

ON "THINKING" AND "FEELING"

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I

I would like to point up a certain convention of speech which has undergone, I believe, a significant and insidious change during the last few decades. I refer to the simple, commonplace yet profoundly revealing expression, "I think." Twenty years ago it was common practice to introduce one's ideas into communication by saying "I think" and then expressing whatever thoughts one wished to express. That is to say, twenty years ago speakers, writers, students in the classroom, the "man in the street" would commonly express their ideas by saying "I think" such and such is the case. Now, we note, a subtle and widespread change has occurred. Speakers, writers, students and everyday conversation tends commonly to substitute "I feel" for the former "I think."

The expression "I feel" is fundamentally different than "I think." "I feel" has traditionally been used; and is still used to introduce expressions of physical or emotional feeling. For example, one might say, "I feel" sleepy or cheerful or whatever. Currently (but not twenty years ago) one hears the expression "I feel" also used to introduce statements of mental conviction, i.e., statements expressing ideas and thoughts. For example, one commonly hears statements like, "I feel the newspaper exaggerated" or "I feel the project is well worthwhile."

I think two things have happened here. First, the rubrical expression "I think" has (largely) lost its former and (I would judge) proper primary office of introducing thoughts and ideas into communication. It has come to be restricted (largely) to what was formerly only a secondary usage. That is, "I think" is now used not primarily to introduce the expression of one's ideas, but to express the circumstance of the speaker's not being certain — of admitting to some doubtfulness in the matter at hand. One (currently) says "I think" to mean "I am not sure, but I suspect ("think") such and such is the case."

Second, the expression "I feel," while still used (properly) to refer to subjective physical and emotional conditions, has (largely) been expanded in its usage to include the former primary office of "I think": to wit — to introduce the expression of ideas. That is to say, today it is commonplace to hear (or read) someone say "I feel such and such is the case" referring not to their feelings, but to their ideas.

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What has brought about this change may be speculative, but the continuing impact of the behavioral sciences, particularly psychology, on all phases of experience would seem to provide a general context of explanation. The progressively increasing specialization of thinking in modern society in conjunction with an increasing tendency to emphasize the importance of personal feeling in nearly all phases of living would also seem a constitutive part of the explanation.

The important consideration, however, is not what brought the change about, but what is its significance? This, I think, can be seen in its effect upon language and upon thinking. The effect is a pernicious one — always a threat and usually an actual impediment to precise speaking and clear thinking. This deleterious effect has spread throughout the fabric of our communication and does considerable harm in terms of acting to prevent the rational analysis of questionable arguments — i.e., by creating a semantic obstruction to rational analysis of argumentation at all levels of communication. The situation, as I see it, is this. When one introduces one's ideas into public communication by saying "I think," one accurately and precisely indicates that he is about to express his thoughts. These thoughts then are correctly seen as subject to the usual rules — and critiques — of logic and common sense and hence are "fair game" for such rational analysis. By contrast, when one introduces one's physical or emotional feelings into public communication by saying "I feel" (sleepy or happy or whatever) one is referring to a subjective condition about which the listener cannot debate. One's own feelings are decidedly not subject to the usual rules — and critiques — of logic and common sense. If, for example, you feel happy or sleepy — whether you appear happy or sleepy or not — who can dispute the fact of your feelings with you? Obviously, no one, for no one else can say how you "really" feel. On the matter of your own feelings — how you feel at any given time — you are always the world's number one expert.¹ Even were you subjected to clinical observations these could only tell, at best, if you were being truthful about reporting your feelings. As to what you really feel, you remain the final judge and measure.

¹This does not mean to imply that you cannot be mistaken in regard to *some* aspect (e.g., the source) of your feelings. You may, indeed, feel something and believe it to be something that it isn't. The classic example is the amputee who feels pain in the amputated limb. But it is the belief about the feeling that can be mistaken — i.e., you may actually be experiencing a nerve disorder as a pain in an amputated limb — but that you feel the pain as a pain in an amputated limb, you cannot be mistaken about. You simply feel whatever you feel and since you are the one and only one) experiencing your feelings you can hardly be disputed with concerning what your experience of them is.

Further, feelings cannot be — logically — wrong. They merely are what they are. Only ideas — expressed as propositions — can be true or false. Feelings simply are or aren't. This puts the "feeler" in a rather "sovereign" position in relation to his feelings. He cannot be wrong in knowing what they are; and they cannot be wrong in being what they are. We express (ordinarily) this sovereign relation of a person to his feelings by saying that "He has a right to his feelings."

Yet further, that sovereignty is an irresponsible sovereignty. That is, a person cannot be held responsible for having the feelings he has. I might feel "blue" for no identifiable reason and yet not be able to feel otherwise. I might tell you that you shouldn't feel "slighted" or "smug" or whatever and you may even agree and still not be able to help going right on feeling "slighted" or "smug." A person has whatever feelings he has whether we (or they) might think they ought to have them or not. A person, as we say, can't help how he feels. This is not to say that a person can never exercise any degree of control over my feeling. In some cases a person may, indeed, choose to interpret something so as to feel "slighted" or "flattered" (or not). What is meant here is simply that (ordinarily) our feelings are largely an involuntary response to external stimuli and hence are something we can neither control nor stand responsible for.

Now then, when one substitutes "I feel" for "I think" in the process of introducing ideas into communication, one, at a single stroke, so to speak, subtly and implicitly surrounds whatever ideas are forthcoming with all the protections of the sovereign position of one's relation to one's feelings. In such case your ideas, now misrepresented as feelings, are no longer open to logical or common sense analysis and critique. Further, they are implicitly and falsely categorized as that about which you cannot be wrong, to which you have a right and for which you cannot be held responsible.

To illustrate the situation I have been describing let us imagine a hypothetical conversation between a "Mr. A" and a "Mr. B."

Mr. A: *I think* the voters should pass the bond issue.

Mr. B: Oh yeah? What makes you think so?

Mr. A: Because we need a new library.

Mr. B: Sorry, but *I think* you're mistaken. We don't need a new library; the old one isn't even used to capacity.

Mr. A: No, *I think* it's you who are mistaken. The old one isn't used because it's inadequate.

Here, each speaker clearly and correctly identifies his ideas with

the rubric "I think," thus enabling his listener to offer rational criticism and counter-argumentation. Now consider:

Mr. A: *I feel* the voters should pass the bond issue.

Mr. B: (If he answers in keeping with the proper interpretation of "I feel") Well, I suppose if that's the way you feel then that's that.

What else can "B" say? "A" certainly knows best what his own feelings are and certainly has a right to have them and cannot even be held responsible for whatever they happen to be. In this latter dialogue "A" has effectively put his idea beyond rational analysis, beyond criticism, beyond reproach by misdescribing them as feelings and has done so very handily by (mis)using the rubric "I feel" in place of the proper introduction of "I think."

Hopefully, by now the import and significance of the change from "I think" to "I feel" is clear. This seemingly simple and innocuous change of wording constitutes a clever, insidious and effective propaganda technique — all the more pernicious since, being relatively new it is not readily recognized for what it is. Further, the change can become a perverted habit of mind leading the user to believe that (in many cases) whatever he thinks is beyond criticism simply because it is he who thinks it — mistakenly regarding his ideas in the status of feelings.

Finally, the new usage introduces a defect into communication which obstructs rational analysis at all levels and in all areas of communication and thereby fosters the growth and maintenance of unreason generally. I think it is time to re-emphasize that what we do is feel our feelings and think our thoughts and that the two should not be misconstrued by using "I feel" to mean "I think."

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