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Is swearing morally innocent?

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Abstract

Some philosophers believe that swearing is morally innocent insofar as it is non-abusive and vulgarities are being used, such as when people exclaim "s**t!" or "f**k!" This article shows this view to be mistaken. I start by arguing that taking offense at non-abusive vulgar swearing is not irrational, before arguing that, even if it were, such swearing would still not always be justified. The fact that many of us find it hard to overcome profanity-induced offense, along with the fact that its existence is necessary for swearing to be possible, is sufficient to render even non-abusive vulgar swearing sometimes wrong. I go on to assess the opposite view, according to which swearing, including non-abusive vulgar swearing, is *never* justified, whereby two objections to this activity are addressed. According to the instrumentalization objection, the fact that swearing is possible *only* if at least some people are sometimes offended by the words that are used means that swearers treat those who are offended by their profanity as mere means. And according to the Ersatz objection, the fact that we can use inoffensive words to raise the emotional content of our speech renders swearing gratuitously offensive. Neither objection is found to be convincing.

KEYWORDS
cursing, offense, profanity, social taboos, swearing, vulgarities

1 | THE SOCIAL TABOO ON SWEARING

Swearing, which can be defined as the use of taboo words in order to add power to one's speech (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Potts, 2007),[1] is a widespread phenomenon within contemporary Western societies, on which I focus in this article. This is certainly true of the United States, where some estimates suggest that Americans use on average 80–90 swear words a day (Jay, 2009, pp. 155–156). While there exist differences in terms of how much different groups swear—for example, teenagers have been found to swear more than older individuals (Jay, 1992; Thelwall, 2008), and males more than females, at least until they reach old age (Jay, 1992, 1999)—the large majority of people within Western societies swear at least sometimes regardless of age (Jay, 1996), gender (Jay et al., 2006; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Rassin & Muris, 2005), socio-economic status (McEnery, 2009), and the size of their vocabulary (Jay & Jay, 2015).

Luckily for these individuals, or at least for those of them who at least occasionally utter religiously inspired swear words, they live in a relatively privileged time and place to do so. Had they lived in e.g. fifteenth century France, they may have been punished with pillory or with having their tongue cut out for using the names of "God or his glorious Mother" to swear (Temperman & Koltay, 2017, p. 27).[2] In fact, until this day, those who engage in blasphemous swearing within Pakistan and Iran might face the death penalty for doing so (World Watch Monitor, 2017). Besides having witnessed the abolishment of such cruel punishments for certain types of swearing, Western societies have seen a relaxing of informal social norms against the use of profanity. Evidence for this can be found in the dramatic increase in the use of swear words since the 1960s (DuFrene & Lehman, 2002), which has been attributed to processes of secularisation, the youth revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the relaxing of profanity-regulations for public broadcasting and movies (McGrath, 2012).

What is apposite for our purposes is that, as impressive as these changes are, it would be wrong to conclude from them that the use of profanity has become *salonfähig* within Western countries. There continue to be norms against it, which are enforced in most cases through the imposition of informal sanctions—just think of ones where swearers are verbally reprimanded, shamed, or shunned. However, formal sanctions continue to be sometimes imposed as well. For example, in 1999, Timothy Boomer was sentenced to four days of community service and to the payment of a 75-dollar fine or a three-day prison sentence in Michigan for cursing in front of two young children after he had fallen out of his canoe (Associated Press, 1999), while in 2008, British media regulator Ofcom awarded a £255,000 fine to music-video channel MTV for broadcasting "highly offensive language" before 9 pm, which included words such as, "f**k",[3] "s**t", "a big c**k" and "f**k it up" (Sweney, 2008). Yet whereas several philosophers have worked on issues surrounding the use of slurs and pejoratives (e.g. Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Hay, 2013; Hom, 2010; Jeshion, 2013; Kirk-Giannini, 2019; Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018), which include highly offensive words, such as N the-word and the C-word, but also weaker ones, such as the terms "jerk" and "s*cker", the topic of *non-abusive swearing*, which I define here as swearing that does not involve the use of slurs or pejoratives and that does not seek to insult specific individuals or groups of people, as when, for instance, someone says "f**k you!", has received scant attention from philosophers. To the best of my knowledge, the main exception is an article by David Shoemaker (2000) in which it is argued that non-abusive swearing should be tolerated—meaning among other things that such swearing ought not to be censored on public television and radio—when vulgarities are being uttered. In Shoemaker's view, for people to be offended by expletives such as "s**t!" and "f**k!" is *unreasonable* insofar as these terms are not used to insult anyone, which is why he opposes restricting their non-abusive use on public airwaves.

[1]More specifically, by breaching the taboos that rests on using certain words or on using them in particular ways, swearers signal that they care about a given issue, which is what adds power to their speech. Note that swearing is different from merely mentioning swear words, which is not done to invigorate speech. In this article, I mention several swear words, but in so doing, I am not swearing.

[2]Compare Mohr (2013, Chapter 3).

[3]The swear words mentioned in this article have been censored upon the editor's request.

One of the aims of this contribution is to challenge this view. After showing that taking offense at non-abusive vulgar swearing is not unreasonable or irrational, I argue that, even if it were, such swearing would still not always be justified (Section 2). I go on criticize the opposite view, according to which swearing, including non-abusive vulgar swearing, is *never* justified, whereby two objections to this activity are answered. According to the instrumentalization objection, the fact that swearing is possible *only* if at least some people are offended by the words that are used at least some of the time means that swearers treat those who are offended by their profanity as mere means (Section 3). And according to the Ersatz objection, the fact that we can use inoffensive words to raise the emotional content of our speech renders swearing gratuitously offensive (Section 4). The final section concludes (Section 5).

2 | IS NON-ABUSIVE VULGAR SWEARING INNOCENT?

Let us begin, then, by looking at David Shoemaker's view on non-abusive swearing in more detail. As mentioned, Shoemaker believes that non-abusive swearing with what he interchangeably calls "vulgarities" or "dirty words" is morally innocent and therefore ought to be tolerated within contemporary societies, which means, among other things, that it should not be banned from public airwaves. As he writes, "there are no good reasons to be found [...] for state's banning the use of such words in public media such as radio and television" (Shoemaker, 2000, pp. 573–574). On his understanding, vulgarities are words that tend to have scatological or sexual derivations/connotations, of which the most common ones in the English language are "f**k" and "s**t". Provided that such words are not used to insult people (as when someone says, "f**k you!"), but instead used merely as "intensifiers, or exclamations" (as when someone says, "f**k yeah!", to express feelings of satisfaction or when someone says, "s**t!", upon learning to have made a mistake), taking offense at their use is deemed to be unreasonable by him.

To support the claim that taking offense at non-abusive vulgar swearing is unreasonable, Shoemaker starts by noting, plausibly, that it cannot be the mere *sounds* of words such as "f**k" and "s**t" that make them offensive. The reason is that the same sounds are found in words whose use is not ordinarily considered problematic—among the examples he gives are a place in Virgina called "Norfolk", which is pronounced "Norf**k", and a type of tree known as the "S**tta tree" (Shoemaker, 2000, pp. 575–576). But, as he goes on to note, again plausibly, neither does it seem that the *referents* of words such as 'f**k' and 's**t' render it reasonable for people to be offended by them, given that the use of synonymous terms such as "copulation" or "intercourse" (for 'f**k') and "faecal matter" or "excrement" (for 's**t') is not taboo (Shoemaker, 2000, p. 577). In his view, this leaves one possible reason as to why taking offense at their non-abusive use might be reasonable, namely that these words are used, or have been used historically, to denigrate particular individuals or groups, as is true of e.g. the N-word (Shoemaker, 2000, p. 580). However, since this is not the case, his conclusion is that taking offense at them must be a "type of irrational reaction" that is akin to a "phobia" and, consequently, not something that can justify banning this type of swearing from public airwaves (Shoemaker, 2000, p. 584).

I believe that there are several problems with this argument, the first of which concerns its irrationality-charge. Whereas it is clear that individuals with, say, cynophobia (an overwhelming fear of dogs) and individuals with pogonophobia (an overwhelming fear of beards) have irrational fears, there are good grounds for doubting whether any offense that people might take at swearing, including non-abusive vulgar swearing, must be irrational, rendering the proposed analogy with phobias dubious. To explain further, it bears mentioning that terms such as "f**k" and "s**t" pertain to human activities that are heavily regulated by taboos, namely that of sex and that of excretion. While some of these taboos are irrational and consequently morally indefensible, such as the taboo against homosexual sex within strongly heteronormative cultures, others are both rational and morally necessary, such as ones against sex between parents and children and ones against public defecation (which may not just cause revulsion, but also help to spread diseases). The reason this is relevant is that we *should want people to take the latter taboos seriously.* However, when swearers break social norms

against the use of specific words pertaining to taboo-ridden activities, they exhibit a cavalier attitude towards said activities and the justified taboos that regulate them. And this, I take it, is something that someone might reasonably find offensive.

Let us suppose *arguendo*, though, that I am mistaken in thinking that it is not irrational for people to be offended when others swear with terms such as "f**k" and "s**t". Even then, and this brings us to a second problem, it does not follow that non-abusive vulgar swearing must be morally innocent. Consider a primary school teacher who knows that one of his students suffers from pogonophobia and is deciding whether to grow a beard. Insofar as this person does not have a very strong desire to have a beard, it looks like it would be problematic for him to grow one, given the distress that this is likely to cause the student. Or consider a dog-owner who knows that a person living in a nearby street suffers from cynophobia. Insofar as this individual can easily avoid walking her dog through the cynophobic's street and thereby spare the latter a lot of anxiety, it would appear problematic for her to do so nonetheless. However, if these observations are correct, then just because it would be irrational for others to take offense at a given action of ours *x* does not entail that it must be morally permissible for us to engage in *x*.

At this point, someone might concede this but ask: Why should the responsibility to protect people from irrational offense fall even partially on the would-be offenders? Given the irrationality of such offense, should the would-be offendees not assume (full) responsibility by trying to overcome their ill-grounded feelings of shock, annoyance, and so on? My response is that, as far as swearing is concerned, including non-abusive vulgar swearing, this is unlikely to be the case. One reason for this is that many individuals—think, for instance, of members of the Dutch anti-swearing organisation League Against Swearing [Bond Tegen Vloeken], which is well-known within this country for its posters on railway stations that urge people to abstain from swearing and for its "swearing hotline" [meldpunt vloeken] where people can report instances of foul language on media platforms (Bond Tegen Vloeken, 2023)—seem unable to (completely) relieve themselves from profanity-induced offense, or simply from specific forms thereof, even if they wanted to rid themselves of it and tried hard. This can be explained by the fact that such aversion tends to be deeply rooted, as most of us are socialized from a young age onwards to take offense at (specific forms) of swearing through aversive classical conditioning (Jay, 2009; Stapleton et al., 2022; Tomash & Reed, 2013).

But there is another, more important, consideration supporting the notion that we should sometimes refrain from swearing, including non-abusive vulgar swearing, when this is likely to cause offense. This is that for swearers to consistently expect others not to be offended by their swearing or by that of other foul mouths would be *self-defeating*, as such offense appears necessary for the activity of swearing to be possible. To bring this out, we need to note two things. First, we must recall that swearing consist of the use of taboo words to add vigour to one's speech. Imagine a person saying, "what a dreadful day" or "what a terrible day". Unlike saying "s**tty day" or "f**king awful day", this would not amount to swearing, as there is no taboo on the use of the terms 'dreadful' and 'terrible' (cf. Mohr, 2013).[4] Second, we must observe that, realistically, words can be taboo *only if* there are (enough) people who are offended by their use in general or only by their use as speech-intensifiers, meaning that they experience negative mental states, such as shock, annoyance, or anger (cf. Feinberg, 1988). Consider again the words 'f**k' and 's**t'. If no one was ever upset about people using these words, it is difficult to see how they could retain their taboo status and continue to be used effectively to swear—for an example of a word that some believe have completely lost its taboo status and thereby its swearing-potential, one might think of the word "pissed"; within contemporary Anglophone societies such as the United States, hardly anyone takes offense anymore when someone expresses their anger by saying that they are "pissed at something" (Malady, 2013). However, if using taboo words is necessary for swearing, and if words can be taboo *only if* they at least sometimes cause offense, then swearing can occur *only if* at least some people some of the time are offended by the words that are used, which suggests in turn that it must be

[4]Indeed, even if the utterer of these words mistakenly believed that there was one, it seems that she will still not have sworn.

unreasonable—because self-defeating—for swearers to expect others never to take offense at their swearing or at similar swearing by other individuals.[5]

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not claiming here that to be able to swear, there should always be a bystander taking offense at our foul mouths, which is clearly wrong. When I shout e.g. "f**k!" when I am all alone, or amidst those who are undisturbed by such exclamations (think of groups with a high tolerance of profanity, such as rappers and soccer hooligans), I am swearing even though there might not be anyone around to experience negative mental states as a result. The point I am making is simply that the words that swearers use must offend *at least some people some of the time* in order to have taboo status and thus to enable swearing, which it was noted may no longer apply in some Anglophone countries to the term 'pissed' even though it remains true of another defecation-related term, namely that of "s**t". However, if this is correct, then it appears incoherent for swearers to complain that other individuals should not be offended by their foul mouths, given that if no one ever took offense at their use of specific swear words or at other people's use of them, they would not be able to swear with those words at all.

3 | THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OBJECTION

Thus far, I have offered reasons for thinking, *pace* Shoemaker, that taking offense at swearing, including non-abusive vulgar swearing, is not irrational or unreasonable, before arguing that, even if it were, it still would not follow that swearing is always morally justified. The fact that many of us find it hard to overcome such offense, along with the fact that its existence is necessary for swearing to be possible at all, seems sufficient to render even non-abusive vulgar swearing sometimes wrong and, I suspect, to justify restricting its use on public airwaves, although a discussion of this topic is beyond this article's scope. What I want to do in this section and the next is to assess a view that is the opposite to the one discussed within the previous section, according to which swearing, including non-abusive vulgar swearing, is *never* morally justified. (While the dearth of normative scholarship on this type of swearing means that there have not been any scholars who have espoused this view in print, it is one that has been advocated for over a century by the aforementioned League Against Swearing (Bond Tegen Vloeken, 2023).)

One possible ground for accepting this view derives from my earlier observation that swearing is possible *only* if at least some people are offended by the words that are used at least some of the time. If this dependency-claim is correct, then it might be argued that swearers must fail to treat any bystanders who are offended by their swearing as ends in themselves (cf. Kant, 1996 [1797]), given that they would not be able to do what they are doing if no one was ever shocked, annoyed, or angered by their foul speech or by similar speech from other swearers. Call this the "instrumentalization objection".

One possible rejoinder to the instrumentalization objection maintains that those who swear are not normally aware that this activity is offense-dependent and, as such, cannot be meaningfully said to treat as mere means those who take offense at their words, the assumption being that such instrumentalization ought to be *intentional*. What is pertinent for us is that, even if this is correct, it remains true that those who swear engage in an activity that can take place *only if* there exist individuals who at least sometimes suffer negative mental states upon hearing the used swear-words, which seems problematic regardless of how we call it.

While the current objection presents a real challenge even my use of the term 'instrumentalization' is unwarranted, then, I do not think it establishes that non-abusive vulgar swearing is wrong across the board. For one thing, when there are no offended bystanders (see the previous section), it is difficult to see what could be morally objectionable about my profanity given that it does not cause anyone to suffer negative mental states, at least

[5]Notice that by having this offense-dependency, swearing differs from various other activities that are deemed offensive by some. For example, for an interracial couple to marry does not require anyone to be offended by their marriage even though some racists are, neither does the possibility of naturist recreation depend on anyone being offended by the sight of naked bodies even though some prudish people are.

insofar as the swear words used are not abusive towards anyone (as is true of "s**t" and "f**k" but not of e.g. the N-word, whose use as a speech intensifier might be morally indefensible *irrespective* of whether there is anyone around to hear it; I leave this for the reader to decide).

What if there are bystanders who are at least somewhat offended by my non-abusive vulgar swearing? Even then, such swearing does not always look wrong. Part of the reason for lies in the fact that swearing may, and often does, serve weighty interests. Without attempting to offer an exhaustive list, let me mention a few:

> *Hypoalgesia*: Swearing can function as a relief mechanism for pain and stress (cf. Montagu, 2001, p. 67). Not only do people report feeling better after swearing (Jay et al., 2006), a study by Stephens et al. (2009) found that individuals who shouted taboo words as opposed to neutral words could hold their hand into a bucket of ice nearly twice as long a finding that was replicated by Stephens and Umland (2011), whereas another study in which participants had to recall memories of being socially excluded demonstrated that swearing reduces social pain as well (Philipp & Lombardo, 2017).
>
> *Social cohesion*: Several studies have found that swearing has the potential to foster cohesion by promoting collective identities. Groups among which this phenomenon has been reported include e.g. Australian tradespeople, workers at a New-Zealand soap factory, and industrial and office workers at a large Swedish firm (Baruch & Jenkins, 2007; Daly et al., 2004; McLeod, 2011; Nelson, 2014).[6]
>
> *Comic and entertainment value*: Although it would be mistaken to equate being vulgar with being funny, some of us, including Shoemaker (2000, p. 583), consider the use of vulgar swear words by certain comedians—Shoemaker mentions Richard Pryor—funny as long as the right words are used at the right time. However, even when someone's swearing is not deemed to have comic value, it might still be entertaining. For example, the success of the televised cooking competition, Hell's Kitchen, is in no small part due to the foul mouth of host Gordon Ramsey, whose frequent use of expletives is a major part of his persona.

What is pertinent for present purposes is that *all of us* seem to reap swearing-related benefits at certain moments. The easiest way of demonstrating this is to recall that virtually everyone swears from time to time and thereby gets to enjoy its hypoalgesic benefits—while some swear more than others,[7] it should be noted that it is not clear that sparse swearers benefit less from this type of linguistic activity than do more frequent swearers, as Stephens and Umland's (2011) study found that the pain-alleviating effects of swearing decrease the more people swear. Furthermore, even in the unlikely event that someone *never swears during her life*, which becomes especially improbable when we consider that terms that mimic certain swear words, such as "fudge" (instead of f**k) and "shoot" (instead of s**t), are best understood as swear words themselves (more on this in the next section), this person will in all likelihood still draw advantages from other people's swearing. This might happen, for instance, when those around her become more pleasant to interact with because they let off steam every now and then by being profane.

Now, if I am right that everyone of us is bound to benefit from swearing in both direct ways and indirect ways during their lives, then it becomes difficult to see how this practice could treat some people as mere means. Such instrumentalization would suggest that there are individuals who are being exploited by the

[6]Swearing can even be part of the identity of an entire city. For example, many inhabitants of The Hague cherish the use of coarse language as an expression of Haguenese identity, which has led some to refer to their city as "Curse City Number 1" [*Vloekstad Nummer 1*] (Bral, 2017).

[7]See the studies cited in the antepenultimate section.

practice of swearing. However, since even those who are relatively easily offended by swearing, or by specific forms thereof, are likely to draw important advantages from it, such exploitation seems missing. (Which, of course, does not entail that it will *always* be justified to swear in their presence even when the swearing involves the non-abusive use of vulgarities; as discussed within the previous section, there are good grounds for thinking that this is not the case.)

4 | THE ERSATZ OBJECTION

Suppose I am right that the instrumentalization objection to non-abusive vulgar swearing fails. In that case, there remains another objection that might be raised against this type of swearing, which similarly maintains that it fails to show due concern for those who are (easily) offended by profanity. This objection, which I will refer to as the "Ersatz objection", is predicated on the assumption that for any taboo word that individuals use to swear, there exist non-taboo words that allow them to achieve the instrumental benefits of swearing *without ever causing offense*, such as "fudge" (instead of f**k) and "shoot" (instead of s**t). If correct, then assuming we should not gratuitously offended others on account of the unpleasant mental states that this produces, the availability of such substitutes, or what are sometimes called "minced oaths" (Hazen, 2020), would suggest that swearing can *never* be morally justified.

I believe that the Ersatz objection is wanting as well. One problem with it is that, although terms such as 'fudge' and 'shoot' are generally considered to be *less offensive* than the taboo words they mimic, some people consider them to be taboo as well due to their association with the latter, which explains, among other things, why those who use them are sometimes reproached for this (cf. Hordijk, 2009). However, if this is so, then rather than being *substitutes* for taboo words, it appears that minced oaths are best seen as *comparatively mild taboo words*, which would mean that using them to invigorate one's speech qualifies as swearing, albeit of a relatively mild kind.

What if people use speech-intensifying words that do not bear *any semblance* to existing taboo words, which seems to be the alternative endorsed by the League Against Swearing (GeenStijl, 2009; Kleinjan, 2011)? For example, in a recent study, Stephens and Robertson (2020) asked participants to an ice-cold water hand immersion-experiment to exclaim the made-up words, "twizpipe" and "fouch" to cope with the cold.

The thing to say about such cases, I think, is that although the words that are used might not be taboo for anyone, they have a major drawback, which is that they *do not provide the same benefits as taboo words*. To explain further, Stephens and Robertson found that shouting words such as 'twizpipe' and 'fouch' fails to have any hypoalgesic effects. Since such effects are the most widely accessible benefit of swearing, as well one of the most important ones given the value that wellbeing has on all major axiological theories (Crisp, 2021) and the extent to which swearing can promote it (whereas Stephens and Robertson report increases in pain thresholds and pain tolerance of over 30%, it was noted already that Stephens et al. (2009) found that study-participants who shouted taboo words as opposed to neutral words could hold their hand into an ice-bucket almost twice as long), the fact that non-taboo words lack such hypoalgesic potential suggests that their use will often not be a suitable alternative to swearing either.

5 | FINAL REMARKS

That concludes my appraisal of non-abusive vulgar swearing. Against Shoemaker, I argued that such swearing is not an entirely innocent activity. As became clear, not only is it not unreasonable or irrational for people to take offense at it, even if it were, engaging in it would still not always be justified, given how difficult many of us find it overcome profanity-induced offense and given that the existence of such offense is necessary for

swearing to be possible. However, I went on to argue that this does not mean that non-abusive vulgar swearing is always wrong. To discredit this opposite view, I considered and rejected two objections against swearing more generally. According to the instrumentalization objection, the fact that swearing is possible *only if* at least some people are offended by the words that are used at least some of the time means that swearers treat those who are offended by their profanity as mere means. And according to the Ersatz objection, the fact that we can use inoffensive words to raise the emotional content of our speech renders swearing gratuitously offensive.

Overall, then, I think we ought to say that non-abusive vulgar swearing is morally permissible in some cases but not others. My hope is that future research will explore in more detail exactly when it is, as well as what the normative implications are for the use of profanity on public airwaves among other relevant settings.

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