

Chapter 2

The Power of Words: A Philosophical Perspective

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Abstract The evolution of societies is primarily determined not by political regimes, nor by modes of production, as some people still believe, but by culture (or its opposite), which proves a far more powerful determinant in the end. Sufficient proof of this is provided by the impact today of the new technical powers of communication that are effectively restructuring our whole social life, including economics and politics. Since the power of ideas and the power of words are so intimately related, we try here to see why this is so and to what extent.

What could be more powerful than the word? In his *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias celebrates it, with good reason, as “that mighty sovereign, which, with an insignificant and perfectly invisible physical reality, achieves the most amazing results” (Gorgias 1960). St James wrote, “the man who never says a wrong thing is a perfect character, able to bridle his whole being” (James 1960). The Analects of Confucius conclude with the sentence, “Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men.” And everyone must be familiar with the response of the Master to the question: To administer the government, what will you consider the first thing to be done? “The Master replied, ‘What is necessary is to rectify names’” (*Confucian Analects* 1892).

Bossuet explained as follows to King Louis XIV why he had to be severe while teaching him the rules of grammar: “We do not blame the fault itself so much as the failure of attention which is its cause. That failure of attention now makes you confound the order of words; but if we let that bad habit grow and become stronger, once you come to handle, no longer words, but things themselves, you will disturb their whole order. You speak now against the laws of grammar; you will then scorn the precepts of reason. Now you misplace the words, then you will misplace the things” (Roy 1991).

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Hence it is that the evolution of societies is primarily determined not by political regimes, nor by modes of production, as some people believe, but by culture (or its opposite), which proves a far more powerful determinant in the end. Sufficient proof of this is provided by the impact today of the new technical powers of communication that are effectively restructuring our whole social life, including economics and politics.

The basic reason for that is the power of ideas, famously rendered in the following conclusion of John Maynard Keynes's *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London, 1936): "The ideas of economists, and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few Years back. [. . .] Soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil."

The reflection I propose to share with you has two main parts, entitled respectively "Mindlessness" and "A Case for Culture."

2.1 Mindlessness

So great is indeed the power of words that, throughout history, tyrants, dictators, totalitarian regimes and certain bureaucracies have invariably feared them above all, as much as they have feared thought and the truth; a sign of this is the fact that intellectuals gifted with words – such as poets, philosophers, journalists – never fail to be the first to be considered suspect and even barbarously eliminated, as a consequence, whenever possible. In *Pour sortir du xx^e siècle*, Edgar Morin recalled the example of Mao Zedong who, thanks to his propaganda, succeeded in making the naive from the West believe that China had definitively suppressed famine, even while people had been and were in fact dying in droves from a succession of famines – including, it is now believed, the worst famine in history. He took advantage of "the key illusion that problems of freedom of expression, of political plurality, are altogether secondary with regard to demographic, food or economic problems" (Morin 1981; Margolin 1997).

For totalitarian regimes, language must be reduced and narrowed. Rémi Brague explains it well when he writes, in his preface to *Éthique de solidarité*: "Since it is incapable of transforming reality, ideology acts on words naming that reality [. . .]. For language is the first link between humans, it is, as it were, the blood of social life. To poison it is to poison the latter. Perverting language is consequently the primary factor of the destruction of the real civic society [. . .]." From then on invasion is called "liberation," the state of exception is named "normalization;" "peace, democracy, liberty, justice" mean that the party now holds power (Brague 1983).

George Orwell made the same point admirably in 1984: “If one is to rule, and to continue ruling, one must be able to dislocate the sense of reality.” That is called “reality control” in ordinary speech (“Oldspeak”), whereas in the new language (“Newspeak”) whose aim is to narrow minds, it is called doublethink, which means “the power to hold two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.” Such statements as the following need hardly surprise, then: “It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words.” And “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.” Indeed “Orthodoxy means not thinking – not needing to think, Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.” The good thing about the proles is that “being without general ideas” they could only focus on petty specific grievances, with the result that “the larger evils escaped their notice” (Orwell 1954).

In a brilliant article dating back to 1959, which he still judges fundamental today, George Steiner underscored how the Nazis succeeded in destroying the German language, incorporating into it the very lexicon and syntax of the inhuman. “Languages [he wrote] are organisms. Infinitely complex, but organisms nevertheless. They have in them a certain life force, and certain powers of absorption and growth. But they can decay and they can die.” They have “great reserves of life. They can absorb masses of hysteria, illiteracy, and cheapness. [...] But there comes a breaking point. Use a language to conceive, organise, and justify Belsen; use it to make out specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanize man during twelve Years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it. [...] Something will happen to the words. Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language. Imperceptible at first, like the poison of radiation sifting silently into the bone. But the cancer will begin, and the deep-set destruction” (Steiner 1985).

We see there, then, how those who most hate both culture and liberty make their essential interdependence evident. To deny one without denying the other is in fact impossible.

The stereotyped languages of our bureaucracies and of a certain business world – instead of “firing people,” you “rationalize,” you “consolidate, you “restructure” – bring out the same convergence. Vaclav Havel has justly denounced in those languages and in those other forms of anonymous, impersonal power, the same irrational automatism and the same inhumanity as in contemporary totalitarian systems (Havel 1989). The visceral hatred of language and of culture, which characterizes them just as much, does not leave room for doubt in that regard.

Milan Kundera stigmatized it all magnificently as so much “totalitarian kitsch.” Although less manifest at first, mental intoxication and emotional intoxication are no less mortal – they are doubtless more damaging still – than physiological intoxication; for every form of intoxication discernment is a matter of life and death. The Greek verb *krinein* (meaning “to separate,” “to judge,” “to decide”), whence are derived “critique,” “criterion,” and so on,

refers back in the first place to a most fundamental physiological function, which is the elimination of noxious substances from the organism: if our kidneys cease to “criticize” we die. The latin verb *cernere*, contained in the word “discernment,” follows the same pattern of meanings: one must separate the good from the bad at all levels. *Excrementum* has the same root; a full and just perception of this in Kundera’s works is altogether remarkable: “kitsch is the absolute denial” of *excrementum* “in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.” Now, “if there is no difference between the sublime and the paltry [. . .], then human existence loses its dimensions and becomes unbearably light.” “Kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death.” “In the realm of totalitarian kitsch, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. It follows, then, that the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions.”

It is obvious here, in a word, that awareness essentially consists in discerning, in being able to judge, and therefore to reject what is bad. There is on the other hand no Either/Or, “Entweder/Oder” in dreams, as Freud observed (Kundera 1984; Freud 1942).

In regard to propaganda, we used to think that it might be true or false, failing to foresee a third possibility, very aptly described by Aldous Huxley as “the development of a vast mass communications industry, concerned in the main neither with the true nor the false, but with the unreal, the more or less totally irrelevant.” We had failed to take into account “man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions” (Huxley 1983; Winter 2002; Miller 1988, 1990). The “dream” world of publicity wields an incalculable influence today, while saying practically nothing that makes sense, being subservient to immense financial interests. So do the media by favoring the spectacle of violence, or what Germans call *Schadenfreude*, delighting in other people’s miseries through scandal mongering, slander, or cheap gossip. The entire arsenal of means of communication can serve here: films, songs, every conceivable form of image, recordings of all sorts, in order to produce, through editing and whatever effects one chooses, the illusion of reality, charging it, as was pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu: “with political and ethical implications that are apt to provoke strong, often negative sentiments, such as racism, xenophobia, hatred mixed with fear of the foreigner,” and their predictable social effects (Bourdieu 1996; Kant 1963).

Judea Pearl, the father of Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street journalist who was executed in Pakistan in 2002, raises the right questions when he denounces ethnic hate and anti-Semitism as now causing the deaths of millions of people. We are witnessing, he says, the most important progression of racial hatred in the history of humanity. How is this possible? It is difficult not to be perturbed, as he is suggesting, by the fact that the press and the media play such a considerable role in the diffusion of that hatred (Pearl 2003; Sontag 2003).

Even within the discourse of ideas, an element of surprise, of sensationalism, will be used to stave off what threatens to become intellectual boredom for

many, playing the role of a means of conviction. The art will consist in hiding or disguising the real message. What is exploited to the core is the classic difficulty of discerning between the sophist and the honest person – between the wolf and the dog, to quote Plato’s well-known simile in his dialogue the *Sophist* (231 a). Beyond the affectation of competition, we witness instead a homogenization of contents and of the types of information sought for, as well as the fostering by the media of a tyranny of public opinion, one of the most important natural vices of democratic societies according to Tocqueville.

What can be more natural indeed, in such a perspective, than to gradually eliminate, as much as possible, well formulated discourse from television. Pierre Bourdieu rightly protested against whatever favored such an elimination, abstaining, for example, from visual illustrations, “as a manner of affirming the autonomy of analytic and critical discourse” and avoiding to obfuscate the line of “argument and demonstration” (Bourdieu 1996).

The fight in defence of human rights – the fight for the right to have rights – begins with the fight against lies, and to give back to words their true meaning. We are otherwise reduced to a form of slavery. Whoever takes over power by eliminating the criterion of truth turns language into a pure instrument of propaganda, of downgrading. As Plato observed in the *Republic*, injustice has recourse to persuasion and brutal strength, under the guise of a scarcely veiled intimidation. The manipulation of words, the absence of any sense, can reduce anyone to the status of a non-person. Degradation settles in as soon as the word loses its dignity, which is to tell the truth, to be the means whereby truth and reality are revealed and made manifest. Suffice it to recall Kafka’s *The Trial*: someone comes to arrest you, without your knowing why, ever: your words will have no impact at all, and after much verbiage you will be executed. To quote George Steiner once more, “The arrest of Joseph K., the opaque tribunals, his literally bestial death, are the alphabet of our totalitarian politics. The lunatic logic of the bureaucracy which the novel sets out is that of our professions, litigations, visas, fiscalities, even in the lighter greys of liberalism” (Steiner 1996). Those who decide are too often apt to follow blindly those who precede them on the way to the precipice, without even attempting to look ahead, as illustrated by the set phrase *mouton de Panurge*, after a story in Rabelais where the rest of the sheep in a herd stupidly jump off a cliff after another sheep – “comme vous sçavez, estre du mouton le naturel, tousjours suivre le premier, quelque part qu’il aille” (Rabelais 1942).

Hence the extreme importance that there remain instances in society where truth and justice are served. But what to do if even these are corrupt? When medias and institutions are in the hands of corrupt people, submitting everything to market values or transforming all values into merchandise, Juvenal’s question proves as necessary as it was in Ancient Rome: *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (“Who guards the guards themselves?”).

And finally, we now have, in addition, “plastic words” to deal with. Everyone should read Uwe Poerksen’s remarkable denunciation of these. Examples he provides are “identity,” “development,” “transportation,” “modernization,”

“communication,” “energy,” sexuality,” “information.” He calls such words “the master key to the everyday,” adding that “they are handy, and they open doors to enormous rooms. They infiltrate entire fields of reality, and they reorder that reality in their own image.” The trouble being that “since science abandoned Latin,” it has drawn into itself, from it and from folk languages deriving from it, “concepts from these languages, altered them, and then released them in their new form back into the common language, where they then had enormous effects.” Needless to say, “amorphous plastic words are the elemental building blocks of the industrial state” (Poerksen 1995).

2.2 A Case for Culture

Any educator has the primordial task of guarding against inhumanity, of denouncing it, and of attempting to remedy against it, as did Socrates. How can one be just? The French philosopher Alain spoke of that profound justice, “a wholly inner wisdom,” over which no one has power. Few have stigmatized as skilfully as he did what he called “the Merchants of sleep,” namely everything that chains reason, shuts it, or closes it upon itself, against what is truly human. “All political power, he wrote, acts through minds and on minds. Armies are armed by opinion. As soon as citizens refuse to approve and to believe, cannons and machine guns can no longer operate.” Journalism, “medias of the light,” “shadow makers” are apt to render us insensitive to reality, anaesthetizing us to the point of unconsciousness. As with all forms of narcissism, moreover, “the deification of humanity by itself leads to the destruction of humanity and of civilization.” There are multiple forms of narcissism, from dictatorships to the “urban” perceiving itself as beyond nature. Genuine culture awakens us to the world and to others, unties the mind, cures it from the obsession and the madness that make one see a thing constantly under the same angle, fortifies judgment, which is “the only power that makes a human being truly free.” One must therefore give everyone access to genuine culture (Alain 1942).

The original institution of democracy is no less instructive. The Greek word *demos*, “people,” had first meant “the poor.” According to Aristotle, the true difference separating oligarchy from democracy was not numbers, but wealth and poverty, freedom being “for everyone.” In Athenian democracy, the poor had access to political dignity, since they could have a direct hold on power through speech. All citizens could speak in the people’s assembly, the *ekklesia*, which was the genuine organ of decision. Now such equality for all citizens was deemed superior by reason of their very diversity. The essence of Aristotle’s argument in favor of democracy is based precisely on that diversity within unity, witness the following remarks: “For each individual among the many has a share of excellence and practical wisdom, and when they meet together, just as they become in a manner one man, who has many feet, and hands, and senses, so too with regard to their character and thought. Hence the many are

better judges than a single man of music and poetry; for some understand one part, and some another, and among them they understand the whole.” And again, “[. . .] The many (to plêthos) might fairly answer that they themselves are often better and richer than the few – I do not say individually, but collectively” (Plato 1955; Aristotle 1996).

The advantage we have today over democracy in ancient Athens is that we are no longer burdened by the exclusion of women, of slaves, and of people of foreign extraction from the title of citizens that alone gave to the poor the right to speak in the general Assembly. As Benjamin Barber brings out forcefully, our human strength resides in our capacity for community, which makes the ideal of participation the most realistic stand for a world at grips, as is ours, with what Clifford Geertz calls the vertigo of relativism (Barber 1998).

Heraclitus saw clearly that harmony is in truth founded on contrariety, on the adjustment of opposites. His examples were the bow and the lyre (see DK 22 B 51), but he would add, “the hidden attunement (harmoniê) is better than the obvious one” (B 54, Kahn translation). By the lyre, he meant the instrument itself, but it also suggests music, which offers the best example, probably, of such a law of opposites. In a symphony the opposition between the instruments must be as clear as possible, with each one preserving its own resonance with a view to the harmony of the whole, to the unity that will draw everything to itself. Peace is likewise invariably to be conquered by hard-fought struggles, through the tension and the maintained unity of contraries, just as, for that matter, life itself. The consensus obtained through debates and democratic actions has nothing in common with the unity imposed by a demagogue. A further advantage of having everyone participate in democracy is that we then also respect the evolution of identities, and the profoundly dynamic character of human existence, lived in constant suspense.

But for all this to be, we must have speech. As the title of a classic of contemporary philosophy proclaims, we “do things with words” (Austin 1962). What can be easier than to destroy someone’s reputation, his or her entire life even, by whispering something gravely slanderous in somebody’s ear? How is it, we must ask again, that a few sounds of no apparent consequence wield such power? And yet, as we pointed out at the outset, how much the common good is served by the power of words is equally obvious: institutions concerned with justice, indeed political power itself, all depend on it.

In fact, the language proper to the speaking animal that we are does refer spontaneously to the just and unjust, to good and evil. So much so that once such words lose their meaning, barbarism is close at hand. Logos alone offers an alternative to violence. In a famous lecture on ethics, Wittgenstein went so far as to say, “Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural,” and “the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk of Ethics was to run against the boundaries of language.” Therefore, “Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable can be no science.” Ethical statements are not verifiable in the same way statements about chairs and tables are. As Wittgenstein says again, “no

statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgement of absolute value.” In the latter case, in other terms, we need to have recourse to conscience. Still, we cannot exchange, or argue, about good and evil, just and unjust, without words and the universal concepts to which those words refer (Wittgenstein 1965).

For words are the expression par excellence, of the universal, the intelligible, all that transcends the senses. We are par excellence awake thanks to words: discernment, necessary distinctions are made manifest through words. As Fernand Dumont wrote, “There is culture because human persons have the faculty to create another universe than that of necessity. Language is its highest incarnation. We speak to go beyond what is already there, to accede to a conscience that transcends the body qua thing and the other qua object” (Dumont 1995; Eliot 1962).

And this explains in turn the very great importance of those disciplines which help to sharpen the mind, or, to put it in Newman’s carefully chosen terms, “to give the mind clearness, accuracy, precision; to enable it to use words aright, to understand what it says, to conceive justly what it thinks about, to abstract, compare, analyse, divide, define, and reason, correctly.” Well before learning logic in a more formal sense, the young must benefit from what Newman, again, called “a discipline in accuracy of mind” (Newman 1976). Such arts are essential to the formation of persons, as well, since they too awaken critical thought. “To read, to write, to count – the teaching of those three acts reaches out into the most profound and subtle works of the mind,” wrote Paul Valéry (1974).

Frequent contact with great works of art, those of poets especially, opens higher horizons and refines the mind. Metaphors, a special gift of poets, afford a good example of this. Speaking of Plato, Iris Murdoch wrote perceptively, “Of course he used metaphor, but philosophy needs metaphor and metaphor is basic; how basic is the most basic philosophical question” (Murdoch 1977). Metaphors, in fact, train the mind to grasp connections hitherto unnoticed between realities very distant one from the other in appearance, “just as in philosophy also an acute mind will perceive resemblances even in things far apart,” as Aristotle observed in his Rhetoric (Aristotle 1991). And such a rapport, one might add, with Proust this time, “is in the world of art analogous to the unique rapport of the law of causality in the world of science” (Proust 1987).

While our native tongue is of course our best access to language itself, to *logos*, our access to it in writing awakens and enriches to an inestimable extent not just language but our thought and our freedom as well, our search for meaning, our life itself at its most intimate and best. As regards meaning, one could hardly exaggerate the great importance of poets and of other artists whose chief material is words. The reason for this is simple and was admirably expressed by Iris Murdoch: “Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them” (Murdoch 1970). Indeed they signify far more distinctly than things ever can. Above all, human thought finds expression in language primarily, specifically in what is called ordinary language. All attempts to construct a univocal language allegedly proper to

rational knowledge “show forth a contrario the originality of tongues,” as Claude Hagège rightly insists (Hagège 1985). One of the most remarkable contributions of cognitive science, in the works of Jerry Fodor notably, is that it has succeeded in proving anew the existence of a language of thought (*lingua mentis*) (Fodor 1975). Likewise, Paul Grice gave new blood to philosophy of language, linguistics, and cognitive sciences by demonstrating afresh the priority of intentions in communication, of “intending to say” and therefore of thought over language (Grice 1989).

In point of fact, even if they have recourse to other symbols, scientists also need ordinary language in order to understand what they are doing and to communicate their knowledge to others. They are, furthermore, moral agents, like everyone else. In Iris Murdoch’s excellent terms, once again, “the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in words. This is why it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist: and if there is a ‘Shakespeare of science’ his name is Aristotle” (Murdoch 1970).

The contrast between the fluidity and evanescence of the sensible world and the invariance, on the contrary, of universals contained in words, has never ceased to amaze philosophers, East and West, down to this day. “Natural language, by which I mean purely biological language, perishes in action,” observed Alain. Whereas it is clear that, as the superb first chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, entitled “Sense-Certainty,” brings out well, words refer to universals, even when they try to point, for example, to “this” singular thing. “This,” and “this individual,” “here” and “now” are all universals that can be said of countless individuals or situations. “Now” is a universal that is said of every “now,” past, present, and future, everyone of them equally elusive, for that matter – as this actual now, for instance, which is never the same – while the written word “now” remains there on the page, unchanged. To quote Hegel, “When I say ‘a single thing’, I am really saying what it is from a wholly universal point of view, for everything is a single thing; and likewise ‘this thing’ is anything you like. If we describe it more exactly as ‘this bit of paper’, then each and every bit of paper is ‘this bit of paper’, and I have only uttered the universal all the time.” In order for expressions such as “this” or “that” to mean this particular thing “here” before me I need to point it out. As Hegel put it again, language has thus indeed “the divine nature of directly reversing the meaning of what is said” (Alain 1960; Hegel 1977). I mean this thing before me, but what comes out of my mouth is inescapably a universal.

To conclude, then, it should be obvious that our first access to intelligibility, the very life of the intellect, the most mature, richest life it behoves us to experience – with the exception of love – is to be found in the infinite nuances of ordinary language. It should be no less obvious, furthermore, that the quality of political life depends on it. We have underscored how dependent democracies are on the capacity to hold genuine rational debates. Their future hangs

therefore on the quality of the formation of its citizens, on their ability to discern what is merely demagogic. In the absence of rational debates, under one form or another, every democracy threatens to degenerate into demagoguery. History has demonstrated, time and again, that the decline of language, of the very faculty of expressing and communicating human thought in a given society, entails an increase of violence. The best way to prevent and control violence is the use of words in a spirit of constructive dialogue. The more articulate and authentic those words prove to be, the better the future for all of us.

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