

Is There a Duty to Speak Your Mind?

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“Is it necessary that every single person on this planet expresses every single opinion that they have on every single thing that occurs all at the same time? Is that... is that necessary? Or to ask in a slightly different way, um, can... can anyone shut the f**k up? Can... can anyone, any... any... any one, any single one, can any one... shut the f**k up about anything— About any... any single thing? Can any single person shut the f**k up about any single thing for... an hour? You know, is that... is that possible?”

— Bo Burnham, *Inside*

1. Introduction

According to a recent poll, the majority of Americans are afraid to share their political views (Ekins 2020). There are more ways to communicate than ever, yet the fear of being ‘called out’ or ‘cancelled’ prevents many people from saying what they really think. Moreover, the tendency to self-censor has increased in recent years. Since the 1950s, the percentage of Americans who do not feel free to express their views has tripled (Gibson and Sutherland 2020). In a culture where one stupid remark can result in mass online destruction, nobody wants to be the next victim of the internet mob's self-righteous fury. So, why risk speaking your mind?

In *Why It's OK to Speak Your Mind*, Hrishikesh Joshi argues that the open exchange of ideas is essential for the flourishing of individuals and society. He provides two arguments for this conclusion. First, Joshi argues that speaking your mind is essential for the sake of the *common good*. Intellectual conformity produces ‘blind spots’ that warp our understanding of the world and prevent human flourishing. Thus, dissenters perform a crucial public service by alleviating society of blind spots. Second, Joshi argues that you should speak your mind *for your own sake*. He draws on the work of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, and Fredrich Nietzsche, as well as contemporary philosophers and psychologists, to argue that dissenters promote their own self-interest by developing their rational faculties and exercising intellectual independence, which are allegedly essential for living a good life. For these reasons, Joshi says we each must speak our mind, even at the risk of blowback. The perils of conformity are too great.

You might ask: Do we need another defense of free speech? There is a wealth of scholarship on the legal protections and sanctions on freedom of speech. Also, we’ll find no better defense of the ideal of free speech (i.e. the idea that society and its institutions should be open to dissenting opinions) than J.S.

Mill's *On Liberty*. What makes Joshi's book important, however, is his focus on the ways in which *social pressures* prevent us from speaking our mind *even when legal protections on free speech are in place*. As Dewey (1981) reminds us, a mere legal guarantee of the civil liberty of free expression is of little avail if the daily freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, is "choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred." Joshi emphasizes the very real costs of self-expression despite the legal protections on free speech. Thus, his book is ultimately about *self-censorship* and the ways it becomes entrenched.

Joshi's defense of the duty to speak one's mind is worth serious consideration, especially in our current political environment. In this paper, I have three goals. First, I will reconstruct Joshi's argument for the claim that you have a duty to speak your mind. Second, I will discuss two surprising implications of his argument. Third, I will raise challenges to some of his main claims. Unlike many philosophical essays, I will not argue for a single unified thesis. Instead, I aim to present the ideas of Joshi's book and engage with them as a whole.

2. The Duty to Speak Your Mind

Do we really want more people speaking their minds? Aren't we already drowning in the opinions of the uninformed masses? In 'Lie Witness News', a segment of the show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, people are asked their opinions about events that never happened, music bands that don't exist, and conflicts in fictional countries. Those interviewed claim that the U.S. has a duty to intervene in 'Zamunda', that President Trump not only won a debate that was still 24 hours away but also rode up to it on a motorcycle, and that it wasn't so bad when 'all the ponies drowned' during water polo at the Tokyo Olympics. We humans are an opinionated bunch, even on issues we know nothing about.¹

According to Joshi, the duty to speak your mind is not a duty to say whatever you really think. When your grandmother gives you an ugly sweater for Christmas, you do not have a duty to tell her that you dislike it (39). So, what exactly does the duty to speak your mind amount to? The clearest articulation of this duty occurs in Chapter 2 of his book, where Joshi says:

¹ Aristotle believed we are social, political animals (i.e. 'zoon politikon'). But, as the evidence above makes clear, we are also opinionated animals. In Greek, it would be ζων δοξαστικόν, transliterated as 'zoon doxastikon', which means something like 'an animal that is full of opinions'.

Whenever there is social pressure to refrain from revealing some evidence we have, I contend, we should take ourselves to have a duty to reveal that evidence—it is in this sense that we have a duty to speak our minds. (37)

As this makes clear, the duty to speak your mind is really a duty to *share evidence*, even when there is social pressure not to do so. Thus, Joshi's central thesis is weaker than you might at first expect. The duty to 'speak your mind' is not about the wide range of ways in which we might express our opinions, preferences, and prejudices; it is about the narrower duty to share one's evidence.² This point will become important later when I raise objections to Joshi's view.

According to Joshi, the duty to speak your mind is a moral duty, not an epistemic duty. It is also a *prima facie* duty, meaning it is not decisive in every context (37). If speaking your mind is likely to get you killed, you are not obligated to speak up. You have no duty to speak your mind if the cost is prohibitively high. Morality would be too demanding if we were required to speak our minds even in the face of death, job loss, or significant harm. We should, however, be willing to "lose some standing amongst [our] social group" (38). As is often the case with moral duties, we must forego narrow self-interest for the sake of the collective good.

The duty to speak your mind is also an *imperfect duty*: it allows for "discretion and latitude" in application (40). After all, we would not be able to function in the real world if we had to speak our minds (i.e. share our evidence) in *every* context. That, too, would make morality too demanding. Thus, the duty to speak your mind does not yield a determinate prescription about when it must be fulfilled. We can pick our battles. Also, the duty must be performed *in good faith* (44). It is possible to share genuine evidence in ways that mislead others (e.g. by sharing only a selection of one's evidence). To prevent people from meeting this duty while intentionally making the epistemic position of others *worse*, we must limit it to those who intend to improve rather than deteriorate the epistemic situations of others. Further, the duty to share evidence kicks in "only when the matter at hand is of sufficient importance" (40).

According to Joshi, the duty to speak your mind is a special case of the more general imperfect duty to *improve the epistemic commons*. The 'epistemic commons' is Joshi's term for the stock of evidence, ideas, and perspectives that are alive for a given community (2, 32). Speaking your mind is important for the common good, according to Joshi, because we enhance our collective ability to reach the truth if we

² One's beliefs might also function as higher-order evidence, but I will set this complication aside in what follows.

share evidence and offer different perspectives. This explains why there is normative pressure to speak your mind. If we allowed social pressure to stifle the free expression of ideas, it would create dangerous blind spots that distort our understanding of the world. To alleviate these blind spots, we must foster a healthy epistemic commons that tolerates diversity of opinion. Thus, we each have an ethical responsibility to preserve and promote a healthy epistemic commons. Here is my own reconstruction of Joshi's argument:

The 'Epistemic Commons' Argument

1. The epistemic commons is a vital public resource that benefits us all.
2. If the epistemic commons is a vital common resource, then we have a duty to protect it. (If we did not contribute to preserving a healthy epistemic commons, we would be freeriding on the labor of others, which is unfair.)
3. If we have a duty to protect the epistemic commons, then we must speak our minds against social pressure to conform. (If we did not speak our minds against social pressure to conform, then we would not adequately protect the epistemic commons.)
4. Thus, we have a duty to speak our minds.

This is one of two defenses that Joshi gives for why we should speak our minds.

In addition to the above argument, Joshi argues that speaking your mind is not only good for others but also *good for your own sake*. At first blush, this is puzzling. On the one hand, Joshi maintains that you have a duty to speak your mind *despite* the costs to yourself. You must be willing to sacrifice your narrow self-interest for the sake of the collective good. On the other hand, he argues that speaking your mind is essential for promoting your own self-interest. Is this a contradiction?

Not exactly. When we take a broader perspective on what makes human life worth living, we realize that individuals must be willing to bear some costs in order to promote their overall self-interest (88). Consider activities like physical exercise, going to the dentist, and studying for exams. These all require us to bear some costs (e.g. the time involved, discomfort or pain, boredom), but we bear these costs to reap greater benefits along other dimensions. Likewise, you should bear the costs of speaking your mind in order to reap greater benefits *for yourself*. What are these benefits? Joshi highlights two ways in which speaking your mind is essential to your own flourishing.

First, speaking your mind allows you to *develop your rational faculties*, which is essential for living a good life. Drawing on Aristotle in particular, Joshi argues that (a) we must look at what is distinctive about humans to determine what is a well-lived human life, and (b) what is distinctive about humans is their ability to *reason*. He writes, “A good life. . . consists in the development and excellent exercise of our distinctively human capacities—namely, our rational faculties” (146). That said, recent work in social psychology has shown that reasoning is an essentially *social* activity. We are not isolated Cartesian inquirers: we need the help of others to reason well. Thus, Joshi combines the insights of Aristotle with recent work in social psychology to argue for a deeply social epistemology, one according to which you must speak your mind to adequately develop your own rational capacities. We can summarize Joshi’s argument as follows:

The Developing as a Thinker Argument

1. To flourish as a human being, you must exercise and develop your rational faculties.
2. To exercise and develop your rational faculties, you must speak your mind.
3. Thus, to flourish as a human being, you must speak your mind.

In the final chapter of his book, Joshi gives another reason why speaking your mind is essential for individual flourishing: it allows us to cultivate *intellectual independence*. Socrates, John Stuart Mill, and especially Fredrich Nietzsche are the heroes of this chapter, each of whom extolled the value of intellectual independence. According to these very different thinkers, great human lives “do something unique, create something new, and refuse to follow the cultural zeitgeist everywhere it goes” (xiii). Yet, we cannot cultivate intellectual independence without outwardly expressing our ideas. As Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy said, “The right to think is the beginning of freedom, and speech must be protected because speech is the beginning of thought.” In other words, we must speak our minds in order to think for ourselves. We can summarize this argument as follows:

The Intellectual Independence Argument

1. A good life requires intellectual independence.
2. To cultivate intellectual independence, you must speak your mind.
3. Therefore, a good life requires you to speak your mind.

This is not to say you must think for yourself on every single issue. There simply isn't time (and we should trust experts on many topics). But we must think independently "at least on the important things" (146-7).

There is much to agree with in Joshi's argument. First, it is undeniable that our own epistemic health largely depends on the health of our cultural milieu; thus, there is normative pressure to promote a healthy epistemic commons. Second, it is plausible that social pressure to conceal evidence may create dangerous blind spots that distort our understanding of the world; thus, we collectively benefit from environments that tolerate diversity of opinion. Third, it is uncontroversial that we cannot fully exercise our rational capacities or develop intellectual independence by mindlessly conforming to the ideas of others; thus, we should speak our minds and think for ourselves.

Having sketched the main arguments in Joshi's book, I will now consider two implications of his view (§3) and then raise seven objections to his defense of the duty to speak your mind (§4).

3. Implications

3.1. We should be skeptical of the results of some fields of research

One of Joshi's central claims is: any time there is social pressure to conceal evidence, our view of the world is likely distorted in important ways (29). The ethical upshot is that we each have a duty to speak our mind. Another upshot is: *the epistemically healthiest fields of inquiry are those which lack strong social pressures to conform*. This has ramifications for how we should think about certain disciplines and institutions. Let me explain.

Joshi argues that fields like chemistry, modern physics, and metaethics work reasonably well because they lack social pressures that discourage the free expression of ideas. In metaethics, for example, there is no stigma attached to defending naturalism, non-naturalism, error theory, constructivism, etc. These issues do not "excite the passions" in ways that make people angry or intolerant towards those who defend one side of the relevant issue (26). As a result, we can be fairly confident that one side of a debate has not been filtered out or silenced by social pressures. In other fields, however, speaking your mind has greater costs. We might expect some areas of social science, politics, or applied ethics to be "so closely linked in the public mind to sensitive issues of policy that an objective, scholarly discussion of them is now impossible" (Loury 1994: 452).

It follows that in fields where there are incentives to not speak your mind, *we should be more skeptical of the conclusions of these fields*. Blind spots will emerge when it is costly to provide evidence on one side of an issue. Thus, we should be wary of the conclusions of *any* field in which there are social costs to expressing unpopular opinions. Presumably, this will include topics such as:

- Do single-parent households lead to more behavioral problems among children?
- Should we tax carbon emissions to reduce global warming?
- Does gun control legislation reduce deaths from gun violence?
- Is abortion morally wrong in most circumstances?
- What are the economic effects of illegal immigration?
- Are intelligence tests biased against minority groups?
- Is there any bias in the hiring and promotion of women in STEM disciplines?
- Are there biological facts about sex differences?

In all these cases, there likely exist social pressures to conform one's opinions to the perspective of one's social group (or what Joshi calls a 'reference network'). Open-minded inquiry will therefore be corrupted by the bias to "find what the community is looking for" (Loury 1994: 453). Yet, these are also fields of research in which it is *extremely important* to get the right answer from a practical, policy-making perspective. Thus, we ought to be more skeptical of the conclusions on precisely those issues we regard as the most practically important.

I think Joshi would accept this skeptical conclusion. But we may be able to avoid this result. Suppose there is stigma in one community attached to working on one side of a debate, but there is also another community in which the incentives differ. For example, there may be social pressure in Community A against defending the moral *permissibility* of abortion, but there may be pressure in Community B against defending the moral *impermissibility* of abortion. In this situation, we may expect each community to leave many stones unturned, but we can be fairly confident that the *collective* result will not be a lopsided selection and analysis of the facts out there. If the lopsided inquiry by some communities is counterbalanced by the lopsided inquiry of other communities, we can be confident that our collective view of the world is not distorted. Thus, the epistemically healthiest fields of inquiry need not lack strong social pressures to conform. An epistemically unhealthy atmosphere for one community might be epistemically fruitful for society as a whole. As Lakatos (1970) argues in the context of scientific inquiry, small groups with dogmatic priors can have a positive epistemic effect on the overall community.

3.2. *We must avoid politics to achieve a good life*

Another upshot of Joshi's argument is that *politics is bad for us*. It stifles independent thought. He writes,

[political] parties have an incentive to create a strong coalition. Thus, parties encourage the adoption of a whole package of views, the connections among which may be simply accidents of history. For instance, a good member of either political tribe today, in the United States, has prescribed and predictable views on immigration, minimum wages, crime and policing, abortion, environmental policy—even if the reasons that would justify particular positions on these issues are quite different from one to the other. Political tribes are not hospitable locations for independent thinkers. (131)

In other words, political parties and platforms are *designed* to produce conformity. They encourage us to adopt views with little reflection, to let our leaders do our thinking for us, and to support whatever our 'team' supports. Joshi thus recommends that independent thinkers "avoid politics" (132).

This is an interesting upshot. Unfortunately, Joshi does not explore in detail how this issue connects to broader questions about the role and value of a healthy epistemic commons *for democracy*. He acknowledges that democratic institutions like a free press and democratic procedures like public deliberation are often rooted in epistemic considerations—that is, they allow for the spread of vital information (11). Yet, he discourages independent thinkers from participating in politics. If we pay too much attention to politics, we let it corrupt us: we lose our ability to think freely and live well. This theme is prominent in recent work by Jason Brennan (2016) and Robert Talisse (2019), both of whom suggest that participation in politics makes us biased, irrational, angry, polarized, and dogmatic. Thus, an increasingly popular suggestion is that citizens should *ignore politics* (see Freiman 2019). However, we might wonder what hope there is for an epistemically healthy democratic commons if those who desire to think well and resist mindless conformity abandon the public space of reasons. Wouldn't we be left with precisely those individuals who are farthest from the ideals of an intelligent, open-minded democratic citizen?

Perhaps we needn't withdraw from politics entirely. There is a difference between avoiding membership in political parties, on the one hand, and avoiding politics, on the other. For example, Socrates was not a member of a political "tribe", but his actions clearly had a political aspect. That said, a common idea in

political science is that voters require partisan labels and political parties for both epistemic and practical reasons. The party helps to construct a conceptual viewpoint by which its voters can make sense of the political world. We use partisan labels and the testimony of political leaders as a useful heuristic for determining what to think about political issues (see Lepoutre 2021). In this way, party affiliation is treated as an effective means to circumvent one's political ignorance. Partisanship also provides an important link between individuals and political action. As Mutz puts it, "partisan labels and self-identification facilitate like-minded interactions, which are important for purposes of uniting people around common political causes and a shared purpose and for orienting them to take collective action" (2006: 128). In his foundational book, *Why Parties?*, John Aldrich (1995) maintains that this system is necessary for effective democracy. Thus, it may not be easy, desirable, or even possible to have large-scale democracy without political parties.

4. Objections

4.1. *The duty to speak your mind does not require social pressure*

According to Joshi, there is no duty to speak your mind when pressure to conform is absent. This is counterintuitive. Imagine an engineer who has some doubts about whether the dam she is constructing will hold. Suppose there is no social pressure to conceal her evidence. Does the engineer have a duty to speak up? Intuitively, yes. A dam bursting can be devastating, and the engineer can share her evidence with zero cost to herself or others. Yet, Joshi seems to suggest that the engineer has no obligation to share her evidence. He writes, "costless sharing of evidence is not what the duty amounts to. I have no duty to say the Earth revolves around the sun now: there is no cost for me in doing so" (42). This implies that one has a duty to speak their mind only when there is a cost for speaking up. Relatedly, Joshi says, "speaking your mind involves going against social pressure in some way" (92). But this has an implausible upshot: individuals who possess evidence that could prevent disaster are *not obligated* to share that evidence *unless* there is social pressure against doing so.³ Why think the duty to speak your mind requires the presence of pressure to conform?

³ A complication here is that other duties may be relevant. My point, however, is that it seems like the *same reasons* would be motivating your duty to speak up in these cases.

Perhaps it is most natural to frame duties as existing where there is temptation to do otherwise.⁴ For example, there is a duty to keep promises because often there is temptation not to do so. However, it would not undermine your duty to keep your promise simply because it is also in your self-interest to keep it. Suppose someone offers you \$100,000 to keep your promise to visit me in the hospital. There is little, if any, temptation to fail to keep your promise. Still, you have a duty to keep it. Analogously, you have a duty to share evidence that may prevent harm *regardless* of the temptation to keep quiet. The presence or absence of social pressure makes no difference to whether you have a duty to speak up (so long as the costs of speaking your mind do not outweigh the potential gains). In fact, the duty to speak your mind likely *increases* as the costs to you *go down*. The less you have to risk, the more obligated you are to say something that could prevent harm. Thus, Joshi is mistaken to claim that the duty to speak your mind kicks in only when there is a cost to sharing one's evidence.

4.2. *What makes the duty to speak your mind a 'duty'?*

According to Joshi, the duty to speak your mind draws its normative power from the more general duty to preserve a healthy epistemic commons. In other words, the duty to protect the epistemic commons explains why there is normative pressure to speak your mind. However, there are a variety of ways to protect the epistemic commons. I might dedicate my career to teaching critical thinking skills to undergraduates; I might edit Wikipedia pages in my spare time; I might object to (what I take to be) false or unwarranted assertions; I might work for a fact-checking company; and so forth. Surely, we do not have a duty—even an imperfect and *prima facie* one—to do *all* these things. Yet, these are all perfectly effective ways to improve the epistemic commons.

Why, then, do only some actions that promote a healthy epistemic commons amount to a *duty*? Joshi does not answer this question. While he focuses exclusively on the duty to speak your mind, we may consider the possibility of other duties that would alleviate blind spots and enhance our collective ability to reach the truth. These might include diversifying one's informational sources (Worsnip 2019), proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence (Clifford 1877), displaying epistemic justice (Fricker 2007), and listening to others (Morgan-Olsen 2013). Each of these would help to improve the quality of evidence, ideas, and perspectives that are alive for a given community. After all, it is not enough to give dissenters the opportunity to voice their opinions; it is also vital that people are willing to open-

⁴ A related thought, suggested by a referee, is the Kantian idea that acting out of duty is most clearly recognizable (i.e. it "shines like a jewel") when there are personal costs for doing so. So, the duty to speak up is most salient when there are costs.

mindedly engage with dissenting views. Thus, the duty to protect the epistemic commons would generate normative pressure to listen open-mindedly to others, diversify one's sources, and so forth.

Are all of these *duties*? Even if many, or all, of these particular examples amount to a duty, it would be implausible to say that *every* action that promotes a healthy epistemic commons is one that we have a duty to perform. Thus, we need an account of why some actions that are good for the epistemic commons are duties (e.g. speaking your mind) while other actions (e.g. editing Wikipedia pages) are not. Perhaps it has to do with the severity of the consequences. If nobody were to edit Wikipedia pages, this likely wouldn't be too damaging for the epistemic commons. (We'd just stop relying on Wikipedia.) In contrast, if nobody spoke their mind in the face of social pressure, this probably would severely degrade the health of the epistemic commons. So, we might draw the distinction along consequentialist lines: the more severe the harm to the epistemic commons, the more likely it is that the action will pass some threshold to count as a 'duty'.⁵ Or we might draw the distinction on Kantian grounds: perhaps we cannot universalize the imperative to not speak your mind, but we could universalize the imperative to not edit Wikipedia pages. I do not claim there is no principled way to answer this question. My point is simply that Joshi provides no account of duties to answer this question. In the absence of such an account, it is unclear why the sources of normative pressure that generate the duty to speak your mind do not generate a proliferation of other duties.

4.3. *The problem of testimonial garbage*

We all know someone who takes a little too much pride in speaking their mind. They loudly proclaim to be a defender of truth but really they're just a know-it-all, or they conflate the expression of unpopular opinion with the virtue of intellectual autonomy, or they're simply misguided. Think of the members of QAnon who believe they need to expose the conspiracies perpetrated by leading politicians, or the self-righteous grandstander who uses Twitter to 'bravely' speak out against injustice but is really just seeking praise from members of their social network, or the YouTuber who genuinely believes that some crackpot 'scientist' has provided them with 'evidence' that 'debunks' widely accepted scientific theories. What will happen when *these* people are told they have a duty to speak their mind, even in the face of social pressures not to? Will it improve the epistemic commons? Will it allow these individuals to

⁵ Joshi's claim that the duty kicks in "only when the matter at hand is of sufficient importance" (40) provides evidence for this interpretation.

flourish? I have my doubts. The ideal that Joshi defends is, I strongly suspect, one that people cannot reliably follow. Thus, it may do more damage than good to the epistemic commons.

Joshi acknowledges this worry in an endnote. He writes:

One issue here is that sometimes we may share evidence for a claim in good faith, but nonetheless be mistaken about whether what we are sharing is in fact evidence for the claim in question. Honest conspiracy theorists of certain stripes will presumably fit this bill. (46, n.9)

This raises an important epistemological question: Is the duty to speak your mind best understood along epistemically externalist or internalist lines? If we interpret the duty *externalistically*, we would need to include a “factive” requirement that the evidence shared in support of some proposition p must *actually* be evidence for p . However, this would make the duty far less action-guiding because we can be mistaken about what counts as evidence for what. If we interpret the duty *internalistically*, we would need to include some kind of reasonableness constraint on what counts as evidence by the agent’s own lights. However, this would imply that conspiracy theorists (moral grandstanders, etc.) who share their views in good faith have a duty to do so. Thus, we face a dilemma.

Joshi is tempted by the internalist interpretation of the duty: he would prefer not to impose an objective factive requirement. While I am sympathetic with internalism in epistemology, this would put additional pressure on the claim that speaking our minds will improve the epistemic commons. The more often people are mistaken about their evidence, the more polluted our epistemic environment will be. As John Greco writes, “parents often transmit groundless prejudices to their children, teachers often transmit cultural myths to their students, and doctors often transmit pseudosciences to their patients” (2020: 2867). Following Greco, let’s call this *the problem of testimonial garbage*. The problem of testimonial garbage occurs alongside the fact that testimony is often a valuable source of knowledge.

This worry is especially apt on the analogy with tragedies of the commons. These tragedies arise because a common resource is susceptible to damage and degradation. But just as industrial pollution can destroy river ecosystems, informational pollution can damage and degrade the epistemic commons. As fallible creatures, our testimonial contributions will often involve misleading evidence, biased interpretations of data, and will foreclose fruitful lines of inquiry. Indeed, there are entire fields of research that have led inquirers on wild goose chases for decades or even centuries, such as phrenology, astrology, alchemy, and numerous other pseudosciences. Thus, speaking one’s mind will often *dilute* the quality of our stock of evidence, ideas, and perspectives.

Speaking one's mind can even bring about serious physical harm. Consider the populist politician who uses his words to incite violence, or the racist witness whose testimony wrongly convicts an innocent man, or the nosy neighbor whose gossip about an unfaithful husband causes the wife to commit suicide. Do these individuals properly discharge the duty to speak their mind? Is there any duty to speak your mind when sharing your evidence is harmful? Unfortunately, there is little discussion of these issues in Joshi's book.⁶ He tends to focus almost exclusively on the ways in which speaking one's mind can prevent tragedy and bring about epistemic goods, but he gives little consideration to the ways in which speaking our minds can bring about harm and pollute the epistemic commons.

4.4. *Is there a duty to be contrarian?*

A pure contrarian, as Joshi defines it, is "someone who disagrees with people for the sake of disagreement" (19). Perhaps they are combative by nature or simply enjoy riling up others. Whatever their motivations, the contrarian is someone who raises doubts, challenges, and criticisms that are *not sincere*.

Is there a duty to be contrarian? According to Joshi, there is not. He writes,

It would be bad if the duty I have been positing so far entailed that such characters are doing something good. Fortunately, it does not. The duty is a duty to share one's evidence in the face of contrary social pressure. What is evidence? Philosopher Thomas Kelly explains: "Intuitively, one's evidence is what one has to go on in arriving at a view." (44)

Why limit the duty to speak your mind to those who express doubts (or share evidence) they hold sincerely? According to Joshi, the pure contrarian is not doing much of a service to society. He gives two arguments for this claim:

First of all, most people and groups, most of the time, get most things right. If that's correct, then pure contrarians will be wrong most of the time. Secondly, a pure contrarian's opinions will

⁶ Joshi does consider the issue of 'noble lies' (75-80). These are cases in which one does not share evidence for the sake of some greater good. Joshi advises us against telling noble lies because we don't really know the wider, long-term consequences of such lies. As he puts it, "each age has its imaginative limitations. From the perspective of a particular age, the epistemic and practical benefits of a purportedly heretical theory will not be obvious" (77). Thus, he says we should be very humble about our ability to determine which pieces of evidence are better kept suppressed. Now, I agree with Joshi that we're often not in a position to *know* how exactly our evidence might bear upon the epistemic health of a community. But we may occasionally have *good reasons to believe* that speaking our mind will bring about harm. If we reasonably believe that speaking our mind will cause more harm than good, should we tell noble lies? It is unclear on Joshi's account.

not contain much “signal”—since he disagrees simply because he wants to disagree, people won’t be in a good position to take him seriously. (19)

I’d like to disagree for the sake of argument. I believe there are several ways in which a contrarian can be epistemically useful. For example, someone who does not harbor sincere doubts could aim to dispel group dogmatism by encouraging others to seriously consider alternative possibilities. Suppose you find yourself in a situation where everyone agrees about some issue. In this context, you might suspect that groupthink is occurring. To make sure the group has not reached a consensus without critical evaluation of the consequences or alternatives, you might raise doubts, challenges, or different perspectives that you do not sincerely hold. These doubts may benefit the group or society even if they are insincere.

In fact, isn’t this precisely what philosophers do in classrooms, workshops, and journal articles? We are a contrarian bunch. In departmental colloquia, for instance, philosophical objections are standardly prefaced with comments like, “I don’t actually believe this, but just for the sake of argument, what if...”. Also, I’m told that William Lycan pretended to be a dualist for an entire semester just to get his students (and himself) to take the arguments for it more seriously. And think about how philosophers will passionately argue for various positions, especially after their third beer, largely for the sport of it. These doubts may serve important epistemic purposes. The contrarian can force people to better articulate the grounds for their beliefs. They may also draw out people who have *genuine* doubts and evidence to share. As Joshi claims, a lone voice of dissent sometimes *can* make a significant difference (67-75). Dissent need not be genuine to have this effect. The contrarian may successfully create a rhetorical space in which dissenters are no longer afraid to express their doubts.

In summary, I suspect the contrarian may have more positive influence on the epistemic commons than Joshi claims. This may suffice to generate a *duty* to be contrarian, at least in contexts where there is social pressure to conform. As Joshi argues, our worldview is more likely to be distorted when there is social pressure to conceal evidence. So, if we limit the duty to be contrarian to contexts where social pressure is present, this would increase the probability that the contrarian is right. Also, it would increase the chances that the contrarian will be taken seriously, for they would not be seen as “going against the grain all the time” (42).

4.5. *Is speaking your mind necessary to develop as a thinker?*

According to Joshi, speaking your mind is required to develop your rational faculties and exercise intellectual independence, both of which are essential for living a good life. But a lot turns on what exactly it means to ‘speak your mind’. If we interpret this as ‘sharing evidence’ against social pressure not to do so (as Joshi defines it on p. 37), then it is unlikely that speaking your mind is required to develop your rational faculties or cultivate intellectual independence. After all, you can develop as a thinker by reading the work of brilliant scholars, listening to podcasts, attending lectures and seminars, working through problems yourself, and so forth. None of this requires you to share evidence in the face of social pressure to conform. We can also imagine individuals who are non-confrontational and thus reluctant to share their opinions, and yet are still highly rational. Why, then, does Joshi claim that speaking your mind is necessary for developing your rational capacities and cultivating intellectual independence?

In Chapter 4, Joshi makes a striking modification to his view: “For the purposes of this chapter, speaking your mind involves not only sharing your evidence, which was the subject matter of Chapter 2, but also *asking questions, raising doubts, and considering alternatives*” (92, emphasis mine). He also adds “working on problems for yourself” (98), “sharing your thoughts” (101), “express[ing] your ideas to others” (97), and getting “feedback” (98) to this new, broader conception of ‘speaking your mind’. It is clear why Joshi expands his conception of ‘speaking your mind’ in this way: it makes the ‘Developing as a Thinker Argument’ and the ‘Intellectual Independence Argument’ far more plausible. Who would deny that developing as a thinker and cultivating intellectual independence must involve asking questions, raising doubts, expressing one’s ideas, getting feedback from others, considering alternatives, and working through problems for oneself? We cannot develop as thinkers in total isolation from others. To live a cognitively flourishing life, we must not reason alone.

What connection does this have to the duty to share evidence? Very little, it turns out. This makes Joshi’s argument somewhat confusing. Although he uses the same phrase—‘speaking your mind’—throughout the book, he actually has two very different conceptions in mind. There is the (narrow) conception that he is careful to outline in Chapter 2, which involves sharing evidence; but there is also the (broader) conception of ‘speaking your mind’ that surfaces in Chapter 4, which he uses to argue that speaking your mind is necessary to develop your rational faculties, exercise intellectual independence, and live a good life. So, it turns out that this book is really about two very different things.

Joshi does not draw much attention to his use of these two very different notions; but quite a lot hangs on this, philosophically. First, it means there is little unity between the arguments in the first half of the

book, in which he argues that speaking your mind is essential for the common good (i.e. chapters 1-3), and the second half of the book, in which he argues that speaking your mind is good for your own sake (i.e. chapters 4-5). While every chapter is about the value of 'speaking your mind', it turns out there are two very different activities upon closer inspection. Second, the equivocation over what it means to 'speak your mind' raises a number of philosophical issues. Are we obligated to 'speak our mind' in both senses? Likely not. We may have a duty to share evidence in the face of social pressure, but it is less likely that we have a duty to express our preferences and prejudices. Do the arguments from the first half of the book become less plausible if we adopt the broader notion of speaking your mind? I think so. It is less likely that speaking your mind will improve the epistemic commons if we interpret 'speaking your mind' as broadly as "expressing your ideas to others". That would introduce the problem of testimonial garbage, discussed earlier.

4.6. If nobody is going to change their mind, why bother voicing your opinions?

There are situations in which you are not going to make any real difference. Whatever you do, others will not listen to you. A classic example is polarized political disagreement. When two people are deeply entrenched in their side of an issue, it is reasonable to think along the following lines:

I have evidence and arguments regarding some of these issues. But if I disagree with my friends or colleagues, that will hurt my social relationships. And given how entrenched people are, nobody is going to change their minds anyway. So, what's the point in me voicing my thoughts?
(74)

Joshi calls this the *inefficacy objection* (67). It is an important worry because it raises the question of why individuals should risk social status if their contribution will make no difference. Why not take the easy route?

Joshi considers two possible replies to the inefficacy objection. First, one might argue that even if you don't make a difference, you would be complicit in a collectively bad outcome; thus, you should speak your mind. (Analogy: Your meat consumption will make no difference to environmental degradation, but you are complicit in a collectively bad action; thus, you should stop eating meat.) Second, one might argue that in many of these cases, there's a small probability that your action *triggers* a very bad outcome (68). But Joshi does not pursue either of these lines of defense. Instead, he argues that we *can* often make a big difference. He writes, "Though it may be tempting to think that one's lone voice of

dissent is going to fall on deaf ears, ample psychological evidence suggests that this is often not the case” (69).

I agree with Joshi that a single person *can* make a big difference within group deliberation. The Asch experiment that he discusses (see pp.69-70) nicely illustrates his point. But there is also abundant psychological evidence indicating that speaking your mind (i.e. sharing evidence) is *not* an effective means to change the minds of others in many real-life situations (Kolbert 2017; Gordon-Smith 2019). In 1975, researchers at Stanford found that people continue to hold unjustified beliefs even after the evidence for their beliefs has been totally refuted (Ross et al. 1975). More recently, a vast amount of work in cognitive psychology demonstrates that we all frequently interpret evidence to fit the conclusions we want to reach, we ignore information that conflicts with our beliefs, and we routinely rationalize away the facts, figures, and arguments that we cannot simply ignore. Anyone who has debated politics with a family member at Thanksgiving dinner will know that some minds just can't be changed.

What's the upshot? Joshi is optimistic about the power to change others' minds by speaking our own. But in many real-life situations, it is painfully clear that speaking your mind won't make any difference.⁷ Do you have a duty to speak your mind in this situation? It is unclear what normative pressure there is to speak up when it makes no contribution to the epistemic commons. If it will only strain relations and cost you standing amongst your social group, then speaking your mind is neither useful for your own sake nor for the common good. There are plenty of real-life situations in which it is reasonable to keep your mouth shut.

At one point, Joshi seems to acknowledge this worry. He writes, “empirical evidence suggests that people are prone to quickly discount the testimony of outgroup members” (42-3). He then quotes Cass Sunstein, who writes, “If people seem to be from some group we distrust or dislike, or a kind of ‘out group,’ they are far less likely to influence us, even on the simplest questions. Indeed, we might say or do the very opposite (‘reactive devaluation’)” (Sunstein 2019: 11). This strikes me as a more significant problem for Joshi's view than he lets on. If speaking our minds will often lead to reactive devaluation, then we may harm the epistemic commons by speaking up. Moreover, the situations in which we are

⁷ That said, Joshi rightly points out that voicing an opinion or perspective may influence the minds of moderates, even if it doesn't budge entrenched partisans (75). This is an underappreciated point in the current literature on political disagreement. Instead of focusing on whether evidence and arguments will change the mind of entrenched partisans, we should study the effects of dissent on non-entrenched audience members. Indeed, the main point of expressing dissent within a polarized environment might be to influence moderates, not partisans.

most likely to face social pressure against speaking up *are precisely those in which reactive devaluation will be the most likely*, namely, disagreement with outgroup members. Thus, it may often be rational to avoid speaking your mind.

4.7. *Is there a 'duty to oneself' to speak your mind?*

According to Joshi, the duty to speak your mind is a duty *to others*. It derives from the more general duty to improve the condition of the epistemic commons. This fits with a common view among contemporary philosophers, namely, that duties arise out of the relation between individuals. However, I'd like to suggest that speaking your mind may also be a *duty to oneself*. Joshi does not consider this possibility in his book, but I think we can draw on aspects of his argument to defend this idea. If my argument is correct, it would provide further support for the claim that we have a duty to speak our minds.

Joshi gives two arguments for why speaking your mind is good for your own sake: the 'Developing as a Thinker Argument' and the 'Intellectual Independence Argument' (see §2). However, these arguments do not demonstrate that you have a *duty* to speak your mind. Instead, they aim to show that speaking your mind is *desirable* for your own sake. You ought to speak your mind because it allows you to exercise your rational faculties and develop intellectual independence, both of which are essential for living well. This explains why there is *normative pressure* to speak your mind. But this normative pressure is insufficient to establish a *duty* to speak your mind. It does not follow from the fact that speaking your mind is essential for your own flourishing that you therefore have a duty to speak your mind. (That would require an additional premise.) In general, appealing to self-interest does not typically provide an adequate normative basis to generate a duty. This likely explains why the language of 'duty' drops out of Joshi's book after Chapter 3.

I will draw on Kant's notion of a 'duty to self' to argue that we have a duty to develop our rational faculties and exercise intellectual independence, which requires that we speak our minds. What exactly is a 'duty to oneself'? It is a special category of duty whose sole object is the agent him or herself. You have a duty to yourself when you are both the subject of the duty (the person who is required to act to fulfill the duty) and the object of the duty (the person to whom the duty is owed). Unlike other duties, a duty to oneself cannot be established on the grounds of our relations or interactions with others. It does not derive from the rights or welfare of 'fellow creatures'.

Kant believed that persons have duties to themselves, including the duty *to develop one's talents and cognitive capacities* (1797: VI 387). This may provide a foundation on which to argue that we have a self-regarding duty to speak our minds. If speaking one's mind is essential for cultivating one's intellectual capacities, then Kant's theory of self-improvement as an imperfect duty to oneself may imply that one has a self-regarding duty to speak one's mind. Indeed, Kant *was* against lifestyles in which one allows custom, popular opinion, or religious doctrine to do one's thinking for oneself. Thus, he seems to endorse the idea that we have a moral duty to think for ourselves (see Kant 1786).⁸

On Kant's view, duties to oneself are not merely instrumental for one's happiness or well-being; they are concerned with a person's regard for his or her own intrinsic worth. As Kant says in his lectures on moral philosophy, duties to the self "do not all relate to well-being and to our temporal happiness" (Collins XXVII: 341). Thus, we cannot reduce self-regarding duties to considerations of an agent's own long-term well-being. This differs from Joshi's argumentative strategy. Joshi argues that we ought to develop as thinkers because it is essential for living a flourishing life. This makes it sound like cultivating our rational faculties is merely a means to promote one's own happiness or welfare. For Kant, however, there is no duty to promote one's own happiness. We must develop our cognitive faculties out of esteem for our own humanity and respect for our rational nature.

There is an ongoing debate about the possibility of duties to oneself.⁹ Marcus Singer argues it is impossible for there to be any such duties because we do not stand in the appropriate kind of relation to ourselves. Thus, he regards duties to oneself as "an appeal to self-interest, disguised in the language of duty" (1958: 203). Likewise, Bernard Williams says the language of 'duties' to oneself is merely a way "to launder the currency of desire" (1985: 51). However, Alison Hills (2003) demonstrates that acts of self-regarding duty are not always a benefit to oneself.¹⁰

Another objection to the idea of a duty to oneself is that moral duties are necessarily other-regarding, since morality revolves around our relations with others. For example, Kurt Baier claims that morality "arises out of the relation between individuals" and thus the notion of a duty to oneself is "absurd" (1958: 215; 231). But this line of argument would only demonstrate that a duty to oneself is not a *moral*

⁸ That said, Kant's theory of self-improvement as an imperfect duty to oneself does not provide any guidance about which specific means are appropriate for developing one's cognitive faculties.

⁹ See Denis (1997), Hills (2003), Timmermann (2006), and Schofield (2021).

¹⁰ Hills writes: "A duty to the self can be grounded in one of your features which is independent of your well-being: fulfilling that duty need not contribute to your well-being. For example, Kant's duties to the self are grounded in the subject's autonomy. An agent could, according to Kant, be required to fulfill her duty to protect her own autonomy at the expense of her happiness, just as she could be required to fulfill duties to others at the expense of her happiness. In that case she would not benefit from fulfilling a self-regarding duty." (2003: 132)

duty; there may, however, be *epistemic* duties to oneself.¹¹ In fact, the standard view in epistemology is that epistemic duties *are* duties to oneself, not to others. As Lackey (2020: 37 n.6) writes, “In the epistemological literature, there is surprisingly little work devoted specifically to the topic of our epistemic duties to others.”¹² The literature is typically framed in terms of responsibilities that we have as believers, not the epistemic needs of those around us.

Are there duties to oneself? Hills (2003) persuasively argues that there is a duty to promote your own well-being.¹³ Admittedly, this kind of duty may seem puzzling. Isn't it pointless to posit a duty to promote your own well-being, given that everyone always wants to promote their own well-being and would do so whether or not it was their duty? As Joshi shows, however, well-being is not always linked to one's desires or narrow self-interest. An individual may find it more comfortable or convenient to defer to authority when forming their beliefs; they may prefer to follow custom, popular opinion, or religious doctrine as a way to achieve peace of mind. But a life would not go well if it did not include asking questions, raising doubts, working on problems for oneself, considering alternatives, and expressing one's ideas to others. These contribute to the agent's flourishing whether or not she desires them. Thus, objective well-being can be ground in an unwaivable duty to the self that is not dependent on desire. If this defense of self-regarding duties is correct, then we can appeal to the 'Developing as a Thinker Argument' and the 'Intellectual Independence Argument' to demonstrate that one has a *duty* to speak one's mind.

5. Conclusion

There is no such thing as entirely free speech. Anyone who speaks out on a controversial issue pays the price of having others know what they think. This can lead to job loss, alienation from friends and family, anxiety, depression, and loss of social status. So, why risk speaking your mind? Joshi argues that the

¹¹ As noted earlier, Joshi conceives of the duty to speak your mind as a moral duty, not an epistemic duty.

¹² Lackey (2020) and Kawall (2002) are exceptions.

¹³ She derives this duty from a duty to promote the well-being of others. Here is her argument in a nutshell. First, she maintains that everyone has a duty to promote others' well-being. Second, it is not always possible to release others from their duty to promote your well-being. For example, duties protecting fundamental human rights, such as the duty not to torture, cannot be waived (Hills 2003: 135). Thus, the duty to promote others' well-being is at least sometimes unwaivable. (If it were waivable, then the analogous duty to the self would always be waivable. This would be a problem because a duty from which one can always release oneself is not a real duty.) Third, Hills argues that reasons for action are universal in the sense that, “if some consideration is a reason in certain circumstances, *ceteris paribus*, it will also be a reason in relatively similar circumstances” (Hills 2003: 136). Thus, if you have a reason to promote the well-being of others, then you have a reason to promote your own well-being. Finally, there is no reason to think your own well-being has less normative significance than the well-being of others. All this entails that you have a duty to promote your own well-being, including your cognitive well-being.

open exchange of ideas is essential for the flourishing of individuals and society. We enhance our collective ability to reach the truth if we share evidence and offer different perspectives; also, we improve our own well-being by developing our rational faculties and exercising intellectual independence. Thus, we should speak our mind and encourage others to do the same, as long as the costs are not too great.

While I agree with Joshi that we collectively benefit from environments that tolerate diversity of opinion, I have also raised some challenges to his view. First, it is false that we have a duty to speak our mind only when there is a cost for speaking up (§4.1). Second, it is unclear why there is a duty to speak your mind but not a duty to improve the epistemic commons in myriad other ways, such as editing Wikipedia pages (§4.2). Third, the ideal that Joshi defends risks being one that people cannot reliably follow (§4.3). This may result in the pollution of the epistemic commons (i.e. testimonial garbage). Fourth, Joshi claims there is no duty to be contrarian, but he may underestimate the epistemic value of contrarianism (§4.4). Fifth, speaking your mind may not be necessary to develop as a thinker, depending on how we interpret the relevant notion of ‘speaking your mind’ (§4.5). Sixth, speaking your mind often will not make any difference (§4.6). Although Joshi is optimistic about the power to change the minds of others, this optimism may be unwarranted. Finally, the duty to speak your mind may (also) be a self-regarding duty, not just a duty to others (§4.7).

I’d like to conclude by suggesting a shift in focus. In his book, Joshi sometimes characterizes the duty to speak your mind as two connected duties. He writes,

[the duty to speak your mind] means sharing evidence even when there is social pressure not to do so. . . . It also means doing what we can to make it less costly for dissenters to put their evidence on the table, even if we don’t have special information of our own to share in a particular context. (150)

In other words, we have a duty to *share evidence* but also a duty to *make it less costly for others to share evidence*. These duties seem sufficiently different that we should not lump them together as two faces of the duty to ‘speak your mind’. Rather, there is a duty to speak your mind, on the one hand, and a duty to encourage others to speak their minds, on the other.¹⁴

¹⁴ That said, those who are genuinely interested in speaking their mind to improve the epistemic commons ought *also* be open to fostering an environment in which their own ideas are challenged. If you are not open to having your own ideas challenged, you are likely not speaking your mind due to the sincere motivation to improve the epistemic commons. Anyone who aims to

Joshi does not discuss in detail the duty to make it less costly for others to share evidence. This strikes me as a regrettable omission. Instead of expecting individuals to stick out their neck by speaking up, perhaps we should put more focus on changing the *culture and norms* that govern public discourse. Put another way, instead of arguing that individuals have a duty to speak their mind, it is perhaps more important that we foster social environments in which individuals do not feel pressure to self-censor in the first place. This was precisely the aim of scholars like J. S. Mill and John Dewey. They were less concerned with encouraging individuals to bear the social costs of dissent and more concerned with how to promote a healthy epistemic community in which dissent is not suppressed. While Joshi does acknowledge the value of alleviating social pressures and taboos against sharing certain types of evidence, this is not the focus of his book. We might wonder, however, whether his argument places too much of a burden on individuals to speak their mind when more emphasis should be placed on protecting such individuals from social sanctions.

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promote a healthy epistemic commons will want to live in a world where people are able to critique and disagree with ideas without fear of social reprisal. In this way, the duty to speak your mind is intimately connected with the associated virtue of open-mindedness.

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