

# Editorial: Flaunting and Flouting

The Greek letter *iota* proverbially represents a mere trifle—the ‘jot or tittle’ of *Matthew* v, 18—but it also constitutes the literally literal difference between a homouousian and a homoiousian Christology, and can therefore mark the boundary between truth and error, salvation and damnation. Ever since the time of Socrates philosophers have been accused of indulging in mere logomachy, and yet threatened with hemlock or hellfire if they fought on the wrong side. Politicians attach importance to the phrasing of their own slogans and manifestoes, but speak of their opponents’ scruples and niceties as being ‘theological’ or ‘metaphysical’.

An explicit disclaimer of concern with such trifles is no guarantee of immunity. The Sunday reviewers who are most caustic in their opposition to ‘linguistic’ philosophy, are also those most inclined to welcome serious attention to words when it is given by C. S. Lewis or George Steiner or Raymond Williams. Nobody has complained that Chomsky takes language too seriously. Fowler on *English Usage* and Gowers on *Plain Words* are allowed to be respectable as well as commercially successful ventures.

That a concern for language is a necessary part of life and culture is recognized by witnesses in every generation. T. S. Eliot strove ‘to purify the dialect of the tribe’. George Orwell reminded us that *Newspeak* is the vehicle of Double-think. Ian Robinson’s plea for *The Survival of English* demonstrates how easily those who are careless in matters of form may become reckless about matters of substance. If we refuse to run the risk of pedantry we face the greater danger of allowing the weeds to choke the crops.

The BBC’s series of short talks on ‘Words’ and Philip Howard’s articles in *The Times* are two other manifestations of a preoccupation with niceties of usage that has survived into an age and climate that are alien to it. Here the emphasis is on the malapropisms which are in process of making themselves acceptable by becoming accepted. By the end of the century ‘tawdry’ will mean the same as ‘sordid’, and the distinction between perspicacity and perspicuity will no longer be perspicuous even to the perspicacious. Those who flaunt their ignorance and flout the conventions of received usage already describe themselves as flouting what they flaunt and flaunting what they flout. Reference to ‘militating circumstances’ will soon follow the newly established practice of saying that one thing mitigates against another. An RSPCA inspector has described some neglected animals as being ‘thin and emancipated’, as though he were speaking about the flappers of the Twenties.

Authors and editors, in philosophy as elsewhere, have their quirks and shibboleths. *Philosophy*’s masthead prohibition on needless technicality

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is sufficient to outlaw some words that might otherwise be banned as ugly neologisms: 'disvalue' and 'disanalogy' are shot without trial. Other cases are recognizably matters of taste, but since an editor's taste is final it may be prudent and just to say what it is. In these pages human beings are never referred to as 'humans'; 'grounds' is never a singular noun; and 'on to' are two words and is not one.

It goes without saying—but it is safer nowadays to say things that go without saying—that we recognize no Platonic dialogue called the *Theatetus*, and no work of Aristotle's entitled the *Nichomachean Ethics*—not even now that the Bobbs Merrill Company have published that enormity in large gold letters on the spine of a recently reprinted translation.

This is a seasonable occasion to retract an error committed in a recent issue. In Booknotes in April 1976 we gave credit to Mr Ian Robinson for coining the word *philosophistry*. Mr David Sanford has written to say that it has a longer history: 'Although the word has not been widely circulated, according to the *OED* it was minted some time ago. The *American Century Dictionary* does not list it, but it does list some very close neighbours: *philosophism*, *philosophistic*, and (in the *Supplement*) *philosophastr*.'

This editorial itself is long enough to be vulnerable to error, even if only of the kind overlooked in a note prefixed to the third edition of a nineteenth century theological work said to have been seen in the University Library at Cambridge: 'The third edition is unchanged from the second edition except that the opportunity has been taken to correct a number of misprints.'

Perhaps the example is apocalyptic.