals and their party.

> Decay … failure (fail) … collapse(ing) … deeper … crisis … urgent(cy) … destructive … destroy … sick … pathetic … lie … liberal …[11]

And the list goes on, suggesting words like *traitors*, *greed*, *cheat*, and *steal*. In quoting this memo, my intent is not to attack Republicans; modern Democrats and independents are just as capable of generating such a memo, and perhaps have done so. My intent is rather to insist that if we see language as an external instrument, we drift quickly and perhaps inevitably into immorality. Indeed, if language is only an instrument, this memo is nothing more than a set of helpful rhetorical tips (though the rhetoric advised is almost comically amateurish). But if I see language as closely related to my self, to who and what I am, it will be much easier to see the moral implications of my speech and writing—and perhaps of my other actions as well.

"Speak, that I may see thee": It is through my words that I know others and others know me. The Thomist tradition stresses language as reflective of our bond with God, but language is also reflective of—even constitutive of—our bonds with each other. Augustine remarks that language was given to us for community. He says we have a natural interest in language and languages because

> by them human fellowship mutually communicates its own perceptions,
> lest the assemblies of men should be actually worse than utter solitude,
> if they were not to mingle their thoughts by conversing together....[12]

This point, that language is essential for any human community, hardly needs argument, but it does need to be stressed if we are to appreciate the importance of language to ethics. The great growth of interest in business ethics over the past few decades has given rise to the idea of the stakeholder—not just the owners and stockholders, but all employees, suppliers, customers, and the community in which the business is located; no business exists in isolation, but is based on a wide network of bonds. The language chosen in communicating with these various stakeholders either helps to forge bonds of community, or it erodes community, infecting it with a generalized distrust that can even metastasize into open conflict. The business that disseminates outright lies or withholds important facts from stakeholders does itself and them great harm, of course, but a subtler and more insidious practice is what has come to be called *spin*.

The Spin

Spin is so radical a misuse of language that it eludes proper definition. When we spin a fact, we put the best possible light on it, a light that shows it in the way most advantageous to ourselves. The very word *spin* is vivid, lively, jaunty; it suggests a sort of game is being played, and, ideally, it is being played expertly. Thus the word itself invites us to lay aside questions of ethics: in a game, one is supposed to play hard and cunningly, not to be concerned with issues of morality. The point of spin is to hide unpleasant realities and to create an impression of good news when the truth is bad. Political discourse led the way in spin, and the Vietnam War was an especially fertile period for the practice, as bombing raids were called *protective reaction strikes* and the practice of burning down villages was called *pacification*. But business learned quickly too, and it is a rare manager today who will speak of laying people off (which was itself originally a gentle euphemism for firing them) rather than *downsizing, restructuring,* or *outsourcing*. But spin is more insidious than the mere use of euphemisms,

which most people can see through pretty quickly. Spin has, in many environments, become expected and even demanded: A manager ought to sound managerial, and a president ought to sound presidential. A manager should never refer to a situation as a *problem*, for example, but ought always to spin it into an *opportunity* or, at the very worst, a *challenge*. (An example from the stock markets: It is a rare stock analyst today who will actually give a stock a "sell" rating, as that has come to be perceived as too negative; as a result, when an analyst lists a stock as "hold," we evidently need to infer that he or she actually means "sell." Language, like money, is subject to inflation.) Business and political leaders are expected to swim, as it were, in the warm, comforting waters of euphemism and jargon. So if a leader tells us hard, painful facts, he or she is somehow appearing unprofessional, and if a politician expresses pessimism about a situation, he or she is somehow not quite right for the job. Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign was certainly damaged by his tendency to put things starkly, which led many to see him as gloomy and sarcastic—as if one ought only to trust and elect an upbeat, continually cheerful person.

The problem is not so much spin itself, as it is the culture it has spawned through its sheer pervasiveness. On the one hand, as shareholders or employees or voters, we detest being lied to; but, on the other hand, we demand it. The spin culture has not so much undone community as it has created a parody of community, a community of continual mistrust, one in which we must assume that a leader is lying to us, and one in which we likewise feel we are expected to lie to any superior. The recent debate over Bill Clinton's testimony regarding his affair with an intern reflects this reality: Poll after poll shows the majority of Americans believe he lied, but almost as large a majority say it was appropriate for him to lie under these circumstances. The Clinton case is both legally and politically complex, but the polls showing that Americans are comfortable with their leader's lying are disturbing, and can be viewed as evidence of this widespread trend. We expect to be lied to by people in power, and this expectation does not seem to bother us. Americans have never been, as a group, a cynical people (and no doubt our national preference for optimism, for seeing things in the most hopeful light possible, has helped in the birth and growth of the spin culture), but the unprecedented bombardment of spin from politicians and business people and of exaggeration and hype from advertisers and the media be taking its toll at last.

Corporate Vision Statements

Such cynicism, such widespread and almost casual mistrust, will have, one can predict, a profound impact on us as a society and as individuals. We still

naturally look to language as a bonding agent, as a builder of community, and some phenomena in business discourse reflect this propensity. The popularity of corporate mission statements—sometimes called *vision* or *philosophy* statements—is an example. Higher management initially grew enamored of the mission statement for purely business concerns, as a means of keeping the organization focused and hence, more productive. But these statements are just as often taken to heart by rank-and-file employees, who feel increased loyalty toward, and commitment to, the organization through them. In my own graduate business courses, I have encountered many students who clearly feel very strongly about their organizations' mission statements, and who often know them by heart. They quote these statements often with evident passion, and they often see the statements as what, in ethics, is sometimes called a *higher law*, transcending the often bad or unethical acts of the organization's leaders—rather like Americans' reverence for the United States Constitution, which stands above whatever missteps our politicians might take. The words "spoken" by the organization in these mission statements have a tremendous ability to bind people together. Likewise, I have encountered students who have had bad experiences with an organization, and they will also quote the mission statement, but now with bitterness and a sense of having been betrayed or duped. In both cases, the interesting thing is how seriously employees take these statements, which evidences how deeply we want to be bound to our organization through language, despite our increasingly widespread cultural cynicism about "official" language. Organizational executives who take the mission statement seriously come to embody it for employees; one hears students describing such leaders in tones approaching reverence.[13]

Language in business, then, has the power to create and foster community, and when language is abused, it has the power to erode community and foster cynicism. We seem to know intuitively that language expresses the speaker's real self, and we often react in disgust when it does not—or we react cynically, saying that a manager "only talks like that because he's a manager." We also know, either intuitively or through bitter experience, that lying "infects the soul" (as Plato put it in the *Phaedo*), that lying and abusing language weaken the liar's character, making other sorts of unethical behavior easier and more natural. This point alone indicates the close relationship between language and self. It follows, then, that any approach to business ethics that does not make language a central concern will inevitably be an empty one. Language must be seen for what it really is—the procession outward of our inner word, of our true selves. When language is seen as a mere tool, a mechanism, we all too quickly revert to amorality or worse.

Language and Power

Although language is so closely related to the self, it can be easily perverted to become a means of alienating us from our selves. An important way this happens is through making a fetish of language. The most famous modern example of this occurs in Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic anthropological study, *Tristes Tropiques*. The book tells of Lévi-Strauss's research in the jungles of Brazil, where he encountered the Nambikwara tribe, who had never seen writing before. While Lévi-Strauss took notes, the members of the tribe began to imitate him, drawing meaningless lines on paper they had gotten from him. But the tribe's chief saw that writing involved some sort of power, and he went further than the others:

> So he asked me for a writing-pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page, and the same look of disappointment came over his face.[14]

Soon the chief went further, and used his "writing" skills to manufacture a list of demands from the outsider, which he "read" with the other tribe members looking on in respect. Lévi-Strauss concludes from the experience that writing, far from being a benign invention, facilitates the exploitation of others and even their enslavement.[15] Language (here, written language) thus can become a fetish or talisman or, more simply, a weapon to use on others. The Nambikwara chief is a vivid example of this, and there is a rather straight line of descent from his list to the Republican memo discussed above, and to the corporate manager who uses language to lie or obfuscate in order to retain control over others. The cynically produced mission or ethics statement—the one produced because something that "sounds good" is needed—is not qualitatively much different from the Nambikwara chief's list of demands. Language—whether written or spoken—is instrumentalized, externalized, divorced from the self and from its natural bonding function.

Lonergan puts this point about the instrumentalization of language within a religious context, but his discussion has implications for language within the narrower business context as well. Lonergan describes people who are "unconverted"—those who have not been fully converted "intellectually, morally, religiously," and thus this group naturally includes many who consider themselves members of a church. The behavior of such people follows a pattern, he says:

> Sociologically, [the unconverted] are Catholics or Protestants, but in a number of ways they deviate from the norm. Moreover, they may lack an appropriate language for expressing what they really are, and so they will use the language of the group with which they identify socially. There follows an inflation, or devaluation, of this language and so of the doctrine which it conveys. Terms that denote what the unconverted is not, will be stretched to denote what he is. Doctrines that are embarrassing will not be mentioned in polite company. Conclusions that are unacceptable will not be drawn. Such unauthenticity can spread. It can become a tradition.[16]

The situation aptly describes the corporate environment when it becomes corrupted, when executives and managers adopt the language of ethics rather than "converting" to genuine ethical behavior and decisions. As Lonergan points out, in such a case the language itself suffers, and, as I have tried to suggest, when language suffers, human authenticity likewise suffers. Language becomes a magical sort of instrument or talisman to be waved about, a mere tool for getting and keeping power over others.

Language, when misused, can become a tool for dominating others, and it can also become a personal shield, a screen behind which one can hide the truth about one's actions. This function of language is memorably analyzed in Hannah Arendt's book on the 1961 trial of the Nazi Adolph Eichmann.[17] Eichmann had routinely supported the cruelest of Hitler's anti-Semitic measures, yet in his own mind he was innocent, and said with conviction that he had nothing against Jews. Arendt saw in him a self-constructed schizophrenia, a carefully built double life—the life he really lived and the life he believed he lived. The wall between these two lives, which kept him from ever facing the horror of what he was doing, was constructed of language. Arendt found him unable to utter a sentence without using a cliché or slogan, and these repeated phrases acted as a safeguard against having to sympathize with his victims:

> The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.[18]

Empty phrases and slogans erected a wall between Eichmann and his real self, a self that could have responded to the suffering of others. His clichés often gave him a sense of elation and consolation.[19] In this schizophrenia, Eichmann was supported by what the Third Reich referred to as "Language Rules," the required use of euphemisms and code terms for killings and brutalities—terms that are

sadly familiar to us, such as *final solution*, *special treatment*, *resettlement*, and *change of residence*. Of course, even the term *language rule* was used as a code phrase for lying. The language rules, Arendt says, "proved of enormous help in the maintenance of order and sanity in the various widely diversified services whose cooperation was essential in this matter."[20] A person who is susceptible to clichés and slogans is ideal for such a policy. The Nazi regime—like the Stalinist one, and like most modern totalitarian ones—recognized that people need help and support if they are to act like monsters, and the Nazis' language policies were crafted to take advantage of the power of the word.[21]

The Euphemizing of Business Language

Can the same phenomenon take hold in the business world—that is, can language be used in such a way as to shield the manager or employee from truths about unethical decisions and acts? I would suggest that this is precisely what happens when we let ourselves be taken over by slogans and euphemisms, when we "rightsize" rather than fire people, when we "get our message out" rather than tell the truth about a crisis. The slogan "Perception is reality" has wide currency today, and it, of course, has a germ of truth: What people believe about a business or product is just as important as, or perhaps even more important than, the facts. If customers do not believe a product works, they will not buy it. But this slogan is also used as a justification for outright lying, as some people take it to mean that there is no reality but perception, which is quite a different thing to say. Robert Jackall's somber analysis of organizational dysfunctions suggests that within the highly bureaucratic organization, this "reality is perception" slogan becomes self-fulfilling; he compares public relations in such organizations to a magic lantern show:

> What matters on the screen are convincing impressions of reality, plausible representations, and a conformity to conventional manners, faces, and tastes. The images cast upon the screen do not so much displace substance, notions of truth, and principles as leave them in the dim periphery of the theater. Public relations becomes public-relations-mindedness, a circuitous institutional logic that makes placating various publics the principal and, at times, the only goal.[22]

The corporate world Jackall portrays is so unrelentingly grim and neurotic that one suspects, or at least hopes, that it is not representative of American business as a whole; still, if Jackall's portrait is an exaggeration, it is one that makes us ask exactly how different it is from the norm. And the answer is sometimes disturbing. In Jackall's corporate world, language is entirely and irrevocably

separated from self, and the people in that world are self-alienated and utterly incapable of anything approaching a genuine ethical response.

The separation of language from self is often a reality, and when language becomes "placating publics" rather than an expression of the self, a blindness to ethical concerns has set in. Some examples of this blinding are the phrases imported into the business world from tough-guy movies and popular culture, such as a "Rambo manager" or a "take-no-prisoners" marketing strategy. When everyone recognizes these phrases for what they are, they can be humorous and effective; but when they become widespread, the values lying behind them slowly start to take root as well.

In this decade of massive layoffs and restructurings, an ethos of toughness has set in, so that the good manager is the most Rambo-like (one famous American CEO has acquired the nickname of "Chainsaw Al"). This ruthlessness is often rewarded on Wall Street, where layoffs are regarded as profit-boosting. But Wall Street can be wrong. Edward Luttwak tells the story of Boeing's decision to lay off over 6000 workers in 1995, which was followed by a great leap in its stock price. But over the next year and a half, the company realized it desperately needed those workers, and by 1997 it had to hire the entire number back, plus an additional 4000, for a total of 10,000.[23] Clearly, toughness does not equate to good business (and still less to employee loyalty and commitment), a fact that is easily obscured when our business vocabulary is infested with macho terminology. The archetype of tough-talkers is Machiavelli, and recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in applying his amoral theory of leadership in *The Prince* to business and management. Management consultants and authors in America and Europe can be found peddling Machiavellian theory for the modern manager who needs to numb his or her conscience in order to appear tough enough. Hans Küng quotes a successful German consultant who preaches that all management really needs is credibility (in which there is, again, a grain of truth—but most of us would agree that credibility, like trust, ought to be earned). The consultant says:

> You are credible as management only on one condition: not because it is morally good or recognized by others, but because you have *chosen it.* For no other reason.[24]

The emphasis and the clipped "for no other reason" are rhetorically chosen to create a desire in the reader or hearer to be as tough-minded and certain as the speaker is. When the rhetoric of self-motivation meets that of Machiavelli, it is easy to let the language take over, to let it blind one to realities. This is part of what Plato meant in saying that a lie infects the soul. That it leads to bad

business decisions as well as bad ethical decisions should be obvious. Realigning language with its source in the self, in the inner word, is the only remedy.

How Did Language Come to Be Separated from the Self?

As we have seen, few thinkers today see language as related to self, as being something that should not be instrumentalized or turned into a commodity or fetish. The Augustinian-Thomistic tradition in this respect has been largely ignored or rejected, and the cultural result is our modern linguistic culture, the culture of spin and sloganeering. If one starts only from our contemporary culture and its gross misuse of language, it is not surprising that thinkers like Lacan and Derrida have arisen to condemn language as an invidious force, rather than a force for self-expression and the building of community. How did we come to this pass? There are two important historical viewpoints on this development. Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* locates the shift as having taken place around the time of Immanuel Kant. In the period following Kant, Gadamer argues, the human sciences (including, especially, those concerned with language) adopted the modes of the natural sciences, thereby cutting off their roots in the humanist tradition. The key values of the humanist tradition were thus lost, especially the four values of common sense, taste, judgment, and the relation of the individual to the larger shared culture. The older tradition valued a communal sense (*sensus communis*), which Gadamer finds expressed well in the philosopher Giambattista Vico:

> ... *sensus communis* obviously does not mean only that general faculty in all men but the sense that founds community. According to Vico, what gives the human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race. Hence developing this communal sense is of decisive importance for living.[25]

There was no place for such a communal sense in the natural sciences, and so it was soon abandoned, even in the human sciences. The same thing happened with the value that Gadamer (this time following Herder) called *Bildung*—the value of rising up to one's full humanity through shared culture. *Bildung* is not the same as our idea of education, which involves an assimilation of culture; rather, in *Bildung*, "that by which and through which one is formed becomes completely one's own."[26] It involves keeping oneself in a state of openness to that which is other, and it is an essentially communal value, as it values the larger, universal whole (the culture into which the individual grows) at least as highly as the particular individual. But this value, too, was gradually obliterated

by the human sciences taking over the methods of natural science as, for instance, sacred texts that were central to that larger culture—texts such as the Bible—were subjected to scientific scrutiny, a scrutiny that inevitably marginalized them.

Aesthetic taste and judgment, too, which had been shared, community-based values, now became interiorized or subjectivized as they also could not stand up to the new methods being applied to the human sciences.[27] These four values, all of which had communal elements at their very core, came into question or were placed into the realm of the merely subjective—that is, they were either obliterated or demoted in the scale of values. Gadamer's point is not to attack science, but to question the uncritical application of its methods. The end result, for our purposes, was a devaluation of the communal, bond-creating element of language. The large historical and philosophical movement Gadamer traced made it easier, or perhaps inevitable, for language to become a mere tool and to lose both its sacral and communal qualities. The path was opened for the individual to become alienated from language—the language that is so central to the individual's identity. We hear this alienation being expressed first in the post-Kantian generations of creative writers, such as Flaubert, whose *Madame Bovary* finds herself unable to express her deepest feelings in anything but threadbare clichés:

> … human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out melodies for bears to dance to, when what we want is to make the very stars weep.[28]

Laments such as this are scattered throughout the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—laments such as T. S. Eliot's frustrated exclamation, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!"[29] One cannot imagine such complaints in earlier periods—Pope, Racine, Shakespeare, Virgil, or Homer did not see language as an obstacle to the self.

Gadamer's analysis of the deep cultural changes that took root in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helps us see how we got to the state we currently occupy with regard to our views of language and the self. The lost values Gadamer enumerates are all related to the idea of the communal, which is one of the traditional purposes of language—that is, building community and human bonds. The contrast between that older culture and our cynical, mistrustful modern one is dire. Again, I want to suggest that our view of language is at the heart of that contrast.

A more recent and highly provocative analysis of our gradual alienation from our language is Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing*.[30] Pickstock bases her

analysis on the concept of *mathesis*, or the tendency to "spatialize" knowledge and, eventually, language itself, turning it into a wholly externalized, manipulable object. For Pickstock (much of whose argument, incidentally, is framed as a direct confrontation to Derrida's view of language), this change, taking language out of its relationship with the individual and with time, began not in the post-Enlightenment era but in the later Middle Ages. Late medieval and Renaissance philosophers and rhetoricians—she focuses on Duns Scotus, Peter Ramus, and Descartes—solidified a slow trend toward what might be referred to as technologizing writing and rhetoric. The process worked in concert with the rise of science to reduce reality to what could be weighed or measured, that is, to what could be conceived of spatially. As may be expected, language was subjected to this process early on. For Pickstock, as for Gadamer, the communal dimension was lost. In fact, she traces the decline of the medieval guilds and the shrinking concept of the Christian family as part of the process. Even the Eucharist, which had been a profoundly communal and socially integrative event, now became interiorized and private. The church itself became increasingly legalistic and juridical, something to which souls were subject rather than something to which they belonged. Religion became increasingly "a set of propositions about faith," from which it was only a short step until it became "a set of privately held beliefs or personal convictions,"[31] much as it is in modern Western society today. Religion becomes a concern only of "the soul," while the body becomes subject to the state. The process of spatialization broke all the communal bonds that were so essential to the human condition, including the bonds between the living and the dead, between believers and saints: Prayers to the saints and to the Virgin Mary in the old culture "reflected the working out of salvation itself as a process of interpersonal support and reconciliation";[32] the saints were friends and kin. The human community, as Pickstock presents it, was linked together in time as well as space, and the process of spatialization reduced this rich human network dramatically.

Modern Corporate Writing and the Spatialization of Language

What does a fully spatialized language look like? It looks like modern corporate writing. Its style is primarily passive, dominated by nouns and nominalizations, and is thus largely dehumanized. Its written form is dominated by what Pickstock calls *asyndeton* (though her use of this venerable and precise rhetorical term is rather loose)—that is, it is dominated by lists and catalogues.[33] These traits will be familiar to anyone who has read many modern memos, reports, and manuals, which often take the form of page after page of bulleted lists. While business-writing texts and teachers routinely plead for a

more human style, there is little evidence that the trend will reverse itself, particularly with the advent of ever more sophisticated computerized style-checkers and word-processor templates and "wizards" that virtually insist on a spatialized, grid-like approach to any written communication.

A growing trend in technical communication over the past two decades has been usability research, a process that can be more or less elaborate, but which essentially consists in a close observation of the user as he or she tries to follow the procedures in a manual. Some usability labs, such as those at IBM, even go so far as to measure the user's eye movements and skin temperature so as to determine when the text induces anxiety. Since technical writing for non-experts is a notoriously difficult endeavor, the usability trend is to be applauded. But sometimes one wonders if it is not another example of the trend Gadamer lamented, the adopting of scientific methods for what is and should be a purely human situation—that is, a highly individual one, one resistant to statistical approaches. Usability research has shown us what the "optimal" page design looks like, and now virtually every technical manual imitates it.[34] Does a page with two columns, the left column being given over to headings and subheadings, with a serif font for text and sans-serif for headings, really become an automatically more readable one? Is reading not more complicated than that? Are not many other factors far more important—difficult, non-quantifiable factors such as the suitability of the discussion to the reader's level of experience? Getting that sort of thing right is very difficult, and is impossible to guarantee; it is essentially non-scientific, relying far more on the writer's intuitive grasp of the material and his or her creativity in presenting it than on whether a predetermined format is followed. Still, we increasingly rely on broad-brush "scientific" research in business and technical writing because we see language as simply an external tool with no real relationship to writer or to reader. We reduce the multi-dimensionality of the writer-language-reader relationship to a simple, flat grid. Perhaps it goes without saying that we are also reducing writers and readers, human beings, to a flat, machine-like status.

Other sorts of flattening are taking place too, as a result of our diminished view of language. Our new "information society" relies heavily on mechanical communication tools, and since we have come to regard language as simply another tool, our communication suffers in many ways. For one thing, it is slowly but deeply changing our view of reality itself. John Keane has recently written about our age of "communicative abundance"—with its fifty or more television channels in most homes, fax machines, Internet access, and instant satellite communication. All these phenomena have the capability of effecting real good for people, but, as in the case of television itself, unforeseen negative

effects have begun to come to the foreground. Keane points out that the role of the intellectual in this new world is quickly changing into something no one had predicted:

> Gone are the days when [intellectuals] could suppose that media of com-munication serve continually to correct and refine their own utterances (as David Hume thought was the chief advantage of the printing press). Many master craftsmen of words sense correctly that they are no longer living in a world of kings' courts and party meetings and scarce, state-controlled media channels, that instead they inhabit a "pluriverse" of words and signs nurtured and sustained by a dynamic and complex plurality of communication systems, segmented audiences and authori-ties…. In the age of communicative abundance, in other words, almost all intellectuals are forced to come to terms with their own powerless-ness. Inclined to keep their distance from politics, disinclined to support ideologies, concerned mainly to excel as paid professionals, intellectuals become experts and academics withdrawn into secure and specialized fields of research.[35]

Keane's larger point here involves the flattening of the intellectual into a mere expert, and the shattering of reality into competing and apparently equally valid realities, which are among the darker societal results of the separation of dis-course from the self. That technology has a tendency to flatten out the human person into a single dimension (or, in Pickstock's terms, to spatialize us) is the theme of a number of neo-Luddite books of recent years.[36] But the important point to grasp is not that technology is a bad thing—far from it—but that it can become so when used by a society that sees the human as predictable, non-mysterious, unrelated to a transcendent God. Revising our views of language, again, can help us to resist the process and regain a genuinely ethical stance, but as long as our views of language remain instrumental, we cannot approach that stance.

Conclusion

There are, then, two essential relational aspects of language, both of which are critical to ethics and especially to organizational ethics: the relation of lan-guage to self as expression of the inner word, which is intimately connected with our very selves; and the relation of language to others, its abilities to form bonds among persons and within communities. Both of these relational as-pects are stressed by the Augustinian/Thomistic tradition, and both are in dan-ger of being forgotten or rejected altogether today. This tradition-based view of language can have considerable relevance to any ethical approach, including the new "virtue ethics" movement. The view of language sketched in this paper

is highly consistent with an ethics concerned with virtue in the individual—as opposed to ethics based on externally imposed codes, or on external calculations, such as the utilitarian "greatest good for the greatest number." It is quite consistent with feminist approaches to ethics such as that of Annette Baier.[37] Baier's arguments start with Carol Gilligan's influential distinction between traditionally male and female approaches to ethical decision-making—the male approach being primarily based on a sense of obligation, and the female based on love or maintaining relationship and community.[38] Leaving aside the vexing question of whether these two approaches are truly gender-based or are societally conditioned, most people who see value in Gilligan's observations (including Gilligan herself) argue that the two approaches need to be combined for a fully responsive ethic. Baier argues that the ground for connecting and blending the two approaches is to be found in the virtue of appropriate trust. Her discussion of trust opens up some highly valuable pathways into ethics, and I would argue that trust is very often a language-based phenomenon: We build trust when we stand by our word, and we erode it when we use language as an instrument for mere self-interest. Genuine communities are based on trust, and dysfunctional ones are characterized by the absence of trust. The overabundance of communication channels open to us today, and our bombardment by advertising and public relations messages that assert a community of aims and ideals when, in fact, the only bond is a commercial one, create a highly dysfunctional community, one in which we learn to survive by trusting language and speakers less and less. We develop a community of suspicion rather than one of trust.

The large historical contexts offered us by thinkers such as Gadamer and Pickstock clarify that the problem is one with deep roots; the problem with language is social and philosophical. One cannot simply blame the business person or the advertiser or the public relations spokesperson for our community of suspicion. I have tried to argue here that a great deal of what is ethically wrong in modern organizations—and in society, that hyperextended organization—has its roots in a deeply harmful view of the place of language, of its relation to the self, and its capabilities regarding others. Any approach to business ethics that does not, therefore, make the nature of language a central concern is bound to be inadequate, to be focused on treating the symptoms rather than the disease itself.

Notes

1. In discussing the Trinity, we should remember the beautiful, if apocryphal, anecdote about Saint Augustine's vision. Walking by the seashore, he came upon a little child with a spoon. The child was taking one spoonful of water from the sea at a time and pouring it into a small hole in the sand. Augustine asked the child what he was doing, and the child replied, "I will have emptied the sea into this hole before you have understood the Trinity."

2. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), Book XV, chap. 11, 209.

3. Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 34.

4. Ibid., 37.

5. Ibid., 45–46. Lonergan's fullest discussion of the mental operations involved in understanding is his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1957).

6. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 84. Yet Augustine saw some truths, especially moral ones, as implanted within us. He says that "every righteous law" is "copied and transferred to the heart of the man that worketh righteousness; as the impression from a ring passes into wax, yet does not leave the ring." *On the Trinity*, Book XIV, chap. 15, 194–95.

7. Ibid., 184.

8. Philosophy has, particularly in America, moved even further away from issues related to God or to faith. This situation has prompted Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* (October 1998), which eloquently calls for the reuniting of faith and reason, theology, and philosophy. The pope argues that this union is quite possible in the modern world, as seen in the exemplary work of some modern thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain and Edith Stein.

9. See Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alain Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977); and *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

10. Among Derrida's numerous works, see especially his fundamental text, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

11. "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control," available at: http://www.fair.org/extra/9502/language-control.html.

12. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book X, chap. 1, 135.

13. Among the voluminous literature on mission statements, Stephen Covey's discussion of them stands out. He insists that an "empowering" mission statement needs to "come out of a solid connection with your deep inner life," and speaks not just to the business person role one plays but rather represents "a lifetime balance of personal, family, work, community" roles. See Covey, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 113. Covey can be accused of idealism in his discussion, but it is an idealism that works: At least one study has found that companies with effective mission statements perform better than those without. See "Mission Statements Equal Profits," available at: http://www.smartbiz.com/sbs/arts/hph4.htm. My point here is not to emphasize the instrumental or profit-making potential of language, but is only to point out the power of such statements among employees and stakeholders.

14. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Washington (New York: Atheneum, 1975 [1955]), 296.

15. Ibid., 299.

16. Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 298–99.

17. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994 [1963]).

18. Ibid., 49.

19. Ibid., 48–54.

20. Ibid., 85.

21. Some of the Nazi "advances" in killing technologies were motivated by the same ideal:

Gassing, for instance, came to be preferred because it was psychologically easier on the executioners than simple shooting. See Daniel Jonah Goldhaben, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 156–57.

22. Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 189.

23. Edward Luttwak, *Turbo-Capitalism: Winners and Losers in the Global Economy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), 54–55.

24. Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 256.

25. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1997 [1975]), 21.

26. Ibid., 11.

27. Ibid., 30–42.

28. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986 [1856]), 259.

29. T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 6.

30. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998).

31. Ibid., 153.

32. Ibid., 155.

33. Ibid., 92–98.

34. For a summary of these research-based format recommendations, see the essays in Stephen Doheny-Farina, ed., *Effective Documentation: What We Have Learned from Research* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988).

35. John Keane, "The Humbling of the Intellectuals: Public Life in the Era of Communicative Abundance," *TLS*, 28 August 1998, 15.

36. The best-known is Neil Postman's *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

37. Annette Baier, *Moral Prejudices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

38. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).