A Clarification

I made a point in this post inelegantly in a way that was easy to misunderstand, so I'd like to clarify it.

I didn't mean that we need to tolerate brilliant homophobic jerks in the lab so that we can have scientific progress. Although there are famous counterexamples, most of the best scientists I've met are unusually nice, open-minded people. Generally I expect that labs that don't tolerate jerks will produce more impressive results than the ones that do, and choosing not to employ jerks is a good idea—jerks usually reduce the net output of organizations.

What I meant is simply that we need, as a society, to tolerate controversial ideas. The biggest new scientific ideas, and the most important changes to society, both start as extremely unpopular ideas.

It was literally heretical, not so long ago, to say that it was ok to be gay—the Bible has a different viewpoint. In a society where we don't allow challenges to the orthodoxy, gay rights would not have happened.

We need to allow free speech because sometimes society is wrong—we needed people to be able to say "gay people are ok" at a time when "gay people are evil" was the consensus opinion.

It's probably impossible to design a simple set of rules that will always allow the right speech and not the wrong speech (although I am sure that in this particular case, it is wrong that gay people in some places still fear for their safety.)

So we agree as a society that people are allowed to say controversial things,

and that free speech goes both ways. Much of the time people use that privilege to be jerks, and we can, should, and do point out why their bigotry is bad. Sometimes they use it to say that people deserve more rights, or that the solar system works in a different way from what the church says—and sometimes we collectively listen.

Over time, this system produces a more and more just world, which says something really good about people as a whole.

I wish we could figure out a way to just never allow hate, discrimination, and bigotry and always allow debate on controversial but important ideas. If that were possible, I'd support it. The distinction is usually clear, but the exceptions are sometimes critically important. Figuring out exactly where to draw the line is really hard.

Generations before us believed a lot of things we now believe (correctly, in my opinion) to be unethical or wrong. Future generations will think a lot of things we believe today are unethical or wrong.

For example, today it is pretty unpopular to say "anyone who eats meat is unethical". But this is easily a stance I could imagine being commonplace in 50 years, because of evolving views on animal rights, impact on the planet, and availability of lab-grown replacements. Perhaps even the arrival of AI makes us think differently about being ok eating other beings just because they're much less smart/emotionally sophisticated than we are.

The last time I tried to discuss this with someone, he said something like: "Banning eating meat would be infringing on my rights, this is not up for discussion."

I expect the fact that we let people live in poverty is also something that future generations will consider an absolute moral failing. I could go on with

a long list of other ideas, and I'm sure I can't even think of some of the most important ones.

The point I most wanted to make is that is that it's dangerous to just ban discussion of topics we find offensive, like what happened [yesterday](#).