The Prevalence of Humbug

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It would be a wonderful thing for mankind if some philosophic Yankee would contrive some kind of "ometer" that would measure the infusion of humbug in anything. A "Humbugometer" he might call it. I would warrant him a good sale.

-- P. T. Barnum

Introduction

Humbug has the peculiar property of being always committed by others, never by oneself. This is one reason why it is universally condemned. No doubt we can agree that humbug is a Bad Thing; but what are we agreeing about? It proves astonishingly hard to say. In trying to understand what humbug is, which is my main objective, one soon finds that no satisfactory definitions are available. I therefore propose to use for the most part an inductive approach. I shall offer a number of varied examples for consideration, hoping that we can eventually arrive at some reasonably satisfying analysis of this elusive concept. There should be time, also, to reflect on the mischief that humbug can work, and to consider some ways of curbing the disposition to produce it.

Chekhov's Lady

My first exhibit is drawn from Maxim Gorky's reminiscences of Chekhov:

Once a plump, healthy, handsome, well-dressed lady came to him and began to speak a la Chekhov: "Life is so boring, Anton Pavlovich. Everything is so grey: people, the sea, even the flowers seem to me grey. . . . And I have no desires . . . my soul is in pain ... it is like a disease."

"It is a disease," said Anton Pavlovich with conviction, "it is a disease; in Latin it is called morbus fraudulentus."

Fortunately, the lady did not seem to know Latin, or, perhaps, she pretended not to know it.1

Morbus fraudulentus -- literally, "the fraudulent disease" -- is not listed in manuals of pathology, although the disorder is endemic, infectious, and seriously injurious to thought, feeling, and ac­tion. (A medical friend has compared it to rheumatism.) The Latin label is too opaque for common use, but "humbug" serves nicely. Chekhov's lady provides us with a clear example of humbug.

Bernard Shaw on Disarmament Conferences

My next example is taken from an interview granted by George Bernard Shaw to an American journalist (M. E. Wisehart) in 1930, on the eve of a naval conference. When the interviewer called the coming meeting a "disarmament conference," Shaw strenuously objected:

" 'Don't!' exclaimed Mr. Shaw. 'Everyone knows it's an armament conference! . . . The question is not 'Shall we do away with armament?' but 'How much armament?'"

The interviewer referred to the preliminary conversations between the British prime minister and President Hoover as "an event of great historical importance," and went on to say:

"It is a harbinger of international understanding and good will. It has brought the English-speaking peoples together as never before and shown them that in sentiment, friendship, respect and good will they are united."

Shaw exploded:

"Do you really believe that?

Humbug."

When the interviewer said, "Why do you say 'humbug'?," Shaw replied:

"Because, generally speaking, Englishmen and Americans do not like one another. Now they are asked to pretend that they do. And this pretense of being affectionate cousins is as dangerous as poison. Better to confess our dislike -- our hatred, if you please -- and ask ourselves what it is all about. Then there would be the possibility of ridding ourselves of it."2

The Shavian Probe

Bernard Shaw's formula, "Do you really believe that?" is a useful device; but it needs to be generalized into "Do you really mean that?" in order to fit cases involving something other than belief. In this form, it is a useful blunt instrument that deserves a label. I propose to call it the Shavian probe.

Unfortunately, it won't always work. No doubt, a journalist who actually thought in terms of bringing nations "together as never before" so that they become "united" in "sentiment, friendship, respect and good will" would be well advised to change his occupation -- perhaps to that of a speech writer for presidential candidates. So in the case I have cited, Shaw's accusation of humbug seems justified.

But what are we to make of the following episode? On January 25, 1980, Mary McCarthy said, in an interview with Dick Cavett on Public Broadcasting, that Lillian Hellman was "a bad writer, overrated, a dishonest writer." Well, true or false, justified or not, there was no humbug about that. But on being asked by Mr. Cavett what was dishonest about Miss Hellman's writing, Miss McCarthy continued: "Everything. I once said in an interview that every word she writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the'" Well, did she really believe that one could lie by using the words "and" and "the"? Hardly -- unless she was using "lie" in some extraordinary and unusual sense. But no doubt Mary McCarthy was in earnest, and did mean what she said, was using just the words she wanted. That leaves the question of whether McCarthy committed humbug still unsettled: we have to undertake a difficult and controversial evaluation of the speaker's feeling and attitude.

According to Miss Hellman's lawyer, his client may get damages for defamation if she can show that "the person making the allegedly defamatory remarks either knew them to be untrue or uttered them without caring whether they were untrue." A philosophical logician might object that truth, in the sense of conformity with ascertainable matter of fact, is not in point. Yet a writer can be dishonest while saying something that is neither true nor untrue: common sense would regard some caricatures as libelous even if they were uncaptioned. When the lawsuit is ultimately heard, it will be interesting to see how judge and jury will cope with the possibly extenuating effects of context -- and with such controversial issues as the applicable legal constraints on emotive or offensive language.

Some Preliminary Comments

Chekhov's lady and Shaw's interviewer provide clear cases of humbug. I think of them as touchstones of usage -- paradigm cases. For me, the two examples are cases of humbug if anything is; if you disagree, then your usage of the key word probably differs in certain respects from my own.

These paradigm cases have some readily discernible features that are worth noting, for future reference in struggles with more controversial examples.

One reason why "Humbug!" is so offensive an exclamation is that it charges the speaker with some kind of falseness. But in neither of our cases was the speaker supposed.to be lying. For Chekhov's lady was not necessarily lying when she said that everything looked and felt "grey" to her: perhaps she used that very word in her private thoughts. Humbug need not entail lying in the strict sense of that word -- even though humbug can be akin to outright lying.

We can usefully distinguish between the speaker's message, as I shall call it, and his or her stance. By the message I mean whatever is explicitly or implicitly said about the topic in question; while I reserve the term "stance" for the speaker's beliefs, attitudes, and evaluations, insofar as they are relevant to the verbal episode in question. To illustrate: If you say to me in a confident way, "The plane leaves at four o'clock," you are not saying that you believe what you say, because that is not the topic on which you are supplying information. But of course, by speaking as you do, in a standard situation in which trustworthy information is normally expected, you are giving me reason to believe that you are not deliberately misleading me.

Similarly, Mary McCarthy, to return to the earlier example, was not saying that she despised the subject of her scathing comments, nor was she overtly claiming to be sincere, but clearly she spoke as one who expected her remarks to be taken as a sincere expression of contempt. (Try saying: "She's disgusting -- but of course I don't feel disgust." That would be a paradox: we could make some sense of it, but not without hard work.)

Now, the pejorative implication of a charge of humbug is commonly leveled against the content of a message (a remark or a text) rather than at what I have called the speaker's stance: then it usually has the force of "Stuff and nonsense," denigrating the message without necessarily imputing falseness or insincerity.3

Consider the following mini-dialogue:

First speaker: As McLuhan has taught us, the medium is the message.

Second speaker: Humbug!

Here I take the second speaker to be rejecting McLuhan's absurd slogan, that is, rejecting the substance of what is being said: there need be no imputation about the sincerity of the speaker's "stance." For he or she may genuinely regard McLuhan's widely quoted fragment of pseudo-wisdom as profoundly illuminating. No matter: without impunging a speaker's stance, we can sometimes condemn what is being said as balderdash, claptrap, rubbish, cliche, hokum, drivel, buncombe, nonsense, gibberish, or tautology. With so rich a vocabulary for dismissing the substance of what is said, we could dispense with this use of "humbug. " That useful word might well be reserved for criticism of a speaker's stance -- to discredit the message's provenance rather than its content. I shall respect current usage, however, by sometimes using "humbug" in the sense of "piece of humbug."

What then is the prima facie charge against a speaker accused of humbug? Well, some of the words that immediately suggest themselves are pretense, pretentiousness, affectation, insincerity, and deception. Often there is also a detectable whiff of self-satisfaction and self-complacency: humbug goes well with a smirk. A common symptom is clever-me-ism, as in Jack Horner's case. In this respect, it resembles cant, which Dr. Johnson memorably defined as "a whining pretension to goodness, in formal and affected terms."

To say that humbug has something to do with insincerity and deception is to point in the right direction, but does not sufficiently identify the word's meaning. Let us see whether the history of the word's changing uses can provide a more specific analysis.

A Short History of the Word's Shifting Meanings

I used to think that the word "humbug" came into general use in the nineteenth century -- possibly because I took the Victorians to be especially prone to hypocrisy. To my surprise, I discovered that its career dates from the middle of the eighteenth century, when it seems to have entered the language as "a piece of fashionable slang" (Century Dictionary) of unknown origins. It may have been used originally in the restricted sense of a false alarm, a hoax, or a practical joke. But its meaning was uncertain even from the start. In 1751 a writer (quoted in the Century Dictionary) complained about it in the following terms:

There is a word very much in vogue with the people of taste and fashion, which though it has not even the 'penumbra' of a meaning yet makes up the sum total of the wit, sense and judgement of the aforesaid people of taste and fashion! [He gives quotations] Humbug is neither an English word nor a derivative from any other language. It is indeed a blackguard sound made use of by most people of distinction! It is a fine make-weight in conversation, and some men deceive themselves so egregiously as to think they mean something by it!

Dr. Johnson did not include the word in his dictionary (1775), possibly because he thought it too coarse or vulgar to be noticed.

By 1828, the first edition of Webster's dictionary treated "humbug" as an approximate synonym for "swindle" or "fraud." As a noun, Webster says, it refers to "an imposition under false pretences"; and as a verb it means "to deceive; to impose upon" -- or, as we might nowadays say, "to con." So the relatively innocent old sense of a practical joke had made way by then for something more obnoxious.

An explicit example of this use occurs in The Pickwick Papers, when Mr. Pickwick furiously upbraids Mr. Winkle for pretending to be able to skate:

Mr. Pickwick . . . uttered in a low but distinct and emphatic tone, these remarkable words, --

"You're a humbug, sir."

"A what!" said Mr. Winkle, starting.

"A humbug, sir. I will speak plainer if you wish. An impostor, sir."

Readers familiar with The Wizard of Oz may remember the unmasking scene, in which the Great Wizard is finally revealed as a timid old man, who confesses to having been making believe.

"I'm supposed to be a Great Wizard."

"And aren't you?" [Dorothy] asked.

"Not a bit of it, my dear; I'm just a common man."

"You're more than that," said the Scarecrow, in a grieved tone; "you're a humbug."

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of 1966 contains the following entries:

for the noun's head sense, "something designed to deceive and mislead" (with cross-references to QUACKERY, HOAX, FRAUD, and IMPOSTURE);

for the verb, "impose on" (with cross-references to DECEIVE, CAJOLE, and HOAX);

for its application to a humbugger, "a person who usually willfully deceives or misleads others as to his true condition, qualities, or attitudes, one who passes himself off as something that he is not" (with cross-references to SHAM, HYPOCRITE, and IMPOSTOR).

The general impression left by this rather confused set of definitions is of adherence to the strong nineteenth-century equation of a humbug with an impostor or swindler. But that identification fails to reflect present usuage. If a main sense of "humbug" were that of something designed to deceive and mislead, a skillfully constructed wig would have to count as a prime example. If a humbugger is a person who willfully deceives others, then the pseudo-Arabs lately used by the FBI to "sting" congressmen would be properly described as humbugs.4 Something is plainly wrong.

By relying too much on the entries in earlier editions, the makers of Webster's Third have overlooked the present dilutions of the old intensely pejorative implications of "humbug." I hope that in the end we can do somewhat better, by considering some further examples of clear cases and test cases.

Russell's Tirade

Consider now the following glimpse of the private behavior of a famous philosopher. In a charming book of reminiscences, Rupert Crawshay-Williams tells of accompanying Bertrand Russell on a trip to inspect a house that was being remodeled for Russell's use. When the two friends arrived, they had to suspend a lively discussion of a new book by the pragmatist F. C. S. Schiller.

On meeting the builder and the architect, who were awaiting his arrival, Russell at once launched a furious denunciation of their supposed delinquency. He brushed aside their excuses, called the architect a liar, and hardly allowed the others to finish a sentence.

The tirade rolled over them until both of them were left floundering and gasping.

Russell ended off by demanding a complete change in their future behaviour. He stopped talking and walked smartly out to the car; we got in; I started the engine;

'So Schiller was really making the context of the statement part of its meaning', said Russell.

Elizabeth and I were still stunned.

'But Bertie', we said, 'you seem quite calm!'

'I am quite calm', he said. 'That's taught them a lesson I think, hasn't it?'

'We certainly think they were impressed. Do you mean to say', we asked, 'that the whole explosion was deliberate and contrived?'

'Yes indeed', said Russell, 'it was the only thing to do -- the only way of making an effect.'

'Well, I suppose it may work', I said. 'But I did think you were being just a little bit unfair at times.'

'Unfair!' Of course I was being unfair.'5

Crawshay-Williams, reverting to a previous conversation, then said: "There you are . . . it's what we were saying last night: you're an aristocrat, and I'm merely a gentleman." Fair comment, although a proper English gentleman may not call himself a gentleman, except ironically.

Ghotbzadeh's Indignation

At the end of January 1980, the Canadian government announced the escape of six American diplomats who had been sheltered in the Canadian embassy in Teheran.

According to the news reports, one of the so-called embassy militants responded by crying, "That's illegal! That's illegal!" When the Iranian foreign minister, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, later met reporters, he took the same line, calling the secret operation a "flagrant violation" of international law.

"'They have violated the laws they claim to defend,' Mr. Ghotbzadeh said of the Canadians. He denounced 'so-called international laws' as having been made only 'for the suppression of the small nations by the big ones.'"6

To this egregious nonsense Ghotbzadeh added a veiled incitement to violence -- "Canada will pay" and "Everybody is free to do whatever they want" -- apparently intending "an open invitation to Iranians around the world to take action against Canada or Canadians"; also an allegation that he must have known to be a lie, to the effect that he had received an apology from the Canadian prime minister, with an accompanying explanation that "the action had been for political reasons in Canada" (both immediately denied by Joe Clark).

In this farrago, I am particularly interested for present purposes in the role played by what is surely a prime case of humbug, the implicit presentation of the speaker (what I have previously called his "stance") as one who, himself respecting international law, is therefore entitled to complain of an alleged violation. Ghotbzadeh's own explicit denunciation of "so-called international law" merely adds to the confusion of what an editorial in the New York Times called his "flagrant logic."

Emerson's Friendship

Ralph Waldo Emerson says the following about friendship, in his celebrated essay with that title:

The moment we indulge our affections, the earth is metamorphosed: there is no winter and no night: all tragedies, all ennuis vanish, -- all duties even; nothing fills the proceeding eternity but the forms all radiant of beloved persons. Let the soul be assured that somewhere in the universe it should rejoin its friend, and it would be content and cheerful alone for a thousand years.7

4 Well, all of us have sometimes been kept waiting for a good friend, but a delay of a thousand years is, as the English say, a bit much. But Emerson is relentlessly enthusiastic about friendship:

Happy is the house that shelters a friend! It might well be built, like a festal bower or arch, to entertain him a single day. Happier, if he know the solemnity of that relation and honor its law! It is no idle bond, no holiday engagement. He who offers himself a candidate for that covenant comes up, like an olympian, to the great games where the first-born of the world are the competitors. He proposes himself for contest where Time, Want, Danger, are in the lists, and he alone is victor who has truth enough in his constitution to preserve the delicacy of his beauty from the wear and tear of all these.8

Surely there is something suspicious about this exaggerated rhapsodizing. Indeed, the very last paragraph of the essay suggests that Emerson might really have preferred the kind of friend that need never be met:

It has seemed to me lately more possible than I knew, to carry a friendship greatly on one side, without due correspondence on the other. Why should I cumber myself with the poor fact that the receiver is not capacious? It never troubles the sun that some of his rays fall wide and vain unto ungrateful space, and only a small part on the reflecting planet. Let your greatness educate the crude and cold companion. If he is unequal he will presently pass away; but thou art enlarged by thy own shining, and no longer a mate for frogs and worms, dost soar and burn with the gods of empyrean.9

"It never troubles the sun that some of his rays fall wide and vain"; "thou art enlarged by thy own shining." Enlarged or puffed up? Emerson sometimes reminds me of Mr. Pecksniff, who is described on his first appearance in Martin Chuzzlewit as "a moral man, a grave man, a man of noble sentiments, and speech." Dickens says of him (in connection with his calling his daughter Mercy a "playful warbler"):

"Playful -- playful warbler," said Mr. Pecksniff. It may be observed in connexion with his calling his daughter "a warbler," that she was not at all vocal, but that Mr. Pecksniff was in the frequent habit of using any word that occurred to him as having a good sound and rounding a sentence well, without much care for its meaning. And he did this so boldly and in such an imposing manner that he would sometimes stagger the wisest people with his eloquence and make them gasp again.

The Czar's Vodka

The back cover (The New Yorker's issue of January 21, 1980, displays a richly colored photograph captioned "The spirit of the Czar lives on." We see an impressively bearded man, head tossed back, with a smidgeon of a smile, dressed in full regimentals, with scarlet jacket, white sash, and enough medals to start a collection. In one hand he holds a wineglass, with the other he is fondling the neck of a fine borzoi. Meanwhile his czarina, with an equally lavish display of evening dress and jewels, squats on the imperial carpet to play with a couple of borzoi puppies. And the message? This, in part:

It was the Golden Age of Russia, and the Czar reigned supreme. Europe, Asia: all the empire was his. Regal coaches carried him in elegance, but with his Cossacks he rode like thunder. Hunting wild boar in the northern forests, hosting feasts for a thousand guests in the Great Palace, no man could match the Czar's thirst for life. And his drink? The toast of St. Petersburg. Genuine Vodka.

(I omit the brand me of what I think of as "Humbug Vodka.")

It would be a waste of time to criticize this text by asking such questions as why the pseudo-czar is wearing all those medals, and why he "rode like thunder," and whether he really did thirst for life as nobody else could, and what all this has to do with the barely perceptible difference between one vodka and another. We know that good sense and relevance have nothing to do with the case, the desired effect on the impressionable reader being achieved if favorable associations are created.

Zaftig Bedfellows

Consider now the following item from the "Personal" columns of The New York Review of Books (February 21, 1980):

ZAFTIG FEMALE WANTED. NYC male, 35, editor/author, lean, reasonably good-looking, financially secure. Seeks woman Renoir would have painted, 25-35, with pretty face, stable personality. Excellent opportunity to share museums, movies, affluence, quiet conversations, caring, maybe marriage. NYR, Box 2956.

If you think this hard to beat for vulgarity, listen to the journal's own puff, on the same page, for its new English affiliate:

AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS too warm and bloody open for you? Prefer treacle in your tarts, not your mail? Tired of being mashed by provincial American bangers? Woo your very own little gooseberry fool abroad merely by running an accurate but winning Personal Ad in the columns of The London Review of Books.

A rare example, this, of puffing a go-between. It might be called pimping for a pimp -- or metapimping.

The Cornell Ship

Ceremonial and political occasions invite humbug. Here is a prime example from the early history of Cornell University:

On Inauguration Day, October 7, 1868, the new university had so many more students than it could handle that "the department of geology was confined to a single room adjoining the coal cellars, and demonstrations in natural history were conducted in the vacant space next to a furnace." The campus consisted partly of "a ravine six or eight feet deep, bridged by two dirt causeways."10 Against this kind of backdrop, George William Curtis delivered an elaborate address with the following peroration:

Here is our university, our Cornell, like the man-of-war, all its sails set, its rigging full and complete from stem to stern, its crew embarked, its passengers all ready and aboard; and even as I speak to you, even as the autumn sun sets in the west, it begins to glide over the waves as it goes forth rejoicing, every stitch of canvas spread, all its colors flying, its musical bells ringing, its heartstrings beating with hope and joy.11

"Complete from stem to stern" -- and students in the coal cellars! The university's cofounder and president, Andrew Dickson White, "looking out over the ragged cornfield and the rough pasture land and noticing the unfinished buildings and the piled-up rubbish," felt that no words "could fail more completely to express the reality," and Ezra Cornell confessed that there was "not a single thing finished."12 Curtis, one might say, was operating on the principle of "Take care of the sounds and the nonsense will take care of itself." The sentiments were appropriately edifying, and the elaborately studied and rehearsed phrasing evoked the expected applause.

Academic Humbug (Veblen)

Any survey of the varieties of humbug should include specimens of the pretentious verbiage that infests scholarly writing. I reproduce the following from Thorstein Veblen's book The Theory of the Leisure Class (part only of an extraordinarily long paragraph) for the pleasure of resuscitating H. L. Mencken's commentary on it.

In an increasing proportion as time goes on, the anthropomorphic cult, with its code of devout observances, suffers a progressive disintegration through the stress of economic exigencies and the decay of the system of status. As this disintegration proceeds, there come to be associated and blended with the devout attitude certain other motives and impulses that are not always of an anthropomorphic origin, nor traceable to the habit of personal subservience.

Not all of these subsidiary impulses that blend with the bait of devoutness in the later devotional life are altogether congruous with the devout attitude or with the anthropomorphic apprehension of sequence of phenomena. Their origin being not the same, their action upon the scheme of devout life is also not in the same direction. In many ways they traverse the underlying norm of subservience of vicarious life to which the code of devout observances and the ecclesiastical and sacerdotal institutions are to be traced as their substantial basis.13

Here we have garrulity laced with jargon. Mencken says that Veblen "achieves the effect, perhaps without employing the means, of thinking in some unearthly foreign language -- say Swahili, Sumerian or Old Bulgarian -- and then painfully clawing his thoughts into a copious but uncertain and book-learned English." As to the long passage he quotes, Mencken concludes that Veblen is trying to say "that many people go to church, not because they are afraid of the devil but because they enjoy the music, and like to look at the stained glass, the potted lilies and the rev. pastor." Mencken says that "this highly profound and highly original observation" might have been made on a postage stamp, thereby saving a good deal of wasted paper.14

Misfires and Violations

With these varied examples of ostensible humbug before us, we can ask what it is about such episodes that inclines us to regard all of them, in spite of their obvious differences, as instances of the same complex phenomenon. Do we mean the same thing each time, or are we perhaps applying the pejorative label to cases connected only by shifting similarities, rather than by the presence of some detectable common property?

Let us first recall the great amount and variety of information normally transmitted in even the simplest and most familiar kind of conversation. Suppose the driver of a stationary automobile asks me the way to, say, Route 13. I would normally take for granted much concerning the speaker's situation and competence that is unsaid, indeed much that would mark the episode as perplexing if it were said: for instance, that the driver wants to get to the highway in question, that he is en route to some other destination, and that he doesn't know how to proceed. Also, on the evidence of his question, that he is a native English speaker who knows what he is saying and hasn't made a slip of the tongue. Correspondingly, I assume that he himself is making parallel assumptions about my own understanding of his problem and willingness to help. (I shall ignore any further information possibly conveyed by signs of anxiety, distress, and the like.)

I propose to speak in such cases of the framing presuppositions of the initiated verbal transaction -- or, more briefly, of the conversation's framework. Establishing the framework -- an operation so commonplace that we normally fail to notice it -- determines the character of the initiated conversation in a way that is crucially important for the possibility of a successful outcome. (Of course much talk has little discernible purpose, amounting to no more than friendly chatter or cocktail-party babble.)

The centrality of the role played by what I have called the conversation's framework can be highlighted by cases of willful falsification of the presupposed understandings. Suppose that on being asked by a stranger, "Do you know the way to the campus from here?" I simply reply, "Yes." That will probably get me a look of resentful incomprehension, especially if I respond to the further question "Would you like to tell me how to get there?" by saying, "No." Please notice that, far from lying, I may be literally -- yet quite inappropriately -- telling the truth. In such a case I would of course be willfully violating the conditions that normally enable the kind of conversational exchange in question to proceed. No doubt I would be resentfully regarded as "trying to be funny." If I then suffer a change of heart, pursue the departing stranger, and, having caught up with him, say, "Would you like me to tell you the way?" he may play the same down-putting game by saying, "No!"

I shall now contrast two different kinds of ways in which intended exchange of information may fail. The first type of case, which I shall call a misfire, results from ignorance or incompetence on the respondent's part: I might mishear the number of the highway in question, or get the number right but not know how to get there, or I might even be suffering from some painful personal anxiety that made me unable to help. In the absence of such impediments I might be simply inept in giving intelligible and useful instructions. Such misfires -- or as our president recently called them, in his usual euphemistic mode when caught blundering, "failures of communication" -- are sufficiently common to induce caution in relying on testimony or authority, however generally reliable and useful. But the risk of misfire is no ground for radical skepticism about the feasibility of successful communication in relatively unproblematic cases. If one stranger doesn't know the way, perhaps another does; if some passer-by is too stupid to understand my problem or too selfish to help, perhaps another will.

Far more serious than such occasional hitches in communication ("misfires," in my terminology) are breakdowns in communicative interaction induced by deliberate falsifications of the constitutive framework. To start with relatively innocuous but still potentially pernicious abuses of this sort: a prankster might perversely pretend not to understand the motorist's question, or pretend to be unable to speak (pointing meaningfully at his own throat), or even deliberately act as if he were a lunatic. (The case I previously considered of an absurdly literal interpretation of a polite formula would also fall under this heading.) In such a case I propose to speak of a violation of the standard framework. Violations, unlike misfires, are not the predictable and excusable consequences of human ignorance or incompetence. They maliciously trade on and undermine the implicit understandings that underpin successful communication and cooperation, and hence erode the foundations of social existence. (Imagine a society in which joking was so common that one could never be certain whether communications were serious or maliciously disruptive.) Violations of the understandings that sustain communication must be regarded as perversions of verbal interaction, animated by deliberate deceit.

How Humbug Differs from Lying

We have already seen that violations of the communicative framework need not consist in the utterance of falsehoods. If I reply on the telephone to the question "Have you got any sausages today?" by saying, "No," and continue in the same vein, saying that I won't have any in the foreseeable future, and the like, everything I say may be literally true, but I shall deceive the other as if I were deliberately lying. As William Blake said (in Auguries of Innocence):

A truth that's told with bad intent

Beats all the lies you can invent.

There is good reason, however, to regard conscious and deliberate falsity -- what Immanuel Kant calls "intentional untruthful declaration" -- as having primary theoretical importance. Sissela Bok, in her valuable book Lying, is following a long-established tradition when she confines her discussion to explicit lying, defined as the production of an utterance expressing what the speaker disbelieves.15 Let us call such an utterance, with acknowledgment to Shakespeare, the lie direct. Until further notice, when I speak of lying I shall mean the utterance, as if believed, of an assertion disbelieved by the utterer.

Moralists have long regarded brazen lying (the deliberate assertion of "the thing that is not," or at least "the thing thought to be not") as meriting the severest reprobation. Montaigne said,

"Lying is indeed an accursed vice. We are human beings, and hold together only by speech. If we knew the horror of it, and the gravity, we should pursue it with fire, and more justly so than other crimes."16

In such statements as this, lying is regarded as a cardinal vice, an unforgivable sin against humanity. Such a view led Immanuel Kant to claim -- implausibly, I think -- that we have an absolute duty not to lie, even when a truthful reply would lead an intending murderer to his victim. If this rigoristic condemnation of lying and the corresponding elevation of truthfulness to a supreme virtue were justified, it would be hard to understand the absence of references to lying in the Ten Commandments (except in the special prohibition against "bearing false witness") or in other religious compendia of vices and virtues.

Traditional defenses of such rigor are unconvincing. Kant, like other writers on the subject, notices the damage inflicted on the liar himself, but reserves his most earnest condemnation for the damage inflicted by a lie on all humankind. But as much can be said about all vice: every criminal injury to an individual also damages the moral fabric of society. Nor is a lie the worst injury: violence and willful cruelty may be regarded as at least equally damaging to the moral character of the perpetrator and as a violation of general obligations needed for social life.

A plausible justification of the prominence assigned to the vice of lying is suggested by a gloss of Montaigne's contention that as human beings "we . . . hold together only by speech." It is obvious that children could not learn to speak if they were reared only by adults who lied to them irresponsibly and at random. For in such an environment a child could not even learn the common names of familiar objects. Closely connected with this point is the familiar observation that the liar is parasitic on general, though not universal, veracity: lying, as a species of deceit, would be futile in the absence of general efforts to be truthful. It seems reasonable to conclude that a liar is, in a radical way, sapping the foundations of social institutions, all of which depend on the general effectiveness of speech. The liar is indeed an enemy of society, who tends to undermine all possibility of civilized intercourse. Universal lying would destroy intelligible speech.

Still, an endorsement of Montaigne's emphasis on the gravity of shamelessly explicit lying needs some supplementation, if it is not to be misleadingly one-sided. The immediate harm done by a successful lie direct -- the deceitful generation of a false belief by concealed violation of the standard framework -- can often be achieved more efficiently, and with less fear of detection or reprisal, by indirect means. One can intimate "the thing that is not" by implication, by significant silence, or even by the double bluff of pretending to lie while actually speaking the truth (as in the classical Minsk-Pinsk joke). (The annals of espionage are a rich source for this kind of deception.) Such maneuvers, a standard resource of advertising and diplomacy, are secure against the accusation of explicit and knowing mendacity: the offender can always plead that he didn't literally say anything that he himself disbelieved. Given the prevalence and effectiveness of such indirect ways of achieving the disreputable benefits of lying, it is surprising that we have no better label for indirect verbal deception than the lawyer's tag of suggestio falsi. We might perhaps speak in such cases of virtual lying. (Webster defines the relevant sense of "virtual" as "being functionally or effectively but formally not of its kind.")

With virtual lying, we are at last in the close neighborhood of the kind of humbug that "functionally or effectively" implants false belief. For in such cases there is characteristically a conscious discrepancy between the utterer's beliefs and the false beliefs to be implanted. Such cases cannot properly be regarded as cases of outright lying, but are all the more pernicious for that reason. The person who composed the vodka advertisement probably believed that the drink he was puffing was virtually indistinguishable in taste and sedative power from any of the competing brands on the market. In eschewing direct lies or even, for the most part, virtual lies for which he might be accountable, he was relying on the powerful forces of suggestion and association -- with all the flummery of the czar's legendary court and so on -- to implant what would have been a naked lie if it had been explicitly stated. The difference between such cases of humbugging deception and outright or even virtual lying is not in the content of the communicated message, or in the intention to deceive by implanting false beliefs, but rather in the sophistication of the means used to achieve the purpose.

The continuities between explicit lying, virtual lying, and what I now propose to call falsidical humbug (I borrow the term "falsidical" from W. V. Quine) have tempted many writers to regard the conventional distinction between lying and humbug as superficial and ultimately misleading. Indeed, some writers will assimilate to lying even relatively harmless efforts to make a good public showing.

Thus Adrienne Rich, in her notes on lying, says:

"We have expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, to pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasized our helplessness."17

(One supporting myth regards only nudity as genuinely natural and "truthful," all concealment or clothing being counted as hypocritical.)

The tendency here illustrated to convert similarities into supposedly profound underlying identities (dressing and personal adornment as "really" the same thing as lying) is a constant temptation for philosophically inclined scholars in search of excitingly paradoxical insight.

For a splendid example one might turn to George Steiner and his startling rediscovery of "the creativity of falsehood," which he characterizes as "a seminal, profound intuition" of the Greeks.18

Linguists and psychologists (Nietzsche excepted) have done little to explore the ubiquitous, many-branched genus of lies. . . . Constrained as they are by moral disapproval or psychological malaise, these inquiries have remained thin. We will see deeper only when we break free of a purely negative classification of 'untruth', only when we recognize the compulsion to say 'the thing which is not' as being central to language and mind. We must come to grasp what Nietzsche meant when he proclaimed that 'the Lie -- and not the Truth is divine!'19

Steiner quotes Nietzsche again, approvingly, as saying, in The Will to Power:

"There is only one world . . . and that world is false, cruel, contradictory, misleading, senseless. . . . We need lies to vanquish this reality, this truth, we need lies in order to live. Steiner seems himself to endorse the view that "lying is a necessity of life" by which "man violates an absurd confining reality" in a way that "is at every point artistic [and] creative."20

This confused and shoddy defense of lying is what Jeremy Bentham would have called "nonsense on stilts." Steiner here seems to be emulating that kind of German metaphysician than whom, according to Carlyle, none could dive deeper or emerge muddier. It is a prime example of the kind of academic or scholarly humbug that consists of saying more than you can reasonably mean, for the sake of the booming sound of your periods (what the older rhetoricians called "bomphoiologia"). If you fail to make the distinctions that I have been proposing between plain lying, virtual lying, pretentious inflation of belief, and so on, proceeding so far, in Steiner's case, as to regard hypothetical if-then statements as cases of lying, you will end with a conceptual gruel in which everything looks like everything else and all intellectual distinctions have vanished in the service of grandiose obfuscation.

Still, a decent respect for the conceptual distinctions between plain and fancy lying and the allied but distinguishable varieties of deceptive humbug, such as I am here advocating, leaves as yet undiscussed the question of relative harm. The subversive effects of the brazen liar in undermining the foundations of linguistic institutions might be compared to outrageous violations of the constitutive bases of other institutions. There is something peculiarly monstrous about a judge who accepts bribes, a farmer who adds poison to his corn, or a doctor who infects patients in order to ensure a steady income. Yet the adulteration of food, to stay with that example, may, in the not very long run, be even more harmful than outright poisoning. The most serious indictment of falsidical humbug is that, without directly striking at the roots of linguistic institutions, it tends progressively to adulterate speech and thought. As a recent writer has well said,

[The] "distortion of values, this insidious numbing of what we once knew without question as true or false, can be blamed, in part, on the language we hear and read every day and night."21

The Complexities of Self-Deception

When humbuggers say what they themselves disbelieve, evading the risks of lying while reaping its benefits, the gross discrepancy between utterance and actual belief (the speaker's stance) can sometimes be established beyond all reasonable doubt. If the perpetrator rebuffs the Shavian probe -- "Do you really believe that?" -- by insisting that he or she really did believe it, bolstering the original humbug by a brazen lie, perhaps tone, facial expression, or actions will expose the fraud. I call such conscious deception first-order humbug.

Humbug is often less obvious and forthright. Suppose a college student told Vladimir Nabokov that he was the greatest writer since Gogol (an imaginary but plausible episode). Any eavesdropper who knew the student's shaky standing in Nabokov's course on Russian literature might question the flatterer's sincerity; but how is the imputed bad faith to be established against reiterated protestations of sincerity? If we suppose the flatterer to be subjectively honest, we might still impute self-deception. If so, we shall have a good example of a self-humbugged humbugger producing what I shall call second-order humbug.

Although self-deception is perhaps as common as lying, there is a difficulty in understanding how it can possibly occur. Consider the conditions for successful deception of one person by another. If somebody else is to be successfully deceived, what I say must seem initially plausible and my assertion of it must provide some reason for the other's acceptance. Hence my own disbelief must be concealed. Should any of these conditions be violated, the attempted deceit will fail: if you say that you are the illegitimate son of the monarch, as one of the British spies used to do, your hearer will probably think that you must be joking (the intended effect); if you show by a wink that you don't believe what you say, your hearer will not succumb to the intended deception. The deceptive appearance must masquerade as reality.

How can one hide one's own disbelief in an intended act of private deception? Is it not absurd to say to oneself, "I don't believe such-and-such and yet I am going to believe it?" One cannot be an authority for oneself, and nothing that I know that I disbelieve can be a reason for me to believe it. And how can I fail to know my own disbelief? Ivy Compton-Burnett once said in an interview, "I don't think there is such a thing as self-deception. When people say they do things unconsciously and sub­consciously, I am quite sure they do them consciously."22

The following argument for the impossibility of self-deception seems to be conclusive: Humbug requires concealment of a deceptive intent; but if the speaker and the audience are identical, as in soliloquy, there can be no such concealment; so there can be no such thing as self-deception.

One might respond by pointing to clear cases of what we call self-deception -- as when a woman shows by words and actions that she still believes in her son's survival, although she possesses proof of his death in battle. Anybody persuaded by the impossibility argument would presumably retort that what happens in such an instance is misdescribed as deception and ought properly to be called something else. But this would amount to an arbitrary change in language, motivated by nothing better than obstinate defense of a dubious argument.

The impossibility argument is underpinned by the following conceptions: "Either you know that you believe what you say or else you don't. And in either case you can't be mistaken." Knowledge of one's own belief is immediately accessible; and there is no middle term between belief and disbelief. Both contentions are wrong: knowing one's momentary belief is not, like a sneeze, a hit-or-miss affair; and various degrees of awareness may be involved.

Consider the following typical example. Before meeting my doctor to hear the latest report on some chronic affliction, I resolve to take a cheerful view. Then, while the doctor talks, I withdraw attention from, blank out, anything that begins to sound like bad news, while attending closely to encouraging remarks. In this way I end by genuinely believing a comfortable but wrong conclusion, based on deliberately selected and distorted evidence. When I close my ears in this way against a sentence that starts "Unfortunately your blood pressure . . ." so that I barely hear the rest of the sentence, do I know what the doctor says? Do I believe what he says? Am I aware of using a strategy of selective attention in support of a predetermined verdict? In each case the answer has to be "Yes and no."

Do I hear the bad news about the blood pressure? Unless I am an unusually talented self-deceiver, I probably do -- as shown by the fact that I may reluctantly be able to dredge it up into full consciousness later. But the censored news is relegated to the back of my mind; I know it as I know that I am writing a letter when I am attending to something other than the act of writing. One might say that I have twilight awareness of the suppressed material. (There is no need yet to invoke the unconscious.) Do I believe what I hear in this twilight way? Again, yes and no. Yes, because unless I do believe it, on my doctor's unquestioned authority, I have no need to suppress it; no, since I manage to prevent the very question of belief from rising into full consciousness. Parallel verdicts apply to the overall program of selective attention and wishful distortion that I execute. I know what I am doing as I know that I am walking even while I am thinking about something else; but having a normal distaste for distortion of evidence, I need to mask my disreputable strategy.

The foregoing analysis of what might be called, in Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology, "bad faith" (mauvaise foi) seems to fit the most familiar cases of self-deception. But it does not fit severe cases of the repression of unwelcome thoughts or tidings, where the strategy of selective attention and rejection can induce neurotic symptoms. Yet it does fit such testimony as the following, from a recent discussion of obesity: "Even while on a binge [of gobbling] one vows to start a diet tomorrow and emerge from it miraculously transformed."23

A further feature of the process of selective attention and repression of unwelcome input in the service of what might be called wishful acceptance deserves notice. In brushing aside the bad news of which he is at least partly aware, the self-deceiver makes the welcome good news part of his consciousness, part of himself, as it were, while doing his best to pretend that what he partly hears and would like to forget simply has not happened. But it has happened and he knows that it has. So there is a kind of dissociation at work, as in the familiar cases of motives that are suppressed as unworthy. So long as the self-deceiver is in the initial stages of the process sketched above, he has a "divided self," a state of strain that is disagreeable to all but accomplished hypocrites.

The constant practice of self-deception may produce a character that cheats as effortlessly as a bird sings: the mask eventually becomes ingrown, fits the face as closely as a death mask. Exposure of such inveterate self-deception is difficult, since it requires a critical judgment of a whole way of life. When we are coping with confirmed hypocrisy rather than momentary self-deception, a verdict of humbug seems euphemistic.

Yet the exposure of episodic self-deception is sometimes both practicable and useful. Second-order humbug can sometimes be detected even if the producer is unshakably convinced of subjective honesty and sincerity. It would itself be an act of humbug, however, to suppose that the critic can pride himself on being free of self-deception. Selective and differential attention, repression, and dissociation are features of all perception and thought. And even wishful acceptance is not necessarily reprehensible when it leads to beneficial results, at least in the short run. Should we denigrate the wishful belief that one is going to win a contest when self-verifying predictions are involved?

Is Humbug Ineradicable?

Ought implies can, say the moralists. So before considering antihumbug remedies, we ought first to hear the vehement objections of those who consider such a project dangerously quixotic because, as one writer has put it, "deception is an inevitable aspect of human action." That quotation comes from a critical review of Sissela Bok's book on lying -- the only adverse notice of the book that I have come upon -- by David Bazelon.24

Bazelon reproaches Bok for exclusive attention to outright and explicit lying -- which he regards as a "disastrous" limitation -- and he heartily dislikes her recommended maxim that "no one should lie except on the rarest occasions." Bazelon thinks such concentration on the impracticable "best" will "unavoidably assure that lesser forms of deception will be used more frequently, accompanied by a greater sense of virtue." He himself (a "lumper" rather than a "splitter") wants attention to be paid to "the phenomenon of deception in full, rich context." Lying should always be regarded, he claims, as "the major form of modern power," short of actual violence, and hence "an actual or potential aspect of all action involving two or more people." Convinced as Bazelon is, then, of the ubiquity and inevitability of lying as an exercise of power over the deceived, he ends with the following remark and conclusion:

"Once the ubiquity of deception is appreciated, and also its central relation to power, the need of power to achieve one's purpose, the issue clearly becomes -- which lie to tell, when, to whom, and for how long."

Since Bazelon is operating with so broad and comprehensive a definition of lying as a mode of deception, his argument, if sound, ought to apply equally well to humbug. No doubt Bazelon would say: The only sensible questions are how to humbug, when, to whom, and for how long. This conclusion might appeal to anybody impressed by the prevalence of humbug; but before succumbing to its attractive cynicism, we ought to notice that the implied argument is invalid.

Think of parallel reflections about, say, dirt or infection: to the effect that since perfect cleanliness is a chimera, the only questions sufficiently practical to be worth considering are how much dirt to tolerate and in which circumstances. As a correction to an impracticable perfectionism, the position is acceptable. But surely indefensible is the suggestion that there is no harm in dirt, or that nothing needs to be done about it. It would be a gross example of the fallacy, for which there is no special label, of arguing from ideal impracticability to permissive laissez-faire.

We need not be committed to the Utopian project of a society completely free from humbug in order to hold, as I do, that the evil should be combated to the best of our ability. Humbug may well be as ineradicable as degeneration and death, but that is a poor reason for indifference or complacency.

Coping with Humbug

I shall now try to keep my original promise to say something useful about how to cope with humbug. I hope you will agree that while humbug has the short-term advantages of devious hypocrisy over naked felony, it is indeed an insidious and detestable evil.

In order to cope with humbug we need, of course, to be sensitive to its occurrence. One soon develops a nose for it. Indeed, there is a danger of becoming tiresomely overzealous in its exposure.

For short-term remedies, I recommend first the ploy that I earlier called the "Shavian probe" -- the deliberately naive and rather impolite challenges expressed by the questions "Do you really believe that?" and "Do you really mean that?" (If the answer is yes, one might then use one of G. E. Moore's favorite expressions: "How extraordinary!") A more elaborate maneuver is to take the humbugging formula literally in order to reveal its latent exaggerations and absurdities. Thus if somebody solemnly delivers the shoddy bit of proverbial wisdom that "the exception proves the rule," one might trump it by saying, "Quite so. The more exceptions, the better the rule!" But a more useful therapy is to translate humbug into plain and clear English. Such translation is especially effective in coping with learned humbug. (The abuse involved is a kind of converse of the emperor's clothes -- too many clothes and no emperor.) Strongly to be recommended also are humor, parody, and satire. (The glorious response, for instance, of the philosopher Samuel Alexander, in his deaf old age, shaking his ear trumpet with laughter on being introduced to a Harvard professor: "I must be getting very deaf -- I thought you said he was a professor of business ethics!") Required reading might well include Flaubert's dictionary of received opinions,25 Frank Sullivan's interviews with Mr. Arbuthnot, the cliche expert,26 and some of the splendid parodies of Russell Baker.27

Fortunately, literature provides wonderful portraits and caricatures of accomplished humbugs -- Dickens' Pecksniff, Uriah Heep, Podsnap, and many more; Moliere's Tartuffe and Alceste; and the confidence men of Herman Melville and Thomas Mann. And much can be learned from a long line of exemplary anti-humbuggers, among whom I include Dr. Johnson, Samuel Butler, Sydney Smith, Anton Chekhov, George Orwell, Vladimer Nabokov, E. B. White, and Adlai Stevenson.

Coda

It would be satisfying to be able to end with some concise and accurate definition. The best I can now provide is the following formula:

HUMBUG: deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.

This definition covers only first-degree humbug. For second-degree humbug, produced by a self-deluded speaker or thinker, the unsatisfactory reference to thoughts and so on would need to be replaced by something like "thoughts . . . that might be revealed by candid and rational self-examination." I must leave the problems concealed in this all too brief formulation for another occasion.

Plenty of work remains to be done. For, as Miss Mowcher liked to say: "What a world of gammon and spinnage it is!" and "What a refreshing set of humbugs we are, to be sure!"28

NOTES

1. Maxim Gorky, Reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Andreev (New York, 1959), p. 79.

2. The Mentor (Springfield, O.) 18 (1930): 16.

3. Of course, criticism of the substance of a remark will often imply censure of its producer. When Scrooge, in Dickens' Christmas Carol, responded to his nephew's cheerful greeting of "Merry Christmas!" with the unforgettably scornful "Bah! Humbug!" he reinforced his disgust by the rhetorical question "[W]hat right have you to be merry? what reason have you to be merry?" A little later he said: "If I could work my will, . . . every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

Similarly, in the wonderful first chapter of The Pickwick Papers, Mr. Blotton (the haberdasher from Aldgate), in calling Mr. Pickwick a humbug, plainly intended a personal insult, later expunged by the frank declaration "that, personally, he entertained the highest regard and esteem for the honorable gentleman; he merely considered him a humbug in a Pickwickian point of view" (another tantalizing glimpse of our elusive quarry).

4. The point is well made in the second chapter of P. T. Barnum's Humbugs of the World (New York, 1866), the only book, to my knowledge, devoted to examination of humbug and its practitioners. He there says: "[A]s generally understood, 'humbug' consists in putting on glittering appearances -- outside show -- novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the public eye and ear" (p. 20); and "An honest man who thus arrests public attention will be called a 'humbug,' but he is not a swindler or an impostor" (p. 21). Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-91), often called the Prince of Humbugs, deserves to be better remembered than as the co-founder of the Barnum & Bailey circus. An international celebrity in his day, a favorite of Queen Victoria and a friend of Horace Greeley, Mark Twain, and Thackeray, he was an honest and harmless humbug, a magnificent advertiser, showman, and entertainer. Fortunately, his extraordinary career can now be enjoyably followed in Neil Harris' fine biography, Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum (Boston, 1973).

5. Rupert Crawshay-Williams, Russell Remembered (London, 1970), pp. 18-19.

6. New York Times, January 31, 1980, p. Aio.

7. Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York, 1926), p. 139.

8. Ibid., p. 145.

9. Ibid., p. 146.

10. Carl L. Becker, Cornell University: Founders and the Founding (Ithaca, N.Y., 1944), pp. 132, 134.

11. Ibid., p. 135.

12. Ibid.

13. The opening section of the first paragraph of chap. 12 of Veblen's book, quoted from H. L. Mencken, Prejudices: First Series (New York, 1919), pp. 67-68.

14. Ibid., pp. 66-67, 69.

15. Sissela Bok, Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life (New York, 1978), p. 14.

16. From the essay "Of Liars," in The Essays of Montaigne, trans. E. J. Trechmann (New York, 1946), I:30.

17. Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose (New York, 1979), p. 188; my italics.

18. George Steiner, After Babel (New York, 1975), p. 220.

19. Ibid., pp. 221-22.

20. Ibid., p. 227.

21. M. F. K. Fisher, "As the Lingo Languishes," in The State of the Language, ed. L. Michaels and C. Ricks (Berkeley, 1980), p. 270.

22. Kay Dick, Ivy and Stevie (London, 1971), p. 10.

23. Sylvia Robinow, review of Marcia Millman, Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America, in New Republic, April 12, 1980, p. 35.

24. Times Literary Supplement, August n, 1978, pp. 908-10.

25. Flaubert's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas, trans, and ed. Jacques Barzun (Norfolk, Conn., 1954).

26. See, for instance, the fine examples collected in George Oppenheimer, Well, There's No Harm in Laughing (Garden City, N.Y., 1970), formerly titled Frank Sullivan through the Looking Glass.

27. Russell Baker, So This Is Depravity (New York, 1980).

28. Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, chap. 20.