

Slippery Words and Evil Deeds

No word is so misused as the word “cowardly.” Terrorist attacks are often said to be cowardly, when in fact the terrorists who carry them out for the worst of ends are sometimes extremely brave. They risk their lives and even intentionally lose them by their acts. At the very least they risk long and condign legal punishment and public opprobrium. I doubt if one person in a thousand can claim to have acted in his life as courageously as most terrorists.

The reason we call terrorists cowardly is that bravery is generally considered a virtue, and we are reluctant to accord people whom we abhor any virtues at all. We want our enemies to be endowed only with detestable qualities, and we are only too aware that courage is the virtue without which other virtues cannot be exercised. If someone were to say “these brave terrorist attacks,” we should suspect him of sympathizing with them.

This is all based on a confusion about the nature of the virtuousness of bravery. Bravery is not a free-standing virtue, as it were, such that anybody who displays it is thereby virtuous. It is like originality in art or architecture: originality is not a virtue unless in the production of something worthwhile *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is to say judged by a criterion other than originality itself. Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind are not good architects because no one ever built buildings like theirs before. They are good architects, if they are, because their buildings are good, if they are.

Likewise courage is a virtue when it is exhibited in pursuit of a worthy end, or at least one that is not wholly reprehensible. We can admire the courage of an opponent when his aim or goal, though we do not agree with it, is not wholly evil; but we do not admire the courage of German soldiers in

the Second World War, though they undoubtedly showed much of it, because what they were fighting for was without any morally redeeming feature. Indeed, courage in pursuit of an evil goal is a vice, not a virtue, without thereby becoming recklessness, which is what Aristotle thought bravery carried to excess should be described as. Terrorists are not reckless: they do not disregard the effects of their attacks but rather want them and calculate to produce them. The attack on the writers and cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* was not worse if carried out by reckless cowards than by brave men.

In describing terrorist attacks, therefore, we should eschew the word “cowardly”—they are not better if they are brave than if they are cowardly. Bravery cannot and does not redeem them.

There is another, slightly more subtle misuse of this word that is common, alas, among British policemen when they speak to the press. A recent case in point was that of a congenitally handicapped 67-year-old called Alan Barnes. Barnes, 4 feet 6 inches high, of strange appearance and with poor eyesight, was mugged outside his home in the North of England. His collar bone was broken in the attack, and not surprisingly he wanted to move away.

Just part of the lamentably long history of man’s inhumanity to man perhaps—but fortunately, not quite. A kind-hearted young local woman, Katie Cutler, was so appalled by the crime that she set up an Internet fund in the hope of raising \$750 to assist Barnes. Within four days the fund had collected \$420,000. Local lawyers, builders, tradesmen, shopkeepers and others have offered their services free, and Barnes, a strong Christian, has thanked the donors in a movingly dignified way. If there is inhumanity in the world, it is important to remember that there is also humanity.

When a local policemen in charge of elucidating the case spoke to the press, he said:

This was a cowardly assault on a vulnerable man who wasn't able to defend himself. His disability means that he is partially sighted and quite short, and it's disgraceful that someone would target him.

And a newspaper with a very large circulation described whoever had done it as the country's "most cowardly thug."

Now here, in the literal sense, the word "cowardly" is used correctly. The man who committed this crime knew that his victim was incapable of resistance and that he risked nothing (except being caught) by trying to rob him. But though the word is correctly used in the literal sense, nevertheless its use is morally corrosive, for it gives the impression that it was the cowardice that made this crime so awful.

Robbery is not a competitive sport such as boxing, which pits two roughly equal men against each other, both of whom are courageous if not necessarily wise. A robbery is not any the better for the victim's being of the same size and strength as the robber, and therefore with a chance of escape or even apprehension of his assailant. But this is precisely the impression that the policeman (and the newspaper) gave by insisting on blaring out its message about the "cowardly thug."

Of course it is true that the crime appalls us more than many, and we hope that when caught, the perpetrator will be punished with the greatest severity; but it appalls us in a special way not because of the cowardice of the perpetrator but because it is an intimation of his deep-seated, heartless villainy. We sense that there is nothing to which he would not stoop for some trifling advantage to himself. If he can perpetrate such a crime, he can do anything. If he is not *the*, he is at least *an* incarnation of evil.

One might ask whether word choice matters here. What's in a word, after all? What is a description of an act compared with

an act itself? But I think that this *laissez faire* approach to language is a mistake, and this has been known for a long time. Confucius long ago pointed to the political dangers of saying what is not meant. If language is the medium of thought, then loose language undermines proper thought. As Pascal put it, let us labor to think well, for such is the beginning of morality.

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