

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROFANITY.¹

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In this paper I shall deal with only so much of the psychology of profanity as may be involved in the attempt to answer two questions: Why do men swear? When they swear, why do they use the words which they do? It is my opinion, however, that when the whole subject of profanity is finally worked out, it will be found to throw considerable light upon two unsolved but much discussed problems—one an old one, the origin of language, the other a new one, the relation between emotion and its expression.

We distinguish two kinds of swearing, asseverative and ejaculatory. The former will include, first, legal swearing, and secondly, popular asseverations taking the form of legal oaths. Of these, legal swearing is not, of course, included in profanity. Nor should we include popular asseverations apart from legal proceedings, provided only they are used with sufficient solemnity, as when a person accused of a serious offense calls the gods to witness his innocence. On the other hand, the light and flippant use of the name of a deity in asseverations, as in the *μὰ Δία* or *νῆ τὸν Δία* of the Greeks, or the *mehercle* or *edepol* of the Romans, or the name of God following the particle *by* (*bei*) in English or German, would be considered as profane swearing, although its moral quality will depend upon the accepted code of the age or country in which it is used.

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The psychology of these asseverative phrases is comparatively simple and need detain us but a moment. Truth-telling is a modern virtue and represents a highly developed civilization. The mendacity of former days and of primitive peoples is well known. Under such circumstances, truth and honesty, whether real or pretended, protect and assert themselves by the strongest appeals to the most sacred objects. Hence, invocations to the deities, to the holy grave, to the saints, to the sword or javelin, to the head of the emperor, to the sun or the moon. Later these phrases, which at first are solemn protestations of honesty or truth, become merely conventional expressions having an adverbial force and differing only in degree from words like 'truly,' 'verily' or 'indeed.'

It is, however, with the second kind of swearing, the ejaculatory, that this paper is chiefly concerned. From this point of view, we may then define profanity as the ejaculatory or exclamatory use of a word or phrase, usually the name of the deity or connected in some way with religion or other sacred things, having no logical connection with the subject in hand, and indicative of strong feeling, such as anger or disapproval. This definition we may accept with sufficient latitude to include the severer forms of profanity, such as cursing, vituperation and blasphemy, and the milder and more common forms, such as the mere interjectional use of words and phrases that have lost their once sacred character.

Since any theory or explanation of profanity must, of course, rest upon the facts to be explained, a brief summary of the more obvious facts will be the best introduction to our study.

The words and phrases used in profane swearing we may roughly divide into seven classes.

1. Names of deities, angels and devils. Such as Indra, Zeus, Jupiter, God, Lord, Christ, Jesus, the Devil, Beelzebub, etc. In this class should be included the numerous corrupted or euphemistic forms of the above names, such as gad, egad, gol, gosh, deuce (*Deus*), *potz*, law (Lord), etc.

2. Names connected with the sacred matters of religion, such as *sakrament*, *kreuz*, the holy mass, zounds (God's wounds), etc.

3. Names of saints, holy persons or biblical characters, such as holy Mary, holy Moses, holy Peter, Jehosaphat, etc.

4. Names of sacred places, such as Jerusalem, the holy grave, the land of Goshen, etc.

5. Words relating to the future life, such as *himmel*, heavens, hell, bless, damn (with its numerous corrupted or euphemistic forms, like *darn*, *dern*, *dang*, *demn*).

6. Vulgar words. Words and phrases unusual or forbidden by polite usage.

7. Expletives, including words or phrases having unusual force for various reasons, such as mercy, goodness, gracious, for pity's sake, confound it, hang it, *tausend*, *million*, etc. Many of these will be found to be fossil remains of religious terms or of ejaculatory prayers, such for instance as mercy and gracious.¹

I shall return later to the question of the common quality possessed by these words adapting them to the use of profanity.

Continuing our inductive study, we should next notice the history of profanity. Here our knowledge is scanty and fragmentary.² The history of profanity, so far as it is written, is bound up with the history of religion, profane swearing having prevailed at those times and among those people where great sacredness has been attached to the names of the gods or to matters of religion. This rule does not, however, apply to ribaldry and vulgarity, which under many circumstances are included in profanity and constitute a very objectionable form, but rather to profanity in its ordinary sense, such as cursing, blasphemy and execration. The psychological grounds for this relation between profanity and religion will be apparent as we proceed. Hence it was that among the Hebrews the vice was so common and so offensive that its prohibition found a prominent place in the decalogue, while in the Levitical law it was punishable by death. For a like reason, among the less serious Greeks the vice was uncommon, being practically lim-

¹ For full lists of common swear-words and their supposed origins, see Small, 'Methods of Manifesting the Instinct of Certainty,' *Ped Sem*, V, 313.

² Sharman, in his quaint book entitled 'A Cursory History of Swearing,' throws interesting side-lights on the subject. I am indebted to him for some of the facts under this head.

ited to a few asseverative phrases, and although the abuse of these was ridiculed at Athens and forbidden in Crete where Rhadamanthus made a law that the people should not swear by the gods, but by the dog and the goose, and the plane tree, it was never taken very seriously. The Athenian boys, for instance, were allowed to swear by Hercules, but only in the open air. In Rome, custom allowed the men to swear by Hercules and the women by Castor.

In modern times it is again in serious and religious England and America that the vice has most prevailed. In England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, after the monkish teaching had implanted a vivid consciousness of the suprasanctity of the body of Christ and of every scene connected with His sufferings, there burst upon the country a wave of imprecation in which profane use was made of the body and members and wounds of Christ and of many things connected with His death.¹ Fossil remains of these oaths have come down to us in such expressions as zounds, 'sdeath, bodikins, ods bodikins, etc. The significance of this historical circumstance will be seen when we discover that the psychological value of an oath depends upon the force of the 'shock' which it is capable of giving.

After the Reformation swearing in England took on a different coloring. It was sonorous in sound and was assumed to be manly. It smacked of the field, the army and the court. Elizabeth herself is said to have been proficient in the lordly art. Hotspur demands of Lady Percy, "Swear me, Kate, like a lady as thou art, a good mouth-filling oath." In the army the favorite English oath was so very common that in France and Holland the name 'Goddam' became a mere nickname for an Englishman. In the seventeenth century an attempt was made to suppress profanity by parliamentary enactments, with every kind of penalty from a fine of twelvecence an oath in England to punishment by death in Scotland. At different epochs in

¹ We should not, however, overlook the fact that owing to the deeply religious feeling of the times, this impious language would cause great offense and distress to the more refined minds, which would find expression in the literature of the day, and coming down to us give us an exaggerated picture of the English profanity of those centuries compared with that of other times and places.

subsequent English history there have been epidemics of profanity, as in the reigns of Charles II., Anne, and George II. Until recent times it has usually been considered manly or lordly to swear, giving the swearer a certain kind of distinction. This, indeed, is noticed now among boys and some classes of men. But in general in this century profanity has become unfashionable. The stamp of vulgarity and social disapproval have proved far more effective agencies in suppressing the vice than any legislation. But the habit still widely prevails throughout the world, especially among soldiers and sailors, in the laboring classes, among the uneducated and among criminals.

We may next notice some psychological facts about swearing. Under what circumstances do men swear, and what are the subjective effects of the oath? In general, profanity is the accompaniment of anger or of emotions of the anger type. People swear when they are provoked, or annoyed, or surprised by a hurt or injury. They swear in personal encounters or altercations when actual bodily injury is not attempted, the most dangerous men not being the hardest swearers. They swear at horses as an incentive to greater exertion and at all domestic animals when irritated by them. Finally, they use oaths in any discourse where ejaculations, interjections and superlatives are demanded or where the poverty of language makes it incommensurate to the occasion. In general, we may say that the occasion of profanity is a situation in which there is a high degree of emotion, usually of the aggressive type, accompanied by a certain feeling of helplessness. In cases of great fear, where action is impossible, as in impending shipwreck, men pray; in great anger, they swear.

As regards the subjective effects of profanity, they are characteristic and peculiar. The most striking effect is that of a pleasant feeling of relief from a painful stress. It seems to be the appropriate expression for certain mental states and is accompanied by that satisfaction which attends all emotional expression. To take a simple illustration: Even men who do not swear can by a sort of inherited instinct appreciate the teleological relation existing between the behavior of a refractory collar-

button during the hurried moments of dressing for some evening function and the half-smothered ejaculation of the monosyllable 'damn.' The word seems to have been made for the occasion. The feeling of annoyance in this case is slight and the instance trifling, but in more serious affairs under the influence of great anger the mental stress demands an outlet which the oath seems to afford in a striking manner. One is reminded of the Aristotelian doctrine of *κάθαρσις*, and tempted to think that its application is more fitting here than in respect to the action of the drama. A forcible illustration of the instinctive desire to relieve the overburdened soul by the use of swear-words came to my notice lately. A friend of mine, a clergyman, has a boy of six years, a sturdy and combative child, but of good habits and careful training. One day, having suffered some serious childish trouble with his playmates, he came in and said, "Mamma, I feel just like saying 'God damn'; I would like to say, 'Jesus Christ,' but I think that would be wrong." This pacifying and, so to speak, purifying effect of profanity is one of the phenomena which any theory of swearing must take into account. It is observed also in other forms of emotional expression, as for instance in the 'good cry,' whose purifying effect in relieving the tension of grief or anger is well known. H. Campbell, writing on the physiology of the emotions, says, "The shouting and gesticulation which accompany an outburst of passion act physiologically by relieving nerve tension; and, indeed, as Hughlings Jackson has suggested, swearing may not be without its physiological justification. Passionate outbursts are generally succeeded by periods of good behavior and, it may be, improved health."¹

Certain facts also in the field of abnormal psychology must be taken account of in any theory of profanity. Mental pathology confirms the evidence of philology that profanity is one of the oldest forms of spoken language. In progressive aphasia, profanity is often the last form of speech to be lost and aphasic patients who can swear oftentimes cannot repeat the profane words from hearing. The oaths slip out quite reflexly. Reformed swearers revert unconsciously to their profanity in moments of great excitement. In automatic writing, in trance

¹ 'The Physiology of the Emotions,' *Nature*, Vol. XVI., 306.

utterances, in the language of instinctive criminals and in subconscious and reversionary psychoses in general, profanity, usually of the milder sort, has a conspicuous place. These phenomena afford at least some ground for the belief that profanity is an ancient and deep-seated form of expression standing in close organic connection with gesture language.

Keeping in mind, then, the principal facts to be explained, let us proceed to consider the theory of profanity. Previous to the fruitful discussion which followed upon the James-Lange theory of emotion and in general acceptance of Darwin's theory of expression, the explanation of profanity, had it been attempted, would doubtless have proceeded along the following lines: Profanity is an expression of emotion, particularly of the emotion of anger. Anger, like other emotions, has as its physiological accompaniment an inner turmoil, an increased metabolism in the nervous centers, an increased excitement and stress, seeking an outlet in motor channels. Profanity is one of the many forms of the outburst of this inner excitement. Why the surplus released nervous energy escapes through this particular channel is to be explained partly by the law of serviceable habit and partly by the constitution of the body. The natural and primitive form of expression of anger is combat, involving a supreme effort of the whole muscular system and high-pressure activity of the heart and lungs. The inhibition of these earlier forms of reaction makes other outlets necessary. The organs of speech serve well as such drainage channels. Animals in anger may fight, but if actual fighting is impracticable, they may snarl or growl or bellow or scream or roar. Men in anger may perhaps be obliged to repress every overt act and every expression of their emotion except facial movements or some form of vocalization. Profanity is therefore a safety-valve; it represents partial inhibition; if the man did not swear, he would do something worse. It may be likened to the engine blowing off steam. Why the vocalization takes the form of the profane oath may also be explained upon the same principles. Oaths are more forceful and give greater vent to the inner turmoil than less sacred words. In the same way we understand why the voice in profanity is usually loud and high. The sub-

jective pacifying effect of the oath, the feeling of relief, is also readily explained from this point of view. It is an actual physiological relief of a central stress. It is a kind of purgation.

This explanation is open to criticism at nearly every point. As popularly understood, it regards the emotion as a kind of psychic force which is aroused by the perception of an object and seeks an outlet. If interpreted physiologically, it presupposes a central excitement or diffusive wave of energy which is itself unexplained. It involves, too, the doubtful theories of accidental discharge and drainage channels. It assumes finally that the emotion precedes the expression and is not mediated by it.

Other recent theories of emotion, such as the James theory¹ or the Sutherland theory,² afford us scarcely more help in explaining profanity and its relation to the emotion of anger. The former, which, as originally stated, finds the emotion to be the sensational outcome of the outer expression, or, as later explained, of certain idiopathic changes or 'visceral stirrings,' does not of course make any attempt to explain the expression itself, and is in any case in serious conflict with one of the most important phenomena of profanity, viz., its alleviating or purifying influence. The latter, which locates the emotions in the sympathetic nervous system and finds their physical basis in changes in the vascular tone of the body, encounters like difficulties in the present application and some others peculiar to the popular view first mentioned. The theory of emotion and its relation to expression offered by Professor Dewey³ is free, as far as the case under discussion is concerned, from the difficulties of the other views. This theory, which the author calls a modification of that of Professor James, discourages the belief in 'accidental discharges' and 'drainage channels'; it holds that all emotional attitudes are either purposeful and adjusted movements, or else disturbances or alienations of adjusted movements, and that the distinctive psychical *quale* of emotion is always the result of

¹ 'Principles of Psychology,' Chap. XXV. PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW, I., p. 516.

² 'The Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct,' by Alexander Sutherland, London, 1898. Chaps. XXII., XXIII.

³ PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW, I., 553, II., 13.

obstructed activities, that is, of the inhibition, tension or effort, involved in the readjustment of former habits of action to present necessities. So far as the following discussion involves any theory of emotion and emotional expression, it will be based upon the theory last named.

It is evident, then, that we can no longer say that profanity is an outburst of emotion and use the emotion of anger to explain it, nor can we affirm that the vocal organs are simply easy drainage channels for excessive nervous discharge. The vocal ejaculation must be more directly connected with its object, *i. e.*, with the perception of whatever evokes it. Profanity, therefore, can be explained only by the genetic method. It must be shown to be a useful form of reaction, at least in the beginning.

If we consider very simple forms of animal life, we may say that the activities of the individual are of three kinds, those connected with the procuring of food, with protection from enemies and with reproduction. So long as these activities are normal there would be no psychical accompaniment which could be called emotion; at most, it would be pleasure or pain. Again, all these activities involve a sensory mechanism and a gradually perfected coördination between the sensory and motor mechanism, and this coördination we may call habit. The failure of this coördination, conscious or unconscious efforts at readjustment, may have for its psychical equivalent something that we may call primitive emotion. It is more nearly related to pain than to pleasure. Let us now confine our study to the second of the above mentioned forms of activity, that connected with protection from enemies. These activities will take two forms, which we may call combat and escape, the latter including flight and concealment. Failure to coördinate the usual sense impressions and muscular reactions leading to flight or concealment will be accompanied by the primitive emotion of fear. A like failure to coördinate the usual sensory and motor elements connected with combat will be accompanied by the emotion of anger. Let us again confine ourselves to the reactions connected with combat. These reactions will need constant readjustment to adapt them to changing environment connected with and leading to changes in bodily structure.

Suppose an animal to be attacked by an enemy of superior strength under circumstances where escape would be impracticable. Any modification of the usual reactions of combat of such a character as to induce in the opponent reactions of flight will be of distinct advantage to the combatant, and therefore used and preserved. Darwin's illustrations will at once occur to us, such as the display of teeth, or reactions which are designed to increase the apparent size of the combatant, such as the erection of the hair or feathers, or the arching of the back. Under this head we may include all kinds of *noises* which an animal may make in order to 'strike terror to the heart' of the opponent, such as the growl, the snarl, the roar, the bellow and the hiss, all of which are, like the curse or oath of anger in human beings, harmless in themselves, but useful as indirect means of defense, since they induce in the opponent the reactions of flight instead of combat. It is conceivable that the faculty of phonation arose originally in this way, as a modification of the organism useful in defense against a more powerful foe. In that case the earliest form of speech would be the ejaculation of anger. It is probable, however, that a more careful inquiry into the origin of phonation will lead us to a somewhat different conclusion.

Fortunately the present discussion does not involve us in the ancient and wordy controversy on the origin of language. The valiant defenders respectively of the bow-wow theory, the pooh-pooh theory, the ding-dong theory, the yo-heave-ho theory, the music theory (which we might christen the tra-la theory), all agree in this—that vocalization of some sort preceded articulate language by vast periods of time. Take for instance the bow-wow or onomatopoeic theory. If a dog was named bow-wow by a hypothetical *homo alalus* because of his bark, it is assumed that the dog himself already possessed a faculty of vocal expression. One wonders then to what extent this faculty of vocalization had developed previous to the time when it became 'speech.' If the dog or other vertebrate could express his anger by a growl, we can hardly doubt that 'speechless man' was very far from speechless at least as regards his emotions, or that he possessed a considerable emotional vocabulary. The tedious discussion

about the origin of language has been very much a waste of words for the reason that it has been conducted usually from the standpoint of philology rather than from that of genetic psychology. In reality it has been a discussion about the origin of conceptual thought and has had to do with a relatively recent period in human development. If we go back of this period, we see at once that primitive man must have possessed an extensive and useful vocabulary.

It would be possible to make a trial list of the forms of vocalization which would be useful to a species of animals, assuming only that the sense of hearing was possessed by its own and other species. There would be for instance the cry of pain, the scream of fear, the shout of joy, the growl of anger, the 'song' of love, and finally the articulate word as expression of thought. None of these are to be considered as mere expressions of emotion, not even the shout of joy. They are merely useful activities, all of them probably being forms of communication. The cry of pain for instance brings food and aid to the young. The 'song' of love, including all forms of vocalization that are pleasing to the ear, is useful in alluring the desired mate. The scream of fear is a warning of danger, while the growl or snarl or roar of anger is useful in putting to flight an opponent. Now the human analogue of the growl or roar of anger is the profane oath, and carrying out the list of analogues we shall have as the various species of human vocalization weeping, screaming, laughing, swearing, singing and talking. The accuracy or completeness of such a classification is unimportant for our purpose. It may be left to anthropologists. But it suggests the wide extent and primitive character of vocalization as contrasted with mere articulate speech. Furthermore, when we reflect that these various forms of vocalization are not mere expressions of feeling, but life-serving forms of communication, we see that they may properly be included in the term language, and the problem of the origin of language takes on a different form and a much simpler one. Moreover, much of the wealth of this primitive, so-called emotional, language has come over into articulate language in the form of the most various modulation, intonation and accent, so that the *meaning* of an

articulate phrase or sentence may be tenfold more than the mere conceptual equivalents of the words.

The saner treatment of this problem from the standpoint of psychology is illustrated in Wundt's new work on *Völkerpsychologie*, the first volume of which, on language, has now appeared. According to Wundt, the order of language development is as follows: (1) expressive movements, (2) gestures, (3) natural sounds, (4) primary interjections, (5) secondary interjections, (6) vocatives, (7) imperatives, (8) onomatopoeic words.¹ The above considerations are of interest to us mainly in revealing the primitive character of the interjection and the ejaculatory expression of anger. They suggest an explanation of the facts cited above concerning the instinctive and reversionary peculiarities of profanity.

We now approach our last problem, and we find this easily solved from the standpoint which we have gained. What is the explanation of the peculiar words used in profanity? These we have seen to be in our era the names of deity, of holy things and places, religious terms of many kinds, and finally vulgar words. Recalling our classification of these terms, do they possess any quality in common which makes them serviceable as expressions of anger, *i. e.*, as means of offense? Yes, they possess that which all weapons possess, the power of producing a shock in the one against whom they are directed, that is, they are all 'shocking.' According to the law of selection which we are applying, the vocal accompaniments of anger will always be those sounds or words which are most terrifying. Before the advent of conceptual language we may expect phonation which is merely loud or which suggests natural enemies or destructive agencies, such as the roar of the storm, the crash of the lightning or the growl of the thunder. When articulate language appears, we shall have the *names* of these destructive agencies, together with the vocal stress and intonation of the original expressions. Hence 'thunder and

¹It should not be inferred that Wundt adopts the old interjectional or pooh-pooh theory of the origin of language, nor that that theory receives any especial support from this article. The question has become much broader. For Wundt's discussion of the general problem of the origin of language, and his 'developmental theory,' see *Völkerpsychologie*, Vol. I., Part II., Chapter IX.

lightning,' 'donnerwetter,' 'Gottes donner und blitz,' or 'potz tausend,' or 'tausend donnerwetter,' where the oath is made as awful as possible by the appeal to mighty numbers. If there is anything upon which the imagination has been accustomed to dwell with peculiar dread, or fear, or awe, its serviceableness in producing a shock is still greater. Hence the particular effectiveness of oaths relating to future punishment, such, for instance, as the English word 'damn,' or the expression 'hell and damnation.' Owing to physical disability, or to social or legal restraints, the angry man may not be able to inflict actual bodily harm upon his adversary, but he can with impunity and much satisfaction condemn him to eternal punishment and in doing so make his voice as awful as his vocal capacity will permit, and fortify his curses by invoking the terrible name of God or making rash use of phrases which are holy or sacred or usually forbidden. In some of the German accumulative oaths we have a mere promiscuous piling up of many of these 'strong' words, as for instance in this: *Alle Weltkreuzmohrentausendhimmelsternundgranatensakrament*. If this is 'wielded' with sufficient force, one can imagine the enemy to fall before it as before a double-edged sword.

We are thus able to understand why the forms of profanity vary with the age and people. When long monastic teaching has given an unspeakable sanctity to the cross and body of Christ, or to the holy sacrament, these words become the material for oaths. Even at the present time the word Jesus used profanely gives us a greater shock than the word God. A German peasant who left the train for a moment at a small station on his journey returned just in time to see the doors of the cars shut by the guards. As soon as he realized that he was left, he stopped with a look of helplessness, and then with great emphasis he pronounced the one word '*Sakrament*.' At other, time and among other peoples greater sacredness may attach to wholly different things, as, for instance, to the sword or javelin, or to the sun, or moon, or to the chief, king or prophet, and then these names furnish the profane vocabulary. The sacredness attaching to asseverative phrases and to legal oaths makes these again serviceable for profanity, and we hear them on every side

of us. Finally, there are certain words that are very vulgar, that polite usage forbids. These again are in a way sacred. Their open use indicates great daring or recklessness, or that the user is so beside himself with passion that he must be in a very dangerous mood. Hence these words produce the desired shock and become serviceable for profanity.

Summarizing the results of this study, profanity is only to be understood by the genetic method, the point of departure being the growl of anger in the lower animal, which is not an expression of emotion, but a serviceable form of reaction in cases of combat. It belongs therefore to a primitive form of vocalization, and hence is ancient and deep-seated, being one of several forms of speech preceding articulate language by an indefinite period of time. By a process of selection it chooses at all times those forms of phonation or those articulate words, which are best adapted to terrify or shock the opponent. The words actually used in profanity are found to have this common quality. Although originally useful in combat, the occasion of profanity at the present time may be any analogous situation in which our well-being is threatened, as in helpless distress or disappointment. There is always, however, some object, though it may even be one's self, against which the oath is directed.

Profanity is a primitive and instinctive form of reaction to a situation which threatens in some way the well-being of the individual, standing next to that of actual combat. Like all instinctive reaction it does not generate emotion but allays it. The emotion arises where the reaction is delayed or inhibited. We are thus able to account for the *katharsis* phenomena of profanity. It seems to serve as a vent for emotion and to relieve it. It really acts as a vent only in this sense that it brings to an end the intolerable period of inner conflict, of attempted inhibition, of repression and readjustment, and allows the 'habitual attitude' to assert itself. The relief is only that of any completed activity. The '*Sakrament*' which the peasant uttered completes in a certain sorry fashion the activity which should have been completed by his entering the carriage. The emotion, his disappointment and chagrin, are the accompani-

ments of other inner idiopathic changes, the result of inhibitory effort, and are decreased, not increased, by the oath.

If then the oath is a form of instinctive reaction, and even a purifying agent, why is it considered to have an immoral quality? For two reasons: first, because advancing civilization bids us evermore inhibit and repress, and secondly, because of the unfortunate but inevitable connection between profanity and the sacred names of religion.