

Thoughts on Free Speech
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The alt-right protest in Charlottesville last week was brutal. Though white supremacy has been a subtext of American politics seething just under the surface for decades, we as a nation haven't seen it manifest itself so visibly and violently in quite some time. We saw hints of it on the campaign trail, but nothing like this. Even if you are a cynic, let's not pretend like the events of last weekend were anything but a drastic escalation. When was the last time you watched a Nazi run over and murder a woman on livestream?

But I think deep down, we all know this. Marginalized groups, white liberals, and Charlottesville residents are dealing with what they've seen in their own ways, and everyone's just trying to make sense of the situation in the way that they can. I'm not going to offer the same hot takes you can hear from anyone in the media, pop culture, and politics, though it deserves to be said as many times as it can be said that last weekend was a display of hatred that ought to be condemned by all, and a reflection of a growing and disturbing strain of politics that has become increasingly empowered and encouraged over the last few years.

As disturbing as the neo-Nazis and white supremacists are, I'm almost more disturbed by the centrists -- the radical centrists, since this is indeed a radical position as I will explain -- who complain that both sides are at fault. Though that may be technically true, this is no doubt a false equivalence. One side is demonstrably more evil in ideology than the other. The position that the radical centrists hold, as far as I understand it, boils down to two major points:

- Violence in the pursuit of political goals, even just goals, is never justified.
- Free speech, even hateful speech, should always be protected.

If both of these tenets are true, then the "both sides" defense can be built upon them easily: yes, the fascists were wrong to murder a woman, but the anti-fascists were wrong to harass, condemn, and provoke the fascists in the first place. Thus, both sides ought to be condemned.

I don't think there's much you can reasonably condemn the counter-protesters for, not even their intolerance towards the protesters, as I will explain later on. Regardless no matter what you condemn the counter-protesters for, the fact of the matter is that their side is not the one which directly led to the murder of a peaceful protester. This is a matter of degree. I urge you to keep that in mind as we dig deeper into the arguments of those who draw the equivalence between the two sides.

Before we get into talking about the above points, I have some auxiliary arguments to address that are somewhat unrelated to the two claims above, but which are often invoked by the radical centrists.

0.1 Very Fine People, or, the "Not all Nazis" Argument

I have to make a comment about the labels I am using here. To suggest, as the President did earlier this week, that some of the protesters on Saturday were "very fine people", is to miss the point entirely. Again, we all watched the events of the morning unfold on livestream. We saw Nazi salutes, bigoted chants, and generous amounts of "Sieg Heil", "Blood and Soil", and "Hail Victory" (and, for what it's worth, "Hail Trump"). If there were protesters present who merely wanted to express ire at the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, they must have known what was going on. Was the renaming of the park to *Emancipation Park* really such a dire proposition that a sane, historically-minded protester would be willing to join forces with literal Nazis in order to counter it? I have to question the true motives of any supposedly moral protester who surrounds himself with such obviously evil company. How important is the preservation of history through statues, really? After all, what are textbooks for?

The fact of the matter is, if you're the guy walking down the street with a group chanting "Sieg Heil", you're for better or worse part of that group. You're adding to their numbers and to their spectacle. You are indistinguishable from their ranks, and your voice will not drown theirs out. No matter your intentions, at that point you are functionally a Nazi.

0.2 Who is to Blame?, or, the "They Started it First" Argument

I have another concern to address, and that is the claim that the violence would never have escalated if the anti-Fascists had not arrived and started throwing rocks at the protesters. In this twisted way, I've seen a number of far-right news outlets claim that the death of Heather Heyer was, in reality, the fault of **the liberals** after all. This argument breaks down when you think about it for even a few minutes.

We have to ask ourselves, how do we assign "blame" to one side in a conflict? The above argument seems to use the "but for" definition, as in, a woman would not have been murdered but for the presence of the counter-protesters. Of course, this definition of blame allows one to always blame the victim of any assault, and thus we need to use a different definition. Any practical discussion of the conflict in Charlottesville has got to view James Fields as an agent with free will and moral responsibility. No one constrained him such that he had to murder a woman. A murderer is to blame for a murder.

If we are to blame the counter-protesters for anything, it is not for the fatal injuries caused by the terrorist attack on Saturday. Maybe the centrist position blames counter-protesters for some other things, which I will address later on. Regardless, this is a crucial point to remember: no matter what we can blame the counter-protesters for, the death of a woman must be pinned on the protesters and the protesters alone. And no matter what we can blame the counter-protesters for, any reasonable discussion of the conflict must not forget the magnitude of difference between their sins and the unconscionable act of murder and terrorism that occurred on Saturday.

0.3 Free Speech Absolutism

I won't be talking too much about the first argument of the radical centrists:

Violence in the pursuit of political goals, even just goals, is never justified.

This is a controversial point, and I'm less likely to convince you to change your mind about it. I personally disagree with the statement, for the record. A practical consideration of nearly any successful revolutionary movement must admit that violence is often instrumental to achieving goals. I think it's a little bit naive to assume, as some progressive do, that one can (reliably) change a system built from the start against them by working within it. These people are often incrementalists (Barack Obama is a shining example), and they often believe that social and political change is effected procedurally over the span of decades. People like Barack Obama, for example, often feel as though they are fighting a battle the results of which may not be seen in their lifetime. There are similar figures on the radical right, although the traditional conservative position is by nature more aligned with the status quo and thus the above discussion doesn't quite apply. Though I don't agree with this viewpoint, I am at least sympathetic to it. If change can be effected without violence, then we ought to try to do so -- the problem lies in whether or not you believe in this kind of change.

The free speech argument is much more dubious. I would even go so far as to say it is a completely untenable position. The argument, one I have heard from many centrists, is that:

Free speech, even hateful speech, should always be protected.

So let's break down some common justifications for this viewpoint and see if they hold up.

0.3.1 Actions Speak Louder Than Words

One argument I've heard is that words are just words. We should protect the views of the neo-Nazis who protested last Saturday, since they were protesting peacefully, and their words did not harm anyone. Someone who would make this argument likely believes that any action in general should be protected, as long as it's not harming anyone. Words, as the argument goes, do not harm anyone. This isn't that unreasonable of an argument, for the record. But it is one that views the world in idealistic, abstract terms. The fact of the matter is that words are not just words. Consider the following statements:

- "I now pronounce you man and wife."
- "I promise I'll do the dishes."
- "I accept your apology."

These are called **performative utterances** in the philosophy of language. They are definitely not just words -- these words are actions, and they cause a real impact on the world. A central problem in the philosophy of language is determining to what extent language influences thought and vice versa, but most people agree that there is certainly a link there. Some sentences, like the ones above, come dangerously close to being actions. However, even fairly clear-cut examples of statements which are not performative can have an impact on thought and thus action.

The point here, and it should be an obvious one, is that words have an impact. I'd argue that accordingly, strong words have a strong impact. Sure, the neo-Nazi protest on Friday may not have physically harmed anyone (still a dubious claim, but let's accept it for now). But the fact remains that the protesters employed violent, bigoted, and discriminatory rhetoric, which in turn encourages violent thought, which in turn causes violent action. Perhaps for more benign statements, we could argue that such a link between language and thought is more theoretical. But in this case, I think, there is only one clear interpretation of the speech of the neo-Nazis. They were fairly explicitly encouraging violent action.

The above discussion is what compels me to say that there is no peaceful way to express the views expressed by the protesters this weekend. The neo-Nazis declared war on our way of life, and a declaration of war is no doubt a performative utterance. Their violent words effect real, violent action. Only the most naive view of language could deem the demonstrations last weekend in any way peaceful.

0.3.2 The Paradox of Free Speech

Another, perhaps more obvious justification for protecting hate speech hinges on something like equal protection under the law, or perhaps a manifestation of the "Golden Rule". As the argument goes, we should protect the free speech of the people we disagree with, so that they will do the same for us. The obvious problem here is that this is a clearly naive viewpoint. There is no guarantee that a doctrine of absolute free speech actually achieves the stated goal of free speech. For example, should we accommodate the free speech of those who wish to suppress it? Should we accommodate the free speech of genocidal maniacs and autocrats (how can we trust them to extend the same courtesy to us)? If you agree with me on the answers to those questions

("no" and "no", respectively), you concede that, paradoxically, supporting absolute free speech undermines free speech. But if you don't agree with me already, let me try to convince you.

So the argument goes, we should hear the opinions of hate groups so that we can debate them out in the open, thus shutting them down. The problem here is that no extremist was ever swayed by civil, rational discourse. In fact, there are studies which show that people are more likely to believe something they've heard many times, regardless of its validity (the **illusory truth effect**) -- and this result remains true even if those people are warned that often repeated statements are no more true than less frequently repeated ones. This fact has been exploited repeatedly by political campaigns and advertisements against you.

As an aside, I think the credo of "fair and balanced" has been inappropriately applied across American media for as long as I can remember, prompting news stations to offer a platform to fringe views in the name of ostensibly remaining balanced. Maybe this is the reason why conspiracy theories thrive in our country, from climate change deniers to anti-vaxxers to the astounding early 2010s movement (championed by none other than Donald Trump) which asserted that Barack Obama was a secret Muslim.

To conclude, if we support absolute free speech, there is no guarantee that we can accommodate the viewpoints of those who wish to censor free speech without empowering their views. In fact, I think the opposite is true. When we accommodate these kinds of views (those associated with supremacy, hate, and extremism), we are only offering them exposure, which results in a misinformed public.

Free speech absolutists: you are gaslighting America.

Some may question who exactly we can trust to define the line where hate speech begins, since it seems like political correctness is moving the goalposts of hate speech further and further these days. If this was your immediate response to my argument, I implore you to consider what it is you are defending. No matter how you define hate speech, neo-Nazism falls under that umbrella. I agree that there is a conversation to be had about censorship in social justice circles. There is also a discussion to be had about who gets to decide what hate speech is exactly. But the fact of the matter is, that is a discussion for another day. Bringing up this issue right here right now is a distraction, and to draw attention away from the very real problems being discussed right now regarding white supremacy in America is profoundly morally irresponsible.

0.4 Final Thoughts

A nuanced, well thought out view of free speech could not possibly defend the hateful kind of speech we heard last weekend. I'm welcome to hear any argument to the contrary, but so far I haven't seen any convincing ones. At this point, the centrists can only claim that (absolute) free speech is good in and of itself, which begs the question -- why? The way I see it, free speech should be guaranteed so that we can have honest discussions about controversial topics and move forward as a society. The mere presence of neo-Nazis disrupts and destroys the discussion, and it runs counter to the stated goals of free speech.

In my opinion, the so-called centrists on this issue are in reality radicals. They support arguments that are extreme and ones which lack any notion of nuance and practicality, and they over-extend and misapply notions like "free speech", "fairness", and "the benefit of the doubt".

In doing so, the radical centrists are playing devil's advocate for the devil himself.