THE DIRTY WORD

Michael and Natasha Berman

For the first two years of my daughter's life, I was scheduled to teach an Introductory Logic course. While I had taught Critical Thinking courses in the past, having to steep myself in categorical and propositional logic left a lasting impression on my own thinking. More importantly, though, these courses influenced my speech-habits during the early years of my child's development. By no means do I intend to assert that my child somehow gained some cognitive benefit from my communication with her during these early stages of her life. Rather, it seems that she acquired the particular virtue of tolerating her father's habit of voicing strangely worded utterances. As she has passed the three and half year mark, her own communication skills and means of expression are well on their way towards developing into her own distinct styles. This I know because we talk a lot. Often times these dialogues are about day care, her friends, or princesses and lots of pink stuff. But sometimes a gem of an argument develops.

While driving home from her day care, the following exchange began: 'Daddy, my friend Erin said a dirty word in day care. What's a dirty word?'

I said, 'What a great question.' After a pause, 'What do you think a dirty word is?' She responded, 'A dirty word is a word that you say.' This is when the Socratic philosopher in me took over: 'What happens when you say a dirty word?' 'Your mouth gets dirty,' she surmised.

This though wasn't enough for me: 'What other things are dirty?' To this she paused and then said, 'Mud.' 'How is mud dirty?' 'When you play with mud your hand gets dirty,' she explained.

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This is where I began to sum up what we had been saying to each other, 'So when you play with mud your hand gets dirty, right?' 'Yes.' 'And when you say a dirty word your mouth gets dirty, right?' A little less certain, 'Yes.' 'So what do you do when your hand gets dirty with mud?' To this she answered quickly, 'You wash your hands with water and soap.' 'Then what do you do when your mouth gets dirty after saying a dirty word?'

This was followed by a bit of a longer pause (I could almost hear the cognitive gears churning away in her skull by this point); slowly she said, 'You wash your mouth with soap and water.' To which of course I said, 'That's right.' Then we both shouted, 'Yuck!' And had a good laugh.

Without making any knowledge claims such as could be found in the fields of cognitive or developmental psychology,[1] one can see that this short conversation involves both an analogy and an equivocation. The first element demonstrates some interesting reasoning from a colloquial expression; the second is a language play that shifts meanings between the metaphorical and the literal. Analogical reasoning in its most basic form allows one to infer relations between objects; for example, sun is to moon as day is to night, or the classic Platonic example that proposes the sun is to sensible objects as the good is to ideas.[2] For the first example one can infer that the relationship is that the moon and night temporally follow the sun and day; but in the classic example, just as the sun provides the light by which to see sensible objects, the good provides the intelligibility to understand ideas. Thus the relation that is demonstrated between the first set of objects in the analogy holds a structural similarity to that between the second set of objects. We should note that these relations need not be identical, as in the case of the classic example. With this in mind, let us turn our attention to the analogy in my conversation with my daughter.

The analogy runs thusly: just as playing with mud makes one's hands dirty, so too does saying a dirty word make one's mouth dirty. It is assumed that mud is in itself dirty,

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which would follow as mud is essentially made of dirt and water. The structural similarity of the relation of saying and playing would consist of a direct contact with a substance that leaves a residue; hence, the mud leaves dirt on the hand, just as the dirty word leaves a residue on or in one's mouth. Ostensibly at this point one might say that the initial question had been answered: what is a dirty word? A dirty word is a substance (thing, word – no distinction being made in this context) that leaves a residue after its utterance, making the mouth dirty as a consequence. This definition, of course, needed to be sounded out a bit further.

Focusing on the key term 'dirty', I posed further questions regarding solutions to dealing with the consequences of coming into contact with dirty substances that left residues. When questioned about how to address the dirt on one's hands from playing with mud, my daughter proposed that one ought to wash one's hands with water and soap. This should effectively remove the dirty residue, which was agreed to by both of us. But if using this solution to cleanse one's hands worked, then would it not also have to work for one's mouth after having been subject to dirty residue? This would naturally seem to follow given the analogical relation between saying a dirty word and playing with mud. However, when my daughter proposed this means of redress for dealing with the residue an obvious and humorous absurdity presented itself: washing one's mouth with soap and water would not be a pleasant experience; it would be 'yuck'. Why then did our seemingly sound line of reasoning, which correctly identified the structural relations between the terms under consideration, yield a further inference that was mutually unpalatable?

It seems to me that the reason for this final element in our short argument stems from an equivocation applied to our key term. In the analogy, 'dirty' is introduced as a descriptor, an adjective for particular words, and subsequently applied to particular things, hands in this case. But the two uses are intrinsically different: when applied to words, 'dirty' must serve as a metaphorical descriptor,

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whereas when applied to things, like physical objects, the 'dirty' substance is taken as physical or substantial as well. The residue then that is left on the hands is a physical thing, but words, while when uttered (heard, viewed or felt, as in Braille) have physical characteristics, do not leave behind a physical residue due to the kind of word that the word is judged to be (which I alluded to above as a colloquial express for such are socio-cultural artifacts; for example, the uttering of the sound 'taco' or 'tako' can refer in Japanese to an octopus, in Spanish to a prepared food, in Swahili to one's posterior, or in American English slang to a pejorative or objectifying reference for women – perhaps the latter two would qualify the term as 'dirty').

The equivocation arises in the argument's treatment of the word 'dirty' as a descriptor of a physical state of residue producing, but which ascribes the same physical descriptor to words themselves (not their means of expression) that are not actually subject to such physical states. Therefore the residue left by the utterance of a dirty word could not be physical (only metaphorical, or maybe even metaphysical?), and any attempt to treat such a residue with a physical solution is destined to end in failure, for the endeavor will be utterly futile. This is the real absurdity of the argument's conclusion, which is of course aperitifed with the idea of water and soap in one's mouth.

To conclude, the humor that marked the end of my exchange on this subject with my daughter ought to recall the conversation's Socratic character. The above analysis examined the structure of our brief analogical reasoning, as well as some of the further implications of the insights to which we mutually agreed. Yet despite a conclusion that we both found satisfactory, there really was no conclusion, or to be more precise no answer. The question that had initiated our inquiry, 'What is a dirty word?', was never answered. Thus just like many Socratic exchanges, we ended up with no knowledge, a negative outcome, though we had an inkling of what a 'dirty word' was not. The positive outcome that our discussion yielded was an enjoyable

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exercise of our cognitive and reasoning capabilities. With these two outcomes, we have a clear example of philosophy occurring in an everyday situation. What more could a practicing philosopher hope for?

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Notes

[1] For an interesting discussion of this subject, see: Michael P. Weinstock, 'Psychological Research and the Epistemological Approach to Argumentation', *Informal Logic*, vol. 26, No. 1 (2006): pp. 103–120.

[2] Plato, *Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), trans. Robin Waterfield, 508a–c.

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