On the duty of not taking offence

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People take offence too easily and are encouraged to do so by, e.g., institutional harassment policies. 'Offensive' is sometimes equated with 'anything that offends someone', sometimes with a definitive list of specific behaviours. When is it justifiable to take offence? Distinctions need to be drawn: between offensive to the senses and to the mind; between meaning to offend, actually giving offence, and behaving in a manner likely to cause offence; between feeling upset and taking some formal action; between what is offensive to some, to all, and in itself. Comments are made on objectivity in moral judgements. Currently there is a failure to distinguish between what offends and what is objectively offensive. Practical consequences occur in terms of censorship and freedom of speech. Generalisations and jokes about identifiable groups or stereotypes are not inherently offensive. A distinction is drawn between being upset and being a victim. Taking offence is a supremely self-serving act. Current concern with offence trivialises morality and runs counter to basic principles of toleration, freedom and fairness.

Preface

I am greatly honoured to have been invited to give the first John Wilson Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the Journal of Moral Education. Although we worked in different countries, thousands of miles apart, for more than twenty-five years, John was one of the colleagues to whom I felt closest and most affectionate. He was a man of great good humour, sincerity, commitment and integrity: good-humoured in the sense of equable, committed particularly to truth and education, and a man of integrity in the proper sense of a man committed to a coherent ideal rather, perhaps, than in the vulgar sense of obedient to conventional mores. One other thing: his style of writing (and talking – there was not a great deal of difference) always delighted me. In this paper, I have attempted a mild emulation of that style, characterized by its openness, plain English, eschewing of irrelevant name-dropping, and, especially, in its tendency to rush off in all directions, concerned more to pursue the truth than

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†This is the text of the first John Wilson Memorial Lecture, delivered at the 40th Anniversary Conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, New College, Oxford, 1 April 2005.

ISSN 0305-7240 (print)/ISSN 1465-3877 (online)/05/030265-11
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DOI: 10.1080/03057240500211600
to pin it down definitively. In John’s work there was more than an echo of Plato’s
dialogues, where the journey matters more than the destination.

John’s interest in moral education is well known. In this paper, by examining the
issue of taking offence, and arguing that a coherent position on the subject requires
sorting out contradictions commonly to be found in our view of morality, I hope to
contribute indirectly to the question of what form moral education should take.
There is material here that speaks directly to the moral upbringing of the young (e.g.,
the questions of censorship of children’s literature and of the attitude towards giving
offence that we should cultivate) and to the ‘moral guidance’ of the adult (e.g.,
harassment policies and other codes of conduct). But it also has, I hope, significant
indirect relevance in exploring some common confusions in our thinking about what
is and what is not morally (as distinct from otherwise) offensive.

I, who happen to be a male, call a female colleague, to her face, a ‘stupid bitch’.
May she, can she, ought she to take offence? If offence is to be taken, does this
depend on the facts of the case? Had some of the facts been different (it was a male
colleague; it was a stranger; the phrase was actually ‘silly bugger’), would the answer
to the question of whether offence was to be taken have been different? Or does it
depend upon my intentions? Upon her feelings? On the background to the
event? Perhaps on some combination of these, or on something else entirely? In the
event, she complains to the University’s Human Equity Office (which covers
harassment disputes, offensive behaviour, in fact more or less anything to do with
human interaction), and files an official complaint. May I, can I, should I now be
offended? Does the fact that she is reacting to something that I ‘started’ have any
bearing on the case? (Did I in fact ‘start’ it? How does one determine the beginning
of such things?) Anyway, in the event, I write a paper ridiculing the whole series of
events, in particular criticizing the University’s policies and procedures on
appropriate behaviour and the manner in which the Equity Office has chosen to
interpret them. May the equity officer, can she, ought she now to take offence as
well?

Whatever the answer to these and similar questions, I think that people are taking
offence too often and too easily. More particularly, while I accept that there should
be some limits on (what is designated as) offensive behaviour, I think that we also
have a duty not to take offence too readily. Perhaps in my simplistic example, the
male is to be severely chastised; but perhaps also the female ought not to have taken
offence or, at least, (and clearly this needs to be distinguished) ought not to have
reacted by taking formal proceedings. This position is out of joint with the times,
when most institutions, particularly academic ones, sport harassment policies or the
equivalent that include copious reference to ‘offensive’ behaviour and language,
when schooling places considerable emphasis on impressing on the young the
importance of not giving offence, and when people in general (at any rate those who
have nothing better to do and can afford it) run to sue in response to the merest
suggestion that they have clay feet.
One way to avoid the following discussion would be to say that 'offensive' is just a general term of discommendation. To call something offensive is more or less equivalent to calling it bad or reprehensible. The problem with that response is twofold: first, it is not actually true; 'offensive' is not just a general term implying disapproval, but rather a word that has a number of distinct meanings and uses. Second, it is not treated as a general term of disapproval in most institutional codes of practice or policy statements: on the contrary, while most policies can be (and often have been) torn apart for their contradictions, confusions and, above all, ambiguities, there is no doubt that generally speaking they mean a set of specific behaviours when they refer to offensive behaviour, except when they fall into the mindless state of equating 'offensive' with whatever causes anyone to 'feel offended'. Similarly, children are not (quite) taught to avoid any critical, negative, unflattering remarks about any culture or behaviour, but they are taught that they should never be offensive in word or deed. So there is clearly presumed to be a difference between saying, e.g., 'we should send all the Pakis home' (offensive) and saying, e.g., 'we should send all the Nazis home' (not-offensive). While there is a sense in which no one should ever be offensive (namely the sense that no one should ever act in ways that cause others understandably and justifiably to take offence), that hardly solves the problem. The problem is basically to sort out what can sensibly be said about justifiably taking offence and to ensure that we confine our rule-making at most to that area. I say 'at most', because it is not self-evident, even when we believe that someone has justifiably taken offence, that the behaviour that causes the offence should be prohibited, punished, etc. But it surely is tolerably uncontentious to say that, at any rate, the mere fact that somebody somewhere does or may take offence at something is not sufficient to brand that something as 'offensive' in any sense that implies unacceptable or not to be tolerated.

So let us begin by making some basic distinctions, in the hope that we can arrive at some rather more specific notions of 'offensive', each of which can then be handled in a rational manner. First, there is a standard distinction between what is offensive to the senses and what is offensive to the mind. The former is relatively unproblematic and less interesting. Even allowing for the fact that your ears, eyes and nose (to get no more intimate) are not mine, we can generalize and agree that some smells, sights and sounds are unpleasant to humans. We can, therefore, without too much fuss say that in referring to the smell of garlic as offensive we are making a comment about the garlic rather than about our likes and dislikes (many of us like garlic; personally I don't particularly mind the smell of it, nonetheless, I recognize that the smell of yesterday's garlic is offensive in a way that the smell of roses is not). The only point relevant to our discussion here is that some people now want to legislate about offensive smells and so on, too. Thus, my doctor's surgery and at least one faculty of education in Canada have recently banned the use of all cosmetics such as scent, aftershave and deodorant. This ban can be defended on the grounds that some people are allergic to the smells in question rather than simply that they find them offensive (that is, don't like them), but that raises the further question of the peanut butter syndrome. By the latter I refer to the question of to
what extent some people's genuine difficulties should lead to restrictions on others. Some children have a very real, potentially lethal, allergy to peanut butter. But it is very rare and, besides, there is a case for saying that the child, the parents and the teacher should monitor the situation carefully, rather than that (as has happened more than once) all children should be forbidden to bring peanut butter to school. These are undoubtedly interesting conundrums in their own right, but will not detain us here. Let us simply say, broadly speaking, and with the sorts of qualification noted, when smells, sights and sounds are said to be offensive, the claim is that the smell, etc., itself is to a degree objectively unpleasing.

But straight away, because the mind is different from any sense organ, it is evident that what is offensive to the mind must to some extent depend upon the particular mind in question. Offensive action and talk must at the very least be action and talk that, when reflected upon and weighed up in the light of one's various beliefs and understandings, are judged to be annoying, irritating or anger-provoking. And since minds are routinely (or may be) different in a manner and to a degree that hearing and sight are not, what is offensive may clearly differ likewise. Garlic smells offensive even if you happen to have no sense of smell. It does not make sense to say that a proposition is offensive except in the judgement of some particular mind(s). Hence, something that is objectively offensive would have to berationally defensible to all as reprehensible, just as an objective scientific claim has to meet public criteria of truth.

A second distinction to note is between being offensive in the sense of 1) meaning to offend; 2) actually giving offence, and 3) behaving in a manner that is likely to cause offence (or, of course, any combination of these). Confusion between the first two senses is common and obviously problematic because it glosses over crucial points in law and morality about intention and consequences. The notion of behaving in a manner likely to cause offence seems to me even more problematic. Likely to cause offence to whom? And is it objectionable to behave in ways that, though deemed likely to cause offence, do not in fact do so? A stag party, for example, might well involve no intention to offend anyone, no actual offence to anyone present, but nonetheless involve behaviour that would be likely to offend the mother of the bride. Is the behaviour in question ipso facto offensive? Well, yes, but only in the very specific sense noted.

Two brief points on taking offence: given the litigious atmosphere we live in, we would do well to distinguish between taking offence in the sense of feeling irritated (outraged/annoyed) and taking offence in some sense formally. At its most extreme taking offence formally would mean treating the offensive behaviour as actionable; less extreme would be to demand an apology. The distinction is between merely feeling offended and regarding oneself as a victim deserving recompense. The other point is closely connected: taking offence (in either of the senses just distinguished) involves in some sense deciding to be hurt. One can of course just be hurt: for example, a person casually says to me 'You know, your father was a bastard', and I am upset, whether I want to be or not. But to take offence is more than to be hurt, more than to be spurned into an emotional reaction. To take offence involves regarding the behaviour that
causes the hurt as reprehensible; it involves a judgement on the propriety of the behaviour, and one can choose not to make such judgement.

The final preliminary distinction is between 1) what is offensive to some people; 2) what is offensive to all people; and 3) what is offensive in itself. This of course immediately invites the question: can one give sense to the idea of something being offensive in itself (in relation to what is offensive to the mind)? I think so, just as one can give sense to the idea of something being morally wrong, even when members of a community do not see it as such. It makes perfectly good sense to maintain that Socrates was right to believe that escaping the death penalty was morally wrong, even though Athenian practice and sentiment did not concur. But while it is perfectly meaningful, can one in fact sustain the notion that there are right and wrong, regardless of opinion? This is not the place to begin another paper on objectivity and truth in ethics, but the topic is familiar enough for it to be permissible for me simply to state my position.

Certain moral principles just do obtain, regardless of what any individual’s opinion may be, because they define what we collectively understand morality to be about. It makes no sense to suggest that there is nothing morally good about being impartial or that there is no presumption in favour of freedom as a moral good, because the enterprise that we understand as morality (even if we are paid up Thrasymacheans) is defined in terms of such things, as surely as football is defined in terms of scoring goals. Coerced behaviour just isn’t moral behaviour. Certain behaviours similarly just are morally wrong, though here I think we have to fall back on intuition, problematic as it may be. Gratuitous torture, for example, is clearly a paradigm case of immoral conduct. Of course, there is room for argument, perhaps never-ending argument, about what is torture and when it is truly gratuitous, but that does not prevent us from stating categorically that if somebody were to saw off somebody else’s head in public, for no justifiable reason, that would be immoral. If you don’t see that, it is not that you have a different moral theory or perspective: it is that you do not understand what the conversation is about.

I would expect this audience to agree with the very limited claim I have made here, even though I have not demonstrated its truth. I would also expect this audience to agree, despite all our differences, with the more realistic and specific claim that seeing off the head of a non-combatant, albeit in a game of very high stakes, when one thinks one has God on one’s side and that nobody can be truly innocent, is offensive. Nonetheless, some will say ‘well, I agree, though I don’t share your view overall; I do find this offensive, but the people who do this and their supporters don’t find it offensive, so aren’t we back to square one?’ My response to this, I’m afraid, is only to repeat myself: I don’t care what they think (and please remember we are not here talking about whether their act is justifiable in some way); this action is quintessentially offensive (even if justifiable). If you don’t see that, then the term ‘offensive’ has absolutely no purchase; it is simply the emotivist shriek of distaste and we may as well cease all debate. We are confusing the fact that people may have reasons (even quite good reasons) for doing things, with the question of whether
what they do, even if it is explicable, is or is not nonetheless disgusting. We are probably also making the common mistake of assuming that all values are moral values. An action might be offensive without being immoral. Conceivably one might justify a particular execution without talking nonsense about it being pretty or edifying. But, in addition to the distinction between ‘explaining’ and ‘justifying’ our actions, we should note this: an act can be morally bad in itself, even if on occasion morally justified. This distinction seems to me extremely important and greatly underappreciated (Barrow, 1991). Many might argue, for example, that abortion is bad (is not morally neutral) but can be justified (e.g., to save the life of the mother). In the same way, conceivably (although I do not accept this myself), a beheading might be arguably morally justified, but it is still in itself morally bad and, ipso facto, repugnant and morally offensive.

Thus we must distinguish between people feeling something is distasteful and determining that objection to it should be formally registered, whether legally or otherwise; between intentionally causing (or trying to) offence, giving offence (intentionally or otherwise), and engaging in activity that is deemed liable to give offence (whether intentionally or successfully or not), and finally, and in each case, between an act that is offensive to a few, an individual, the majority or inherently. And we must recognize the meaningfulness of the latter. Furthermore, the inherently offensive need not be of the extreme and vivid sort that I used as an example. Indeed, I would suggest that more commonly and obviously it is the ignoring of certain very general and abstract principles that is self-evidently offensive, as, for instance, when we see a person treating others purely as means or when we witness examples of blatant discrimination.

What then is problematic about offensiveness? Bearing in mind the distinctions noted, can it not now be readily agreed that offensiveness is always negative (though it may be justified), that other things being equal we should seek to avoid causing offence, that inherently offensive acts are morally culpable and that people are morally right to take offence, in the sense of make some kind of formal protest, when subjected to inherently offensive behaviour?

There are two problems. The first is that some would object to the fact that in summarizing I have left out reference to acts that, while not inherently offensive, nonetheless as a matter of fact cause offence to some or many. The second is that, despite what I have said, the current climate of political and moral correctness has led to a complete failure to make the distinction between what someone finds offensive and what is inherently offensive. The consequence of these two points is that almost any practice or comment, as things currently are, can be objected to, because almost anything will cause offence to someone in the sense of ‘upset’ them, and the climate of the times defines ‘offensive’ in terms of what causes upset as opposed to the way(s) in which I have tried to characterize it. In taking any person’s reaction as a given, it refuses to allow recognition of any of the distinctions and qualifications to which I have referred.

I do not think it necessary or profitable to analyse various policy documents in detail at this time to make the point that, time and again, actions that may undoubtedly cause
some people to feel hurt on some occasions are treated as if they were inherently offensive, when there are no discernible grounds for so doing. (And please remember that I concede the possibility that there are inherently offensive acts, which some supporters of these policies would on occasion quite inconsistently deny.) Nor is it worth travelling through the same documents to establish that no thought at all appears to have been given to the distinction between there being reason in the sense of explanation for taking offence and reason in the sense of justification, and between taking umbrage and responding with some kind of formal retaliation. Nor do we need here to demonstrate the palpable fact that such documents have been drawn up by people who do not understand the significance of such things as intentions.

The points at issue are perfectly illustrated by Philip Roth's *The human stain* (2000), where a professor, referring to two students who have never appeared during the first six weeks of his class, asks would-be humorously, 'are they spooks?'. Too bad for him that the students in question are black and that a secondary meaning of the word spook (primarily, ghost) is, apparently, a black person in a derogatory sense. Needless to say, the professor did not know they were black, was not thinking of the secondary sense of the term (if he knew it), and intended no offence. Needless to say, it is not inherently offensive to refer to unseen students as spooks (ghosts). But somebody somewhere took offence. Somebody simply did not like it, and the professor's career is finished.

For those who do not like examples from fiction (which indeed can only illustrate, not demonstrate reality), I would refer to a book such as Diane Ravitch's *The language police* (2003), which catalogues the hundreds of effectively banned references in school text books in the United States. One of Ravitch's points is that censorship is not and does not have to be a state monopoly, because by the time the various facts of the matter such as centralized book-buying by large states and the wish of publishers to make money and avoid trouble rather than advance the world of book-learning are taken into account, anything that any group that is prepared to raise objection to in an offensive manner (my joke) will effectively be censored.

Thus, to cite actual examples, a biography of Gutzon Borglum, who designed the monument at Mount Rushmore, is to be dropped because the monument 'is an abomination to the Black Hills because many Lakota people consider the Black Hills to be a sacred place to pray' (Ravitch, 2003, p. 12). A bias and sensitivity panel, such as apparently most publishers in the US now use, was equally concerned about a brief history of peanuts. It 'wanted to kill the passage for saying that some Brazilian tribes had been defeated by European explorers. [They] did not challenge the historical accuracy ... they must have concluded that these facts would hurt someone's feelings' (p. 9). A true story about a blind man who hiked to the top of the highest mountain in North America was rejected on the grounds that it was biased against those who do not live in mountainous areas and that it suggested that blind people 'are somehow at a disadvantage' (p. 10). A story about a rotting tree stump that provided shelter to a succession of insects, birds, plants and animals was rejected because, in comparing the tree stump to an apartment house, it contained 'a
negative, demeaning, stereotype of apartments' (p. 13). The panel claimed 'Youngsters who have grown up in a housing project may be distracted by similarities to their own living conditions. An emotional response may be triggered' (p. 13). A passage about owls was rejected because owls are taboo for the Navajos; 'to avoid giving offence, the tests will pretend that owls don't exist' (p. 17) writes Ravitch and, as she further says, 'it seems to be a settled principle that tests should not contain anything that is so upsetting to certain students that they cannot demonstrate what they know' (p. 20). As Riverside (one of the contracting agencies) itself says, its tests 'are designed to avoid language ... or examples that are generally regarded as sexist, racist, otherwise offensive, inappropriate, or negative towards any group'.

Once the notion of offensiveness is allowed to float free it is naturally open to interpretation across the spectrum. As Ravitch points out, the effective censorship and attempt to stifle freedom of speech and enquiry know no political boundaries: the fundamentalist right and the puritanical left are equally involved. In some ways it is more effective to campaign against offensiveness than against the morally wrong, because despite arguments about what is morally wrong, and specifically whether one can objectively establish such a thing, there is nonetheless a lingering assumption that when we are talking of the bad we are at any rate trying to get beyond mere individual opinion. But, while on the one hand those brave souls campaigning against offensiveness seek to conclude that what they decree offensive is objectively so, on the other, when trying to establish that something is offensive, they are willing to rely solely on the fact that some person or group doesn't like it. But to repeat, people very often take offence for no particularly good reason, sometimes on the basis of faulty reason, and sometimes when, regardless of their reasoning, to take offence is unreasonable.

Broadly speaking, and again against the popular tide, I suggest that most utterances that involve generalizations about identifiable groups are not inherently offensive. (If they are, I'm not sure where this leaves a social science such as sociology, which is based upon generalizations.) I may feel hurt by jokes about Englishmen, but it is not clear that I am actually harmed by them (whatever their content) in any other way than that I feel hurt. But suppose the joke or the claim involves caricature, making Englishmen look foolish, suggesting they are hypocrites, or plain falsehood? Suppose it does? On what grounds is it to be asserted that I should be forbidden to make false generalizations or even make fun of people? Is it in fact reasonable for me to feel hurt, let alone to seek some kind of protection or recompense, because I have been insulted? It is certainly reasonable to be annoyed, indeed it would hardly count as a bona fide insult if no annoyance was felt, but I can see no obvious grounds for thinking it reasonable for me to maintain I have been wronged.

Of course, one concedes that the English do not count in this argument: because of their dreadful behaviour and overwhelming arrogance over the centuries, they deserve all they get. I find this line of argument, which is usually implicit rather than explicit, to be recognized in the fact that nobody ever does complain about jokes
about the English, somewhat dubious. It is sometimes suggested that the English can
not (do not) take offence because they feel self-confident and superior. But I can
certainly be hurt by remarks about class or gender in an English context. I can
certainly take offence in the sense of feeling offended, but I do not take offence in the
other sense of seeing the hurtful remark as in some way actionable. The reason that I
do not is largely that I do not think I should. I do not think the fact that I am
personally hurt by suggestions that certain behaviour is typical of men, or that upper-
class mores are pathetic, amounts to evidence that a moral wrong has been done –
that somebody has intentionally acted in an inherently offensive manner. I think it
morally wrong for me to play the victim card, when in no serious way can it be
argued by reference to a coherent moral, political and social theory that I am a
victim. I am not a victim in the sense of one who has been morally wronged; I am
merely upset.

Inevitably, someone will push the matter further at this stage, and suggest that the
point is that, as an Englishman, I have not suffered. The point is that you can make
remarks about Englishmen of a sort that you cannot make about Jews or women,
because of what the latter have suffered. But this line of argument is hopelessly weak
on two familiar counts. First, while Jews have certainly suffered, it does not follow
that the individual Jew I am addressing has. Second, the argument from history is
confused and unstable on several grounds: how far back do we go? It is just silly to
talk as if some groups have been persecuted for three thousand years, while others
have never suffered. The reason that we should indeed be more cautious about
making jokes about Jews than Englishmen, is that contingently one is more likely to
cause upset and, other things being equal, it is good to avoid upsetting people. But
other things have to be equal, and context is all: there is a relevant difference
between making a joke that pokes fun, however mildly, at Jews in front of a Gestapo
Officer, and telling the same joke with your Jewish friends over dinner.

The above paragraphs are designed to challenge the common assumption that
such things as jokes or unflattering generalizations about ethnic or gender groupings
are inherently offensive. But now I want to go further and sketch an argument for the
conclusion that not only is it not necessarily wrong to cause offence (in the sense in
question), but it is actually often wrong (morally weak) to take offence. Before doing
so, however, I need to protect myself by reminding you of the limits of my case. I am
not here talking about cases where people intentionally engage in inherently
offensive behaviour. In such a case, when, for example, people are forced to demean
themselves or some individuals are clearly unfairly treated, those people have every
right to take offence (in both senses). The issue is whether the person who feels
anger at some person’s remark or behaviour towards them (who does not like what
has occurred), has moral justification for recourse to some kind of formal response,
even though they cannot produce a convincing argument to establish the inherent
offensiveness of the act.

One reason that taking offence seems morally questionable is that it is necessarily a
very self-regarding stance to take. By definition, if you take offence at some joke, you
are being humourless, self-important and arrogant. Even if you are plainly insulted,
to treat it as actionable betrays an unattractive and unvirtuous preoccupation with self-image. Being offended is one of the supreme self-serving acts – far more unattractive and objectionable than causing offence in most instances. In a way, this point could be said to be emphasized by the contrast between the stoic response of a Primo Levi to real horror and indignity and the quite trivial grounds for complaint that come up in so many of the actual examples of today’s censorship and charges of offensiveness. There is also an element of intellectual vice in trying to make capital out of objectively harmless jokes and generalizations.

But why do I want to argue for a positive duty not to take offence? Because the true ultimate moral principles include toleration, fairness and freedom. As already indicated, without these, we are not talking about morality. For all I know we may be talking about something more interesting or important, but we are not talking about morality. Taking offence, when it means treating one’s personal hurt as grounds for punitive response, involves a refusal to show tolerance, to allow freedom or to play fair – for why should you be allowed to say what you want, when others are denied that right by you?

Here we necessarily touch upon (and can only refer to) bigger issues in moral philosophy. I remain an unrepentant Millian in respect of freedom of speech and cannot see that it makes any sense to claim to be in favour of it (as most of this audience surely will) if you do not recognize that that means the freedom for people to say precisely what you do not want to hear – however offensive you or anybody else finds it. Similarly, toleration that extends only to what we are not offended by is not toleration at all: by definition, toleration means putting up with what you actually do not want to put up with. And it is not fair, if for no other reason than that as a matter of fact those pressure groups that have succeeded in categorizing what they personally find offensive as inherently offensive have never extended the same rules to people of different persuasion.

A familiar response here is ‘Well, you’ve had your day; now it’s our turn’. This seems to rather misunderstand the nature and point of morality which, whatever one’s personal viewpoint and regardless of the difficulties, is essentially, again by definition, a universal code. If you do not believe there is such a thing, then you can hardly defend your position on moral grounds. If there is or may be such a thing, then a crude appeal to power or revenge is singularly out of place.

My conclusion is that it is very sad that, notwithstanding many strong counter-arguments and incredible exposés of some of the nonsense we are subject to (e.g., D'Souza, 1991; DelFattore, 1992; Hentoff, 1992; Hughes, 1993), educational institutions continue to be governed by policies that condemn people for saying what they believe or find amusing or think worth an airing, simply because some pressure group has decreed it will not tolerate it, and yet that fail to condemn acts that truly are inherently offensive, such as intolerance and the suppression of free speech. It is sad, too, that we are bringing up children to believe that tolerance and respect imply never saying or doing anything that might upset someone (which they do not), and not to understand that they imply putting up with much that one finds personally upsetting (which they do). I believe, by contrast, that we should be teaching children
that causing offence, though other things being equal something to be avoided, is sometimes necessary, and sometimes even morally desirable; that it is sometimes good for people to feel offended, perhaps even to be offended in the objective sense. Respect for others implies recognizing difference. Thus, we should feel no compunction in drawing attention to difference. Why, then, there should be any resistance to commenting on difference, joking about it, or even objecting to it sometimes, I do not really understand.

References