

What You Can't Say

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Have you ever seen an old photo of yourself and been embarrassed at the way you looked? Did we actually dress like that? We did. And we had no idea how silly we looked.

It's the nature of fashion to be invisible, in the same way the movement of the earth is invisible to all of us riding on it.

What scares me is that there are moral fashions too. They're just as arbitrary, and just as invisible to most people. But they're much more dangerous. Fashion is mistaken for good design; moral fashion is mistaken for good. Dressing oddly gets you laughed at. Violating moral fashions can get you fired, ostracized, imprisoned, or even killed.

If you could travel back in a time machine, one thing would be true no matter where you went: you'd have to watch what you said.

Opinions we consider harmless could have gotten you in big trouble.

I've already said at least one thing that would have gotten me in big trouble in most of Europe in the seventeenth century, and did get Galileo in big trouble when he said it that the earth moves. [1]

It seems to be a constant throughout history: In every period, people believed things that were just ridiculous,

and believed them so strongly that you would have gotten in terrible trouble for saying otherwise.

Is our time any different?

To anyone who has read any amount of history, the answer is almost certainly no. It would be a remarkable coincidence if ours were the first era to get everything just right.

It's tantalizing to think we believe things that people in the future will find ridiculous.

What would someone coming back to visit us in a time machine have to be careful not to say?

That's what I want to study here.

But

I want to do more than just shock everyone with the heresy du jour. I want to find general recipes for discovering what you can't say, in any era.

The Conformist Test

Let's start with a test:

Do you have any opinions that you would be reluctant to express in front of a group of your peers?

If the answer is no, you might want to stop and think about that. If everything you believe is something you're supposed to believe, could that possibly be a coincidence? Odds are it isn't. Odds are you just think what you're told.

The other alternative would be that you independently considered every question and came up with the exact same answers that are now considered acceptable. That seems unlikely, because you'd also have to make the same mistakes. Mapmakers deliberately put slight mistakes in their maps so they can tell when someone copies them. If another map has the same mistake, that's very convincing evidence.

Like every other era in history, our moral map almost certainly contains a few mistakes. And anyone who makes the same mistakes

probably didn't do it by accident. It would be like someone claiming they had independently decided in 1972 that bell-bottom jeans were a good idea.

If you believe everything you're supposed to now, how can you be sure you wouldn't also have believed everything you were supposed to if you had grown up among the plantation owners of the pre-Civil War South, or in Germany in the 1930s or among the Mongols in 1200, for that matter? Odds are you would have.

Back in the era of terms like "well-adjusted," the idea seemed to be that there was something wrong with you if you thought things you didn't dare say out loud. This seems backward. Almost certainly, there is something wrong with you if you don't think things you don't dare say out loud.

Trouble

What can't we say? One way to find these ideas is simply to look at things people do say, and get in trouble for. [2]

Of course, we're not just looking for things we can't say. We're looking for things we can't say that are true, or at least have enough chance of being true that the question should remain open. But many of the things people get in trouble for saying probably do make it over this second, lower threshold. No one gets in trouble for saying that $2 + 2$ is 5, or that people in Pittsburgh are ten feet tall. Such obviously false statements might be treated as jokes, or at worst as evidence of insanity, but they are not likely to make anyone mad. The statements that make people mad are the ones they worry might be believed. I suspect the statements that make people maddest are those they worry might be true.

If Galileo had said that people in Padua were ten feet tall, he would have been regarded as a harmless eccentric. Saying

the earth orbited the sun was another matter. The church knew this would set people thinking.

Certainly, as we look back on the past, this rule of thumb works well. A lot of the statements people got in trouble for seem harmless now. So it's likely that visitors from the future would agree with at least some of the statements that get people in trouble today. Do we have no Galileos? Not likely.

To find them,
keep track of opinions that get
people in trouble, and start asking, could this be true?
Ok, it may be heretical (or whatever modern equivalent), but
might it also be true?

Heresy

This won't get us all the answers, though. What if no one happens to have gotten in trouble for a particular idea yet? What if some idea would be so radioactively controversial that no one would dare express it in public? How can we find these too?

Another approach is to follow that word, heresy. In every period of history, there seem to have been labels that got applied to statements to shoot them down before anyone had a chance to ask if they were true or not. "Blasphemy", "sacrilege", and "heresy" were such labels for a good part of western history, as in more recent times "indecent", "improper", and "unamerican" have been. By now these labels have lost their sting. They always do. By now they're mostly used ironically. But in their time, they had real force.

The word "defeatist", for example, has no particular political connotations now. But in Germany in 1917 it was a weapon, used by Ludendorff in a purge of those who favored a negotiated peace. At the start of World War II it was used

extensively by Churchill and his supporters to silence their opponents.

In 1940, any argument against Churchill's aggressive policy was "defeatist". Was it right or wrong? Ideally, no one got far enough to ask that.

We have such labels today, of course, quite a lot of them, from the all-purpose "inappropriate" to the dreaded "divisive." In any period, it should be easy to figure out what such labels are, simply by looking at what people call ideas they disagree with besides untrue. When a politician says his opponent is mistaken, that's a straightforward criticism, but when he attacks a statement as "divisive" or "racially insensitive" instead of arguing that it's false, we should start paying attention.

So another way to figure out which of our taboos future generations will laugh at is to start with the labels. Take a label "sexist", for example and try to think of some ideas that would be called that. Then for each ask, might this be true?

Just start listing ideas at random? Yes, because they won't really be random. The ideas that come to mind first will be the most plausible ones. They'll be things you've already noticed but didn't let yourself think.

In 1989 some clever researchers tracked the eye movements of radiologists as they scanned chest images for signs of lung cancer. [3] They found that even when the radiologists missed a cancerous lesion, their eyes had usually paused at the site of it. Part of their brain knew there was something there; it just didn't percolate all the way up into conscious knowledge. I think many interesting heretical thoughts are already mostly formed in our minds. If we turn off our self-censorship temporarily, those will be the first to emerge.

Time and Space

If we could look into the future it would be obvious which

of our taboos they'd laugh at.

We can't do that, but we can do something almost as good: we can look into the past. Another way to figure out what we're getting wrong is to look at what used to be acceptable and is now unthinkable.

Changes between the past and the present sometimes do represent progress. In a field like physics, if we disagree with past generations it's because we're right and they're wrong. But this becomes rapidly less true as you move away from the certainty of the hard sciences. By the time you get to social questions, many changes are just fashion. The age of consent fluctuates like hemlines.

We may imagine that we are a great deal smarter and more virtuous than past generations, but the more history you read, the less likely this seems. People in past times were much like us. Not heroes, not barbarians. Whatever their ideas were, they were ideas reasonable people could believe.

So here is another source of interesting heresies. Diff present ideas against those of various past cultures, and see what you get. [4]

Some will be shocking by present standards. Ok, fine; but which might also be true?

You don't have to look into the past to find big differences. In our own time, different societies have wildly varying ideas of what's ok and what isn't. So you can try diffing other cultures' ideas against ours as well. (The best way to do that is to visit them.) Any idea that's considered harmless in a significant percentage of times and places, and yet is taboo in ours, is a candidate for something we're mistaken about.

For example, at the high water mark of political correctness in the early 1990s, Harvard distributed to its faculty and staff a brochure saying, among other things, that it was inappropriate to compliment a colleague or student's

clothes. No more "nice shirt."

I think this principle is rare among the world's cultures, past or present.

There are probably more where it's considered especially polite to compliment someone's clothing than where it's considered improper.

Odds are this is, in a mild form, an example of one of the taboos a visitor from the future would have to be careful to avoid if he happened to set his time machine for Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992. [5]

Prigs

Of course, if they have time machines in the future they'll probably have a separate reference manual just for Cambridge. This has always been a fussy place, a town of i dotters and t crossers, where you're liable to get both your grammar and your ideas corrected in the same conversation. And that suggests another way to find taboos. Look for prigs, and see what's inside their heads.

Kids' heads are repositories of all our taboos.

It seems fitting to us that kids' ideas should be bright and clean. The picture we give them of the world is not merely simplified, to suit their developing minds, but sanitized as well, to suit our ideas of what kids ought to think. [6]

You can see this on a small scale in the matter of dirty words. A lot of my friends are starting to have children now, and they're all trying not to use words like "fuck" and "shit" within baby's hearing, lest baby start using these words too.

But these words are part of the language, and adults use them all the time. So parents are giving their kids an inaccurate idea of the language by not using them. Why do they do this? Because they don't think it's fitting that kids should use the whole language. We like children to seem innocent. [7]

Most adults, likewise, deliberately give kids a misleading view of the world.

One of the most obvious examples is Santa Claus. We think it's cute for little kids to believe in Santa Claus. I myself think it's cute for little kids to believe in Santa Claus. But one wonders, do we tell them this stuff for their sake, or for ours?

I'm not arguing for or against this idea here. It is probably inevitable that parents should want to dress up their kids' minds in cute little baby outfits. I'll probably do it myself. The important thing for our purposes is that, as a result, a well brought-up teenage kid's brain is a more or less complete collection of all our taboos and in mint condition, because they're untainted by experience. Whatever we think that will later turn out to be ridiculous, it's almost certainly inside that head.

How do we get at these ideas? By the following thought experiment. Imagine a kind of latter-day Conrad character who has worked for a time as a mercenary in Africa, for a time as a doctor in Nepal, for a time as the manager of a nightclub in Miami. The specifics don't matter just someone who has seen a lot. Now imagine comparing what's inside this guy's head with what's inside the head of a well-behaved sixteen year old girl from the suburbs. What does he think that would shock her? He knows the world; she knows, or at least embodies, present taboos. Subtract one from the other, and the result is what we can't say.

Mechanism

I can think of one more way to figure out what we can't say: to look at how taboos are created. How do moral fashions arise, and why are they adopted? If we can understand this mechanism, we

may be able to see it at work in our own time.

Moral fashions don't seem to be created the way ordinary fashions are. Ordinary fashions seem to arise by accident when everyone imitates the whim of some influential person.

The fashion for broad-toed shoes in late fifteenth century Europe began because Charles VIII of France had six toes on one foot. The fashion for the name Gary began when the actor Frank Cooper adopted the name of a tough mill town in Indiana. Moral fashions more often seem to be created deliberately. When there's something we can't say, it's often because some group doesn't want us to.

The prohibition will be strongest when the group is nervous. The irony of Galileo's situation was that he got in trouble for repeating Copernicus's ideas. Copernicus himself didn't. In fact, Copernicus was a canon of a cathedral, and dedicated his book to the pope. But by Galileo's time the church was in the throes of the Counter-Reformation and was much more worried about unorthodox ideas.

To launch a taboo, a group has to be poised halfway between weakness and power. A confident group doesn't need taboos to protect it. It's not considered improper to make disparaging remarks about Americans, or the English. And yet a group has to be powerful enough to enforce a taboo. Coprophiles, as of this writing, don't seem to be numerous or energetic enough to have had their interests promoted to a lifestyle.

I suspect the biggest source of moral taboos will turn out to be power struggles in which one side only barely has the upper hand. That's where you'll find a group powerful enough to enforce taboos, but weak enough to need them.

Most struggles, whatever they're really about, will be cast as struggles between competing ideas. The English Reformation was at bottom a struggle for wealth and power, but it ended up being cast as a struggle to preserve the souls

of Englishmen from the corrupting influence of Rome.
It's easier to get people to fight for an idea.
And whichever side wins, their
ideas will also be considered to have triumphed, as if God
wanted to signal his agreement by selecting that side as the victor.

We often like to think of World War II as a triumph
of freedom over totalitarianism. We conveniently forget that
the Soviet Union was also one of the winners.

I'm not saying that struggles are never about ideas,
just that they will always be made to seem to be about
ideas, whether they are or not. And just as there is nothing
so unfashionable as the last, discarded fashion, there is
nothing so wrong as the principles of the most recently
defeated opponent.

Representational art is only now
recovering from the approval of both Hitler and Stalin. [8]

Although moral fashions tend to arise from different sources
than fashions in clothing, the mechanism of their adoption seems
much the same. The early adopters will be driven by ambition:
self-consciously cool people who want to distinguish themselves
from the common herd. As the fashion becomes established they'll
be joined by a second, much larger group, driven by fear. [9] This
second group adopt the fashion not because they want to stand
out but because they are afraid of standing out.

So if you want to figure out what we can't say, look at the
machinery of fashion and try to predict what it would make
unsayable. What groups are powerful but nervous, and what
ideas would they like to suppress? What ideas were tarnished by
association when they ended up on the losing side of a recent
struggle? If a self-consciously cool person wanted to differentiate
himself from preceding fashions (e.g. from his parents),
which of their ideas would he tend to reject?
What are conventional-minded people afraid of saying?

This technique won't find us all the things we can't say.
I can think of some that aren't the result of

any recent struggle. Many of our taboos are rooted deep in the past. But this approach, combined with the preceding four, will turn up a good number of unthinkable ideas.

Why

Some would ask, why would one want to do this? Why deliberately go poking around among nasty, disreputable ideas? Why look under rocks?

I do it, first of all, for the same reason I did look under rocks as a kid: plain curiosity. And I'm especially curious about anything that's forbidden. Let me see and decide for myself.

Second, I do it because I don't like the idea of being mistaken. If, like other eras, we believe things that will later seem ridiculous, I want to know what they are so that I, at least, can avoid believing them.

Third, I do it because it's good for the brain. To do good work you need a brain that can go anywhere. And you especially need a brain that's in the habit of going where it's not supposed to.

Great work tends to grow out of ideas that others have overlooked, and no idea is so overlooked as one that's unthinkable.

Natural selection, for example.

It's so simple. Why didn't anyone think of it before? Well, that is all too obvious. Darwin himself was careful to tiptoe around the implications of his theory. He wanted to spend his time thinking about biology, not arguing with people who accused him of being an atheist.

In the sciences, especially, it's a great advantage to be able to question assumptions.

The m.o. of scientists, or at least of the good ones, is precisely that: look for places where conventional wisdom is broken, and then try to pry apart the cracks and see what's underneath. That's where new theories come

from.

A good scientist, in other words, does not merely ignore conventional wisdom, but makes a special effort to break it. Scientists go looking for trouble.

This should be the m.o. of any scholar, but scientists seem much more willing to look under rocks. [10]

Why? It could be that the scientists are simply smarter; most physicists could, if necessary, make it through a PhD program in French literature, but few professors of French literature could make it through a PhD program in physics. Or it could be because it's clearer in the sciences whether theories are true or false, and this makes scientists bolder. (Or it could be that, because it's clearer in the sciences whether theories are true or false, you have to be smart to get jobs as a scientist, rather than just a good politician.)

Whatever the reason, there seems a clear correlation between intelligence and willingness to consider shocking ideas. This isn't just because smart people actively work to find holes in conventional thinking. I think conventions also have less hold over them to start with. You can see that in the way they dress.

It's not only in the sciences that heresy pays off. In any competitive field, you can win big by seeing things that others daren't. And in every field there are probably heresies few dare utter. Within the US car industry there is a lot of hand-wringing now about declining market share. Yet the cause is so obvious that any observant outsider could explain it in a second: they make bad cars. And they have for so long that by now the US car brands are antibrands something you'd buy a car despite, not because of. Cadillac stopped being the Cadillac of cars in about 1970. And yet I suspect no one dares say this. [11] Otherwise these companies would have

tried to fix the problem.

Training yourself to think unthinkable thoughts has advantages beyond the thoughts themselves. It's like stretching. When you stretch before running, you put your body into positions much more extreme than any it will assume during the run. If you can think things so outside the box that they'd make people's hair stand on end, you'll have no trouble with the small trips outside the box that people call innovative.

Pensieri Stretti

When you find something you can't say, what do you do with it? My advice is, don't say it. Or at least, pick your battles.

Suppose in the future there is a movement to ban the color yellow. Proposals to paint anything yellow are denounced as "yellowist", as is anyone suspected of liking the color. People who like orange are tolerated but viewed with suspicion. Suppose you realize there is nothing wrong with yellow. If you go around saying this, you'll be denounced as a yellowist too, and you'll find yourself having a lot of arguments with anti-yellowists. If your aim in life is to rehabilitate the color yellow, that may be what you want. But if you're mostly interested in other questions, being labelled as a yellowist will just be a distraction. Argue with idiots, and you become an idiot.

The most important thing is to be able to think what you want, not to say what you want. And if you feel you have to say everything you think, it may inhibit you from thinking improper thoughts. I think it's better to follow the opposite policy. Draw a sharp line between your thoughts and your speech. Inside your head, anything is allowed. Within my head I make a point of encouraging the most outrageous thoughts I can imagine. But, as in

a secret society, nothing that happens within the building should be told to outsiders. The first rule of Fight Club is, you do not talk about Fight Club.

When Milton was going to visit Italy in the 1630s, Sir Henry Wootton, who had been ambassador to Venice, told him his motto should be

"i pensieri stretti & il viso sciolto." Closed thoughts and an open face. Smile at everyone, and don't tell them what you're thinking. This was wise advice.

Milton was an argumentative fellow, and the Inquisition was a bit restive at that time. But I think the difference between Milton's situation and ours is only a matter of degree.

Every era has its heresies, and if you don't get imprisoned for them you will at least get in enough trouble that it becomes a complete distraction.

I admit it seems cowardly to keep quiet.

When I read about the harassment to which the Scientologists subject their critics [12], or that pro-Israel groups are "compiling dossiers" on those who speak out against Israeli human rights abuses [13], or about people being sued for violating the DMCA [14], part of me wants to say, "All right, you bastards, bring it on."

The problem is, there are so many things you can't say.

If you said them all you'd

have no time left for your real work.

You'd have to turn into Noam Chomsky. [15]

The trouble with keeping your thoughts secret, though, is that you lose the advantages of discussion. Talking about an idea leads to more ideas.

So the optimal plan, if you can manage it,

is to have a few trusted

friends you can speak openly to. This is not just a

way to develop ideas; it's also a good

rule of thumb for choosing friends. The people

you can say heretical things to without getting jumped on

are also the most interesting to know.

Viso Sciolto?

I don't think we need the viso sciolto so much as the pensieri stretti. Perhaps the best policy is to make it plain that you don't agree with whatever zealotry is current in your time, but not to be too specific about what you disagree with. Zealots will try to draw you out, but you don't have to answer them. If they try to force you to treat a question on their terms by asking "are you with us or against us?" you can always just answer "neither".

Better still, answer "I haven't decided." That's what Larry Summers did when a group tried to put him in this position. Explaining himself later, he said "I don't do litmus tests." [16] A lot of the questions people get hot about are actually quite complicated. There is no prize for getting the answer quickly.

If the anti-yellowists seem to be getting out of hand and you want to fight back, there are ways to do it without getting yourself accused of being a yellowist. Like skirmishers in an ancient army, you want to avoid directly engaging the main body of the enemy's troops. Better to harass them with arrows from a distance.

One way to do this is to ratchet the debate up one level of abstraction. If you argue against censorship in general, you can avoid being accused of whatever heresy is contained in the book or film that someone is trying to censor. You can attack labels with meta-labels: labels that refer to the use of labels to prevent discussion. The spread of the term "political correctness" meant the beginning of the end of political correctness, because it enabled one to attack the phenomenon as a whole without being accused of any

of the specific heresies it sought to suppress.

Another way to counterattack is with metaphor. Arthur Miller undermined the House Un-American Activities Committee by writing a play, "The Crucible," about the Salem witch trials. He never referred directly to the committee and so gave them no way to reply.

What could HUAC do, defend the Salem witch trials? And yet Miller's metaphor stuck so well that to this day the activities of the committee are often described as a "witch-hunt."

Best of all, probably, is humor. Zealots, whatever their cause, invariably lack a sense of humor.

They can't reply in kind to jokes.

They're as unhappy on the territory of humor as a mounted knight on a skating rink.

Victorian prudishness, for example, seems to have been defeated mainly by treating it as a joke. Likewise its reincarnation as political correctness.

"I am glad that I managed to write "The Crucible,"" Arthur Miller wrote, "but looking back I have often wished I'd had the temperament to do an absurd comedy, which is what the situation deserved." [17]

ABQ

A Dutch friend says

I should use Holland as an example of a tolerant society.

It's true they have a long tradition of comparative open-mindedness. For centuries the low countries were the place to go to say things you couldn't say anywhere else, and this helped to make the region a center of scholarship and industry (which have been closely tied for longer than most people realize). Descartes, though claimed by the French, did much of his thinking in Holland.

And yet, I wonder. The Dutch seem to live their lives up to their necks in rules and regulations. There's so much you can't do there; is there really nothing

you can't say?

Certainly the fact that they value open-mindedness is no guarantee. Who thinks they're not open-minded? Our hypothetical prim miss from the suburbs thinks she's open-minded. Hasn't she been taught to be? Ask anyone, and they'll say the same thing: they're pretty open-minded, though they draw the line at things that are really wrong. (Some tribes may avoid "wrong" as judgemental, and may instead use a more neutral sounding euphemism like "negative" or "destructive".)

When people are bad at math, they know it, because they get the wrong answers on tests. But when people are bad at open-mindedness they don't know it. In fact they tend to think the opposite. Remember, it's the nature of fashion to be invisible. It wouldn't work otherwise. Fashion doesn't seem like fashion to someone in the grip of it. It just seems like the right thing to do. It's only by looking from a distance that we see oscillations in people's idea of the right thing to do, and can identify them as fashions.

Time gives us such distance for free. Indeed, the arrival of new fashions makes old fashions easy to see, because they seem so ridiculous by contrast. From one end of a pendulum's swing, the other end seems especially far away.

To see fashion in your own time, though, requires a conscious effort. Without time to give you distance, you have to create distance yourself. Instead of being part of the mob, stand as far away from it as you can and watch what it's doing. And pay especially close attention whenever an idea is being suppressed. Web filters for children and employees often ban sites containing pornography, violence, and hate speech. What counts as pornography and violence? And what, exactly, is "hate speech?" This sounds like a phrase out of 1984.

Labels like that are probably the biggest external clue. If a statement is false, that's the worst thing you can say about it. You don't

need to say that it's heretical. And if it isn't false, it shouldn't be suppressed. So when you see statements being attacked as x-ist or y-ic (substitute your current values of x and y), whether in 1630 or 2030, that's a sure sign that something is wrong. When you hear such labels being used, ask why.

Especially if you hear yourself using them. It's not just the mob you need to learn to watch from a distance. You need to be able to watch your own thoughts from a distance. That's not a radical idea, by the way; it's the main difference between children and adults. When a child gets angry because he's tired, he doesn't know what's happening. An adult can distance himself enough from the situation to say "never mind, I'm just tired." I don't see why one couldn't, by a similar process, learn to recognize and discount the effects of moral fashions.

You have to take that extra step if you want to think clearly. But it's harder, because now you're working against social customs instead of with them. Everyone encourages you to grow up to the point where you can discount your own bad moods. Few encourage you to continue to the point where you can discount society's bad moods.

How can you see the wave, when you're the water? Always be questioning. That's the only defence. What can't you say? And why?

Notes

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