

Dear Professor Tirrell: Speech isn't Toxic, People Are

In [Jean-Paul Sartre's play "No Exit,"](#) the character Joseph Garcin concludes that torture and other forms of physical punishment pale in comparison to the torment of poor company. So he pronounces that "Hell is other people." The same cynical view overcomes me when intelligent people theorize about the harm caused by offensive speech.

[Lynne Tirrell](#), Philosophy Professor at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, recently gave a talk titled "Toxic Speech" in Brooklyn, New York. In an [interview with Skye Cleary](#), Tirrell summarizes the main points of her talk and defines what she means by 'toxic speech':

"My talk introduced concepts we need for thinking about speech that's toxic to individual, social, and political health. Toxins are poisons, substances with the capacity to inflict damage to an organism, so I was addressing how something we say can be toxic. How do we cash out that metaphor? I also wonder if it is really best construed metaphorically or if we should think quite literally.

Toxins don't all function the same way. Some act acutely, like polonium, and kill with a single dose. Others are sub-acute, taking time to do their deadly damage. And still others are chronic, not killing but impairing the well-being of the one targeted. Chronic toxicity is the easiest one to see as having a speech-parallel. Racist and sexist speech are modes of delivery of racism and sexism. They're like arsenic.

[...] It is all about avoiding damage, to enhance and maintain personal freedom and autonomy. The devastating power of acutely toxic speech makes it obvious that it must be recognized and avoided. Sub-acute and chronic toxicity also need to be recognized and avoided, and we are lucky that there's more time to combat those effects."

Tirrell uses toxicity as a metaphor for speech that she feels is hateful, racist, ableist and sexist. Similar to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter [Stewart's famous test for spotting obscene speech](#), she knows toxic speech when she sees it.

Words that hurt are comparable to arsenic. Similar to the toxic chemical, these expressions damage an organism's health when ingested. They should be removed from our discourse. The ears of the young and impressionable ought to be protected from toxic speech. Hence, vulnerable college students require trigger warnings and safe spaces. Or [do they?](#)

Hate speech [is illegal in Canada](#). But even the Canadians are unsure where to draw the line between hateful speech and constitutionally protected speech. Free speech law in the U.S. protects hate speech. The closest the U.S. has ever come to banning hate speech is the 1940s ["fighting words" doctrine](#), forbidding the use of hateful words which provokes the commission of violent acts. Tirrell is less concerned with words that incite violence than she is with words that hurt people's feelings, such as racial epithets and sexist remarks.

Speech does hurt people's feelings. But it isn't the speech itself that's toxic. It's the people engaged in the discourse and the asymmetry of the interaction, usually between someone who uses words to provoke (think Milo Yiannapolous) and

another person who is ultra-sensitive to caustic speech, sometimes because they've suffered some related prior trauma (a so-called snowflake).

Tirrell would tell the provocateur to stop using hurtful language because "the devastating power of acutely toxic speech makes it obvious that it must be recognized and avoided." I would simply recommend that the sensitive party leaves the speech forum if he takes offense. The act of exiting both protects him from further trauma and signals his disagreement with the speaker's message. There's no need to disrupt the speaker with angry chants. Just leave the forum. It's that simple.

With its growing intolerance of politically incorrect expression, the Left has surrendered the mantle of free speech defender on college campuses to the Right. Students at [UC Berkeley protested provocateur Milo Yiannapolous'](#) talk through violent mayhem, not as philosopher [John Stuart Mill recommended](#), by confronting speech with more speech. Toxic speech was upstaged by violent action. Wasn't the point of the fighting words doctrine to prevent such violence? Again, it's not the speech that's toxic. It's the people.

Maybe Garcin was right and hell truly is other people. Following the plot of Sartre's play, though, perhaps it's only the case that people become poor company when you're locked in a room with them for an eternity ... with no hope of exit.

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Shane Ralston is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Penn State University Hazleton. You can read many of his other articles at [his academia.edu page](#).

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