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# RaY

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Back in 2016, Theresa May, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, claimed that the use of safe spaces in universities would not only stifle innovation of thought, but also harm the economic development of the country. ‘We want our universities not just to be places of learning but places where there is open debate’, she declared in parliament, adding: ‘I think everybody is finding this concept of safe spaces quite extraordinary, frankly’ (Mason, 2016). A year later, her Minister for Higher Education, Jo Johnson, joined in, announcing that universities that curbed debate would be fined, and suggesting that students ought to become more resilient and open to controversial ideas (Syal & Mason, 2017). At the same time, Louise Richardson, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford, argued that students made uncomfortable by their lecturers’ homophobic opinions should debate them rather than seek out safe spaces (Riley, 2017). With the passing of another year, and Johnson having resigned over Brexit, his successor, Sam Gyimah, picked up the baton, arguing that free speech was under threat from student ‘wreckers’, characterising the effect as ‘chilling’, despite a parliamentary joint committee finding that there was little evidence to suggest censorship on campus was a live concern (Adams, 2018). He continued to press the urgency of this issue – claiming that he had been forced to wait twenty minutes before giving a speech at an unnamed university whilst a safe space policy was read out, a claim denied by all the institutions he had visited (Tickle, 2018) – until he too resigned over Brexit.

Across the Atlantic, Jordan Peterson has emerged as something of a lightning rod after his public refusal to address students at the University of Toronto using gender-neutral pronouns, arguing that if a university tries to make you feel accommodated then it ceases to be a university, and declaring that ‘the university is not a home, it is not a safe space’ (YouTube, 2018). In 2016, the Dean of Students at The University of Chicago wrote to all his newly enrolled charges that ‘we do not condone the creation of intellectual safe spaces where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own’ (Garton Ash, 2016). Laura Kipnis, of Northwestern University in Illinois, has also taken up the fight against safe spaces, as well as content warnings, no-platforming and the prohibition against sleeping with your students. In an interview with the *Guardian* she decried the illiberalism of the contemporary left student: ‘The people supporting free speech now are the conservatives. It’s incomprehensible to me, but it’s the so-called liberals on campus, the students who think of themselves as activists, who are becoming increasingly authoritarian’ (Cooke, 2017). This is an authoritarianism borne in sensitivity, as she sees it, led by ‘ideologues of feelings’ (Kipnis, 2017, p. 26), a melodrama that will ultimately undo the university. Kipnis states in the

interview, and again in her book *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (2017, p. 2), that her motivation to work against these movements came about because ‘I dislike being told what I can and can’t say’.

The university campus has long been a site of political engagement and activism for young people (see Loader, Vromen, Xenos, Steel & Burgum, 2015). Safe spaces emerged in the women’s movement of the late twentieth century, before being adopted by students. They offer protection from violence and harassment and encourage marginalised groups to be able to speak to one another freely, generating collective strength. The Roestone Collective (2014, p. 1360) suggest that safe spaces are ‘a way of practicing social justice that recognises, emphasizes, and in some way encourages social difference’. They support neglected identities, common understanding and acceptance and affirmation of their occupants (Day, 1999). Within an institutional context, safe spaces are often about reclaiming unsafe space, where there has been a structural imbalance or history of oppression. They challenge this legacy by giving a voice to those it has excluded, allowing for the sharing of largely unrecognised identities and experiences, and the challenging of the social norms that have ossified around the history of the institution. This empowers the occupants to encounter the risks of their institutional setting on their own terms (Hunter, 2008). Safe spaces might include members of the dominant group or be organised along more separatist lines to generate the best conditions for the relational work of recognising and mobilising a shared history and identity and are usually enacted in student societies or support groups on campus.

This article draws on social and cultural theory in order to counter the popular criticism of safe space illustrated above. The argument is organised into two main parts: the first demonstrating that critics of safe spaces have made too little of the moral function of communication in their defences of free speech; and the second that they have made too much of the role of debate in university life. The first section opens with Max Weber’s account of political vocation, something he sees exemplified in the ability to balance an ethics of ends with an ethics of responsibility. This is taken to be a useful model for thinking through communication, which it is argued is a constant balancing act between the universal (freedom of speech) and responsibility (as responding faithfully to others). This balance is then articulated through a reading of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom responsibility entails reigning in your freedom, directing it (freely) towards others and not expecting the same in return. Together, this provides an account of moral communication as something like a gesture of welcoming

through attentive listening, where what matters more than having your say is responding helpfully to what the other person has said.

The second section uses this account of moral communication as a groundwork to challenge what is identified as the *debate fetishism* at the heart of criticisms of safe spaces: the primacy of an idea of debate as a free exchange on a marketplace of ideas in a way that obscures the social relations at the heart of communication. It is then argued that this debate fetishism has three consequences for thinking about safe spaces. First, it negates the moral function of communication described in the first section. By positioning debate as the primary mode of communication in universities, critics of safe spaces refuse to recognise the vital work that safe spaces can perform in providing an environment where underrepresented voices can be heard and where support for difficult experiences can be offered. Second, it naturalises the dominant voice of the institution whilst pathologizing the alternative. Rather than allowing for safe spaces to make the university more welcoming to different identities and experiences, attacks on safe spaces cast the students who would want or need them as falling short of the idealised student body and as acting to contaminate its culture by refusing the demands of debate. And third, it neutralises the attempts of the non-privileged to occupy institutional space with their own voice. That is, attacks on safe spaces attempt to undermine the means by which some students can come to feel that they fully belong in the university.

Finally, it is concluded that these attacks on safe spaces manufacture a crisis through which blame (for sabotaging the proper functioning of the university) can be attached to students who are already institutionally disadvantaged. This amounts to little more than a defence of the university as a factory of sameness. The privileging of debate over moral communication only serves to entrench privilege and to exclude difference.

### **Moral communication**

How do we do justice to the responsibility that comes in speaking with others? This is a question of power, and not dissimilar to that asked by Max Weber (1958) of the politician, whose actions can not only influence others, but also shape events of such historical magnitude that they alter the course of lives. ‘With this we enter the field of ethical questions’, writes Weber (1958, p. 115), ‘for that is where the problem belongs: What kind of a man must one be if he is to be allowed to put his hand on the wheel of history?’ A politician must have passion,

he says, some feeling of devotion towards a cause that guides their action; and they must act with a sense of proportion, with distance from those their actions touch, but without ever taking that impact lightly. This account of political character hinges on a distinction made in ethical conduct, directed either towards ultimate ends or towards responsibility. An ethics of ultimate ends operates on principles; it is about being *right* and if it hurts people whilst achieving this, then the principles go unquestioned. As Weber (1958, p. 121) argues, ‘the attainment of “good” ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones – and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil ramifications’. An ethics of responsibility, on the other hand, is not about being in the right, but about taking people into account; when acting responsibly, no principle can excuse the harm done to any individual in the pursuance of some end. The politician must find the balance between an ethics of ends and an ethics of responsibility, positions that are permanently in conflict with one another, and only those who have politics as a calling, who practice it as a vocation, are capable of this (Weber, 1958, p. 127). Such a person navigates the tension, not by overcoming it, but by acting with proportionality, achieving ends whilst minimising harm, and neither ignoring nor justifying the suffering that remains. Achieving this, the politician adopts a Lutheran pose: ‘Here I stand; I can do no other’ – a moral position that Weber (1958, p. 127) describes as ‘genuinely human’.

Weber’s account of the moral vocation of the politician offers an interesting approach to thinking about balancing the demands of a universal (freedom of speech) with responsibility to those whose ability to be heard is anything but. As Judith Butler (2005, p. 7) argues, universality that fails to take account of cultural particularity is violent in its exercise, ‘a suffering imposed from an indifferent outside at the expense of freedom and particularity’. In order to think through how balance can be struck amidst this tension, we need to think carefully about what these ideas of *responsibility* and *freedom* might entail – and the work of Emmanuel Levinas provides a useful platform for doing so. Levinas (1993, p. 18) defines violence as acting as if you are alone, as if your actions existed outside of a relationship with another, or that the individuality of those who are touched by your actions does not matter. ‘In other words’, writes Levinas (1993, p. 19), ‘what characterizes violent action, what characterises tyranny, is that one does not face what the action is being applied to’. It is in this facing-up, or, more accurately, in the encounter with a face, that he locates responsibility. For Levinas (2008a, pp. 88-89), the face stands as a trace of the otherness of the other person. It is an expression of exteriority that resists the attempt to reduce the external to the contents of my

thought, that exceeds the idea of the other that I might hold, and that challenges the assumption that I can know the other. The face is also naked, in the sense that it signifies without being part of a system of signification, a form of nudity that then ‘extends into the nakedness of the body that is cold and that is ashamed of its nakedness’ (Levinas, 2007, p. 95). The face of the other, then, is both the revelation of strangeness and a display of vulnerability and defencelessness, the last nakedness that decency allows, that exposes to us the fragile nature of the human being. As Butler (2006, p. xviii) explains: ‘The Levinasian face [...] communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable’. This idea of the face, as a marker of elusiveness and nudity, has three consequences for an understanding of freedom.

The first consequence is that the face-to-face, as a confrontation with something we cannot understand, that lies beyond, demands that we act with responsibility. Levinas (2007, p. 43) writes: ‘The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity’. The inaccessibility of the other person – their irreducibility to thought – means that we can never know them in the way that we think we know ourselves. We can never know the thoughts, motivations, desires or intentions of the other person. This means that our freedom (spontaneity) is dangerous, since our ability to act without such knowledge can cause harm even when we do not intend it. Butler (2005, p. 69) says that, for Levinas, the ‘I’ breaks down in the face of the other into a state of humility, where the very fact that we possess freedom demands that we use it with responsibility for its outcome, for how it might affect other people. ‘To welcome the Other’, writes Levinas (2007, p. 85), ‘is to put in question my freedom’.

The second consequence is that freedom is not here curtailed but directed instead towards the other. The other does not counter my freedom by a display of power ‘but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent’ (Levinas, 2007, p. 84). We are not coerced or threatened into limiting our free actions by a show of strength; we should not see the other freedom as a force. Whilst the encounter with the other calls into question my powers, it does so from the vulnerable position of exposure rather than from a position of superior force. The face speaks, silently, in its nudity, that *thou shall not kill*, a moral demand rather than an ontological necessity – since people obviously do still choose a path of harm. It asks, peacefully, as Butler (2005, p. 31-33) shows, that we set aside self-concern and enquire after the other, since they stand as a limit to our apprehension. Freedom

is intact – but responsibility consists of reigning it in so that actions might touch, but do not harm, the other. This moral demand – both how it demands and what it demands – is ‘fundamentally pacific’ (Levinas, 2007, p. 171).

The final consequence is that understanding freedom in this way necessitates that we forgo any expectation of symmetry or reciprocation. When I encounter the other, I cannot extract myself from the first person, into some imagined state where all responsibilities go in all directions (Levinas, 2007, p. 295; p. 305). Since to encounter the other is to come face-to-face with otherness, to recognise that the other is absolutely other to me, one cannot maintain an equivalence between oneself and others. The fact that the ‘I’ and the other are not interchangeable means that the relation to the other is without expectation of reciprocity: ‘The knot of subjectivity consists in going to the other without concerning oneself with his movement toward me’ (Levinas, 2008a, p. 84). As Butler (2005, p. 31-33) explains, in an encounter with the unknown, the most important question is always ‘who are you?’ and, by extension, ‘what can I do for you?’ Responding to the other must be done without consideration of what the other can do in return. You can sacrifice your own freedom, but you cannot ask the same of anyone else; or, as Levinas (2008a, p. 126) has it, ‘to say that the other has to sacrifice himself to the others would be to preach human sacrifice!’

Levinas sees this moral asymmetry enacted in conversation. It is not enough to see the face, as vision relates to grasp, to grasp the other rather than to encounter the ungraspable. In merely looking, the identity of the ‘I’, of the individual, ‘envelops the alterity’ of the other (Levinas, 2007, p. 194). But in conversation, in the revelation of speech, the ‘I’ is put into question. ‘Speech cuts across vision’, as Levinas (2007, p. 195) puts it. The face is not an expression of my knowledge about that person, but an invitation to speak with them, to enter into ‘social commerce’ (Levinas, 1993, p. 21). Putting yourself first or privileging your own understanding of the world, the egoism of the ‘I’, is to never truly encounter a world of others. ‘Reason is alone’, writes Levinas (2008b, p. 68): ‘And in this sense knowledge never encounters anything truly other in the world’. Or, as Butler (2005, p. 83) puts it: ‘reason’s limit is the sign of humanity’. Which is why you need to get out of your own head and communicate – to be exposed to the other. Here, the nudity of the face is met by an act of exposure in return, an exposure that makes you vulnerable in response (Levinas, 2008a, p. 15). This means being open to an address that places you on the back foot, since you are responsible for responding to the other, guided not by your own inclinations but by a need to answer to the other person.

As such, the position of the 'I' in conversation is passive, in the sense of being without regard for oneself – even despite oneself – but a passivity without indifference (Levinas, 2008a, p. 139). As Butler (2005, p. 136) explains, letting yourself be undone is what allows you to be moved and is the basis of our humanity. The alternative is the domination of speech, unilateral speech acts without due consideration for the other's place in the conversation or a response to the other that does not do justice to the way they have presented themselves. This kind of indifference to the other is an act of egoism. To communicate one must respond to what the other has previously said, which requires a certain responsibility and fidelity to the other's expression. As such, it involves deference to the other, putting the other person first, and it requires patience (see Levinas, 2008b, pp. 134-135). Simply biding your time until you get a chance to have your say, grasping at what the other is trying to relate or turning a deaf ear altogether will get you nowhere. Deferring to the other, waiting for them to reveal their position, listening intently – this is a responsible response. As Butler (2006: 134) argues, it forces you to become alive to what is precarious in another life rather than assuming what is going on with others by extrapolating from your own experiences. As such, responsibility is urgent and yet demands patience; it is all the more urgent *because* it demands patience. This patience or *attentive intent* is what Levinas (2007, p. 27) calls the 'welcoming of the Other'.

But of course, we have freedom of speech. Levinas (1998, pp. 100-101) acknowledges that the law, in establishing mutual obligations between citizens, in many cases works against the idea of putting the other first. There is not only the face-to-face but also the realm of justice, which means judges and institutions and states deciding on things. Freedom of speech is one of those things that belongs to justice. But establishing justice stands apart from moral life, since it necessitates deciding between equals rather than elevating the other, politics rather than ethics. To be moral is to go over to the other without any concern for reciprocity, so long as this is freely chosen, that no-one forces us to be moral, and since our political right to be heard is robust even if we eschew it. Our rights to free speech are protected; we can choose, however, to be quiet. In any event, the idea of reciprocity in communication is overrated, insofar as it leads us to understand communication as a kind of contact between interiorities. The importance placed on freedom of speech being the freedom of *my* speech belies the hubris that through communication I can reduplicate my thoughts in the mind of the other, a project, John Durham Peters (2000, p. 21) suggests, that 'deserves to crash'. This model of communication is doomed to failure, and whilst the other can no more reproduce their thoughts in me than I can in them, if we celebrate the position of receiving more loudly than that of sending, then we



get out of this forlorn project altogether, by attempting to understand the other whilst recognising that it is not fully possible. This would emphasise the activity required in listening, the active attentiveness that we can understand, after Levinas, as a moral activity. As Butler (2005, p. 84) observes, it takes humility to recognise that if you are not open to being addressed by the other, then you are not engaged in any kind of address at all; it makes you vulnerable and it places you at risk – but otherwise we place ourselves in isolation, forever trying and failing to reproduce ourselves in others. Better, as Jean-François Lyotard (2014, p. 80) argues, to understand communication not as the putting outside of that which was previously inside, the delivery of a prepared message, but as the questioning of your message from the outside. The distance between inner-worlds can never be overcome, but, as Sybille Krämer (2015, p. 174) suggests, being receptive to this questioning emanating from the other gives us a trace of what is otherwise hidden.

To return to Weber, then, the balance between adherence to a universal principle and responsibility towards the singular might be found in acknowledging, as Roger Silverstone (2008, p. 147) does, that ‘the traditional requirement for freedom of speech, as the beginning and end of a human right [is] insufficient on its own terms’. There is more to having a right than being right. The universality of freedom of speech as a principle – which is fine in principle – goes unquestioned when it causes or perpetuates harm. And, as Onora O’Neil (1990) argues, it cannot be a freedom enjoyed by all, since in an unequal society not everyone has the same resources for being heard, and so the free speech of the powerful restricts that of the powerless. In speaking, as in politics, we have our hand on the wheel of history, that is, there is the potential to perpetuate historical silencing in a way that does harm to those who ought to be heard. A sense of proportion is required in listening, as Les Back (2007, p. 159) cautions, such that we face up to who we communicate with as a mystery that cannot fully be unravelled and take care of who our messages touch when we do so. This understanding of moral communication is in contradiction with free speech absolutism; as Levinas (1998, p. 230) argues, drawing on the work of Vasily Grossman, ‘the “small goodness” from one person to his fellowman is lost and deformed as soon as it seeks organization and universality and system’. Attentiveness to the trace of the other’s inner-world we receive in moral communication is a small thing, is attention to a small thing, that would be crushed by universality. To reject such disproportionality, to find the balance that resides in acknowledging one’s right to free speech and measuring it against the small good that can come in being receptive to the other, using that right to encourage and then to listen, is to approach a

life of communication as a moral vocation. To say *Here I stand* – and then to listen. This is a genuinely human position.

## **Debate fetishism**

Criticism of safe spaces is motivated by an idea of the academy as an environment *of and for debate*. But it would be a mistake to conflate academia, as a movement through ideas, with the university as a site where debate occurs *amongst other things*. It would also be a mistake to model the student body after its idealised and historically privileged image in such a way as to assume that the university can function without those other things, like support groups or societies for the underrepresented. Fabian Cannizzo (2018) has argued that the university is imagined according to a persistent idea of the Golden Age of Academia, an idealised past that sets contemporary values – a nostalgia that normalises. For Robbie Shilliam (2018), the controversy over things like safe spaces follows this archaic image, conjuring a time before the student body diversified in order to attack those with diverse needs or demands. By way of context, Kalwant Bhopal (2018, p. 103) argues that ‘higher education institutions continue to perpetuate the superiority and predominance of whiteness’, with Sara Ahmed (2012, p. 35) adding that the ‘institutional whiteness’ of the university marks non-white bodies as out of place when occupying its spaces, whilst students protest that little is done to tackle racist abuse on campus (see Weale, 2019). Vik Loveday (2015) highlights the way that working class students are made to feel that they do not belong, not only because there is little institutional support for things like caring roles, but because the dominant educational discourse casts working class culture as deficient. Genny Beemyn (2019) describes how university campuses are often hostile environments for trans and non-binary students, where experience of harassment and discrimination dissuades many from revealing their gender identity. And the 1752 Group highlights enduring cultures of sexual abuse and harassment against female-identified students (see Bull & Page, 2018). Attacks on safe spaces operate with an idealised student body from an imaginary past: white, middle-class, cis-gendered and male. In turn, they attempt to obviate the need for spaces that support underrepresented identities or difficult life experiences.

To acknowledge both mistakes is to recognise that there are circumstances in which debate is undesirable – or actively unhelpful. Debate that is forced into the wrong location or targeted at those already wronged without any sense of proportion, looks a lot more like ‘the fetish of

assertion', as Bernard Williams (2004) called it, than it does a progression toward enlightenment. Under these conditions what we have is a kind of *debate fetishism*. Debate fetishism obscures the social dynamic inherent to communication, leaving instead the appearance of relationships between ideas exchanged on a marketplace. The notion of a marketplace of ideas masks the human conditions behind the production of ideas themselves – and how some become dominant over others. It ignores the fact that an exchange of ideas is always a relationship with the other, it is deaf to the moral responsibility that is inherent to any such relationship, and it treats identities and experiences as if they were entirely exterior to the production of ideas and the way that some enjoy a better time of it on the marketplace than others. There are three consequences of debate fetishism in the context of safe spaces: the primacy of one mode of communication (debate) above more appropriate alternatives; the invention of a threat of contamination in a way that elides the historical and material inequality of voices within the university; and, as a response to this contamination, the containment of struggles to establish a voice within the institution against its otherwise entrenched culture.

First, the critics of safe spaces have positioned debate as the primary mode of communication in the university in a way that primes it to reproduce sameness. Debate is framed as the only game in town – or gown – such that its rules must permeate every inch of the institution. This is somewhat back-to-front, as spaces themselves have rules or, more accurately, generic conventions that govern the activities that take place within them, and the university is made up of a multiplicity of spaces, each with their own etiquette of occupation. Debate is an exchange of statements, the statements governed by informal logic and the exchange by rhetoric. Done well, it is an art. But it can only be done well when its rules or format make sense under the generic conventions that govern the environment in which it is put to use. And done badly, debate looks a lot like a series of reciprocal speech acts that lap against each other and then recede, debaters taking it in turns to broadcast at each other. Its lionisation as the pinnacle of the work of the university mirrors the 'holy status' that John Durham Peters (2000, p. 33) sees attributed to dialogue: 'It is held up as the summit of human encounter, the essence of liberal education, and the medium of participatory democracy'. Lofted up so high, it casts a shadow over other useful things we can do with communication in institutional spaces. As such, we have to go beyond uncritical celebration of debate in order to recognise forms of communication that are more appropriate to some of the spaces that comprise the university.

Safe spaces are set up to perform the relational work of supporting neglected identities, fostering common understanding and facilitating acceptance and affirmation (see The Roestone Collective, 2014). They are organised in different ways, dependent on who they accommodate, and so the generic conventions that sustain their work will vary, but moral communication is at the heart of this work of recognition. As spaces that work, then, they only make sense when those identities that are not neglected, who are already understood, accepted and affirmed, reign in their freedom to speak to allow others to be heard. This means recognising that we are not interchangeable, that any demand for symmetry would only reproduce imbalance, such that allowing the previously unheard a voice does not need to be matched with a right to assert in response. Debate in this context makes little sense; what we have is a ‘*differend*’ (Lyotard, 2007), two irreconcilable modes of communication, neither of which can succeed in the same space because they adhere to different rules. Those with a dominant voice are encouraged to listen, to be attentive and sincere, to practice humility – or else the space ceases to work for anyone. That you cannot enter such a space to practice your debating skills is entirely appropriate, since the whole purpose of it is to grant a voice that is otherwise crowded out.

But debate fetishism obscures the value of non-reciprocal communication, of suspending our own voice so that we might hear the other. Debate is just one piece of the communicative tool kit. Applying it to students who have survived sexual violence or to trans students at support groups, for example, would be a misapplication; that is, it is not possible to debate someone’s identity or life experience into something that it is not, and if it were possible to do so then that would be grounds alone to doubt the usefulness of the tool. Yet too often *debate* is used as a false flag to shut down others, to refuse to listen, to justify a kind of moral deafness – to act ‘without ears, like a hungry stomach’ (Levinas, 2007, p. 134). Under these conditions, debate is not so much dialectical as it is restorative, or, a resetting of the scene. If a space is set up to look after victims of sexual violence, say, and it irks you that you cannot debate there whether victims are often themselves to blame, then your desire for debate here, at best, silences victimhood and, at worst, only serves to justify injustice. If another is set up for students to freely explore their experiences of being trans, for example, and you see this as an opportunity to debate their right to self-identify, then debate here is another attempt to leverage the status quo. Where you choose to want your debate says a lot about what you want to achieve with it. To borrow an image from Levinas (2006, p. 26), here writing about his disappointment with philosophy, it ‘follows the path of Ulysses whose adventure in the world was but a return to

his native island'. The end of such a debate is inscribed in its beginning. It is a return to the same, a homecoming for the already welcomed.

Second, the primacy of debate casts safe spaces as a threat to the values of the university, which in turn configures those students who might need or want them as a contamination of its culture. This obscures how the history of the university has produced some voices as privileged and others as unwelcome. Jacques Derrida (1999, p. 22) has emphasised the connection between the Levinasian account of *welcoming* and *attention*, essayed above, and his own work on hospitality. In a Derridean account of hospitality, welcoming difference into a space should mean that the space is put into question, rather than coming with the expectation that it endures unchanged, and that those who were once outside, when welcomed in, should be allowed to retain their distinctness rather than give over their identity to the host (Derrida, 2000). This means giving people a *place*, rather than merely tolerating their presence in a space, a kind of absolute hospitality that is receptive to difference rather than enforcing conformity or sameness. 'Absolute hospitality', as Ala Sirriyeh (2013, p. 6) explains, 'is a gift not a duty and there is no expectation of a commitment to the host's terms and conditions'. It is a hospitality beyond debt. But as Ahmed (2012, pp. 42-43) argues, the university welcomes difference only within a conditional hospitality. Those bodies that fail to fit, that do not reproduce the idealised student body, are positioned as out of place in the institution; they are reduced to the status of guests or temporary residents of university space. In order to qualify for even this reduced status, the host demands assimilation, such that the university maintains exclusion through a practice of pseudo-inclusivity that demands that others leave their identity and experiences at the door – or else be marked down as a toxic debtor. This is a welcome that must pass 'through the violence of the host' (Derrida, 1999, p. 15), which is to say, no kind of welcome at all.

The non-privileged student body is being made to carry a 'symbolic indebtedness', as Loveday (2015) describes it, allowed in – despite themselves – but obligated to leave the university untouched by their presence. Defences of the university from student activism often invoke an idea of the academy before it permitted what was previously outside to enter its institutional space, or, as Shilliam (2018, p. 54) suggests, 'a higher education that existed before the contamination of identity, race, politicisation'. Speech was free because it was attached to the right kinds of bodies saying the right kinds of things. This invokes a figure of the student in no need of safe spaces, but only because they were on safe ground to begin with. Those who deviate from this are marked as 'space invaders' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 13), interlopers in a place

reserved for others. Those who need or desire safe spaces are treated as the problem – ‘feminist killjoys’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 62), for example – rather than holding a mirror to the institutional space in which they might feel unsafe. To recall Gayatri Spivak (1988), by conjuring a subject in their own image, a privileged actor in the reproduction of culture and knowledge, the critics of safe spaces are constituting those who would use them as voiceless – those who cannot speak in case they contaminate the whole academic project in its narrow and entrenched form. That is, this attachment to an idealised student body, engaged in debate as the pinnacle of the work of the university, acts to categorise students who are different and who are sometimes engaged in different activities (such as support groups) as bodies that do not belong, after which the only option is to try to *pass*. And yet the relation to the other – which is to say morality itself – is a ‘non-allergic relation’ (Levinas, 2007, p. 51); we do not get sick in an encounter with alterity, but better. A university that is not welcoming, that is not hospitable to difference, that is envisioned as sterile or aseptic, reproduces the same; critics who want this – in the reproduction of bodies and of ideas – should at least wear it rather than hiding moral evasion behind the supposed neutrality of the marketplace.

Third, debate fetishism finally serves to contain the threat of contamination by derailing the struggle to find a voice. The seriousness of the threat ascribed to safe spaces by their critics suggests that their occupation is static and separate – as if students will always and at all times occupy them – such that the university produces graduates that have been secluded from debate for the duration of their studies. This makes it easier to portray safe spaces as at odds with the culture of the university and as detrimental to a society that values the forging of ideas through debate. Instead, it makes more sense to speak of safe spaces as a process of becoming that serves the kinds of academic activities that their critics hold to be all-important. Safe spaces allow the relational work of sharing and recognising to occupy the official space of the university. They provide ‘spaces of relief’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 37) that allow for a sense of belonging without conformity or debt. By encouraging students to find strength in underrepresented identities and to share unrecognised experiences, safe spaces can facilitate a kind of political consolidation or ‘uprightness’ (Levinas, 2007, p. 78). Uprightness can be understood here as a process of becoming in which *debtor bodies* can find community in otherwise unrecognised identities and, in sharing experiences that *solvent bodies* do not possess, those experiences heard here, in the heart of the institution, can feel that this debt is unjust. Recognising that the transaction is undue, that these identities and experiences can stand upright in the university, that they do not need to be left at the door to permit entry, allows for

students to feel that they belong – not as if at home, but squarely within the institution of academia – such that they can partake fully in the university. Sometimes students might occupy safe spaces; other times they will occupy spaces where debates happen – and most of the time they will be in spaces organised for something else entirely, since debate is only a very small part of academic activity. The existence of safe spaces makes it more likely that the thinking and communicating of ideas – in all spaces – can be open to everyone and that it might no longer be weighted in the favour of privilege.

But in response, the critics of safe spaces practice what Ahmed (2012, p. 179) calls ‘overing’, a position that trivialises struggles by suggesting that ‘we’ ought to be over this kind of thing by now. This glosses over the fact that not every member of that imaginary ‘we’ has been allowed to feel themselves an unquestioned part of the institution, and so it serves to neutralise struggle by obscuring those who are struggling. Even more so, the critics engage in what she calls ‘aboveness’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 181) – as we see in the idea that the university is above the kind of coddling attached to safe space, that it is a space of debate or it is nothing. This idea of being above something, rather than simply past it, is a position of privilege. It maintains the comfort of privileged bodies, already secure, and denies it to others by refusing the process of belonging, the uprightness and symbolic solvency that safe spaces can enact. Attacks on safe spaces are an attempt to settle the university once and for all – as not for all – by neutralising the means that would open it up. This is the privileging of privilege.

### **Concluding remarks**

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate that safe spaces should not be seen as a deterioration of the proper purpose of the university, required only by students who have somehow fallen short of the standards of academic debate, but are instead simply an extension of the moral organisation of everyday space and the conduct of communication. By characterising students as lacking in resilience, easily-offended or overly-emotional, by promoting the idea that they are illiberal wreckers of free speech in retreat from challenging ideas, the critics of safe spaces are engaged in stigmatising those who are already institutionally disadvantaged. Imogen Tyler and Tom Slater (2018, p. 728) remind us that stigma is a form of power and domination, or, as they suggest is often overlooked in readings of the work of Erving Goffman (1990), a kind of social control. This mirrors the ‘intensification of stigma production’ (Tyler & Slater 2018, p. 727) exemplified by attacks on benefits claimants under conditions of

austerity, essentially justifying the removal of support by demonising those who need it. It is also of a piece with attacks on identity politics of various stripes (anti-racism, feminism, trans rights), with the language around resilience and emotion sustaining the image of students as ‘snowflakes’ interested only in ‘grievance studies’. This stigmatisation is achieved by denying the suitability of alternative spaces of communication and promoting the monopolisation of debate across the university; by denigrating those who seek safe spaces as falling short of the standards of debate and, by extension, as seeking to contaminate the culture of the university; and finally by undermining the means by which students might find the support and recognition to navigate higher education – so that the idea that they are not cut out for university is self-fulfilling. These attacks on safe spaces constitute a form of debate fetishism that is mobilised to resist any moral understanding of what communication is for. But disliking being told what you can and cannot say is no basis for a philosophy of communication. Through a reading of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, this article has offered that an understanding of communication based on listening, in finding a balance between the right to freedom of speech and the responsibility to hear the other, much more closely picks out the reality of a life shared with others. Achieving this balance is tricky, but with something as fundamental to social existence as communication there is value in seeing it as a kind of moral vocation. A vocation, after all, is when you feel called to something; communication as a moral vocation is a response to a call emanating from the other. Safe spaces help in finding the right balance, by allowing for a sense of belonging to voices that too often go unheard whilst encouraging those who possess an already privileged voice to listen. Debate is useful but it should not over-determine the way we speak.

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