

The War on Words: Why Clarity in Public Discourse Is a Moral Imperative

By Patrick Keeney

The lifeblood of any society is its language, and the health of its words determines the health of its public life. Civilizations do not rise or falter solely by the strength of their arms or economy, but by the integrity of their discourse—by the clarity, honesty, and precision with which they speak to themselves. When language is degraded—when words are twisted, emptied, or weaponized—public trust erodes, civic conversation collapses, and politics devolves into performance.

The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a philosopher as well as a



Marcus Aurelius Photo by Achim Wagner/Shutterstock.com

statesman, urged precision in thought and speech as a matter of both personal discipline and civic duty, advising, “Be not careless in your actions, nor confused in your words, nor rambling in your thoughts.”

Confucius offered strikingly similar counsel. When asked what his first act would be upon assuming power, he replied, “Rectify the language.”

At first glance, this may appear an odd priority, particularly when set against the more urgent demands of governance. Yet within this seemingly modest prescription lies a profound political truth: societies drift from their foundations when language becomes untethered from meaning. Words, once the instruments of understanding, become tools of confusion and contention, and the fabric of civic life begins to fray.

Our era is marked by partisan division, linguistic confusion, and a perilous erosion of civic trust. Words, once vehicles of meaning, have become instruments of power. A compliant press traffics not in truth but in “narrative.” The goal is not to further understanding but rather to persuade in a way that leaves the listener with no room for dissent. This is not the

“marketplace of ideas” extolled by J.S. Mill but a battlefield of slogans, euphemisms, and distortions.

In his trenchant book “Truth and Truthfulness,” the late British philosopher Bernard Williams argued that sincerity and accuracy are not merely academic niceties but essential to maintaining free institutions. Without them, the very possibility of democratic deliberation collapses. In their place, we get manipulation masquerading as journalism and ideology masquerading as truth. Clarity and truth are sacrificed on the altar of political expedience.

Consider, as a case study, the treatment of Donald Trump’s rhetoric. Hyperbolic at times? Certainly.

However, the press, in its zeal to discredit, has often stripped his remarks of their context, presenting his metaphors as a manifesto. Consider, for example, Trump’s remark about the potential economic collapse of American auto manufacturing if Chinese car imports are left unchecked. His use of the word “bloodbath” to describe this scenario was a metaphorical illustration of the potential for an ominous economic development. Yet, in the fevered partisan imagination of much of the media, this becomes a literal call to civil war.

One need not be a Trump supporter to recognize the harm such misrepresentation inflicts on public discourse. It replaces thoughtful engagement with moral panic and encourages not reflection but a reflexive outrage—an emotional response that narrows, rather than expands, the space for reasoned debate.

Isaiah Berlin, perhaps the 20th century’s most eloquent defender of liberal pluralism, warned against the monist impulse—that is, the desire to reduce the world’s complexity to a single, rigid, and unchallengeable moral order. Monists tend to crave certainty and so are uncomfortable with nuanced understandings or metaphorical language. And in pursuing this certainty, they bend and shape meaning to suit their ends.

For Berlin, such an approach is inimical to liberty, as it replaces open debate with orthodoxy and substitutes conformity for understanding. Berlin was giving voice to what Orwell had referred to many years earlier as the “smelly little orthodoxies”—the ideological cant and moral posturing that then, as now, masquerades as enlightened opinion.

In the tumult of the culture wars, the impulse in our public discourse is to impose a monist uniformity on both thought and language. Truth may be the first casualty in any conflict, but subtlety and nuance are seldom far behind. Ambiguity, doubt, and uncertainty—once recognized as hallmarks of intellectual seriousness and a recognition of the complexity of human affairs—are now recast as moral deficiencies. To hesitate is to falter. To question is to betray. Skepticism and curiosity betoken a lack of faithfulness. In such a cultural climate, the subtle nuances of meaning are flattened, and the space for thoughtful deliberation becomes increasingly thin. There is only one reasonable view, one settled science, and one permissible way to think about the issue at hand.

This is not merely a cultural malaise but, as both Aurelius and Confucius would recognize, a political crisis. Liberal democracy rests not on unanimity but on debate. It presupposes citizens capable of reasoned judgment—citizens who can weigh claims, consider evidence, and reach conclusions free of coercion. Such judgment is impossible in an atmosphere where language is opaque and meanings are manipulated.

As Confucius knew, the antidote to this crisis is rectifying language. It is a return to clarity in speech and writing. It is a commitment to words that mean what they say and say what they mean. As Williams argued, it is, above all else, a commitment to the virtues of truthfulness, both in our dealings and in the public sphere.

The integrity of its public discourse can be used to measure the health of a society. When we lose the ability to speak

with clarity, we compromise our capacity to think with precision. And from confused thoughts follow misguided and confused actions. When thought falters, freedom falters. The struggle for clarity, then, is not a trivial or semantic matter—it is, at its core, a moral imperative.

In this daily contest over language, we would do well to align ourselves not with this or that camp but with those who still believe that telling the truth matters, and that clarity and intellectual integrity are essential to the health of our public life. In upholding the integrity of our language and a commitment to truth, we do more than maintain the standards of civil discourse—we protect the very foundations upon which a free and humane society depends.

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