

The Speech of Heroes

Almost everyone loves the idea of “speaking truth to power.” Standing tall, talking boldly, consequences be damned – how heroic!

Yet on reflection, this Speech of Heroes takes two radically different forms.

The most common Speech of Heroes, by far, *upholds* Social Desirability Bias. Example: “Everyone should be completely equal” sounds wonderful, but no actual society follows through. Many self-styled heroic orators respond along these lines:

Equality! We all say we believe in it. We know it's the right path. Yet we are a den of hypocrites! We pay lip service to the ideal of equality, but when inequality glares at us from every corner, we avert our eyes. Shame on us! Shame! I say unto you, we must practice what we preach. Let us live the equality we love. Put apathy aside, my brothers and sisters. Let us tear down all the inequalities we see. Then let us ferret out every lingering pocket of inequality. We must tear power from the grasp of all the corrupt leaders who casually say they oppose inequality but never do anything about it. Together we can, should, will, and must build a totally equal society!

This kind of heroic rhetoric is standard in religious societies. The sacred texts provide a strict blueprint for life, yet the government makes only a token effort to strictly implement the blueprint. In response, the heroic orator sticks out his neck, decries the hypocrisy of the Powers That Be, and demands strict adherence to the holy book. Which is music to the ears of every pious members of this society. See the Protestant Reformation or radical Islamism for nice examples.

Notice, however, that this heroic rhetoric also dominates socialist and nationalist oratory. Step 1: Loudly and clearly affirm a crowd-pleasing ideal. Step 2: Decry the obvious hypocrisy of the status quo. Step 3: Promise to strictly implement the crowd-pleasing ideal. You've got socialist slogans like, “Social ownership of the means of production,” “Complete equality,” or “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” You've got nationalist slogans like, “Death before dishonor,” “Germany for the Germans,” or “The safety and prosperity of *all* our people.” In each case, the speaker presents himself as a hero by puritanically appealing to popular sentiment.

Once in a long while, however, we encounter a radically different form of heroic oratory. Instead of upholding Social Desirability Bias, the hero *frontally attacks* it. As in:

Equality! You all pay lip service to it, but who really believes it? Why should people who produce and contribute the most receive the same treatment as people who do little or nothing? You love to denounce the hypocrites who say they believe in equality but fail to deliver it. But I say to you: Those hypocrites keep you alive! In a totally equal society, there's no incentive to do anything but kvetch. If you're tired of hypocrisy, remember that there are two ways to end it. You could strictly implement this monstrous ideal of equality. Or you could proclaim the truth: Equality is a monstrous ideal! Let's raise the banner of meritocracy, and thank our greatest producers instead of scapegoating them.

In a religious society, the analogue would naturally be rationalistic atheism: "Forget these pathetic 'holy' books, fantasies written long ago by ignorant fanatics." In a nationalist society, the analogue would be along the lines of, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," or even, "Our country is not the best in the world. It's not even average. It's below average – and things won't improve until we admit our failures and humbly emulate the winners."

Which form of oratory is more heroic? Once you take Social Desirability Bias seriously, the answer is clear. You can't "speak truth to power" *unless you speak the truth*. Implausible scenarios where Social Desirability Bias and the truth coincidentally converge, appealing to Social Desirability Bias is deeply unheroic. Even villainous.

And truth aside, challenging your society's fundamental values takes a lot more courage than merely decrying the violation of those values.

Yes, when you damn ruling elites for hypocrisy, those elites often retaliate. Rhetorically, however, you're still taking the path of low resistance. You start with simple-minded feel-good slogans with broad appeal. Then you point out corruption flagrant enough for anyone to see.

When you denounce your society's *fundamental* values, however, you outrage elites *and* masses alike. When you merely attack hypocrisy, elites have to worry about making a martyr out of you. When you spurn Social Desirability Bias, in contrast, elites win popular

support by teaching you the price of arrogance. Who but a hero would openly challenge such a powerful pair of enemies?

Do I hold myself out as a man who embodies the Speech of Heroes? Barely. While I routinely challenge Social Desirability Bias, my society remains highly tolerant. No one's going to jail me for my words. Indeed, since I have tenure, no one will even fire me for my words. If I lived in a normal repressive society, I would publicly say far less than I do. A gold-star hero would publicly express thoughts like mine... while living in Communist China or Saudi Arabia.

While I wouldn't advise you to try this, anyone who does so is my hero.