

Excerpted from Paul Graham (2004), "What You Can't Say." Available at <http://www.paulgraham.com/say.html>

WHAT YOU CAN'T SAY

Have you ever seen an old photo of yourself and been embarrassed at the way you looked? *Did we actually dress like that?* We did. And we had no idea how silly we looked. It's the nature of fashion to be invisible, in the same way the movement of the earth is invisible to all of us riding on it.

What scares me is that there are moral fashions too. They're just as arbitrary, and just as invisible to most people. But they're much more dangerous. Fashion is mistaken for good design; moral fashion is mistaken for good. Dressing oddly gets you laughed at. Violating moral fashions can get you fired, ostracized, imprisoned, or even killed.

If you could travel back in a time machine, one thing would be true no matter where you went: you'd have to watch what you said. Opinions we consider harmless could have gotten you in big trouble. I've already said at least one thing that would have gotten me in big trouble in most of Europe in the seventeenth century, and did get Galileo in big trouble when he said it — that the earth moves.

It seems to be a constant throughout history: In every period, people believed things that were just ridiculous, and believed them so strongly that you would have gotten in terrible trouble for saying otherwise.

Is our time any different? To anyone who has read any amount of history, the answer is almost certainly no. It would be a remarkable coincidence if ours were the first era to get everything just right.

It's tantalizing to think we believe things that people in the future will find ridiculous. What *would* someone coming back to visit us in a time machine have to be careful not to say? That's what I want to study here. But I want to do more than just shock everyone with the heresy du jour. I want to find general recipes for discovering what you can't say, in any era.

The Conformist Test

Let's start with a test: Do you have any opinions that you would be reluctant to express in front of a group of your peers?

If the answer is no, you might want to stop and think about that. If everything you believe is something you're supposed to believe, could that possibly be a coincidence? Odds are it isn't. Odds are you just think what you're told.

The other alternative would be that you independently considered every question and came up with the exact same answers that are now considered acceptable. That seems unlikely, because you'd also have to make the same mistakes. Mapmakers deliberately put slight mistakes in their maps so they can tell when someone copies them. If another map has the same mistake, that's very convincing evidence.

Like every other era in history, our moral map almost certainly contains a few mistakes. And anyone who makes the same mistakes probably didn't do it by accident. It would be like someone claiming they had independently decided in 1972 that bell-bottom jeans were a good idea.

If you believe everything you're supposed to now, how can you be sure you wouldn't also have believed everything you were supposed to if you had grown up among the plantation owners of the pre-Civil War South, or in Germany in the 1930s — or among the Mongols in 1200, for that matter? Odds are you would have.

Back in the era of terms like “well-adjusted,” the idea seemed to be that there was something wrong with you if you thought things you didn't dare say out loud. This seems backward. Almost certainly, there is something wrong with you if you *don't* think things you don't dare say out loud.

Trouble

What can't we say? One way to find these ideas is simply to look at things people do say, and get in trouble for.

Of course, we're not just looking for things we can't say. We're looking for things we can't say that are true, or at least have enough chance of being true that the question should remain open. But many of the things people get in trouble for saying probably do make it over this second, lower threshold. No one gets in trouble for saying that $2 + 2$ is 5, or that people in Pittsburgh are ten feet tall. Such obviously false statements might be treated as jokes, or at worst as evidence of insanity, but they are not likely to make anyone mad. The statements that make people mad are the ones they worry might be believed. I suspect the statements that make people maddest are those they worry might be true.

If Galileo had said that people in Padua were ten feet tall, he would have been regarded as a harmless eccentric. Saying the earth orbited the sun was another matter. The church knew this would set people thinking.

Certainly, as we look back on the past, this rule of thumb works well. A lot of the statements people got in trouble for seem harmless now. So it's likely that visitors from the future would agree with at least some of the statements that get people in trouble today. Do we have no Galileos? Not likely.

To find them, keep track of opinions that get people in trouble, and start asking, could this be true? Ok, it may be heretical (or whatever modern equivalent), but might it also be true?

...

Prigs

Of course, if they have time machines in the future they'll probably have a separate reference manual just for Cambridge. This has always been a fussy place, a town of i dotters and t crossers, where you're liable to get both your grammar and your ideas corrected in the same conversation. And that suggests another way to find taboos. Look for prigs, and see what's inside their heads.

Kids' heads are repositories of all our taboos. It seems fitting to us that kids' ideas should be bright and clean. The picture we give them of the world is not merely simplified, to suit their developing minds, but sanitized as well, to suit our ideas of what kids ought to think.

You can see this on a small scale in the matter of dirty words. A lot of my friends are starting to have children now, and they're all trying not to use words like "fuck" and "shit" within baby's hearing, lest baby start using these words too. But these words are part of the language, and adults use them all the time. So parents are giving their kids an inaccurate idea of the language by not using them. Why do they do this? Because they don't think it's fitting that kids should use the whole language. We like children to seem innocent.

Most adults, likewise, deliberately give kids a misleading view of the world. One of the most obvious examples is Santa Claus. We think it's cute for little kids to believe in Santa Claus. I myself think it's cute for little kids to believe in Santa Claus. But one wonders, do we tell them this stuff for their sake, or for ours?

I'm not arguing for or against this idea here. It is probably inevitable that parents should want to dress up their kids' minds in cute little baby outfits. I'll probably do it myself. The important thing for our purposes is that, as a result, a well brought-up teenage kid's brain is a more or less complete collection of all our taboos — and in mint condition, because they're untainted by experience. Whatever we think that will later turn out to be ridiculous, it's almost certainly inside that head.

How do we get at these ideas? By the following thought experiment. Imagine a kind of latter-day Conrad character who has worked for a time as a mercenary in Africa, for a time as a doctor in Nepal, for a time as the manager of a nightclub in Miami. The specifics don't matter — just someone who has seen a lot. Now imagine comparing what's inside this guy's head with what's inside the head of a well-behaved sixteen year old girl from the suburbs. What does he think that would shock her? He knows the world; she knows, or at least embodies, present taboos. Subtract one from the other, and the result is what we can't say.

Mechanism

...

Although moral fashions tend to arise from different sources than fashions in clothing, the mechanism of their adoption seems much the same. The early adopters will be driven by ambition: self-consciously cool people who want to distinguish themselves from the common herd. As the fashion becomes established they'll be joined by a second, much larger group, driven by fear. This second group adopt the fashion not because they want to stand out but because they are afraid of standing out.

So if you want to figure out what we can't say, look at the machinery of fashion and try to predict what it would make unsayable. What groups are powerful but nervous, and what ideas would they like to suppress? What ideas were tarnished by association when they ended up on the losing side of a recent struggle? If a self-consciously cool person wanted to differentiate himself from preceding fashions (e.g. from his parents), which of their ideas would he tend to reject? What are conventional-minded people afraid of saying?

...

Why

Some would ask, why would one want to do this? Why deliberately go poking around among nasty, disreputable ideas? Why look under rocks?

I do it, first of all, for the same reason I did look under rocks as a kid: plain curiosity. And I'm especially curious about anything that's forbidden. Let me see and decide for myself.

Second, I do it because I don't like the idea of being mistaken. If, like other eras, we believe things that will later seem ridiculous, I want to know what they are so that I, at least, can avoid believing them.

Third, I do it because it's good for the brain. To do good work you need a brain that can go anywhere. And you especially need a brain that's in the habit of going where it's not supposed to.

Great work tends to grow out of ideas that others have overlooked, and no idea is so overlooked as one that's unthinkable. Natural selection, for example. It's so simple. Why didn't anyone think of it before? Well, that is all too obvious. Darwin himself was careful to tiptoe around the implications of his theory. He wanted to spend his time thinking about biology, not arguing with people who accused him of being an atheist.

In the sciences, especially, it's a great advantage to be able to question assumptions. The m.o. of scientists, or at least of the good ones, is precisely that: look for places where conventional wisdom is broken, and then try to pry apart the cracks and see what's underneath. That's where new theories come from.

A good scientist, in other words, does not merely ignore conventional wisdom, but makes a special effort to break it. Scientists go looking for trouble. This should be the m.o. of any scholar, but scientists seem much more willing to look under rocks...

Whatever the reason, there seems a clear correlation between intelligence and willingness to consider shocking ideas. This isn't just because smart people actively work to find holes in conventional thinking. I think conventions also have less hold over them to start with. You can see that in the way they dress.

It's not only in the sciences that heresy pays off. In any competitive field, you can win big by seeing things that others aren't. And in every field there are probably heresies few dare utter. Within the US car industry there is a lot of hand-wringing now about declining market share. Yet the cause is so obvious that any observant outsider could explain it in a second: they make bad cars. And they have for so long that by now the US car brands are antibrands — something you'd buy a car despite, not because of. Cadillac stopped being the Cadillac of cars in about 1970. And yet I suspect no one dares say this. Otherwise these companies would have tried to fix the problem.

Training yourself to think unthinkable thoughts has advantages beyond the thoughts themselves. It's like stretching. When you stretch before running, you put your body into positions much more extreme than any it will assume during the run. If you can think things so outside the box that they'd make people's hair stand on end, you'll have no trouble with the small trips outside the box that people call innovative.

Pensieri Stretti

When you find something you can't say, what do you do with it? My advice is, don't say it. Or at least, pick your battles.

...The most important thing is to be able to think what you want, not to say what you want. And if you feel you have to say everything you think, it may inhibit you from thinking improper thoughts. I think it's better to follow the opposite policy. Draw a sharp line between your thoughts and your speech. Inside your head, anything is allowed. Within my head I make a point of encouraging the most outrageous thoughts I can imagine. But, as in a secret society, nothing that happens within the building should be told to outsiders. The first rule of Fight Club is, you do not talk about Fight Club.

...I admit it seems cowardly to keep quiet. When I read about the harassment to which the Scientologists subject their critics, or that pro-Israel groups are "compiling dossiers" on those who speak out against Israeli human rights abuses, or about people being sued for violating the DMCA, part of me wants to say, "All right, you bastards, bring it on." The problem is, there are so many things you can't say. If you said them all you'd have no time left for your real work. You'd have to turn into Noam Chomsky.

The trouble with keeping your thoughts secret, though, is that you lose the advantages of discussion. Talking about an idea leads to more ideas. So the optimal plan, if you can manage it, is to have a few trusted friends you can speak openly to. This is not just a way to develop ideas; it's also a good rule of thumb for choosing friends. The people you can say heretical things to without getting jumped on are also the most interesting to know.

... Perhaps the best policy is to make it plain that you don't agree with whatever zealotry is current in your time, but not to be too specific about what you disagree with. Zealots will try to draw you out, but you don't have to answer them. If they try to force you to treat a question on their terms by asking "are you with us or against us?" you can always just answer "neither".

Better still, answer "I haven't decided." That's what Larry Summers did when a group tried to put him in this position. Explaining himself later, he said "I don't do litmus tests." A lot of the questions people get hot about are actually quite complicated. There is no prize for getting the answer quickly.

ABQ

A Dutch friend says I should use Holland as an example of a tolerant society. It's true they have a long tradition of comparative open-mindedness. For centuries the low countries were the place to go to say things you couldn't say anywhere else, and this helped to make the region a center of scholarship and industry (which have been closely tied for longer than most people realize). Descartes, though claimed by the French, did much of his thinking in Holland.

And yet, I wonder. The Dutch seem to live their lives up to their necks in rules and regulations. There's so much you can't do there; is there really nothing you can't say?

Certainly the fact that they value open-mindedness is no guarantee. Who thinks they're not open-minded? Our hypothetical prim miss from the suburbs thinks she's open-minded. Hasn't she been taught to be? Ask anyone, and they'll say the same thing: they're pretty open-minded, though they draw the line at things that are really wrong. (Some tribes may avoid "wrong" as judgemental, and may instead use a more neutral sounding euphemism like "negative" or "destructive".)

When people are bad at math, they know it, because they get the wrong answers on tests. But when people are bad at open-mindedness they don't know it. In fact they tend to think the opposite. Remember, it's the nature of fashion to be invisible. It wouldn't work otherwise. Fashion doesn't seem like fashion to someone in the grip of it. It just seems like the right thing to do. It's only by looking from a distance that we see oscillations in people's idea of the right thing to do, and can identify them as fashions.

Time gives us such distance for free. Indeed, the arrival of new fashions makes old fashions easy to see, because they seem so ridiculous by contrast. From one end of a pendulum's swing, the other end seems especially far away.

To see fashion in your own time, though, requires a conscious effort. Without time to give you distance, you have to create distance yourself. Instead of being part of the mob, stand as far away from it as you can and watch what it's doing. And pay especially close attention whenever an idea is being suppressed. Web filters for children and employees often ban sites containing pornography, violence, and hate speech. What counts as pornography and violence? And what, exactly, is "hate speech?" This sounds like a phrase out of *1984*.

Labels like that are probably the biggest external clue. If a statement is false, that's the worst thing you can say about it. You don't need to say that it's heretical. And if it isn't false, it shouldn't be suppressed. So when you see statements being attacked as x-ist or y-ic (substitute your current values of x and y), whether in 1630 or 2030, that's a...sign that something [may be] wrong. When you hear such labels being used, ask why.

Especially if you hear yourself using them. It's not just the mob you need to learn to watch from a distance. You need to be able to watch your own thoughts from a distance. That's not a radical idea, by the way; it's the main difference between children and adults. When a child gets angry because he's tired, he doesn't know what's happening. An adult can distance himself enough from the situation to say "never mind, I'm just tired." I don't see why one couldn't, by a similar process, learn to recognize and discount the effects of moral fashions.

You have to take that extra step if you want to think clearly. But it's harder, because now you're working against social customs instead of with them. Everyone encourages you to grow up to the point where you can discount your own bad moods. Few encourage you to continue to the point where you can discount society's bad moods.

How can you see the wave, when you're the water? Always be questioning. That's the only defence. What can't you say? And why?