

Abortion and the Obscurity of Language

Clarity of language leads to clarity of thought, which is necessary for clear moral analysis.

Language is revealing in debates about morality. Most of the time, long before we finish staking out our positions—on any number of controversial ethical issues—our choice of words gives us away. The intense public dispute about abortion is a case in point. If you refer to an “unborn baby,” you’re more likely to oppose abortion. Whereas if you opt for more clinical terminology—words and phrases like “fetus,” “uterine material,” or “product of conception” as well as looser talk of “(just) a cluster of cells” or “(just) a lump of tissue”—it’s more likely you support abortion.

The preferred nomenclature of each camp is equally revealing. *Equally revealing but not equally adequate.* For in truth, pro-life advocates do not speak of “homunculi”—the miniature men medieval medicine once imagined in human sperm. On the contrary, the identity of the newone and the neonate—i.e. the fact that the difference between the prenatal and postnatal human organism is one simply of location—clearly licenses talk of “unborn baby.” Such a designation does not, then, “decay with imprecision,” as T.S. Eliot nicely puts it.¹ “Unborn baby” may be a politically charged description at this moment in time. It also happens to be accurate. It is an instance of language being faithful to the reality it purports to represent.

The same cannot be said, however, for the clinical language more likely to be used by those who identify as pro-choice. Why? Moral philosopher David McPherson offers this perceptive insight:

Unwanted early human life is often described as merely a “cluster of cells,” a “clump of tissue,” “uterine material,” the “product of conception,” etc. Of course, each of us adults is also a “cluster of cells,” a “clump of tissue” and a “product of conception,” but we do not refer to each other in these terms because they under-describe the reality of what we are as human beings.²

It is not that this scientific language is simply mistaken or wholly inaccurate. Rather, its employment *in this context* serves to “occlude the humanity of the unborn.” First, because such language is *reserved* for nascent human life. If I refer to my offspring but not myself as a “cluster of cells” I imply a denial of our common humanity. Secondly, because such language is reductive: I may not

be less than “a clump of tissue” but I am more. Thus, while dehumanization has often taken the form of some vile leader or vicious faction using the names of *animals* to describe fellow human-beings—e.g., the Hutu government referring to Tutsis as *inyenzi* or “cockroaches” ahead of the Rwandan genocide of 1994—at the beginning of life clinical language serves the same end.

In America, we talk a lot about “terminations” in the *abstract*. We’re uncomfortable talking about the fleshly realities of abortion, despite the prevalence of that procedure. And the irony is that when we *are* required to refer to what abortion actually entails, *we remain abstract*. We default to “doublespeak.”

Doublespeak is a word coined by George Orwell in his famous dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It refers to language that is deliberately used to deceive or conceal, to distort or minimize the truth. Full of euphemisms (“polite words or expressions [employed] to refer to things people may find upsetting or embarrassing to talk about”), doublespeak is the form of communication employed by Oceania, the totalitarian regime Orwell imagines coming to power in Britain. Furthermore, in his essay, “Politics and the English Language”—also written in the late 1940’s—Orwell makes this assertion: “In our time, political speech and writing are largely a defence of the indefensible. . . . Political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and cloudy vagueness.”³ Two of the examples Orwell gives are:

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. . . . People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.

Why, then, do politicians use doublespeak? “Such phraseology is needed,” Orwell concludes, “if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.” Government officials or political representatives have learnt how to do things with words—namely, to downplay, to obfuscate, to distract—because they cannot afford to let their language faithfully represent the horror

1 This is T.S. Eliot’s vivid descriptor from *Four Quartets*.

2 David McPherson, “Transfiguring the Unborn: Abortion, Human Equality, and Moral Perception,” *Public Discourse*, 22 September 2022 (accessed via: <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2022/09/84756/> [accessed on 9 September 2024])

3 Collins Dictionary (accessed via: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/euphemism> [accessed on 9 September 2024])

4 George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, 1946, accessed via: <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/> [accessed on 9 September 2024])

of the indefensible policies they've executed and now excuse. If they *did*, if officials and representatives were to use language that helps the public vividly apprehend the atrocities their leaders have commanded and commended—that might provoke an outcry or stimulate opposition. So, preserving political power—keeping your job—requires either *silence* (simply refraining from speaking of the violations you're responsible for) or *doublespeak* (“naming things without calling up mental pictures of them”).

Returning to abortion, the doublespeak surrounding this subject allows us to shirk the reality, to look away from abortion. Consider how this operation is described on Web MD:

A surgery called multifetal *reduction* lowers the number of fetuses and improves your chances for a healthy pregnancy. Also called fetal *reduction* or selective pregnancy *reduction*, it's a safe procedure, and chances of problems are small.⁵ [emphases added]

The operation in question is the abortion of a sibling. But notice the way “reduction”—a formal, abstract, bloodless Latinate noun—distances us from the reality to which it refers. The formulation “lower the number” is clinical, bureaucratic, dispassionate. Here's how that procedure is then explained:

Usually, the procedure happens during the first trimester (12 weeks) of your pregnancy. That's when the fetuses are still in separate fluid-filled pouches. Your doctor can look at the fetuses with an ultrasound probe. Using these pictures as a guide, your doctor will put a small needle in your belly or vagina, then *gently* inject a special drug into a pouch. This medicine quickly *stops the fetus's heart*.⁶ [emphases added]

This writer remains oblivious to the disconcerting juxtaposition of the word used to describe the injection (“gently”) and the abrupt description of the effect of the intervention (“stops the fetus's heart”).

One might expect more transparent language from abortion doctors. But here is Dr. Meera Shah, a Planned Parenthood medical officer, explaining “medical” (or chemical) abortion:

Taken within the first eleven weeks of pregnancy, [mifepristone] ends the pregnancy and is then followed by misoprostol pills taken at home that induce cramping, bleeding, and *expulsion of the pregnancy*. It is a safe and effective way to end a pregnancy.⁷ [emphases added]

The subject (the newone) is, then, simply dissolved into the process (the pregnancy). Another abortion doctor, Christine Henneberg, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, likewise defaults to doublespeak:

An aspiration is an efficient, relatively gentle approach to *emptying the uterus*. It involves a small tube, manual or electric suction, and a circular, back-and-forth motion of my hand and wrist. Today it is how every doctor performs nearly every early abortion . . .⁸ [emphases added]

5 Accessed via: <https://www.webmd.com/infertility-and-reproduction/fertility-multifetal-reduction> (accessed on 08/11/2021).

6 Ibid.

7 Dr. Meera Shah, *You're the Only One I've Told: The Stories Behind Abortion* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Review Press, 2020), p. 17.

8 Christine Henneberg, “Aspirations,” *New York Review of Books*, 5 May 2022 (accessed via <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2022/05/05/aspirations> [accessed on 7 May 2022])

Neglecting to inform the reader what the uterus needs to be emptied of, here again is writing where the subject goes M.I.A. Similarly, the abortionist's description of the “circular, back-and-forth motion of my hand and wrist” would be analogous to an assassin's description of a “gentle twitch on my pointer finger” to pull the trigger of a gun—hardly an adequate description of the act in question.

In 2015 Planned Parenthood staff were secretly filmed cheerfully discussing the procedures for extracting organs from aborted babies. Here's what one staff member said:

“We've been very good at getting heart, lung, liver, because we know that, so I'm not gonna crush that part, I'm gonna basically crush below, I'm gonna crush above, and I'm gonna see if I can get it all intact.”⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the scandal, writing in the *New York Times*, Ross Douthat questioned the moral significance of how appalled the public was by the use of such language:

The problem these videos create for Planned Parenthood isn't just a generalized queasiness at surgery and blood. It's a very specific disgust, informed by reason and experience—the reasoning that notes that it's precisely a fetus's humanity that makes its organs valuable, and the experience of recognizing one's own children, on the ultrasound monitor and after, as something more than just “products of conception” or tissue for the knife.¹⁰

Clarity of language leads to clarity of thought, which is necessary for clear moral analysis. The fact that one side of the abortion debate routinely engages in euphemisms and doublespeak to obfuscate and confuse indicates which side of this debate is committed to the truth about abortion.

For further reading:

- James Mumford, “The Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *The New Statesman*, 25 August 2020.
- James Mumford, “Are Human Rights Merely a Matter of Perception?” *Newsweek*, 25 October 2022.
- David McPherson, “Transfiguring the Unborn: Abortion, Human Equality, and Moral Perception,” *Public Discourse*, 22 September 2022.
- George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, 1946.
- Ross Douthat, “Looking Away from Abortion,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2015.

9 Quoted in Ross Douthat, “Looking Away from Abortion,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2015 (accessed via <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-looking-away-from-abortion.html> [accessed on 9 September 2024]).

10 Douthat.