

Free Speech Psychodrama

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Abstract. Free speech creates an emotional predicament, in a way that Liberals have tended to downplay, and which has become hard to identify and describe. The gist of the predicament is that it can be upsetting – deeply and complicatedly upsetting – to encounter people expressing contempt for your beliefs or values. In societies that protect freedom of speech and conscience, there is, for most of us, no way to totally avoid these encounters without reclusion, and no way to avoid their emotional impact without engaging in forms of irony or suppression that aren't necessarily better than the problem they're reacting to. Instead of rejecting the Liberal rights that give rise to the predicament, I sketch another solution to it, namely, reforming *de facto* customs that promote discursive combat. Liberals are wrong to see these customs as an indispensable and beneficial corollary to Liberal rights.

I. Voltairean Machismo

I want to discuss a phrase. “I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” This line is usually attributed to Voltaire, but it isn't in his corpus, and he didn't use it that we know of. It comes from a 20th century biographer, who wanted a slogan to convey the spirit of Voltaire's liberal outlook.

The job of this saying, nowadays, is to be recited by people trying to remind us of Liberalism's enduring wisdom and appeal. These folks are right to think that their worldview needs PR support. Western society's faith in Liberalism is failing, especially among younger people. It's banal to say so, but basically true. I share some common ground, politically, with the people hoping to reverse this trend. But I often find the rhetorical tactics they use for this to be seriously misguided. For outreach purposes, dusty old sayings are futile at best. Typically (rightly or wrongly), the people who are recanting Liberalism, or who never bought it in the first place, consider the sage truisms of yesteryear to be part of what got us into

this mess – whether that’s the climate crisis, or the resurgence of reactionary nationalism, or the decline in many people’s living standards. To lecture that audience *using* the sage truisms of yesteryear, is a bit like saying: “remember that, in lieu of accountability or a positive vision, Liberalism merely offers pious quotations.”

Still, this complaint – that Liberal advocacy misreads the room – applies widely. The Voltaire-quoters are getting it wrong in weirder, more specific, ways.

First, their slogan is so hollowly bombastic. You could contrast it with familiar claims about truth winning out in the marketplace of ideas. Even if you find those claims to be spurious, or silly, at least the person making them, as a Liberal PR campaigner, is saying a thing they believe. The one who says “I disagree with what you say but I’ll defend to the death *et cetera*,” simply doesn’t mean what he says. There may be exceptions – a few Voltaire-quoters who would lay their lives down at this altar, like the staff of certain French newspapers. Whatever we think of them overall, we can grant that these people have a spine. But they aren’t typical. Typically, a declared willingness to risk one’s life for free speech is just big talk. Many regimes in our world engage in repressive censorship. The Voltaire-quoters aren’t putting their necks on the line to fight this, because of course they aren’t. You have to be uncommonly brave, and perhaps a bit rash, to risk everything in defence of your own ethical creed. To risk it all in defence of other people’s creeds – creeds that you expressly disagree with – requires a moral personality that’s almost unheard of in our culture. If it’s going to be found anywhere, it won’t be among nostalgic moderates lobbying for a return to Liberalism’s heyday.

Moreover, on top of the hollowness – or delving further into it – notice the stagey role-play that goes along with this saying. The Voltaire-quoter’s purpose is to convey a moral opinion. His thesis is that we should defend other people’s right to say stuff we disagree with. But he isn’t stating that thesis. Instead, he’s rehearsing a remark which, if it were aimed at an imaginary substitute for his actual audience, would be acting out what his thesis enjoins. In other words: the *you*, in “I disagree with what you say...”, isn’t the real-life reader or listener to whom these words are immediately directed, but rather, an off-stage character, who is assumed to be saying disagreeable stuff. The remark isn’t delivered to this off-stage person, because they’re just a prop in the pantomime. The Voltaire-quoter is inviting us to project ourselves, as their sidekick, into a fantasy where we nobly declare that we will die to protect an anonymous person’s rights. But the moment of ethical wish-fulfilment never arrives. The point of the phrase is to conjure the fantasy, not to follow through with the gallant gesture of solidarity about which we are fantasizing.

Well, so what? Why does it matter if the commonplace usage of this phrase – let’s call it Voltairean Machismo – is phony and performative? It matters because it’s a conspicuous and revealing manifestation of a problem which is hiding in plain sight – a problem with Liberal society and its prevalent cultural imaginaries.

If my story is right, the natural follow-up question is: why? Why do people want to act out this ethical pantomime? Why has a glib misquotation felt so temptingly sayable, for so many people, to the point of it becoming a cliché? What's going on, I think, is that taking free speech seriously places people in an emotionally shaky position. To sincerely believe that others have a right go around saying things you find contemptible, is to dwell in a more distressing and uncomfortable headspace than free speech advocates like to admit. Voltairean Machismo is a way of sublimating that emotion. It takes an ethical commitment that is, at its heart, pragmatic and conciliatory, but then, because that commitment induces feelings of vulnerability, it twists it into a posture which feels tougher and more self-assured.

The Liberal culture warrior knows that free speech comes at the cost of hurt feelings. But he believes the price is worth paying. I say he is in no position to judge, because he is motivatedly ignorant about what that price comes to. Granted, there have been decades worth of work in free speech theory, and in social theory more broadly, highlighting the fact that oppressed people have a different experience of verbal conflict – that this is a part of the social dynamics through which they are victimized and subordinated. I'm not resisting that critical insight, or seeking to claim it as my own. What I am saying is that the reality of living under free speech is emotionally arduous, even in all the cases in which speech isn't playing a constitutive role in the harms of social injustice. Even when all that is at stake, by one's own lights, is the question of how one is left feeling, the answer to that question is a bigger problem than free speech theory recognizes. The fact that lots of people go about, a lot of the time, feeling wretched, and stoically interpreting that as a psychic tax that must be paid to support free speech, is a genuine predicament. This isn't a flourishing form of life, and it should at least be seen for what it is.

2. The Emotional Predicament

In what follows I'll try to work back around to a slightly more charitable interpretation of Voltairean Machismo, by exploring the predicament that leads to it, for certain people. I don't think this attitudinal posture is a politically, emotionally, or spiritually healthy response to our predicament. But I do think the predicament is a real one, and I don't see that good solutions to it are easy or obvious.

To set the stage for this, I'll table two framing assumptions.

I'm saying that an emotional predicament arises if we take free speech seriously. But you may think the predicament I'm examining isn't a result of free speech in particular. You may think it comes from something larger, like pluralism, or multiculturalism, or at the most zoomed-out descriptive level, the bare fact of human difference. Hearing speech that you find contemptible is indeed distressing. But the distress of difference isn't far from the surface in any form of human society,

and it's especially near the surface in a Liberal society, where diversity in our life-style customs is protected by right. The turbulent feelings that come along with free speech are, then, merely symptomatic of the turbulence that comes with realizing that other people value different things, that they don't necessarily like or respect your values, and that there isn't a whole lot you can do about that.

Now, I want to say that this isn't the right diagnosis of our predicament. It's true that mere difference can be a source of distress, and that there is some conformist pressure, in most cultures, which partly owes to a felt need to alleviate this distress. But nevertheless, communities can sometimes foster a pluralistic ethos, in which mutual tolerance is embraced not only as a pragmatic necessity, but also as a personal ideal, through which individuals can enjoy equanimity in the face of difference. Part of what makes this achievable are norms of active forbearance. It's easier to not get wound up about other people's dubious worldviews if we can ignore them and get on with our own lives. We can cultivate a spirit of tolerance and personal equanimity if we avoid rubbing our disputes in each other's noses.

What makes free speech a recipe for turmoil, then, is that it protects, if not positively vaunting or encouraging, the projection of our disputes into public space, so that we have to routinely confront other people's disdain for our beliefs and values. To put it another way, free speech is a greater source of emotional turbulence than freedom of belief or lifestyle *per se*, because speech is the most imaginatively powerful means we have for exhibiting our worldviews to each other.

In principle, we could have a form of Liberalism in which we respect each other's freedom of belief, lifestyle, and association, while also have norms of restraint in how we publicize our minds via speech. This isn't the model we adopted in post-war Liberal societies, although it has been trialled in many subcultural enclaves. Our model in post-war Liberal society is one which, instead, welcomes discursive conflict, and sees this not as a threat to pluralism, but instead, as an essential part of pluralism, and an expression of what makes it appealing and good. This model tells us that we cannot have freedom, in its most gleaming form, without according special and more robust protections to speech specifically. Whether or not this is a viable way to cash out a political morality based on the ideal of freedom, my claim for now is that the bad feelings that haunt our way of life aren't a result of a pluralism *per se*, but of living under a model of Liberalism that amplifies the challenges of pluralism, by positioning free speech at the centre of social policy.

My second key assumption is that there is enough ideological diversity, in most real-world Liberal societies, that you will, if you are living under free speech, regularly encounter people disdaining your values, unless you become reclusive. It's possible for smaller homogenous societies to emerge under Liberalism's pluralistic parameters. But this isn't how things usually go. Usually, to use one of Rawls's terms, we live under the fact of Reasonable Pluralism. As Rawls says, and as most Liberals agree, the fact that there are many worldviews which reasonable people could hold, means that if we let reasonable people adhere to the

worldviews that seem best to them, we end up with pervasive ideological disagreements.

But still, why shouldn't the pervasive disagreements remain mild? We could accept that ideological diversity is the likely eventuality in most Liberal societies, while denying that this inevitably leads to disdainful encounters. Why should a commitment to free speech force us to brace ourselves for hearing things that we find downright contemptible, as opposed to just misguided or mistaken?

My answer to this – which I will only assert, rather than defend – is that people are too emotionally messy for that. We find it hard to accept that others have merely grabbed the wrong end of the stick. We find it tempting to impute stupidity or depravity to those we disagree with. And when those people succumb to their corresponding temptation, and impute stupidity or depravity to us, we find it easy to escalate the drama by reacting with high indignation. Some people are susceptible to these tendencies a lot of the time, and most of us are susceptible to them some of the time. Because of this, any social format that makes us regularly confront disagreeing views, will also lead to us regularly confronting disdainful expressions of disagreement. If you have a less pessimistic view than me about these features of human nature, you won't feel the force of the predicament I am positing. Or, if you think these tendencies are a real but historically-contingent part of human life, you can think of the predicament I'm positing as one which belongs to the contingently emotionally messy form of society that we currently inhabit.

So, with these assumptions on the table, let me restate the predicament – which, I am arguing, nudges some people towards Voltairean Machismo. A commitment to free speech leads to us feeling distressed and unsettled, and these feelings in turn make it harder for us to lead good lives. If these feelings are not always apparent, that's because they are the imperceptible background hum of our lives.

Now, I anticipate a quickfire reply, which is: “wait, that's all?! Isn't it sheer hyperbole to portray everyday emotional hiccups as a distinct and theoretically significant predicament? Of course it's no fun being around people who say things we find contemptible. But life isn't a picnic. We deal with this the same way we deal with other unenjoyable experiences. We try our best to avoid the interactions that trigger the negative feelings. Or we use our capacity for irony to remove the sting from these situations. Or we work to channel the negativity of these experiences into something positive. Or we just busy ourselves and endure it.”

I think there is something worth taking seriously in all four of these suggestions. But I don't think they are enough, individually or together, to dissolve the predicament. These are strategies for navigating the predicament, rather than solutions that relieve us of the predicament outright. I'm going to talk through the strategies one at a time, and in discussing their limitations, further explain why there's a problem in Liberalism's unwillingness to recognize the extent of this quandary.

We are terrifically emotional creatures, and nothing good comes of pretending otherwise. Voltairean Machismo is a symptom of a political milieu which is loath to acknowledge the affective mayhem that its vision of justice engenders.

3. Strategies of Avoidance and Denial

3.1 *Pure Avoidance*

Two of the strategies that I will discuss deny that there's anything to regret about encounters with contemptible speech. But for now let's assume the contrary, for the sake of argument. The first strategy that I mentioned is the one that says: never mind, just arrange your life in a way that avoids these distressing encounters.

I have three worries about this strategy of Pure Avoidance. First, this way of negotiating the predicament is only open to a subset of the population. Naturally this depends on contingent facts about how the logistics and life and work are configured in particular times and places. But for most of us in real-world Liberal societies, ordinary life puts us in regular contact with people whose worldviews differ from our own, and thus makes us liable to encounter contemptible speech.

The second problem is that even if Pure Avoidance happens to be practically feasible for you, it has collateral costs. At minimum it's inconvenient. It means giving up on a range of social activities. And over time it predictably leads towards reclusion. When you pull back from public life you may have like-minded friends with whom you can create an insular social coterie. But relationships drift, and a withdrawal from uncurated social intercourse impairs your ability to make new connections. This point relates to a grain of truth in Mill's overall-dubious ideas about the link between social friction of individual vitality. We are social creatures, and the novelty of meeting new people invigorates us. Mill is wrong to believe that the benefits of good social friction so decisively outweigh the costs of bad friction. But he's right that for beings like us, a life of social homogeneity is ultimately deadening. The strategy of Pure Avoidance dallies with that danger. Granted, if the emotional strain of offensive encounters is a weighty burden, as I am claiming, reclusion might sometimes be the lesser of two evils. But it would still be an evil.

Here is the third problem. Even when Pure Avoidance is feasible, and a lesser evil than the problem it's supposed to remedy, it seems to involve a dereliction of civic duty. Plausibly, we shouldn't actively avoid interacting with our neighbors. This is a complex issue, admittedly, which can't be handled properly in a few minutes. And our intuitions may pull us in different directions on it. An antisocial person is free to become a hermit, isn't she? And aren't people allowed to form separatist, values-based communities? On the other hand, we surely can't be indifferent to

cases in which large numbers of people blankly refuse to interact with minoritized others. Whatever associative liberties we rightfully possess, they don't permit us to totally ostracize people. Suffice it to say, then, there is an ethical question mark around Pure Avoidance. Plausibly, being a member of society involves some obligation to recognize the existence of – and thus, to not deliberately eschew all interaction with – others in your group, including others with whom you have no common ground. We have a conditional duty to sometimes interact with at least some of the co-citizens we disagree with. This duty would seemingly be flouted by a Purely Avoidant response to the emotional predicament of free speech.

3.2 Ironic Avoidance

In light of all this, suppose you accept that you cannot arrange your life in a way that avoids offensive encounters altogether. And suppose we're still provisionally granting that such encounters are indeed significantly distressing. Instead of Pure Avoidance, you could adopt a strategy of Ironic Avoidance. When you encounter people saying things which you vehemently disagree with, refuse to take these people, or the bad things that they say, seriously. Let these encounters register in your mind as an instance of the wacky or the preposterous. This isn't a way of materially evading the emotionally distressing encounters, but rather, a way of psychically evading the emotional toll that they otherwise exact.

I'm ambivalent about this strategy, for two reasons.

First, if we consider people working in emergency services, or the survivors of severe trauma, irony looks like a useful tool for managing overwhelming distress. It seems unduly earnest, to the point of being callous, to adopt any general opposition to this coping strategy. Irony will sometimes be a survival tactic for people who have to shoulder more than their fair share of life's psychic burden.

Second, I think there is something attractive in the kind of ironic self-understanding that Richard Rorty prescribes as a basis for personal conviction in multicultural society. Experiences of difference force us, if we are honest, to recognize the radical contingency of our commitments. But abjuring those commitments, in the wake of this, leaves us in the type of rootless condition that Communitarians foresee as Liberalism's bleak end-state – a state in which our autonomy diminishes in value, because we lack the conviction to turn it towards projects that we deeply identify with. Rorty thinks we can slip out of this bind, by holding our commitments ironically: recognizing their contingency, but embracing them with undiluted gusto in light of that. Maybe, if it is carried out with finesse, an ironic way of interpreting our own values, and other people's values in turn, can help us strike a balance, in being ardent creatures of conviction, who at the same time realize the arbitrariness of their convictions, and the flukiness of the settlements

they happen to occupy, on the wider map of ideological locations available to them.

If nothing else, this strategy again seems like it could be the lesser of two evils. If the emotional toll of offensive encounters is a heavy burden, as I am claiming, it may be that Ironic Avoidance is the less bad option for some people.

But I don't think Ironic Avoidance can therefore be seen as dissolving our predicament, once we take stock of its downsides. First and foremost, ironic ways of interpreting people's attitudes require you to engage in conscious pretense. You know that you aren't actually amused by this person's risible attitudes. You know that choosing to see them in an ironic light is a coping strategy that you're adopting, because you would find it too stressful to stomach the angst that you'd be feeling if you took their attitudes seriously. This knowledge of your own ironic pretense will either be cognizable to you, upon reflection, or it won't be. Neither condition seems great. If the knowledge of your pretense, in response to some offensive encounter, is cognizable to you, then you get to carry around an immanent awareness that you aren't being honest with yourself, because you find it too hard to do so. Alternatively, if the knowledge of this pretense isn't cognizable to you, then this offensive encounter has turned you into a stranger to yourself.

Champions of irony, including Rorty, try to soften the blow of their proposals by claiming that pretense is inevitable in any case. Ironic Avoidance may make you a stranger to yourself. But if you're always already self-estranged, then that's business as usual. This rejoinder gets a veneer of plausibility from psychoanalytic insights about the normality of subconscious opacity. But the veneer soon rubs off, because if you're serious about a psychoanalytic perspective, then you should see self-estrangement as a state that's amenable to effortful change. We are never totally self-transparent. But we can be more or less so, and to resign ourselves to self-estrangement is to renege on the ideals of inquiry and understanding that animate the psychoanalytic enterprise. As with the emergency services worker, who cracks a few dark jokes after a brush with tragedy, the pretenses of Ironic Avoidance have a place as a short-term tactic for coping with trying moments. But with our emotional predicament, facing up to the bad feelings is a part of being honest about how your social reality affects you. When irony becomes a longer-term strategy for managing distress, you eventually risk greater psychic injury to yourself, than whatever peril was involved in confronting that which had to be coped with.

3.3 Positive Denial

In that case, enough with these strategies of avoidance! Let's tackle the negative feelings head-on. The third strategic response to the emotional predicament of free speech is to find a way to channel the bad feelings that come with offensive encounters into something positive. Let's call this option Positive Denial.

I want to start with a straightforward concession. There's no doubt that it's possible to channel the bad feelings we are exploring into something positive. If someone's speech upsets you, you might be inspired by this to work harder on trying to save the world. Or maybe your horizons are closer to home, and you can use your feelings as fuel for a self-improving endeavour, like exercise or education.

The interesting question isn't whether this is possible. The question is whether there is a sufficiently widespread ability, in human beings, for transfiguring our intrinsically negative experiences of social conflict-based distress, such that these bads can be viewed as integrated elements of the good, instead of manifest bads. The question isn't whether or not this is possible, but whether this is typical.

I don't think this is typical. I see two main reasons why some people can, atypically, succeed in inverting distress. First, some people have eccentric temperaments, in which the instigation of strong feeling, negative or positive, is a vital stimulus for action. Think of these people as psychic analogues of extreme sports junkies. They find ordinary life dull, and need to feel things intensely, in order to feel much of anything. It can sometimes be better for such people to go through upsetting experiences than to be stuck in run-of-the-mill activities. Second, some people can invert distress because they have enough psychic security and self-possession to engage in successful acts of creative self-actualization, which extract a sense of fulfilment from negative experiences. Think of a writer who gets drawn into a heated verbal quarrel. Many of us would spend days or weeks after an episode like this, mentally replaying the event to try to work through the turmoil that it elicits. For the writer, that process can simultaneously supply precious inspiration. The net result, for them, isn't just that they digest their feelings, but that they can create something that expresses their talents or their view of the world.

Brilliant! But still, *modulo* some sensible caveats about children not being overly sheltered, most of us would be better off, overall, if our lives had fewer experiences of serious emotional turmoil in them. The rejection of this prosaic truth is a vestige of our society's post-Christian veneration of pain – indeed: it's the same Leibnizian, best-of-all-possible-worlds mindset that Voltaire satirized in his novella, *Candide*. Yes, some experiences of distress can be of benefit to their bearers. And as Voltaire himself says, we have to try our best to “cultivate our garden.” But most of us don't have the peculiar personality or the wherewithal that we would need in order to reliably turn our emotional sow's ears into motivational or creative silk purses. Is that sweeping anthropological claim true as a matter of necessity? Probably not. But it's true in our society, and in any society in the modal vicinity which we could realistically try to bring about. The Positive Denialist strategy remains a 100% permissible way of trying to manage the emotional predicament of free speech. But it won't work for most of us, most of the time.

Now, speaking of optimists who overestimate people's ability to turn bad experiences into something positive: the poster boy for Positive Denial is of course

Mill. His argument for free speech is premised on the claim that encounters with dissenting opinion are beneficial. The usual way of construing these benefits is in epistemic terms. Confrontation with dissenting opinion promotes truth, or better justification for our beliefs. But a closer reading of Mill's argument reveals that his envisioned benefits are in fact something grander than these everyday epistemic goods. The encounter with dissenting opinion is meant to be what jolts us into a state of vitality. Mill thinks that conformity – both behavioural and intellectual – mires us in an animalistic state of being. It guarantees that we can be, at most, the happy pigs, with whom the unhappy Socrates is contrasted in the essay on *Utilitarianism*. We cannot attain to the higher pleasures of human life while remaining in this state. Confronting encounters are to be cherished, then, because they help us break out of our utility-limiting psychic torpor. The emotional turbulence that comes with this, then, is just a side-effect of a salubrious experience, a bit like the sensory shock one might experience climbing into a therapeutic ice bath.

Does this argument give us grounds for denying what I said a moment ago: that most of us would be better off if our lives involved fewer experiences of distress? I don't think so. Mill's ideas about how to overcome psychic torpor are too much of a one-size-fits-all prescription. What seems right, in the argument just outlined, is that it's better for beings like us to exist in a state of vital awareness and active agency, than a state of dulled sensibilities and passivity. You don't need to be a Utilitarian to find that aspect of Mill's ethical theory appealing. But then the question is: are there other ways for us to be jostled awake, apart from Mill's preferred way, involving social friction and conflict? And the answer is: "yes." Mill's arguments rest on an exaggerated claim about the positive relationship between social conflict and psychic vitality. Different people are vitalized by different kinds of experiences, and it is a disappointing feature of Mill's argument in *On Liberty* that he wants to resist that commonsensical observation, especially given that he is, elsewhere in this work, so ready to emphasize and exalt human diversity.

3.4 Deflationary Denial

The fourth strategy that I mentioned earlier is simply to try to distract ourselves and endure the hardships involved in the emotional predicament of free speech. Don't avoid them, don't try to turn them into something positive. Just suck it up and get on with the rest of life. We can call this option Deflationary Denial.

Again, I'll begin with a concession. Just as some people are wired-up to experience the stress of conflict as an energizing elixir, other people are abnormally wired-up, such that they find this stress to be completely negligible. I said that we are terrifically emotional creatures, and that we should not pretend otherwise. But it's consistent with this to recognize that some individuals are not super-

emotional. For people who are naturally low-affect, then, or for people whose experiences have inculcated in them an affectively muted demeanour, a Deflationary Denialist approach may well be appropriate. But what about for the rest of us?

Constantly ruminating on our bad feelings usually isn't a good way of coping with them. Getting on with life undoubtedly has its advantages. The dubious part of Deflationary Denial isn't that. It's the part that tells us to fully *ignore* our bad feelings. If we dwell on it, it can start to seem like a perplexing bit of advice, to say "just suck it up." It's hard to tell whether this is tantamount to deep spiritual wisdom, like a doctrine of radical detachment from the material world, or whether it's an invitation to indulge in the worst kind of self-abnegating false consciousness. "Things are bad, but you should pretend they aren't." And any attempt to get behind these associative impressions – to ask if it *makes sense* to believe that negative emotional experiences need not be experienced as negative – seems likely to bottom out in brute intuitions. If someone intuitively judges that painful feelings are not necessarily a significantly bad thing, for the person who experiences them, it's hard to know what kind of consideration could affect their view.

Still, even if you think that bad emotions aren't intrinsically negative, you may still grant that they can be instrumentally negative. One way bad emotions are liable to cause havoc, is if their suppression results in pent-up frustration, which erupts in ways that are dysfunctional, and resistant to consolation, insofar as the proximate causes of the outburst bear no obvious relation to their underlying causes. If you have a loved one who has trialled these emotional ostrich techniques, and if you have put up with the eruptions, you may share my misgivings about this strategy's merit. Like Ironic Avoidance, this is at best a short-term tactic for managing acute pain, at a point where honest reckoning isn't feasible. If it becomes a longer-term strategy for downplaying how other people's expression makes you feel, it's going to be no great help for you yourself, and unhelpful for those around you.

Another way bad emotions are liable to create problems, if left unattended, is by weakening our powers of attention. In his influential work on *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, Joel Feinberg argues that offensive acts can justifiably face restriction, under a Liberal legal regime, not because offense is intrinsically evil, but because it captures our attention in a way that inhibits our autonomy. From this angle, the issue with Deflationary Denial is that it involves an unrealistic idea of how we ignore and attend to things. When it is within your volitional control to ignore turbulent feelings, instead of ruminating about them, you have no need for strategic advice. Unless you are labouring under severe neurosis, you go for the first option, as naturally as you pull your hand away from a hot stove. This whole predicament arises because it is in the nature of these social emotions that we are considering, that they linger in our minds when we would rather that they didn't. You can volitionally ignore them in the superficial sense of not talking about them, or not engaging in deliberate ratiocination about them. But this isn't

enough to stop them from sub-consciously bubbling up to distract and preoccupy you.

In a certain sense – the sense that matters, ethically and politically – beings like us are not really able to ignore the adverse social emotions that befall us in uncurated social intercourse among people who disdain our values. We can feign indifference to these emotions, as the Deflationary Denialist advises, but this won't magically vaporize them. These emotions will still affect us, and any feigned indifference potentially subverts our attempts to make sense of their influence.

3.5 *Voltairean Machismo Revisited*

Which brings us back to Voltairean Machismo. Taking free speech seriously creates emotional turmoil, because it means consciously saying “yes” to a social order in which you encounter people saying contemptible stuff and disdaining your values. You can dodge those encounters, or ironically deflect the feelings they trigger, or try to use those feelings as psychic fuel, or button-up and ignore them. But all of these strategies have a limited power to mitigate the hardship, and some of them create their own collateral hardships. In charting the limitations of these strategies, I have been trying to give us a better grasp on this emotional predicament's tenacious character – how it gets its tendrils into us, and holds them there.

For all its faults, Voltairean Machismo is a reaction that befits the predicament's texture and temper. The Voltaire-quoter isn't pretending that his encounters with difference leave him feeling tranquil, or muted. He isn't hiding from the fact that his neighbors disdain his values, or ironizing away the implications of that. He is, roughly in line with what a Positive Denialist recommends, trying to use his feelings to inspire a positive vision. This goes awry, because his vision is a pipedream. He has no intention of risking his life to defend the rights of his adversaries. He likes the idea of this gallantry, and he may get a little buzz of self-esteem in play-acting the hero. But this is at best a stop-gap solution to the predicament. And its transience aside, it is, in its macho posturing, unlikely to placate the insecurity for which it is compensating. The Voltaire-quoter is rightly showing us that the feelings stirred up in him, by living among people with very different worldviews, are big and juicy ones. But he would do better to admit that these feelings partly consist in anxiety and confusion – a poignant desire to feel safe, and for life to make sense. His attempt to express these tender feelings portrays them as something cartoonishly tough. But in that respect, his struggles are ultimately symptomatic of broader pathologies, relating to emotional illiteracy and toxic masculinity.

In any case, expressions of Voltairean Machismo surely protest too much. A theatrical reverie of heroic sacrifice isn't a mark of real confidence or composure. It bespeaks a politics that hasn't figured out how to metabolize the complicated emotions that its ideal of justice precipitates, and which it's invested in denying.

4. Combative Customs

So, where does this leave us? Should this culminate in a plea for civility? If living under free speech is an ordeal, maybe we ought to be nicer? While I don't want to join in the chorus of philosophers praising anger and criticizing civility, I do want to distinguish my position from the pro-civility camp. If my take on thing is right, then widespread incivility isn't the source of our discursive malaise – something that could, in theory, be inoculated against through the better cultivation of civic virtue. Rather, incivility is itself symptomatic of the malaise. We have been unrealistic about the emotional turmoil that Liberal policies and practices create, and the fierce contemptuousness of public discourse is partly a consequence of this.

Perhaps, then, if the emotional predicament of free speech is as troublesome as I'm saying, we should take it as a reason to reject Liberalism – to make common cause with critics, either Marxist progressives, or Communitarian conservatives, who see Liberalism as instating an untenable form of collective life, which is too fragmented to sustain the belonging and cohesion that our well-being requires. This isn't an absurd response, but it seems hasty, until we have properly gauged the possibilities – both theoretical and practical – for a Liberal politics that confronts the predicament, instead of, as per usual, downplaying or denying it.

The way forward that I see some promise in, is to reinvent the *de facto* and semi-institutionalized customs that promote martial ideals in public communication. It's a mistake, I believe, to think of these customs as an indispensable corollary to Liberal rights. I said earlier that we could have a model of Liberalism in which we protect freedom of belief, lifestyle, and association, while also having norms of restraint around how we publically express ourselves. Some post-war Liberal philosophers would interpret that vision of social practice as a repudiation of their ideals. But the theses that ground that interpretation are at best under-defended. Yes, unreflective conformity prevents beings like us from realizing our creative and intellectual potential. And yes, a robust legal right to free speech is a bulwark against this. But it doesn't follow from either of these plausible claims, that human beings are benefited, individually or collectively, by the active fermentation of controversy. This latter thesis only follows from the other two if we accept the most idiosyncratic parts of Millian psychology – the parts that dubiously equate the absence of conflict, in people's lives, with a deficit in mental vitality and autonomy.

I said we should reinvent the *de facto* and semi-institutionalized customs that promote martial ideals in public discourse. I will mention one example of each.

A *de facto* custom that we might be better off without, is the one that encourages people of conscience to perform acts of public counterspeech – to find people saying harmful stuff, in public spaces or online, and to try to use good speech to combat the bad effects of their bad speech. Now, this rarely has a positive impact on the people whose speech is contested. It often makes them more belligerent and

dogmatic. Advocates of counterspeech therefore like to claim that the real beneficiaries of these interventions are third party onlookers, rather than the speakers themselves. But the evidence for that claim is piecemeal at best, and I think it verges on wishful thinking. The natural third-party reaction to most speech fights, nowadays, is weary cynicism. My point isn't that we should retreat into apolitical quietism. My point is that a custom of doing politics through acts of performative expressive combat, whether one-sided, or in a coordinated *tête-à-tête*, is a largely futile praxis, nowadays, if it was ever otherwise, and in any case, that the toll it exacts upon its participants undermines or outweighs its sporadic benefits.

An example of a semi-institutionalized custom that Liberal society might be better off without, is the one that treats universities as the ideal venues for hosting fiery showdowns about inflammatory cultural controversies. To be clear, I'm not denying that academic disciplines should, in their teaching and research work, engage with controversies that fall within their disciplinary subject matter, in a way that reflects their disciplinarily-relevant methods of inquiry. I'm talking about all the extra-curricular debate-club pageantry that sets the tone for campus life in many large universities. These are a semi-institutionalized custom, insofar as universities in most Liberal societies have some formal obligation to uphold free speech, alongside academic freedom, and insofar as these events are thought of as integral to upholding free speech at universities. I think we should reform these customs. It's a platitude in debates around higher education, that these events advance the university's core epistemic aims. But we have few good grounds for believing that this is actually true. And there is little or nothing to value in the distraction and aggravation that these events cause to the university's members. Universities definitely need academic freedom. They don't need free speech psychodrama.

The overall take-away is that we should be less blasé about the emotional strain that free speech creates. We have good reasons to uphold free speech, but it is a pricier deal than its defenders want to admit – even its more moderate defenders who have been rightly persuaded to acknowledge the harms of hate speech. Liberals have invoked a hodgepodge of psychological theses to downplay the emotional predicament that I've been examining. Those theses are best seen as a reverse-engineered just-so story, whose purpose is to try to substantiate a whole-hearted faith in free speech's long-run utility. It would be better to paint a more honest picture of human emotion and social psychology, and then, being guided by that picture, set about reforming our customs of discursive combat. Those customs might promote the well-being of the alien creatures that Mill and his acolytes imagine us to be. But they aren't much help for the prickly, sensitive beings that we are.*

* This draft benefited from discussion with Jack Hume, Erin Nash, Achilleas Sarantaris, Helena Ward, Liane Wergen, and Ziyang Yin.