

Fr Jerry Pokorsky is a priest for the Diocese of Arlington, VA, and a regular columnist for CatholicCulture.org. Fr Pokorsky published an article some time ago on the contemporary recycling of old errors, specifically in the area of moral theology. He quoted one of the would-be reworkers of what God has revealed who said:

“[This paradigm shift in moral teaching would be] both descriptive and conceptual, as it follows a pattern that is both argumentative and narrative, theoretical and sapiential, phenomenological and interpretative.”

The new paradigm, Fr Pokorsky said wryly, promises to use big words.

Now even though I know what all of the individual words mean in this quote, I still have no idea at all what this guy is saying. The reason for that is because he is speaking in the ancient, yet ever-popular, language known as gibberish. Why? Why the use of vague language and highfalutin words to say nothing, at least nothing sensible? Undoubtedly one reason for such a tactic is to conceal evil. Take, for example, the word “phenomenological” in the above blubbering. Phenomenology, as a “formal philosophy” was proposed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 1900’s. It holds that experience of things (phenomena) is the source of human knowledge or reality. “Back to things” was a motto used by Husserl. Experience (a person’s experience, or the experience of various people), and analysis of that experience, is king. Now phenomenology might not be all bad, it might contain some elements of truth, and maybe it was even a useful counterbalance to some trends in philosophy at the time. The point here, though, is that in the above conglomeration of words it is being applied to morality. It would seem to be saying that what is moral (what is right and good and true) is determined not by what God says, not by what God has revealed (told us), but rather by the experience of people and an analysis of that experience. As such, it is false. Notice that I say “it *seems* to be saying.” A person can say “phenomenology” applied to morality, they can even mean what I said it seems to mean, but yet at the same time deny such a meaning if the situation called for it. Highfalutin gibberish is often used to conceal evil. It’s not something new; it is a brand of what the ancient Greeks called sophistry. May God save us from the liar and the thief, the one who was a murderer from the beginning, the chief sophist.

The use of big-sounding words and/or nice-sounding words to conceal intentions or evil, however, is not even the main point that I want to come to. Such a tactic would still be useless if...if...if what? If it wasn’t effective. Why does this so often work? Why would so many be willing to sit there with a deeply thoughtful look on their face, oooing and ahing, nodding in agreement, saying how astounding that is, in spite of having no idea what any of the babble means? Is it not so often because people are afraid of looking stupid to others or out of sync with the latest and greatest? Is it not so that I can be “smart” too? Do not those who use such sophistry rely on that very fact?

Language will serve either God or Satan, God if it is pure and truthful, Satan if it is misleading, deceitful, or manipulative – if it is anything but honest. It is not difficult to use language in manipulative ways, in ways that are meant to control other people. There are plenty of relatively simple, everyday ways that people use language for such purposes. As just one example, how do people say something like: *we* think this or *we* want this, implying that they are speaking for everyone when in fact they are only speaking for their own little cadre or even just for themselves. It is a tactic, one that says: hey, everybody is against you if you don’t go along with what I say. It’s a tactic that’s even used in Catholic parishes, and it’s dishonest. It’s a brand of the manipulative tactic of saying: hey everybody says, this is what everybody’s doing.

Let us stop and ask ourselves at this point: Do I really want to so readily and easily cede control of myself over to others? If not, what do I need within myself to prevent it?

The first is the habit of being truthful and honest myself. St Thomas Aquinas demonstrates that truth (or truthfulness) and honesty are virtues. Our Lord did not rely on being slick, or on clever speech or tactics. He told things as they are and we need to form this habit first within ourselves. Now some care does have to be taken here – being honest and truthful has to be combined with the virtue of charity, which means looking out for the true good of the other. If you don’t like someone’s shirt, for example, it is not the virtue of honesty to go

up to them and tell them how ugly their shirt is. That would not be virtue but rather a reflection of my own interior disorder; it would be a sin, an infraction against charity or kindness. Sometimes people will say something like: well, I was honest about my feelings or I told someone how I felt. Why? Was it for *your* immediate satisfaction, *or* in order to bring about true good for others? If I fly into a rage and tear into someone, for example, that's not honesty, it's the sin of wrath. "Being honest about how I feel" is all too often a form of self-interest. There are plenty of times when I should just keep my mouth shut because it is not for true good. Truthfulness and honesty also do not preclude holding things in confidence if such a confidence is truly good; the seal of the confessional is an utmost example. Even civil law (well at least at this point) protects communication between spouses.

The virtues (habits) of honesty and truthfulness, then, do not entail a person just shooting off their mouth whenever they feel like, and because they feel like it. What it does entail is speaking, acting, and even thinking straightforwardly, free of self-interest; it entails seeing things as they really are and not believing, thinking, speaking, or acting in any way contrary to that. We must practice honesty and truthfulness first with (or about) our own selves, which will lead to good confessions and freedom from the many burdens that weigh people down so often. Becoming more than what I am, having real character, real substance, something of lasting value, being of true value to others, cannot be attained without simple yet rigorous honesty. Truthfulness and honesty entails putting aside all lying, hypocrisy, and boasting – regardless of how subtle it is. St Thomas Aquinas argues that honesty is part of beauty because honesty implies harmony and harmony is part of beauty. One definition of humility is simply: honesty or truthfulness about ourselves. Imagine if everyone in the world, or even everyone you knew, practiced simple honesty and genuine humility. How much more at ease would we be. How much more peaceful would things be. Life would be so much simpler and more pleasant.

Honesty and truthfulness, then, begins with ourselves. But there are times when it is right and good and true to call others to it as well. This would certainly include anyone in your charge, like your children for example. Help them grow in these virtues (first and foremost by setting the example) and you will lead them into a much happier life in this world and much more importantly, into eternal life.

Being tactful is often a part of the virtue of charity, but there is a difference between using "tactics" in communication and being tactful; the use of tactics is almost always done out of self-interest, often to avoid some cross. This use of sophistry has become so common in our society today that people often now seem to even consider this sin a virtue. It's part of: how to get what I want – directly contrary to what our Lord calls us to. Unfortunately, it seems to have all too often crept into the human dimension of the Church as well. It is so easy to let the world lead the Church rather than stand with truthfulness so that the Church, and thus our Lord, leads the world. This is another area where, in good charity, one can and should insist on truthfulness and honesty.

Being truthful and seeking truth is a choice or decision that I have to make, and then put into practice. It doesn't just happen.

In this brief discussion on building the virtues of truthfulness and honesty, let us finish with the virtue of faith (all virtues work together). To practice honesty and truthfulness, I have to be able to see truth! Exercising the virtue of faith really does enlighten our minds – about ourselves and the world around us. Faith does not impede our thinking or the capacity, it enhances it. Remember that exercising the virtue of faith means I choose to believe; I say: I know this is right and good and true *because...* God said so. I can strive to understand further why it is that He said this way and not another, but faith means I start with acceptance that whatever it is, is in fact right. Let's choose to live well, die well, and in so doing, live forever in a state far greater than we have now!

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.