

From the Editors

What's in a Name?

In act II, scene 2, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare gives Juliet the famous line “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” She is arguing that, rather than it being a thing’s name that counts, it’s really what it “is” that matters. But is Juliet correct when it comes to titles of journal articles?

Although there are bioethics papers with boring titles that have earned stellar reputations and are widely quoted and reproduced (no names please); how many papers can we point to that had great titles but, upon the reading, turned out to be a boring disappointment?

Robert Sparrow, known for sparkling titles that illuminate the content of his papers, observes that

it’s easier to come up with a boring title than an amusing or striking one and it’s easier to write a bad paper rather than a good one. Of course, good titles and good papers don’t go together of necessity. But within limits, the fact that someone has tried hard to come up with a good title might be taken as a sign that they have put the same amount of effort into the content of the paper. It is even possible that the discipline involved in writing the paper with a good title is itself productive, in the same way that confining oneself to the form of a sonnet rather than writing blank verse can be productive of better poetry: with fewer words to choose from and with the more difficult structure to realize, one pays more attention and makes better choices.”¹

As testament to the power of titles, it comes as no surprise that the articles most accessed on CQ’s webpage on the Cambridge University Press website, <https://journals.cambridge.org>, are often those with intriguing titles.

When title master Leonard Fleck was asked about the inspiration for his popular and quirky “Whoopie Pies, Super-Sized Fries: ‘Just’ Snacks? ‘Just’ Des(s)erts?” (CQ 21(1), January 2012), he said, “The title came about because I was doing this essay on personal responsibility for health and, by chance, I stumbled on this story about these two state legislatures arguing with one another about who originated the Whoopie pie.” For Fleck, a clever title is “informative, not boringly descriptive, will draw the reader to the article, and at least get them to read the abstract or first couple paragraphs.” From there, he says, “I want to write those paragraphs in an engaging and provocative enough way that the reader will want to read the rest of the essay.”²

Readers respond to titles by saying, “A paper with an enticing title is like a wrapped gift that hints of a surprise inside. I don’t feel the same about something

handed to me in a paper bag.” (Michel Roth, personal communication) Also, “a good title promises a good read. I’m less likely to put it aside to read later.”³

Advice for authors in search of a title: think of it as a marketing tool for your paper. A good paper title should perform the same job as a good book jacket. It should be spirited and have immediate impact. It should say, “Look at me.” As Sparrow points out, “There is so much published nowadays that, if you can catch a reader’s eye so that they are more likely to read your paper, that’s not insignificant.”⁴

The lure of good titles is not confined to journal articles. At the Canadian Philosophical Association, there has been talk of awarding a prize for the best presentation title. Should there be an Oscar equivalent for outstanding achievement in the category of titles for bioethics papers?

If so, here are some examples that would surely be strong contenders:

Death Is Not What It Used to Be

James N. Kirkpatrick, Kara D. Beasley, and Arthur Caplan

(CQ 19(1), January 2010)

Does Public Health Have a Personality (and If So, Does It Matter If You Don’t Like It)?

John Coggon

(CQ 19(2), April 2010)

The Double Effect Effect

Charles Foster, Jonathan Herring, Karen Melham, and Tony Hope

(CQ 20(1), January 2011)

Does a Fish Need a Bicycle? Animals and Evolution in the Age of Biotechnology

Sarah Chan and John Harris

(CQ 20(3), July 2011)

Could anyone resist the temptation to open these beautifully wrapped packages?

Notes

1. Robert Sparrow, personal communication.
2. Leonard Fleck, personal communication
3. Carol Coe, personal communication
4. Robert Sparrow, personal communication.