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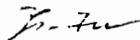
Dear Colleague:

"A plant needs roots to grow. With man it is the other way around: only when he grows does he have roots and feel at home in the world." I used to quote this Hofer aphorism (vintage 1973 and hence before the gender revolution) to my class on "Space and Place," as a device to get students to think about the meaning of rootedness for human beings. If I use the aphorism now, I would have to revise it to say, "A plant needs roots to grow. With woman or man it is the other way around: only when she or he grows does he or she have roots, etc." The trouble is, when I use the revised version in class, students are likely to grade me PC 10 (on a scale of 1 to 10) and fail utterly to attend to the issue to which I wish to address. Language that draws so much attention to itself and wallows in its own righteousness is less and less able to evoke the world.

Ordinary language is by its nature riddled with bias. If we succeed in cleaning it up we shall be speaking Fortran or Pascal. Ordinary language is sexist, racist, and, above all, it reeks with class prejudice. Mary McCarthy, in her novel Birds of America, has one man accuse another of snobbery when the latter expressed a dislike for the "commonness" of LBJ. "It isn't just you. Our whole vocabulary is rotten with feudal distinctions. Look at villain or clown. Those were just words for peasants. Then think about 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' Do you know what rogue meant? A beggar. Being a prince, Hamlet couldn't think of any worse thing to call himself. And Hamlet is an ethical person. The vocabulary of ethics, once you start to think about it, is more foul and retrograde than any other kind of talk. You say an action is low or base or mean or boorish, which are all synonyms for vulgar, i.e., characteristic of the common people. As opposed to noble, gentle, kind, meaning aristocratic... There is no vocabulary for a democratic ethics; even words like free or frank, which you would think were sort of yeoman words, actually meant belonging to the ruling class."

So, students, don't let me catch you using such words as villain, clown, rogue, mean, base, boorish, low, vulgar, noble, gentle, kind, free, frank, etc., etc. You will get a grade of PC 1--if that! To be on the safe side, don't let me catch you speaking English or any other mother tongue.

Best wishes,



P.S. What has happened to Mary McCarthy, who died only a few years ago? As a young man aspiring to be an intellectual, I considered Mary McCarthy as one of my role models. The others included Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Iris Murdoch.