

## Conclusion

Leaders who wish to persuade must seek information on which to base their presumably persuasive appeals. Moreover, they must seek information while making those appeals and afterward, to gauge the effectiveness of the work. Given the discussion of information-seeking principles, strategies, and costs, it is clear that leaders have before them here an extraordinarily difficult endeavor. Part of this endeavor can be better prosecuted if leaders consider and act on the following seven cautions:

1. Do not shoot the messenger.
2. Reward people who give you good information.
3. Be prepared to give as well as receive information.
4. Do not allow your optimism to shut out negative information.
5. Do not allow your negativity to disallow positive information.
6. Do not accept or reject information solely on the basis of the source.
7. Be wary of exchange relationships and traps.

These cautions notwithstanding, leaders need to realize that information seeking is fraught with political and ethical dilemmas. The seven cautions will not suffice: leaders must weigh and consider the conditions under which they might want to disseminate in order to obtain or withhold information and the conditions under which they might or might not want to enter into possibly fraudulent relationships with others in order to obtain the information they think they want. As we will note in Chapter Three, there is an ecology of ideas, and there surely is an ecology of relationships that can be supported or harmed by the means by which we seek information.

# The Ethics and Ecology of Persuasion

Information seeking inevitably raises questions of ethics. You can, should you so desire, seek information by spying, or stealing, or torturing, or blackmailing informants. Most of us will say that such means are unethical. We can try to keep our information seeking ethical—straightforward, no lies, no subterfuge, above board, not hurtful to ourselves or to others—assuming we can do so. We still have many ethical questions to deal with when we turn from information seeking to the next step: the persuasion of others. There are, moreover, ecological questions to deal with as well, given that how we choose to persuade others is connected to the larger political environment.

## The Ethics of Persuasion

It might seem obvious that seeking information can be an ethical matter. But what of persuasion more largely? To address this question, we have to consider the relationship between choices and ethics, and we have to think of persuasion as a form of action with choices. Not all actions are of ethical import. In Book Three of the *Ethics*, Aristotle makes careful distinctions between involuntary and voluntary actions, and further distinctions between voluntary actions stemming from desire or temper, and actions stemming from

choice. "What is chosen is voluntary, but not everything that is voluntary is chosen. Well, is it the result of previous deliberation? For choice implies a rational principle, and thought. The name, too, seems to indicate something that is chosen *before* other things." Aristotle argues that "what we deliberate about is practical measures that lie within our power" and that "since, therefore, an object of choice is something within our power at which we aim after deliberation, choice will be a deliberate appetition of things that lie in our power."<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli makes a similar distinction with his observation that "men act from necessity or from choice."<sup>2</sup> And Immanuel Kant reminds us that "a free will and a will subject to moral laws are one and the same."<sup>3</sup> William James suggests that "ascending still higher, we reach the plane of Ethics, where choice reigns notoriously supreme. An act has no ethical quality whatever unless it be chosen out of several all equally possible. . . . The ethical energy *par excellence* has to go further and choose which interest out of several, equally coercive, shall become supreme. . . . The problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become."<sup>4</sup> In a slightly different vein, Montaigne quotes Cicero, "Even a just action is just only so far as it is voluntary," and Montaigne goes on to say that "if the action does not have something of the splendor of freedom, it has neither grace nor honor."<sup>5</sup>

For a matter to be of ethical import, it must be a matter of choice. We do not look at someone and say, "Look how tall she is. Isn't she *ethical* because she's so tall?" She did not choose to get tall. She had no choice in the matter. So her tallness is not of ethical import. We can say, though, "Look how kind she is to other people. Isn't she ethical because she's so kind?" Or, "Look how nasty she is to others. Isn't she unethical, given her nastiness?" To put it another way, if we remove the capability of a person to commit a crime, then the non-crime behavior of that person cannot be considered ethical *per se* because there was no choice.

There has to be choice if the matter is to have ethical import. But not all choices necessarily have ethical implications. Choosing between red and black jelly beans does not bear on matters ethical. As John Dewey put it, "Choice would hardly be significant if it did not take effect in outward action, and if it did not when expressed in deeds make a difference in things."<sup>6</sup> Choices are ethical matters when they involve deliberation of practicable means to an end.

We have at the very least three choices to make when we engage in persuasion. First, we have to make choices regarding the ordering of the goods. What is it that we think should be? Second, we have to make choices about the kind or form of arguments to be used. Should we argue on the basis of principle, or interest, or greed, or revenge, or honor? Third, we have to make choices about how we are going to talk. Should we speak passionately or coldly, softly or with raised voice, slowly or rapidly, with simple words and sentences or with complexity?

Let us consider these three choices that we have to make when we undertake to persuade others and examine how the choices have ethical considerations.

### Persuasion and Ordering of the Goods

Persuasion is a form of rhetoric. Some, as with Aristotle, would argue that rhetoric is above all concerned with persuasion: "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,"<sup>7</sup> and, as Francis Bacon argues, that "the duty and office of rhetoric is, to apply reason to imagination to the better moving of the will."<sup>8</sup> Better moving suggests more than effectiveness. Richard Weaver argues that "rhetoric seen in the whole conspersion of its function is an art of emphasis embodying an order of desire. Rhetoric is advisory; it has the office of advising men with reference to an independent order of goods and with reference to their particular situation as it relates to these. The honest rhetorician therefore has two things in mind: a vision

of how matters should go ideally and ethically and a consideration of the special circumstances of his auditors."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Weaver tells us, "a rhetoric without some vision of the order of the goods is actually a contradiction in terms; it would have nowhere to go, nothing to do. We cannot be too energetic in reminding our nihilists and positivists that this is a world of action and history, and that all policies involve choosing between better and worse."<sup>10</sup> And, finally, Weaver reminds us that "just as no action is really indifferent, so no utterance is without its responsibility."<sup>11</sup>

As Walter Beale suggests, "Rhetorical education is an attempt to shape a certain kind of character capable of using language effectively to carry on the practical and moral business of a polity. It is based implicitly on ideals of individual competence and political well-being. Its dual purposes are the cultivation of the individual and the success of a culture."<sup>12</sup>

The process of persuasion is in effect a worldview—an ordering of the goods, a choice between better and worse, and, beyond that, an understanding of how we do the ordering and how we talk about it. Thus, a basic question for all rhetoricians is one of epistemology. As P. Albert Duhamel puts it, "The rhetorician's conception of the value of argument, the process of invention by which arguments are to be discovered, the extent to which the devices of elocution are to be employed, is the result of his evaluation of the reliability of the intellect, the nature and availability of truth, and the existence of certitude. . . . Thus Aristotle was preoccupied with the erection of a system of rhetoric which would discover and express probabilities; Plato valued only the Absolute."<sup>13</sup>

When we attempt to persuade, then, we are making—and offering to others—a choice of a worldview.

Following are some examples of ordering of the goods, of asking people to choose between the better and the worse. A politician tells us that schools are in bad shape, and we need to get students' scores up on the statewide tests. Here is a clear ordering of goods, a vision of the world, and an epistemology all neatly packaged

together. To say that schools are bad is to say, directly or indirectly, what good schools are (something to do with test scores, apparently), and that in the world we would prefer, there would be schools and schools would be attending to the teaching of something that can be measured by means of paper-and-pencil tests, and we would "know" whether schools were achieving the good we desire by comparing test scores.

As another plain example, the school board decides to allocate additional monies to the athletic program, and thus not additional monies to the debate program. Budget is policy, and policy is a choice among alternatives. Whether the board wishes to argue that the choice is between two equally worthy goods, or between the lesser of two evils, or better or worse, the board is still making a choice of practicable means to an end. When asked by parents and other community members about the budget, board members will have to have recourse to an ordering of the goods.

### Persuasion and Selection of Arguments

It is difficult enough to settle on a given policy or a given course of action to follow, but there are still other difficult choices to make. There are many ways in which to convince others to follow that policy or course of action. There are many ways to talk, many ways to argue. You have to make choices. We have already noted choices of action that are not acceptable. Again, force is not persuasion. But there are many ways to engage in speech that attempts to persuade by nonforceful means. And whatever way we choose to talk will have profound implications.

For example, if your child asks, "Why should I love Grandma?" you could reply, "Because she has a lot of money, and if you're nice to her, she'll leave it to you in her will." Or you could reply, "Because she's your grandma." Both responses ask for the same behavior—loving Grandma—but the one response constitutes a calculative relationship and thus, ultimately, a calculative society, and the other constitutes a normative relationship and a normative society.

Or, for example, consider the responses you might make to a student asking you why she should study. A considerable array of arguments can be invoked. Why should you study? Because I'll hit you if you don't. Because you will become a better person. Because you will make me sad (or angry, or ashamed) if you don't. Because I want you to be able to get a good job. Because you will become self-actualized. Because you'll find the subject matter of intrinsic interest. Each of these responses contains in itself an argument, a view of the world, a vision of the good. If the only way I think I can get you to study is to hit you, that is saying a great deal about me, you, and what I think about the world. It is not a pleasant world I am constituting and offering when I have to hit you to "persuade" you (and, as we noted in Chapter One, force is not persuasion in the first place). Left unspoken, with such an argument or threat, is whether what is supposed to be studied has any meaning or relevance here at all or whether obedience is sufficient. To argue in terms of instrumental payoff—study hard in order to get a good job—might seem persuasive (at least it is not brute force) as a rational choice resulting in money and other goods, but the silence as to the possible intrinsic rewards of studying suggests a willingness to consider the world solely in economic terms. Each of the other arguments for studying implies a particular way to constitute the world. (It might be noted that where we are talking about choice of argument here, others might use other terminology, such as *story* or *narrative*. The terminology might differ, but the notion holds. For example, to speak of an "economic narrative" of schooling is to be making a series of choices of ways of arguing, of constituting and explaining the world.)

So we can advocate a given behavior for a host of different reasons and with greatly different consequences. In *The Rebel*, Albert Camus notes that "to live is also to act. To act in the name of what?"<sup>14</sup> We need to ask ourselves what we act in the name of. We need to consider the different kinds of arguments, the different ways of speaking, when we speak in the name of something.

"We think about those things that offer us alternative possibilities," Aristotle says.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps. But sometimes we choose among alternatives without a good deal of thought. We choose a line of argument, a way of talking and reasoning and persuading, without, sometimes, a great deal of attention. And sometimes the choice we make is not even a conscious choice; we talk a certain way out of habit. What we need to do is reflect on how we talk. One way of reflecting on how we talk is to consider some of the basic kinds of arguments we can make when trying to persuade others.

### *Choice of Arguments*

Given that speech that is intended to persuade—to move to belief or action—is directed to a specific audience at a specific time, with specific circumstances and priorities already established, human beings are not to be separated from that context, nor are they likely to be persuaded solely by rational discourse or logic. It is thus that Aristotle (and a host of others following him) placed such emphasis not only on logic but on emotions and feelings, and the audience's estimate of the speaker. Beyond choice of balance between or combination of logos, pathos, and ethos, there are many kinds of arguments, many ways to choose to appeal to an audience.<sup>16</sup> We will consider four basic kinds of argument.

One kind is an argument from definition or genus. We speak of the nature of the thing—a nature that is presumed to persist and not be altered. In *The Federalist* No. 10, James Madison argues that "the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them every where brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of society." In *The Federalist* No. 51, he gives another example of argument from definition: "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to controul the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human

nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary."<sup>17</sup> In much of his writing, Abraham Lincoln used a fundamental argument from definition. As Richard Weaver suggests, Lincoln's "refusal to hedge on the principle of slavery is referable to a fixed concept of the nature of man."<sup>18</sup>

A second kind of argument is similitude (and dissimilitude). Something not known very well is said to be similar to something known much better, and if the one is like the other in some respects, it is probable that it is like the other in other respects. For example, teacher leaders have often used an argument from similitude in making claims to be professionals: we are like doctors in that we do thus and so; therefore, we should be accorded the same sort of respect and privilege accorded doctors generally.<sup>19</sup>

Third, we can argue from consequence. The argument depends on establishing a cause-and-effect relationship, as in, "If you elect me, your taxes will be cut," or, "If you elect my unworthy and venal opponent, we will have another Great Depression."

Fourth, we can argue from circumstance. The argument seeks not principle or similitude or even cause and effect, but rather relies on the brutal facts of the moment. In plain form, the argument is, "Given the situation, what else can we do?" An argument from circumstance focuses on what you are stuck with in the immediate here and now, as opposed to an argument from consequence that at least attempts a look into (or a hedge against) something in the future.

In discussing the forms of argument and their implications, Richard Weaver puts forth a suggestive argument of his own. Weaver claims that "a man's method of argument is a truer index in his beliefs than his explicit profession of principles. Here is a means whereby he is revealed in his work." The "choice of one's source of argument," Weaver says, is "the most critical undertaking of all" (strong words from such a careful writer!). Moreover, he notes, "Nowhere does a man's rhetoric catch up with him more

completely than in the topics he chooses to win other men's assent."<sup>20</sup>

For Weaver, the kinds of arguments differ considerably in terms of philosophical and ethical weight. He argues that for the most part, an argument from definition or genus is superior philosophically to an argument from circumstance. Lincoln, Weaver suggests, tended to rely on arguments from definition, which tends to peg him as a true conservative (at least by Weaver's definition, as one concerned with human nature and basic principles), whereas Edmund Burke, later to be adopted as a hero of the conservatives, tended to argue from circumstance and thus had little solid grounding and should not be taken as an exemplar for conservatives. Applying Weaver's approach to our earlier example, we can see that telling a child to love her grandma in order to receive money is an argument from consequence, and not a very edifying one at that; telling a child to love her grandma "because she's your grandma" is looking for bedrock, an argument from definition.

Others have made distinctions similar to those noted by Weaver. Winston Churchill identified the significance of arguing from principle rather than circumstance: "Those who are possessed of a definite doctrine and of deeply rooted convictions upon it will be in a much better position to deal with the shifts and surprises of daily affairs than those who are merely taking short views, and indulging their natural impulses as they are evoked by what they read from day to day."<sup>21</sup> And Churchill would no doubt have approved of Tocqueville's observation, "What I call great political parties are those that are attached more to principles than to their consequences; to generalities and not to particular cases; to ideas and not to men."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Richard Weaver suggests, "Other parties take their bearing from some philosophy of man and society; the Whigs take their bearing from the other parties. Whatever a party of left or right proposes, they propose (or oppose) in tempered measure. Its politics is

then cautionary, instinctive, trusting more to safety and to present success than to imagination and dramatic boldness of principle. It is, to make the estimate candid, a politics without vision, and consequently without the capacity to survive."<sup>23</sup>

An example of how one's choice of argument can lead to per- ilous results can be seen in the sometimes popular way to argue for such programs as the visual and performing arts in the schools. Some say that the best way to argue for school arts programs is to claim that arts are an inherent part of the human condition, and as part of being human, we should be exposed to them. That argument will not persuade people, say the "realists," given the current emphasis on testing and accountability. We have to argue from con- sequence, they say: put an arts program in your high school, and test scores will go up. The argument from consequence here is a dan- gerous one, given that it is notoriously difficult to link test scores to other variables, and even if an evaluation study showed a signifi- cant correlation, naysayers could always argue that the evaluation methodology was inadequate or faulty. Moreover, there is a reason- able chance that test scores will go down.

Some years ago, I happened to hear a similarly structured argu- ment from a school district official. The district had just embarked on a major school desegregation program. The official told a com- munity group that we would know whether the desegregation plan was a good thing if test scores went up. This argument from conse- quence was exceedingly shaky, given the odds that test scores would likely remain the same or regress. A much more powerful argument came from a school board member in the same district, who had said in court that they had desegregated the schools because it was the right thing to do—an argument from definition.

Both the "arts will raise test scores" and "desegregation is good if test scores go up" are examples of Weaver's "politics without vision," without "the capacity to survive."

Weaver's argument is suggestive, even if we do not accept it as applying equally in all circumstances.<sup>24</sup> It may be that one form of

argument is not necessarily superior ethically to another in all cir- cumstances. Argument from definition or basic principle will not always keep you on solid ground. *Les Misérables* offers a telling example. Jean Valjean is pursued by police inspector Javert. The inspector is governed by a basic principle: the law is the law and must be upheld at all costs—a reasonable notion about the law, this argument from definition. But Javert steadfastly ignores any con- sideration of circumstance, any consideration of justice tempered by mercy. In the end, his argument from definition is not an argu- ment but an idée fixe. Javert cannot deal with the contradiction between his argument from definition and his underlying feelings of humanness toward Jean Valjean (who, after all, spared Javert's life). He resolves the contradiction by committing suicide. (We might note too that officious bureaucrats often operate from a Javert-like argument from definition of regulations.)

A poignant instance of sticking to principle as an argument is found in Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film, *Wild Strawberries*. An old curmudgeon, Isak Borg, has loaned money to his son for medical school expenses. His daughter-in-law points out that she and her husband have had to work overly hard to pay back the money, money the old man does not need. Isak is unperturbed. "Although I realize it's difficult for him, a bargain is a bargain," he says, and he knows that his son "understands and respects" him. His daughter-in-law returns with, "That may be true, but he also hates you." The argument is so strong that even near the end of the film, with Isak trying to bring up the subject of the "bargain" (with an intent to forgive the debt), his son interrupts him, saying, "Don't worry, you'll get your money." Isak protests, "I didn't mean that," but Evald responds, "You'll get your money all right."<sup>25</sup> There are similar examples of arguments from definition getting in the way of understanding other, larger issues in Barbara Tuchman's *In Praise of Folly*, ranging from the Protestant Succession and the British loss of the colonies to the U.S. prosecution of the war in Vietnam.<sup>26</sup>

But overall, Weaver's distinctions are critical. What are the ethical implications of these different ways of arguing? Or, to paraphrase James Boyd White, what kind of a world do you claim and constitute when you choose a given form of argument? What kind of character do you define for yourself? What kind of character do you offer to others when you choose to talk one way rather than another?<sup>27</sup> Moreover, what kind of character are you attributing to your audience when you talk one way rather than another?

If you offer your audience a bribe of one sort or another, you are saying, "I know you. I know that you will not be moved by ethics or principles, but I do know you will be moved by the possibility of riches." If you suggest to your staff that blackmail will be useful in neutralizing an opponent, you are stating that you think blackmail is appropriate behavior and you think your staff does too. On the other hand, if you spend a great deal of time with your staff looking for an argument that will not only be "effective" but is also on ethical high ground, your staff will respond accordingly.

We do have to think about these things that offer alternative possibilities. Every choice of argument constitutes the world.

#### *Choices of Facts and Issues*

There are more choices to make in constructing arguments. You have to choose which facts and issues you want to bring to bear. (Again, note the verb *choose*, with all the implications again of ethical matters.) You cannot say everything about everything. You will have to be selective, focusing on some facts and issues (and perhaps on what you think will work), and you will necessarily have to ignore other facts and issues (including perhaps those that you think will damage your case).

One kind of choice to make stems from the need to sort out the consequential from the unimportant. As Edmund Burke suggests,

To complain of the age we live in, to murmur at the present possessors of power, to lament the past, to conceive

extravagant hopes of the future, are the common dispositions of the greatest part of mankind; indeed the necessary effects of the ignorance and levity of the vulgar. Such complaints and humors have existed in all times; yet as all times have not been alike, true political sagacity manifests itself in distinguishing that complaint which only characterizes the general infirmity of human nature, from those which are symptoms of the particular distemperature of our own air and season.<sup>28</sup>

It is difficult to sort through the facts and issues, especially when we have so much information at our disposal. "Microscopes and telescopes really confuse a man's clear sense of sight," said Goethe.<sup>29</sup>

There are practical consequences and dangers associated with being too unselective. That wonderfully shrewd observer Samuel Johnson listens to an argument for being perhaps less selective than need be in trying to make a case:

*Goldsmith*. "If you put a tub full of blood into a stable, the horses are like to go mad." *Johnson*. "I doubt that." *Goldsmith*. "Nay, Sir, it is a fact well authenticated." *Thrale*. "You had better prove it before you put it in your book on natural history. You may do it in my stable if you will." *Johnson*. "Nay, Sir, I would not have him prove it. If he is content to take his information from others, he may get through his book with little trouble, and without endangering his reputation. But if he makes experiments for so comprehensive a book as his, there would be no end of them; his erroneous assertions would then fall upon himself; and he might be blamed for not having made experiments as to every particular."<sup>30</sup>

Johnson's observation is on the mark. If we choose to select and support claims at a given level of specificity in some areas but not

others, we lay ourselves open to the reader or auditor to ask why we are proving the perhaps inconsequential in some areas while leaving perhaps more important areas unattended.

Another kind of choice that must be made is when to avoid saying something out of prudence or fearing to offend colleagues or ruling powers. "The enjoyment of power is fatal to the subtleties of life," observed Alfred North Whitehead.<sup>31</sup> Indeed. In the original (1781) version *The Robber*, Schiller has Karl kill Amelia rather than forsake his gang. In 1782, at the request of a wealthy patron, Schiller changed the story: in the end, instead of killing Amelia, he marries her!

Chris Patten, former governor of Hong Kong, found that his publisher dropped plans to publish his memoir because of complaints from the company's owner, Rupert Murdoch, that Patten took a negative view of China. This was not the first time that Murdoch involved himself in such matters. "In a similar move in 1994 to avoid irritating the Chinese Government, he removed the BBC news service from his Hong Kong-based satellite service, Star TV, after Beijing protested its coverage of Chinese dissidents."<sup>32</sup>

What to put on the table; what to talk about, is a matter of power. In "One out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century," Tillie Olsen notes that "women's books of great worth suffer the death of being unknown, or at best a peculiar eclipsing, far outnumbering the similar fate of the few such books by men."<sup>33</sup>

### Persuasion and Choosing How to Talk

The third choice to make focuses on style—on how we are going to talk. Of the many aspects of style, we can best look at four: terminology; euphemism and clear language; sentence structure, order, and syntax; and tone and delivery.

#### Terminology

How we choose to name things is of critical importance. Richard Weaver notes that "teaching people to speak the truth . . . can only

be done by giving them the right names of things." Weaver reminds us that early on, Adam is involved in the naming of things: "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." The names stuck: "A name is not just an accident; neither is it a convention which can be repealed by a majority vote at the next meeting; once a thing has been given a name, it appears to have a certain autonomous right to that name, so that it could not be changed without imperiling the foundations of the world."<sup>34</sup> The world has to be named, and as Plato tells us, names have to be taught by teachers.<sup>35</sup> More recently, Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty has this to say:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."<sup>36</sup>

In *Standing by Words*, Wendell Berry reflects on the "gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning." He reminds us that

in order for a statement to be complete and comprehensible three conditions are required:

1. It must designate its object precisely.
2. Its speaker must be willing to stand by it: must believe it, be accountable for it, be willing to act on it.
3. This relation of speaker, word, and object must be conventional: the community must know what it is.<sup>37</sup>



Berry talks too of "precision of definition, this setting of bounds or ends to thought [without which] we cannot mean, or say what we mean, or mean what we say; we cannot stand by our words because we cannot utter words that can be stood by."<sup>38</sup>

Berry's concern about precision is shared by Tocqueville. In reflecting on how "democracy has modified the English language," Tocqueville notes that innovation in language "consists in giving to an expression already in use a sense not in use." Meaning is piled on meaning, with "no common arbitrator, no permanent tribunal, that can fix the sense of the word definitively," and thus word meaning is "left in a mobile situation." As for himself, Tocqueville says, "I would rather that the language be bristling with Chinese, Tartar, or Huron words than that the sense of French words be rendered uncertain. . . . There is no good language without clear terms." Tocqueville notes too the predilection of those in a democracy for abstract terms. Given mobility and the changing situation in a democracy, people must "have very large expressions" to contain their thoughts: "As they never know if the idea they are expressing today will suit the new situation they will have tomorrow, they naturally conceive a taste for abstract terms. An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: one puts in it the ideas one desires and one takes them out without anyone's seeing it."<sup>39</sup>

In our own time, we can observe careful attention to terminology, as suggested by the following four examples.

Perhaps no one else understood better the subtleties of language and terminology than Winston Churchill. In addition to the marvelous stirring speeches of 1940—speeches that held Britain together at a time when many were ready to give up—Churchill paid close attention to small details, as evidenced in his concern over the "Home Guard" terminology, shortly after taking office in 1940. The volunteers working throughout the country at various tasks had been given the somewhat uninspiring title of "Local Defence Volunteers." Churchill proposed "Home Guard." Despite

Anthony Eden's opposition that "LDV" had already passed into current usage and had been "woven into a million brassards," Churchill held his ground (and would one have expected less of him?), and the "more simple and better name of 'Home Guard'" was born.<sup>40</sup>

The second example emerges from the Seattle school district's lengthy battle over school desegregation during the late 1970s. The proposed plan was termed "mandatory busing" by opponents, while supporters said the plan featured a "fixed assignment" strategy. The opponents fastened on the adjective "mandatory" with some success, given all the negative freight of that term in a nation that prides itself on freedom and rugged individualism. The supporters selected "fixed assignment" perhaps because the phrase sounds benign and conjures up no negative images (rather, one might argue, "fixed" implies a certain virtuous solidity), when in fact a student assigned to a certain school most assuredly would be paired with another school in another part of town and would indeed be transported, like it or not, to that school.

The third example of the power of terminology comes to us from the world of physics and physicist Stephen Hawking, who "came to prominence just at a time when John Wheeler, an American physicist, had coined the science-fiction-friendly term, black hole. 'It was,' Wheeler wrote later, a 'terminologically trivial but psychologically powerful' description. Hawking, author of the equally powerful titled 'A Brief History of Time,' . . . noted: 'The importance in science of a good name should not be underestimated.'"<sup>41</sup>

The fourth example of the importance of names, modest but telling, comes from a small college in western Pennsylvania. The institution recently changed its name from Beaver College to Arcadia University, "aiming to shed a source of ridicule and boost enrollment." The new name was chosen based on surveys of thousands of alumni and parents, with a short list sent to focus groups.<sup>42</sup>

We might well conclude that the importance of names, good names, should not be underestimated in any human endeavor.

### *Euphemisms and Distancing Language*

Euphemisms and distancing language are reflections of disconnection between words and meaning. In a justly famous description of the revolution at Corcyra, Thucydides gives us a sense of what happens when the connection between words and meaning becomes loosened:

Words had to change their meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting, a justifiable means of self-defence. The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected. To succeed in a plot was to have a shrewd head, to divine a plot still shrewder; but to try to provide against having to do either was to break up your party and to be afraid of your adversaries.<sup>43</sup>

George Orwell spends considerable time in *1984* and in *Animal Farm* dealing with euphemisms and the disconnect between words and meaning. Perhaps, though, his strongest statement comes from his oft-reprinted essay, "Politics and the English Language":

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. . . . Political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. 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*. . . .

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics." All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. . . . But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better.<sup>44</sup>

What can happen to language when euphemism comes into place is nicely illustrated by Lope de Vega in his play *Fuenteovejuna*, with one character telling us that "the blind man is said to be myopic, or, if you squint, you have a slight cast in one eye. A man with a wooden leg is a trifle lame, and a careless spendthrift a good chap. An ignorant ass is said to be the silent type, a braggart is known as soldierly." Weil, another character replies, that may be so in the city, but here "a grave man is a bore. . . . If you are just, you are called cruel, if merciful, then you are weak. One who is constant is called boorish, the polite man is a flatterer, one who gives alms, a hypocrite."<sup>45</sup>

In *Dog Years*, Günter Grass comments at length on how the Nazis used obscurantist language to avoid facing complicity in evil. Grass imagines the German army chasing a dog: "The Nothing will be after-accomplished on the double. Each and every activity of the Nothing attuned to distantiality will be substantivized in view of final victory so that later, sculptured in marble or in shell-lime, it may be at-hand in a state of to-be-viewedness."<sup>46</sup> The Bolsheviks famously indulged in their own alterations of language: "jocose euphemisms were coined for the business of killing: 'to send to a meeting,' 'to dispatch to Dukhonin's headquarters' (with reference

to General N. N. Dukhonin, lynched by soldiers in late 1917), 'to put into an envelope and mail,' the last signifying to arrest and then execute."<sup>47</sup>

Albert Camus, no stranger to language, lies, and oppression, argued that "since the man who lies shuts himself off from other men, falsehood is therefore proscribed and, on a slightly lower level, murder and violence, which impose mutual silence. The mutual understanding and communication discovered by rebellion can only survive in the free exchange of dialogue. Every ambiguity, every misunderstanding, lead to death; clear language and simple words are the only salvation from it." And Camus observes in a footnote that "it is worth noting that the language peculiar to totalitarian doctrines is always a scholastic or administrative language."<sup>48</sup>

Writing in his journal during World War II, Romanian novelist Mihail Sebastian comes close to Camus in his comments on what happens to language in times of war and crisis: "Later, much later, a study may be written about a strange phenomenon of these times: namely, the fact that words are losing their meaning, becoming weightless and devoid of content. Their speakers do not believe them, while their hearers do not understand them. If you analyzed word by word, grammatically, syntactically, and semantically, the declarations to be found almost daily in the newspapers, and if you opposed these with the facts to which they refer, you would see that there is an absolute split between word and reality."<sup>49</sup>

In her account of her own life and the lives of her grandmother and mother, Jung Chang examined how China, during the late 1950s, "slid into doublespeak. Words became divorced from reality, responsibility, and people's read thoughts. Lies were told with ease because words had lost their meanings—and had ceased to be taken seriously by others."<sup>50</sup>

Inflated language, a kind of euphemism, is another bar to clarity. Tocqueville once again gives a useful example. Social climbing will push people to "enhance a very coarse profession with a Greek or Latin name. The more the job is low and distant from science,

the more the name is pompous and erudite. Thus it is that our rope dancers are transformed into acrobats and funambulists."<sup>51</sup>

Euphemisms are sometimes used to distance the speaker from other people. Torturers in Baghdad are reported to throw political prisoners into a tank of battery acid known as the "swimming pool."<sup>52</sup> Melvin Konner provides an extensive list of distancing slang that hospital residents and interns use, including "hang crepe" (given the condition of the patient, you will need to hang crepe when talking with the family to get them to expect the worst) and "crispy critter" (a child suffering from major burns). Konner suggests that if such language "seems frequently brutal and egotistical, we should consider the circumstances that produce it and remember that it is a revealing body of expression that may well be essential to their survival."<sup>53</sup>

Euphemisms sometimes serve appropriate social functions. If you have had to leave the table at a formal dinner party because of a stomach ailment, you would not want the host to describe in explicit terms the reasons for your abrupt departure. Or if you are an executive causing the abrupt departure of an employee, you might want to use language in the letter of termination that is clear but not necessarily brutally clear (as in, "Dear Joe. You're fired. Sincerely, Ruth"). With all the emphasis on clear language and short sentences, we would do well to consider situations where such an emphasis would be inappropriate. Richard Lanham's *Anti-Style: A Textbook* is a useful antidote in this regard.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps in the end we can go back to Orwell's advice: "What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. In prose, the worse thing one can do with words is to surrender to them."<sup>55</sup>

#### *Sentence Structure, Order, and Syntax*

"Rhetorical form is one of the carriers of meaning," Edward Corbett reminds us, and certainly the sentence (from the Latin, *sententia*, "a way of thinking") is one of those forms and carriers.<sup>56</sup>

More broadly, Richard Weaver helps us understand the implications of sentence structure choice in noting the differences between the simple and the complex sentence:

The complex sentence will be found nearly always to express some sort of hierarchy, whether spatial, moral, or causal, with its subordinate members describing the lower orders. In simple-sentence style we would write: "Tragedy began in Greece. It is the highest form of literary art." There is no disputing that these sentences, in this sequence, could have a place in mature expression. But they do not have the same effect as "Tragedy, which is the highest form of literary art, began in Greece" or "Tragedy, which began in Greece, is the highest form of literary art." What has occurred is the critical process of subordination. The two ideas have been transferred from a conglomerate to an articulated unity, and the very fact of subordination makes inevitable the emergence of a focus of interest. Is our passage about the highest form of literary art or about the cultural history of Greece? The form of the complex sentence makes it unnecessary to waste any words in explicit assertion of that.<sup>57</sup>

Lord Chesterfield, by his own assessment an expert on pleasing and persuading, advises his son on the strategies of sentence structure composition:

I have spoken frequently in Parliament, and not always without some applause; and therefore I can assure you, from my experience, that there is very little in it. The elegance of the style, and the turn of the periods, make the chief impression upon the hearers. Give them but one or two round and harmonious periods in a speech,

which they will retain and repeat; and they will go home as well satisfied, as people do from the Opera, humming all the way one or two favourite tunes that have struck their ears, and were easily caught. Most people have ears, but few have judgment; tickle those ears, and depend upon it, you will catch their judgments, such as they are.<sup>58</sup>

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch points out the necessity of clear order and good syntax:

In writing, whether in prose or in verse, we can only produce our effect by a series of successive small impressions, dripping our meaning (so to speak) into the reader's mind—with the correspondent advantage, in point of vivacity, that our picture keeps moving all the while. Now obviously this throws a greater strain on his patience whom we address. Man at the best is a narrow-mouthed bottle. Through the conduit of speech he can utter—as you, my hearers, can receive—only one word at a time. In writing . . . you are as a commander filing out his battalion through a narrow gate that allows only one man at a time to pass; and your reader, as he receives the troops, has to reform and reconstruct them. No matter how large or how involved the subject, it can be communicated only in that way. You see, then, what an obligation we owe to him of order and arrangement; and why, apart from felicities and curiosities of diction, the old rhetoricians laid such stress upon order and arrangement as duties we owe to those to honour us with their attention.<sup>59</sup>

Abraham Lincoln, a master craftsman of prose, provides our final example of the importance of order and syntax:

There were many books in New Salem and few escaped the inquiring and insatiable Lincoln, who read them, not casually and in haste, but with infinite care and thoroughness, often writing out what he had read, to be sure he understood. "I have," states a credible witness, "known him to write a proposition in three different forms in order to state the meaning as clearly and simply as possible—and to spend half a day doing so."<sup>60</sup>

#### *Delivery and Tone*

Rhetoric has been given a bad name by those who suggest that the discipline is primarily a bag of emotional tricks designed to fool an audience. Given the emphasis in past centuries on the formal qualities of speech delivery and tone at what was seen as the demise of content, philosophy, and ethics, the bad name may be in part deserved. But we should not overlook the importance of delivery and tone. They give us a sense of the speaker's attitude toward himself and also of the speaker's attitude toward the audience. Such variables as "vocal pitch and quality, facial expression, and directness of eye contact" will tell us much.<sup>61</sup>

In *The Legal Imagination*, James Boyd White draws on Stark Young's observations on tempo and tone in language:

The tempo and tone are languages quite as the word is, sometimes one of the three is more important to the idea, sometimes another. The plain word no means simply negation or refusal, but by tempo and vocal tone other meanings are added. When a character asks, Are you certain of his guilt? and another answers no, he is speaking two languages, one of the language of the word, which in this case remains the same; the other of music, by which the meaning can be changed at will. If he says no at once in a clear tone, no fifty seconds after the question and in a shrill tone, no one minute after

the question in an angry tone, and so on, he is plainly saying different things, things of which the word is only a small part. The gradations and values of sound in the theatre are in their way as infinite and inexhaustible as music is.<sup>62</sup>

We noted in Chapter Two that information seeking has political and, even more important, ethical implications. We note here the same sentiment. The choice of terminology, the choice of euphemism or clear language, the choice of sentence structure, the choice of order and syntax, the choice of delivery and tone: all of these choices carry ethical freight. All of us, and certainly leaders, have much to consider in weighing our choices of how to speak. These choices are ethical in another sense as well, in that persuasion is an ecological matter.

#### **Ecology of Persuasion**

The title of his 1972 book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, gives us a sense of one of Gregory Bateson's ways of viewing the world. There are connections to be acknowledged and understood, Bateson argued:

There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself. It branches out like a rooted parasite through the tissues of life, and everything gets into a rather peculiar mess. When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise "What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species," you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake

Erie is a part of *your* wider eco-mental system—and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of *your* thought and experience.<sup>63</sup>

It is in this way, then, that Bateson considers the “problem of how to transmit our ecological reasoning to those whom we wish to influence in what seems to us to be an ecologically ‘good’ direction.” As Bateson concludes, “The means by which one man influences another are part of the ecology of ideas in their relationship, and part of the larger ecological system within which that relationship exists.”<sup>64</sup>

In *Rights Talk*, Mary Ann Glendon refers to the ten-second sound bites that are preferred by the media but actually “constrict opportunities for the sort of ongoing dialogue upon which a regime of ordered liberty ultimately depends” (bumper sticker reasoning, as I put it). She notes, “A tendency to frame nearly every social controversy in terms of a clash of rights (a woman’s right to her own body vs. a fetus’s right to life) impedes compromise, mutual understanding, and the discovery of common ground. A penchant for absolute formulations (‘I have the right to do whatever I want with my property’) promotes unrealistic expectations and ignores both social costs and the rights of others. Saturated with rights, political language can no longer perform the important function of facilitating public discussion of the right ordering of our lives together. Just as rights exist for us only through being articulated, other goods are not even available to be considered if they can be brought to expression only with great difficulty, or not at all.”<sup>65</sup>

Here Glendon is close to Michael Ignatieff: “Our needs are made of words: they come to us in speech, and they can die for lack of expression. Without a public language to help us find our words, our needs will dry up in silence.”<sup>66</sup> And listening with approval to Ignatieff is John Dewey: “Expression of ideas in communication is one of the indispensable conditions of the awakening of thought not only in others, but in ourselves. If ideas when aroused cannot

be communicated they either fade away or become warped and morbid.”<sup>67</sup> Speech can prevent thought, and thus further speech, as Orwell reminds us: “The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible.”<sup>68</sup>

Glendon goes on to say that “when political actors resort to slogans and images rather than information and explanations, they hinder the exercise of citizenship. Leaving so much unsaid, they create a discrepancy between what we officially proclaim and what we need in order to make sense of our lives.”<sup>69</sup>

In a penetrating essay on obscure writing, Primo Levi suggests a larger ecological relationship: “He who does not know how to communicate, or communicates badly, in a code that belongs only to him or a few others, is unhappy, and spreads unhappiness around him.” Levi goes on to say that someone who engages in bad communication deliberately “is wicked or at least a discourteous person, because he imposes labor, anguish, or boredom on his readers.”<sup>70</sup>

Richard Weaver notes that rhetoric “supplies the bonds of community, for community rests upon informed sentiment.”<sup>71</sup> If this is so, then bad speaking means ill-informed sentiment that threatens the existence of community.

Words uttered can have an immediate impact, even without apparent intent. Is there no one who will rid me of this troublesome priest? asks Henry II, and before too much later, Becket is murdered in the cathedral at Canterbury. And the impact surely can go beyond the immediate to the larger surround. Robert Kennedy had a sense of the impact of words on the larger surround when he discouraged his aides from speaking harshly of Lyndon Johnson. Kennedy disliked and distrusted Johnson, to be sure. But he did not like the harsh attacks and would not contribute to that kind of talk. “A clash of personalities would undermine the senator’s policy arguments and cheapen his public stature. And it would weaken the presidency, an office Kennedy expected, someday, to occupy.”<sup>72</sup>

Michel Berenbaum, Georgetown University theology professor, reminds us that "a natural expansion of verbal violence is physical violence." Berenbaum was reported as convinced that some of the "unconscionable verbal violence in Israel was a factor in the deranged actions of the Rabin assassination and worries about some of the same patterns in America."<sup>73</sup>

Rollo May quotes W. H. Auden: "As a poet, there is only one political duty, and that is to defend one's language from corruption. And this is particularly serious now. It's being so quickly corrupted. When it's corrupted, people lose faith in what they hear, and this leads to violence."<sup>74</sup>

In *The Federalist* No. 1, Alexander Hamilton spoke with "caution" on the necessity of moderate speech, holding out the hope of reasoned discourse. He acknowledged that bad judgment can come from numerous causes and that we can "see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of question." Moreover, he suggested, "we are not always sure, that those who advocate the truth are influenced by purer principles than their antagonists." And, finally, he saw as ill judged "that intolerant spirit, which has, at all times, characterised political parties. For, in politics, as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword. Heresies in either can rarely be cured by persecution."<sup>75</sup>

There is not enough space here to begin to document the negative political campaign advertisements—the attack ads that show just how far we are from essays that compose *The Federalist*. But I will offer one further example of the results emerging from what is seen as do-what-it-takes-to-get-elected rhetoric.

Riding the term limits bandwagon in 1992, Washington State politician George Nethercutt unseated House Speaker Thomas Foley. Nethercutt promised to serve but three terms. However, after his three terms, Nethercutt found it advantageous to run again. For reasons that may be difficult to fathom, his constituents returned him to the House for a fourth term. (Perhaps several decades from now, Nethercutt will be defeated by yet another "term limits" cam-

paigner.) My point here is that despite his reelection, the congressman has in some way contributed to the overall decline in respect for politicians and the political process. The lesson many young people learn from hearing speech that can so easily reverse itself (war is peace, freedom is slavery, term limits are essential, term limits are meaningless) is that, once again, words either lose their meaning or simply do not matter. In a society where people can use words to mean whatever they want them to mean, words are simply weapons to be used to gain an immediate advantage.

"He broke a campaign pledge. And not just any pledge, but the one that defined him. And he has broken it in spectacularly appalling fashion, reinforcing the idea that politicians are a bunch of dishonorable crumbs only out for themselves." "A lot of people will do or say anything to get elected,' [former Colorado Senator William] Armstrong says. 'That cynicism is a cancer on the body politic. And any time a guy like Nethercutt can get away with a stunt like this it's just bad.'"<sup>76</sup>

I already noted the debilitating results of some arguments from consequence, with the examples of how to promote arts in the schools and how to argue for school desegregation. To argue that either should be linked to a rise in achievement test scores is to give away a great deal, and not only in terms of the particular program in question. Once arts proponents start arguing from consequence, with all sorts of what turn out to be strained attempts to link arts and test scores, the arguments will take on a life of their own, a legitimacy. These arguments will become accepted as the way to make the case to the district. Music programs will be justified on the basis of increased test scores, as will additional programs in creative writing and every other "soft" educational offering. The ecological connection of the arguments cannot be denied once established, and the more it is used on one situation, the more it will be used in other situations, building on itself and providing its own justification. It is curious that it matters little if the modest arts program is actually adopted. Once the argument from consequence is made and

accepted, others with other programs to propose will have to follow the form.

### Persuasion and the Ecology (and Ethics) of Response

So far we have been talking about the ethics of persuasion from the point of view of the person attempting to persuade. But persuasion is never unidirectional. The persuader is trying to persuade an audience, and as a member of the audience, we have choices to make. We can choose to accept the claims and how those claims are made. Or we can choose to reject those claims or the basis on which they are made. With these kinds of choices, we are on ethical ground.

For example, at a school staff meeting, a teacher repeatedly argues that some students, especially those from poor families, lack the basic intelligence to do the work. "We all know that they are dumb," she says. You are at that staff meeting. You have to decide whether to reinforce the expressed stereotype (and you can reinforce by either vocalizing your support or remaining silent) or to contradict what the teacher is saying.

When a speaker uses euphemisms that obscure meaning, you must choose to accept the language or ask for clarification. When a speaker uses hurtful language (hurtful to those present or hurtful regardless of who is in the audience), you must choose to speak out against such language or to let the language ride and thus by default support the usage.

A speaker uses passive voice to disclaim responsibility: "Mistakes were made." You can choose to accept or reject, reinforce or deny.

### Conclusion

As a leader, you will set the tone of an organization not only by your own speech but by how you choose to accept or reject the speech of others. If you are expedient in how you respond to the speech of others, you will show yourself as expedient.

Clearly the question of how to respond has ecological dimensions. Others in a given organization are always watching their leaders with care, looking for probabilities of future behavior. If you are expedient in one situation, the odds are that you will be expedient in another. Moreover, your giving expediency your blessing tells everyone in the organization that they too can be expedient in how they choose to respond to the speech of others—and can be expedient in how they choose to speak themselves in trying to persuade others. Gregory Bateson suggests that it is a characteristic of error to propagate itself in a system. And in a similar manner, it is a characteristic of responses to speeches to propagate and spread.

We can see, then, that the ethics of persuasion and the ecology of persuasion pose political and ethical dilemmas for leaders. And perhaps we can see, with Ben Jonson, that "language most shows a man: speak, that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind. No glass renders a man's form or likeness, so true as his speech."<sup>77</sup>