




Religion and the English Language

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Abstract

In an article he intended to be an update of George Orwell's *Politics and the English Language*, Arthur Schlesinger writes, "It takes a certain fortitude to pretend to amend Orwell on this subject" (Schlesinger, 1974: 553). Yes, amending Orwell on the subject of English usage takes fortitude, perhaps even hubris. So, it will not be attempted here. No, this essay is not an *update* of Orwell's essay; it is an *application* of it to the field of religion. The argument presented here is that religious writers often misuse the English language, resulting in a lack of clarity and beauty. Importantly, those who write about the source of all beauty should not do so in ugly prose. The subject of an article should affect the aesthetic nature of the prose. Ugly prose to describe God is a misuse of the English language. Misuse of the English language in religious thought is both a result of poor thinking and a cause of it. The remedy is to put Orwell's rules for writing into practice among religious writers and speakers. This article presents an argument that directly follows Orwell's observations and applies them to the field of religious studies.

Keywords: God, religious writing, Orwell, English, beauty.

Introduction

What I have most wanted to do is make theological writing into an art.

For those who are concerned about such matters, and there may be very few of them, writers and speakers abuse the English language with alarming regularity. Writers and speakers often relegate matters of grammar and style schoolmarm's who pester speakers and writers with wearisome commands, "Do not end your sentences with a preposition," or "Do not split your infinitives." Most pay attention to their advice only when required to do so, and they will mutter under their breath while doing it. Professional writing and speaking, along with colloquial writing and speech, are deteriorating in quality, power, beauty, and meaning (Schlessinger, 1974: 553). The corrosion of language may not seem surprising. After all, culture is decadent, and decadent cultures corrode everything they encounter (Orwell Foundation, 2011). Why should language be an exception? Why should someone prefer better language to worse, and who gets to decide what is a better and worse use of language? Is not the desire for better use of language simply preference or, at worst, cultural imperialism? Implicit in the logic these questions present is that language naturally evolves and devolves over time, and change should not worry the user. Language, however, is a tool humans use for communication. It does not simply evolve. People change it, and people are changing it for the worse (Orwell Foundation, 2011).

While religious communication is not the cause of the decline of language, it certainly takes part in the decline and contributes to it. Consider the case of words ending in -tion in the Christian



faith. The Church has picked a long train of -tion words to define many of its most important doctrines: sanctification, justification, election, regeneration, predestination, redemption, propitiation, adoption, revelation, and others. The ear can barely hear these terms before the mind pushes them into oblivion.

Unfortunately, the religious assault on the ear continues with words ending in -ology: Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, thanatology, Pneumatology, hamartiology, cosmology, theological anthropology, demonology, deontology, epistemology, angelology, ontology, Bibliology, Mariology, missiology, Paterology, soteriology, and teleology. Like hiding a Rembrandt in a trash bag, it is as if someone picked words most likely to create disinterest to describe Christianity's most precious beliefs. If an enemy of the Faith had attempted to make Christianity sound indecipherable and unapproachable, if he wanted to create such dissonant sounds that people would avoid reading or listening to the ideas, ideals, and doctrines of the faith, he likely would have had less success.

The decline of religious language is the effect, and the effect must have a cause. The cause is not just the influence of a particular religious writer, but religious communication in general. The effect, however, can reinforce the cause and produce the same effect in a more intense form. As Orwell writes, "A man may take to drink because he feels himself a failure, then fail all the more completely because he drinks" (Orwell Foundation, 2011). Language is misshapen because of poor thinking, but the misshapen language makes it easier to think badly. As postmodern philosophers argue, "Language conditions thought" (Roney, 2002: 14).

Modern religious language is full of bad habits that could be avoided if writers and editors would expend the effort to correct them. Unfortunately, these habits are so entrenched that the effort to eliminate them may be more significant than the effort needed for the writing process itself.

The following quotes demonstrate the abuse of English by religious writers. Some of these quotes come from academic journals, others are from books by influential thinkers. These passages are not the worst examples of bad writing, though. There are many worse examples of religious prose in print, difficult as that might be to believe. These passages only serve as examples of the malaise. They are sparkling jewels of literary barbarity.

1. The internal cause of such enculturation is our loss of identity through the abandonment of the faith tradition. Our consumer culture is organized against history. There is a depreciation of memory and a ridicule of hope, which means everything must be held in the now, either an urgent now or an eternal now. Either way, a community rooted in energizing memories and summoned by radical hopes is a curiosity and a threat in such a culture.... this is not a cry for traditionalism but rather a judgment that the church has no business more pressing than the reappropriation of its memory in its full power and authenticity.

It is the task of prophetic ministry to bring the claims of tradition and the situation of enculturation into an effective interface (Brueggemann and Hankins, 2018: 1-2).

2. Additionally, theological reflection on the Revolt has been a specialized denominational religious discourse, whereas the Revolt was a national public event for the common good. If this Revolt is to be understood to have played a significant role in transforming society, such as the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, and as a particular theo-praxiological event that articulates the essence—the desire and



values—of what it means to be a human being, then it must be considered as active resistance.

This understanding of the Revolt will provide insights that proactively, creatively, and intentionally address the endemic structural oppressive realities that define and determine particularly the life of the people in the Black Atlantic World and generally that of our contemporary society (Reid-Salmon, 2015: 98-99).

3. Science is a socially conditioned enterprise that strives for maximum rationality and objectivity in its explanation of the world. However, since the relativity of its social conditioning opposes its desire for objectivity, there is a philosophical tension at the very heart of science. Given this tension, why does science even work?

More precisely, why does science converge to the truth rather than diverging from it? To answer this question, my presentation below will unfold in four steps. First, I will introduce multiperspectivalism as an epistemological grammar to show that cognitive knowledge is simultaneously: (1) subjective, (2) objective, and (3) socially constructed.

Second and third, I will show that Barbour's critical realism and Bloor's social constructivism both embody multiperspectivalism as their common epistemological grammar (King, 2022: 504).

4. First, my working post-metaphysical/epistemological stance is articulated as a realistic operational constructivism and functionalism. Second, a series of arguments are advanced to substantiate the thesis: (1) God is an observing system *sui generis*; (2) self-referential communication is divine operation; (3) unsurpassable complexity is divine mystery; (4) supertemporal autopoiesis of meaning is divine processing; (5) *agapae* is the symbolic medium of divine communication... (Moon, 2010: 105).
5. Religion is an emergent complex; adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose, and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure (Taylor, 2007: 12).
6. The primitive mythological consciousness resists the attempt to interpret the myth of myth. It is afraid of every act of demythologization. It believes that the broken myth is deprived of its truth and convincing power. Those who live in an unbroken intellectual world feel safe and certain. They resist, often fanatically, any attempt to introduce an element of uncertainty to introduce an element of uncertainty by "breaking the myth," by making conscious its symbolic character (Tillich, 1957: 51-52).

Ugliness

If there is a common thread among these quotes, it is ugliness. However lofty the sentiments, imposing the logic, or deep the reflection the author is trying to communicate, the writing is as ugly as a squashed possum in the pale moonlight. Something is broken when religious communication becomes ugly. The Person religious writers are describing, God, is the Creator of all beauty. According to the great monotheistic traditions, God is the One in whom the good, the true, and the beautiful come together.



The Christian tradition, both in the East and the West, concludes that in God, all accidents are substances. Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck writes,

The fact of the matter is that Scripture, to denote the fullness of the life of God, uses not only adjectives but also substantives: it tells us not only that God is truthful, righteous, living, illuminating, loving, and wise, but also that He is the truth, righteousness, life, light, love, and wisdom... Hence, on account of its absolute perfection, every attribute of God is identical with His essence (Bavinck et al., 2003: 173).

Although he is a source of profound controversy because of his syncretic tendencies, Eastern Orthodox philosopher and theologian David Bentley Hart states the Eastern Orthodox position well. He writes,

Christian metaphysical tradition... asserts that God is not only good but goodness itself, not only true or beautiful but infinite truth and beauty: that all transcendental perfections are one in Him who is the source and end of all things, the infinite wellspring of all being. Thus, everything that comes from God must be good, and true, and beautiful (Hart, 2005: 54-55).

It would be improper, therefore, to argue that God is merely loving or wise. God is love, and God is wisdom. Applying the same logic, if God is beautiful, God must be beauty itself. Not only is God beauty itself, but God is the source of all beauty, the origin of every beautiful thing. If God is the origin of all beauty, if God exists in eternal, infinite beauty, it is nearly sacrilegious to describe God with ugly prose.

While only one of the above writers directly describes the person of God, the others do not have an excuse. If one is describing the implications of God's work, crying for the reformation of the Church, describing the liberation of the oppressed, studying the structures of society, or understanding religion, one is in direct contact with God's work. To use ugly prose to discuss God and the works of God is the literary equivalent of creating a model of Venice with Play-Doh, replicating Michelangelo's *David* with used chewing gum, or making a velvet Elvis version of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. Some things should not be done.

Lack of Imagery

Beyond ugliness, something else is striking in these quotes: the absence of imagery. These authors use abstract language, almost exclusively. Without concrete language, writing is unpleasant to read and hear. Worse, it becomes opaque. Images are important because they give the mind the ability to grasp complicated concepts. Public speakers use stories and images to convince and compel because they readily understand how effective they are. Jesus was a master at using images. Using farming, business, and family images, Jesus connected to His audience and explained the Kingdom of God. So powerful were His images, that they still shape thought in Western Civilization. In Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech, the images of children holding hands and singing *Free at Last* make the hearer's skin tingle. There will be no tingling skin, and no imagination captured by the prose above.

Pretentious Diction

Each of these quotes also contains examples of what Orwell calls "pretentious diction" (Orwell Foundation, 2011). The authors, while expressing interesting thoughts, drape their thoughts in



language designed to make one impressed with the author, not to express their thoughts clearly. They use phrases like “Schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting...” “... supertemporal autopoiesis...” “... multiperspectivalism as an epistemological grammar...” to give extra heft to their arguments. If polysyllabic words gave arguments intellectual heft, these arguments would have the mass of a neutron star.

Unfortunately, pretentious diction has the effect of causing disinterest in the reader. It may make the reader conclude the author is intelligent, but it will not make the reader pay attention to the author’s argument. Most readers, having an internal “voice” reading while reading silently, will “hear” these phrases and lose interest quickly. The effect is even worse when reading aloud. Instead of the pretentious diction giving support to their arguments, it creates boredom.

Another tactic authors frequently use to give heft to their arguments is the introduction of non-English terms. While Orwell argues against the use of non-English terms in *Politics in the English Language*, the collection of his essays, *All Art is Propaganda*, is brimming with foreign terms (Orwell, 2009: 110, 132, 159, 193, 216, and 221, for example). While Orwell may have used this unfortunate tactic, his advice in *Politics and the English Language* is still correct.

Authors should not use foreign phrases unless absolutely necessary. While religious authors are not the only ones to use this dubious tactic, they use them with depressing regularity, however. Religious authors often use Latin, Greek, French, or German terms such as *Apologia*, *aufhebung*, *eschaton*, *analogia*, *testimonium*, *actus purus*, *sensus divinitatis*, *summum bonum*, *lex*, *simul justus et peccator*, *solo*, *imago dei*, *anamnesis*, *apophasis*, *extra calvinisticum*, *sola fides*, *analogia entis*, *lex naturalis*, *actus purus*, *deus absconditus*, *sensus divinitas*, *theologia*, *théologie totale*, *parousia*, *nihil*, *zeitgeist*, *verbum*, *vox*, and similar terms to add the flair of sophistication to ordinary arguments. Why say, “The Image of God was defaced in the fall,” when saying “The *Imago Dei* was defaced in the fall” sounds so much more erudite? In theology, biblical studies, and religious studies, non-English terms may be required on occasion, but unnecessary use reduces clarity. Writers in the field of religious studies, therefore, should use non-English terms sparingly.

Modern English and St. Paul

Now that some of the abuses of the English language have been described, consider again the kind of writing they produce. Here is a translation of 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a in good English:

If I speak human or angelic languages
but do not have love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries
and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains
but do not have love, I am nothing.

And if I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body in order to boast
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not conceited,
does not act improperly, is not selfish, is not provoked, and does not keep a record of
wrongs.



Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends (HCSB).

Here is St. Paul's beloved description of love in modern religious writing:

If I enunciate my oral communication with the grammar and syntax of the totality of humankind and of the cherubim of the heavenly sphere and possess not love, I have become a sounding *glockenspiel* or a clanging percussion instrument.

If I have the supernatural *charis* of forth-telling, and have the ability to fathom all mysterious phenomena regarding the divine-human interface and all data concerning the spiritual consciousness, and have the *pistis* to remove mountainous occlusions but do not possess love, I have become the *nil*.

If I donate all of the materials over which I have a considerable bit of physical control to the dispossessed and marginalized, and give my body over to sub-optimal exigent situations so that I may gasconade and do not have a heart posture directed toward the other, I am nothing.

Love is unruffled and possesses friendly, generous, and considerate characteristics. It does not have an irrational desire for the possessions of others; it does not have an over-weening sense of its own abilities, especially in regard to a negative comparison toward other persons, nor does it express such sensibilities in conversation with other persons in familial or cultural contexts.

Love does not increase the shame felt by other persons, thereby increasing others' need for psycho-emotional intervention. Love does not participate in the grammar of selfishness by seeking its own way, it manages the temperamental aspects of its personality and has no ledger for the wrongness it experiences at the hands of others.

Love does not express undue happiness at the nothingness participative behavior of others, but rejoices at behavior that is in correspondence with reality.

It never ceases its protective actions, never stops holding to a belief in the ultimate reliability of persons in its orb of influence, never stops holding to a positive desire and expectation for the right occurrence, never stops in attitudinal persistence toward the end pointed to it by the Divine-human encounter.

While a parody, this reconstruction of 1 Corinthians 13 is not unthinkable. It is consistent with the modern lack of concrete wording and is consistent with the modern lack of clarity. There are no vivid images at all. Abstract, cumbersome wording has robbed what images there are of their power.

Words With No Meaning

At its worst, modern religious communication does not choose words for the sake of meaning and invent images to make their meaning clearer. Religious authors often string together prefabricated phrases and euphemisms to give the appearance of meaning when little is actually being said. This problem is much more common in congregations and popular religious texts than in



academic writing. Consider the following travesties of the English languages spoken frequently in evangelical circles: traveling mercies, a hedge of protection, lean in to, blessed, love on, heart for, let go and let God, do life together, leave it with the Lord, faith journey, prayer warriors, season of life, instruments of God, and plant seeds that will grow at the right season. Unlike the failures related to pretentious diction, these phrases are not thoughts dressed up in unnecessarily complicated words. Authors and speakers use these phrases *in place* of thought. When they are uttered or written, the listener can safely infer the writer or speaker is searching for a thought, perhaps vainly.

Consider this phrase, "I'm passionate about seeing individuals encounter God in a real way and seek to blow the lid off common misconceptions, personal limitations, and powerless living" (Cunnington, 2015: 5). The phrase "blow the lid off" is a phrase with a vague meaning, or perhaps it has no meaning at all. Could it mean "forcefully remove the chief obstacle" or "remove obstacles to success"? Perhaps it does, but it does not add to the clarity of the statement. It adds an emotive sense of strength, but not a clear meaning. Why use "individuals" instead of "people?" How does an individual encounter God in a real way, or perhaps better, how does one encounter God in a less-than-real way? Is there a fictional way to encounter God? If so, would that be a meeting with someone else? Would it be a delusion? Perhaps these phrases once had meaning, but now they are dead metaphors (Orwell Foundation, 2011) expressing vague sentiments and not concrete ideas.

Words Used to Obscure Meaning: Euphemisms

Orwell argued political speech and writing are frequently the defense of the indefensible, and the same can be said of religious language (Orwell Foundation 2011). For example, religious speakers and writers will use phrases like "moral failing" to cover a host of sins. How many pastors have been fired for a "moral failing?" Unfortunately, that number is legion. The trouble is when a writer uses the phrase "moral failing" it could mean a variety of sins. A moral failing could be an affair with a church member, an illicit meeting with a member of the church staff, or viewing pornographic material on the office computer. It could mean flirtatious conversations with another person, or it could mean having a series of sexual encounters with teenagers in the church. The phrase could mean something like sexual abuse, or it could mean something like a one-night stand with a stranger while on a layover. Almost always in religious jargon, however, "moral failing" refers to a bad decision of a sexual nature, sexual sin. The term is simply a euphuism the author uses to avoid saying what happened. It is odd to note that "moral failing" seldom has to do with abusive language, condescending arrogance in Twitter posts, laziness, or drug use. If there are examples of "moral failing" referring to greed, pride, gluttony, gossip, suing fellow believers, innuendo, stubbornness, or callous behavior, there are so few of them they are not worth noting. "Moral failure" is almost always about sex, but there are more ways to fail morally than sex.

"Substance abuse" functions in much the same way as "moral failing." "Substance abuse" refers to addictive behaviors, and authors use this euphuism when they want to hide the substance being abused. When a writer uses "substance abuse," the substance could be anything from alcohol to acid. All the writer is communicating is that some addiction is devouring the person. Seldom do we hear of pastors or theologians who have a cocaine addiction or a marijuana addiction. No, they have a "substance abuse problem" (Bristow, 2022) The difference between the usage of "substance abuse" and "moral failing" is that "substance abuse" is designed to *prevent* moral judgment from being used against the addicted, while "moral failure" is an *invitation* to judgment (Ssemakula, 2021). Addicts, by definition, cannot control their use of a substance, and judging one who has no control is unseemly. The one who "failed morally" was in control.



Judging them makes one feel superior. Would it not be best to clarify both the moral failing and the addiction? Would it not be best to refrain from judgment in both cases?

Among the most destructive religious euphuisms is "restored to ministry." In evangelical circles, most churches are independent operators. They hire and discipline their clergy according to their standards without regard for what those outside the congregation might think. Ministers can be "restored" with little oversight and a mere promise to change. An infamous case of "restoration" is that of Johnny Hunt, former President of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In 2010, Hunt and his wife were on vacation in Panama Beach with another clergy couple. According to Hunt, the unnamed wife invited him into her condo. There he kissed and fondled her awkwardly (Daily Mail, 2023), at least that is how he tells the story now. At first, he denied the encounter ever happened. Then he had to admit there was an encounter after additional evidence emerged. As was reported in the SBC's report on sexual abuse, the woman said the incident was not consensual. Further, her description sounds like a prelude to rape, including the forcible removal of clothes and pinning her down (Wingfield, 2022). In response to the allegations becoming public, Hunt stopped preaching for about 6 months. He, however, assembled a group of four pastors who "counseled" him until he was ready to return to preach again. In December of 2022, his hand-selected group of pastors declared him to be "restored." "Restored to ministry" simply meant a group of people, a group selected by Hunt himself, decided Hunt was transformed. In their judgment, he was unlikely to repeat his reprehensible actions. Hunt's counselors used the phrase "restored to ministry" to hide what should be obvious: the process they were involved in could not lead to Hunt's transformation. "Restored to ministry" was a cover for a process that does not and cannot address the underlying problem (Wingfield, 2022).

Often "restored to ministry" gives those who have committed abusive behaviors cover to repeat their actions. The "restored" go back to their congregations or callings, and have access to people in the same way they did before. In short, "restored to ministry" can be a way of saying that someone is now acceptable to minister again even in cases where he or she should *never minister again*.

Religious euphuisms often give dignity to events and processes that deserve no dignity. They tend to protect the reputations of those who have committed injustices, they often minimize egregious behavior. In short, they are a defense of the indefensible; they exist "to make lies true" (Orwell Foundation, 2011). They also exist so the author does not have to say what has happened. They exist to sanitize speech through "semantic bleaching" (Irvine, 2011: 20), and make it easy to hide ideas. It is quite easy to use a euphemism to avoid communicating facts. It takes courage to tell the truth.

In Defense of Complicated Writing

After winning the dubious "Bad Writing Award," Judith Butler, Professor of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley, argued that difficult language has an important role to play in postmodern thought (Butler, 2023). Postmodern writing is often difficult and obscure, and postmodern philosophers often use neologisms and difficult syntax. If postmodern writing were food, it would have the texture of peanut brittle mixed with dirt. The difficulty of the prose is part of the point for Butler. Difficult *ideas* require difficult *writing* (Roney, 2002 p. 14).

With a bit of condescension, Butler argues it is the authors producing introductory volumes who rely on simple speech. Sophisticated audiences appreciate the challenge of difficult wording



(Butler, 2023). In fact, the difficulty of the writing, challenges the reader to think more clearly and deeply about the world. Difficult wording encourages more radical thinking (Butler, 2023). Difficult writing is not a problem to be solved. It is a gift to be celebrated.

Interestingly, in postmodern thought, it is not difficult speech that hides an agenda, but plain speech (Roney, 2002: 14). Plain speech is tied to the cultural norms that produce and reinforce it. Using written language in the way the culture uses language prevents critique. The fastest way to insulate the culture from change, then, is to communicate in the same way it does.

It is difficult to say Butler's argument is convincing. As Shakespeare would say, "Brevity is the soul of wit." Of course, one does not have to go back to the great bard to see the point.

Famed biologist Richard Dawkins has lampooned postmodern writing in his review of Roger Scruton's *Intellectual Impostures*.

Suppose you are an intellectual imposter with nothing to say but with strong ambitions to succeed in academic life... What kind of literary style would you cultivate? Not a lucid one, surely, for clarity would expose your lack of content (Dawkins, 1988: 141).

For Dawkins, it is impossible to know if the postmodernists' writing is genuinely profound or the work of frauds (Dawkins, 1988: 142). In fact, he points to a website called the *Postmodern Generator* that can "randomly generate, syntactically correct nonsense, distinguishable from the real thing only in being more fun to read" (Dawkins, 1988: 143). Obtuse prose is not, for Dawkins, evidence of brilliance. It is not even obscuring good thoughts with bad writing. It is proof of intellectual vacuity.

Further undermining Butler's case is the observation that some of the most powerful and effective critiques of social injustices have come from clear, direct communication. Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* is fascinating because it functions exactly the opposite of Butler's logic. In it, King does not simply use common and clear language, he appeals to the documents and wisdom of the culture to show the practice of segregation was against the culture's most cherished values. The language and the documents of the culture did not protect it; they indicted it. Similarly, Frederick Douglass' *The Hypocrisy of American Slavery* appeals to the *Declaration of Independence* to point out the hypocrisy of slavery. The argument is straightforward: one cannot believe all are created equal and enslave some. Both speeches argued for social change and served as a critique of the nation. Within them, however, is no pretense, no neologisms, no indecipherable syntax, no ambiguous statements. What they have, though, is rhetorical power. Clarity and beauty convince and compel. Polysyllabic obscurity does not.

Beauty, Clarity, and Orwell

If writing is the art of communication, then writing well is to communicate well. Good writing, clarity, and beauty not only provide the best hope for the reader to understand, but they also are the most effective way to convince a reader, Butler's views notwithstanding.

While complex ideas do not require complex writing, religious writers should conclude that beautiful ideas need beautiful expression. Writing about God and the works of God should bring out the highest efforts to achieve beauty and clarity.



Unfortunately, religious writing and speech are often corrupted by the use of extra syllables, euphemisms, jargon, and pretentious diction. These abuses of the English language make the product less engaging, clear, and credible. If the authors who use these bad habits are trying to be persuasive, their tactics will not work. Orwell's advice, however, will:

- 1: Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figures of speech commonly seen in print.
- 2: Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3: If it is possible to delete a word, delete it.
- 4: Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 5: Break any of these rules rather than saying something barbarous (Orwell Foundation, 2011).

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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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