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Cussing & Cultural Decay

While cuss words are in a sense “just words,” the message they send signals anger, violence, hate, incivility, and close-mindedness. Cancel cuss words or see criminality.

California Democratic Party Chairman John Burton led a “F*** Donald Trump!” chant at California’s Democratic Party convention in Sacramento two months ago. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) peppered her April *New York Magazine* profile with vulgarity, and DNC Chairman Tom Perez does the same in his stump speeches, having a particular affinity for the s-word meaning leftist policy, or, as some might say, excrement. Talk about a party that’s starting to resemble the bar scene in *Star Wars*.



Some may chalk this up to the unprecedented hatred for the current president, and that certainly has made this behavior more palatable to many. Yet in reality, it is an inevitable result of our cultural decay.

Recently I was at an all-male affair of mostly wealthy people; the vulgarity flowed like water. While at someone’s house during the same time, *The Wizard of Lies* (a film about Bernie Madoff) was on TV, and, not surprisingly, it was replete with curses. More tellingly, this low-grade habit has seeped into news and commentary, with even conservative sources often now using terms such as a**, crap, s***storm, and WTF (with everyone knowing the acronym’s meaning). Why, I had to pass up a writing opportunity with a certain rightist entity a while back because, ironically, one of the editorial requirements was that one use asterisk-worthy language.

Many will call this much ado about nothing. One time after I treated this subject, for example, a reader sent me an e-mail complaining that “we aren’t all Little Lord Fauntleroy’s.” Since this is a common sentiment among those confusing foul tongues with manliness, let’s consider what our first president and a true man’s man, George Washington, had to say about the matter. On August 3, 1776, he issued a general order, the second part of which stated:

The General is sorry to be informed that the foolish, and wicked practice, of profane cursing and swearing (a Vice heretofore little known in an American Army) is growing into fashion; he hopes the officers will, by example, as well as influence, endeavour to check it, and that both they, and the men will reflect, that we can have little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our Arms, if we insult it by our impiety, and folly; added to this, it is a vice so mean and low, without any temptation, that every man of sense, and character, detests and despises it.

Joan of Arc, too, required the men leading her army, and their underlings, to refrain from swearing. Confederate general Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson did likewise, once reprimanding a soldier



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for cursing at a mule (since the mule registered no objection); he is also quoted as having once said, “Nothing justifies profanity.”

To many this will sound like a Church Lady concern, which some will slough off with, “Don’t we have bigger things to worry about? C’mon, they’re just words!” Yet most of us don’t really believe words are so inconsequential. People criticizing even illustrative use of the “n-word” and other racial epithets certainly don’t believe it. Nor do those disgorging our whole regime of politically correct terminology or enacting hate-speech laws beyond the United States. It’s not just leftists, either. Those enforcing heresy laws (in pagan civilizations as well, mind you) in ages past certainly believed words could be as powerful as weapons. And do we zealously defend our rights guaranteed by the First Amendment because we think our utterances are “just words” or because we know “The pen is mightier than the sword”?

So there may be a good reason to say or not say something, and some things are just matters of semantics. But the larger issue of the use of words is never much ado about nothing.

Now, even most prolific users of vulgarity won’t appreciate its emanation from certain mouths. Just consider the FCKH8.com feminist videos in which little girls, perhaps eight to 10 years old, are shown repeatedly swearing (mainly the f- and s-words) as they espouse feminist causes. Even at YouTube, hardly a bastion of holiness, the down-votes dwarf the number of up-votes. For when vulgarity is put in the most innocent mouths, we see its ugliness most clearly, just as dirt shows most readily on white.

Of course, there are things adults can do that children shouldn’t, such as voting, joining the military, entering into contracts, and driving; yet other things no one should do, even though many view them as adult prerogatives, such as getting drunk, using illegal drugs, watching pornography — and cursing. Just think of some respected figure from your life, past or present, be the individual a kindly grandmother, a clergyman, or a respected teacher. Assuming he had a clean mouth to begin with, how would you react if you heard him swearing like a drunken sailor? Wouldn’t you be shocked? Might you even lose some respect?

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George Washington called swearing a vice “without any temptation” because, unlike with lust or gluttony, the urge to curse is relatively easy to resist. Yet it’s increasingly common for people not to resist but revel in it. As *Christianity Today’s* Carolyn Arends wrote in the 2013 article “The Trouble with Cussing Christians,” “It’s cool these days to be a Christian who swears. It gives the curser an ‘I’m into Jesus, but I’m not legalistic’ badge. A recent tweet about a behavioral study that linked swearing and honesty went viral among my church friends (although no one could produce a link to the actual study).” Of course, this just reflects the wider society. It’s much as how people today often issue the disclaimer, “Look, I’m no prude” before criticizing an example of loosening sexual mores. We should be saying “Look, I’m no pervert,” but in this highly sexualized time sin is in. And there’s social pressure to not be too pure of tongue just as there is to not be too pure of body.

This trend is promoted by Hollywood, which delights in disgorging expletive-laden fare. Such influence is significant because entertainment engages the senses, influences fashions, and molds emotions. As with all of today’s social degradations, this then is given an intellectual veneer of legitimacy with specious science. Aside from the behavioral-study reportage cited by Arends, just consider three



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articles from the last several years:

- The BBC printed in 2016, “Swearing at work might be good for your career.”
- *Elite Daily* gave us the 2014 gem, “Science F*cking Confirms It: 11 Reasons Cursing Is Good For The Soul.”
- The *pièce de résistance*, however, was provided last year by the *Los Angeles Times*: “Go ahead, curse in front of your kids,” penned by UC San Diego professor of cognitive science Benjamin Bergen.

The *Times* is just being consistent, though. It also published the 2013 article “Many researchers taking a different view of pedophilia,” which makes the case that, as is claimed about homosexuality, pedophilia is yet another inborn “sexual orientation” that “does not change.” I guess the message is: Cursing and molestation — do it “for the children.”

(Regarding this “research,” note that as I reported in “Blinding Me With Science: Fraud and Folly for Fame and Funding” [The New American, March 2014], at least 15 percent of scientific papers today are fraudulent to some degree. Moreover, don’t count on the press to filter them. Most journalists know little about science and, more significantly, only care about making headlines — and eyebrow-raising, fringe pseudo-science fits the bill.)

What we’re witnessing here is man’s common desire to justify himself. As to this, Arends mentions another common line of thought, writing that many of her “friends point to the arbitrariness of the cuss-word system.... ‘What if table was a swear word?’ asked my daughter. ‘Or elbow?’... She has a point. There is something absurd about the designation of particular words as profane.” Yes, she has a point — just not a good one.

What if “boy” meant “girl”? (Then you’d have transgender lunacy.) Joking aside, what if “table” meant “car” or “elbow” meant “table”? Then we’d say “*table*” when referencing a car and “*elbow*” when referencing a table. It isn’t hard to grasp. If “love” meant “hate,” “I love you” would mean “I hate you,” but do we consequently consider someone’s profession of love meaningless? We only would if we believed he didn’t mean it, that it really was “only words.” Or imagine a man accused of making terroristic threats saying to the judge, “C’mon, your honor. They’re just words. What if ‘kill’ meant ‘help’?!”

Likewise, when then-Vice President Richard Nixon visited South America in the 1950s and flashed the “A-O.K.” sign, people were livid because it has scatological implications in their culture, perhaps being tantamount to flashing the middle finger. It’s too bad Nixon didn’t just know to say, “Relax, now, you rubes; don’t you realize symbols are all arbitrary?”

The point is that while the labels assigned may be arbitrary and vary with time and place, *what they represent doesn’t*. Whatever term we use to reference a table, killing, or sex, it is those things being referenced. So in defense of vulgarity, the arbitrariness argument is silly; it’s like saying a gift is irrelevant because it could be wrapped in many different kinds of paper; it’s to say that ideas should be ignored because of the variability of the symbols used to relate them, even though the ideas existed first and the only purpose of the symbols is to relate them. Then, if someone insults you with oblique language, would you accept his coy defense, “Hey, that’s not what I actually said” (deceitfully referencing a literal interpretation of his own words)? Or would you say, “Look, I know what you meant”?



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Note, too, that the arbitrariness argument, logically analyzed, is an attack on language itself. What if “table” meant “elbow”? *All words are arbitrary* labels. So why is this skepticism about them only manifested when the matter is vulgarity? Because the motivation isn’t intellectual but emotional: With vulgarity, again, people have something they seek to justify.

So the question now arises: What is *meant* when expressing vulgarity? Its nature is perhaps best revealed by examining when people are most likely to use it: When they’re angry and lose control. When a man painfully stubs his toe, a vehicle runs into his brand-new car, or he’s facing off with a fellow challenging him in the street, the expletives are more likely to fly. This is when they’re uttered most passionately and constitute vulgarity in its purest form, and it is clear what it is: verbal violence.

It’s born of a desire to lash out, to rage against the object of one’s ire, be it the table he stubbed his toe on or the man with whom he’s arguing. When you say “[Expletive] you!” or “You’re just a little [expletive],” it’s not constructive criticism or even any kind of substantive criticism. It’s a verbal punch. Much as with actual fisticuffs, it signals that the dialogue (in the sense of negotiation) has ended and the fighting has begun. This is why back-and-forth swearing often precedes an actual fight: It can be an intermediate step to physical violence.

So what are we to make of the habit, so common today, of peppering regular conversation with vulgarity? Those guilty may generally be angry people, but for certain is that they’re injecting verbal violence into regular conversation. Translated, a vulgarity-infused sentence could be read as in the following example with the bracketed terms in place of the expletives: “That [punch] guy makes some good [kick] pizza.” It’s almost as if it’s a linguistic version of the “knock-out game,” with verbal violence used simply out of a perverse sense of fun.

Perhaps George Washington’s, Joan of Arc’s, and Stonewall Jackson’s opposition to vulgarity was informed by their Christian foundation. The Bible does state, after all, “But now put you also all away: anger, indignation, malice, blasphemy, filthy speech out of your mouth” (Colossians 3:8). Jesus himself said, “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man: but what cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” Christian or not, though, there is good reason to heed these words. As John Adams put it, “The only foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue.”

Virtue, of course, means “good moral habits.” And the Founders all emphasized that “liberty cannot be preserved, if the manners of the people are corrupted,” as British martyr for republican government Algernon Sidney put it. Just as a vice-ridden man — hooked on drugs and alcohol, indulging sexual perversion, and prone to violent outbursts — is viewed as on a downward spiral and destined for prison time or untimely death, is it different with a vice-ridden civilization? Is it not destined for the prison and death of tyranny?

Obviously, virtue involves more than purity of tongue. But this priority lies right in the middle of the counsel to be good in thought, word, and deed. Can we be a virtuous land, worthy of freedom, when expressions reflecting the Deadly Sin of wrath litter our discourse? Is our downward moral spiral not reflected in, and exacerbated by, our downward spiral of language? Moreover, is there really a convincing case for using vulgarity? Even if one is skeptical of this essay’s arguments, prudence would dictate erring on the side of caution.

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit,” noted historian Will Durant. This applies to the habits known as virtue and vice as well. English philosopher Edmund Burke also



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explained, beautifully, a relevant principle here: “Manners are of more importance than laws. The law can touch us here and there, now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation like that of the air we breathe in.”

If we saw a group of children continually spewing expletives, we’d likely consider it an ugly scene and testimonial to lost innocence (absence of sin). Yet as poet and playwright John Dryden said, “Men are but children of a larger growth” — and when God looks down on His children, aged vulgar mouths can’t seem any prettier. Thus would we do well to ponder a simple truth: Growing up shouldn’t mean growing ugly.

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