

And, best beloved of best men, Liberty.

—Algernon Swinburne

REVIEWS

You Are Perfectly Things

by Allen Mendenhall | Posted November 27, 2014

Continuing in its fifth year, the BroadSides series published by Encounter Books consists of paperback pamphlets modeled on 18th-century political pamphlets such as *The Federalist Papers* and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Short and accessible, polemical and jargon-free, speedily produced and mass-marketed, these pamphlets examine any number of policy issues from immigration and climate change to gun control and Obamacare.

Published this year, the 39th book in the series is Greg Lukianoff's *Freedom From Speech*, a vigorous and cogent refutation of the increasingly popular notion that people have a right not to be offended. Lukianoff is an attorney and the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving civil liberties in academia. His first book, *Unleashing Liberty*, earned high acclaim from pundits and reviewers with diverse political leanings.

Who gets to decide what is offensive and what isn't? How do we determine who is worthy of such power?

"It seems as if every day brings a new controversy regarding the purportedly offensive remarks of a celebrity, an official, or an ordinary citizen," Lukianoff observes, "followed by irate calls for the speaker to suffer some sort of retribution." He points to Donald Sterling, Phil Robertson, Paula Deen, Gary Oldman, Don Imus, Mel Gibson, Jerry Seinfeld, Isaiah Washington, and Alec Baldwin as examples of public figures whose insensitive statements provoked the ire of the commentariat and set into motion institutional disciplinary procedures that used humiliation as a form of rehabilitation. Having a mean thought and then expressing it, or failing to choose your words prudently, can result not just in your silencing, but in your punishment. And the parameters of approved opinion keep getting narrower. What Lukianoff calls "the thought pattern of the modern American censor" is reducible to this decree: "there must be zero tolerance for anything that anyone might consider offensive, regardless of the context."

This impossible standard raises countless questions. Who gets to decide what is offensive and what isn't? How do we determine who is worthy of such power? By what criteria should allegedly offensive statements be evaluated for acceptability? What's a manageable method for regulating speech if people of every background and belief are prone to offense at some phrase, characterization, or tone? One wonders where all this is heading when the CEO of a major corporation, Mozilla, is forced to resign after it's revealed that he made (legally permissible) donations to a campaign supporting California's Proposition 8 (a proposition opposing gay marriage).

Regardless of one's view of that issue, it shouldn't escape notice that no respectable figure was calling for the president to resign because of his own documented

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opposition to gay marriage while Proposition 8 was on the ballot in 2008. By what measure does Obama get a pass while Brendan Eich, the Mozilla CEO, gets the boot?

There are no reasonable answers to these questions, only more questions. Lukianoff acknowledges that "what happened to Eich was not an actual First Amendment violation" because Mozilla is a private company, not a government entity, "but that does not mean," Luikianoff avers, "it had nothing to do with free speech." On the contrary, "freedom of speech is a far broader idea that includes additional cultural values" that warrant debate and study, not silencing and condemnation. Only through the rigorous filtering mechanisms of longstanding deliberation and civil confrontation can good ideas be sorted from the bad. Only by maintaining disagreement at a rhetorical and discursive level can we facilitate tolerance and understanding and prevent the imposition of ideas by brute force.

Lukianoff's primary target is American higher education and such strange phenomena as the now-frequent "disinvitations" of speakers and the "trigger warnings" for course materials deemed upsetting. The problem is not limited to American colleges and universities — other countries and other entities have their own varieties of censorship — but the censorship culture tends to emanate from American institutions of higher education, where eager and impressionable students are easily conditioned to believe they are doing the right thing by removing from their purview ideas they don't like. The irony is that young people believe they're dissenting when they quash dissent, usually at the behest or encouragement of faculty and administrators who enjoy positions of authority.

Build thick skin; develop counter-discourse; sharpen your own mind and rhetoric. But don't put the institutional muzzle on free expression.

Students above all will benefit from Lukianoff's quick and informative read. They'll learn that intellectual comfort is dangerously close to unthinking laziness and that censorship is not a matter of "left" versus "right," "liberal" versus "conservative," or any other simplistic, polarizing signifiers that dumb down constructive debate or prevent it altogether.

Freedom of speech is not the same as freedom from speech. Rather than learning how to avoid offense at all costs, academics, professional victims, and those pretending to be academics and victims ought to learn how not to take offense, how to handle offense in healthy and productive ways, or how to intelligently, rationally, creatively and convincingly rebut arguments and positions with which they disagree. Build thick skin; develop counter-discourse; sharpen your own mind and rhetoric. But don't put the institutional muzzle on free expression.

We all on some level wish to live out our days serenely and swimmingly, away from opposition and complacently content with our limited experience and cherished presuppositions. It's work, after all, to defend our convictions and justify the actions that our beliefs inspire us to take. The fact of the matter, however, is that we cannot progress without overcoming challenges. If universities are places that cultivate critical thinking, as they claim to be, they must welcome a range of values and opinions. Freedom of speech cannot mean freedom to suppress the speech of others. A freedom that is divisible or available to a preselected few is no freedom at all.

Lukianoff realizes this. His organization combats censorship in its many manifestations on a daily basis.

As battles over university censorship continue, keep your eye on Lukianoff. He'll be on the front lines. "The fight for freedom of speech has never been easy," he says, adding that "it will be a hard battle indeed." More than a few readers of this book

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will be ready to enlist. Mr. Lukianoff, reinforcements are on their way.

Editor's Note: *Review of "Freedom From Speech," by Greg Lukianoff. Encounter No. 39, BroadSides. Encounter Books, 2014, 61 pp.*

About this Author

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