The Ethics of Metaphor


While Hitler and Nazi metaphors seem never to go out of fashion in the toxic tides of American public discourse, they seem recently to have been set aside, at least temporarily, in favor of slavery and Ku Klux Klan metaphors.

In a recent speech to the Faith and Freedom Coalition, the former Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin stated that when the United States’ debt to China comes due—“and this isn’t racist,” Palin assured her audience—“it’ll be like slavery … We are going to be beholden to a foreign master.”

Palin is hardly alone in invoking slavery to score political points. Earlier this year, Bill O’Brien, a New Hampshire Republican then running for Congress, described the Affordable Care Act as “a law as destructive to personal and individual liberty as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850,” while the rocker-provocateur Ted Nugent claimed that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” programs of the 1960s were “responsible for more destruction to black America than the evils of slavery and the KKK combined.” Not to be outdone, the Florida Democrat Alan Grayson compared the Tea Party to the KKK by sending constituents a fund-raising email containing an image of a burning cross. When challenged, Grayson replied, “If the hood fits, wear it.”

Such metaphors offend many, but they are hardly unusual. Each passing news cycle brings fresh reports of the demonization, poisonous analogies, and historical slanders that characterize contemporary discourse. Whether comparing President Obama to Stalin, or Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin to Hitler, public argument is rage-driven, dysfunctional, and ethically questionable.

I often talk with students about how argument is more than an instrument for persuasion, that it is equally and perhaps essentially an ethical activity. By this I mean that in making arguments about such topics as health care or government surveillance we can choose between language that expresses such virtues as honesty, accountability, and generosity, and utterances that rehearse the spleen and intolerance currently passing for normal discourse.

Yet such discussions can be frustratingly inconclusive, responding less to shared ethical standards than to the ideologies of the participants. Moreover, aren’t provocative metaphors functioning exactly as they should? Metaphors are meant to unsettle. They are instances, according to George Lakoff, of “novel poetic language” in which comparisons are made “across conceptual domains” to stimulate new insights. We think in metaphors, and metaphorical language has structured our conceptions of reality since the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. To seek to regulate metaphor is perhaps to limit our ways of seeing.

And yet some metaphors we know—we just know, as Justice Potter Stewart just knew about pornography—are misleading, malicious, or worse. How do we decide? How do we determine what counts as an ethical metaphor? What criteria apply?
I offer what I call the Four Tests, or criteria for evaluating the ethical standards of figurative language in public discourse.

1. **The History Test.** How closely does the metaphor correspond to the facts of the case, as best we understand them? When the Arizona congressman Trent Franks compares abortion to genocide, for example, we can begin by asking what is meant by genocide, what forms does it take, what are its legal definitions. Where has it historically occurred, and under what conditions? Who has sponsored and who has suffered it? In short, we attempt to understand the term in all its legal, cultural, and historical contexts. And this means we have to know what such terms mean before using them.

2. **The Resonance Test.** Certain metaphors and similes have a unique cultural power to incite. Such language goes beyond literal meanings to invoke longer histories of associations and images. “Hitler” is one such term. When we think of Hitler, we think of more than an individual, no matter how invidious. We recall the Warsaw ghetto, the death camps, and the gas chambers. “Hitler” is not simply the name of a person; it is a vessel brimming with historical memories. It is a bell that, when you ring it, the room is filled with other sounds, other echoes. There are many such terms: “lynching,” “blood libel,” “apartheid.” If we are to use such terms, we need to attend to their place in our collective cultural consciousness.

3. **The Proportionality Test.** Is the seriousness of the metaphor proportional to that which it is applied? Some years ago, I read a story in *The Boston Globe* in which a sportswriter described the walls of Fenway Park as closing in on the visiting pitcher the way Russian tanks surrounded Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring. The metaphor failed, quite horribly, the proportionality test. When sensationalism overcomes judgment, we may be entering the realm of unethical discourse.

4. **The Quiet Room Test.** I use “Quiet Room” here to indicate a place for writers’ self-examination. The final test of the ethical metaphor, in other words, is the one we administer to ourselves. Deep down, we know—do we not?—when we are arguing to incite or to enlighten, to inflame or to understand. The last test, then, is the one we take in our own Quiet Rooms, evaluating the intentions and effects of our words.

I do not imagine that those modest tests can be applied universally, or that they will resolve disputes between parties of fundamentally different values. Some divides cannot be breached. Yet the very act of reflection may serve as a starting point: an acknowledgment that the language of public argument inevitably engages us, students and teachers, in questions of ethics, values, and virtues. Such understanding, should it come, may be the first step toward a better, healthier, and ultimately more constructive practice of public discourse.

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