

Apology for an Old Email

I have caught wind that somebody has been digging through the archives of the Extropians listserv with a view towards finding embarrassing materials to disseminate about people. The Extropians mailinglist was a forum in the mid-90s where people had conversations about science fiction, future technologies, society, and all sorts of random things. It was not moderated, so the noise level was very high—occasional interesting ideas but also large quantities of silly, mistaken, or outright offensive stuff. For a few years, while I was a student in London, I occasionally posted to this mailinglist, contributing postings in all of these categories.

The best thing would probably have been for all of those words to have been buried and forgotten. Good ideas have been taken up in other contexts, further developed, and written up in more readable formats; and the no-good stuff deserves to rest in the great ash heap of history. The mailinglist served a useful function at the time, as a place where people from around the world could have freewheeling conversations about wild ideas. Nowadays the Internet offers many other forums that better serve those functions.

But I fear that selected pieces of the most offensive stuff will be extracted, maliciously framed and interpreted, and used in smear campaigns. To get ahead of this, I want to clean out my own closet, and get rid of the very worst of the worst in my contribution file. I should warn that this is unpleasant business; read on at your peril.

So here goes. (The context was a tread about offensive content and offensive communication styles.)

I have always liked the uncompromisingly objective way of thinking and speaking: the more counterintuitive and repugnant a formulation, the more it appeals to me given that it is logically correct. Take for example the following sentence:

Blacks are more stupid than whites.

I like that sentence and think it is true. But recently I have begun to believe that I won't have much success with most people if I speak like that. They would think that I were a "racist": that I _disliked_ black people and thought that it is fair if blacks are treated badly. I don't. It's just that based on what I have read, I think it is probable that black people have a lower average IQ than mankind in general, and I think that IQ is highly correlated with what we normally mean by "smart" and "stupid". I may be wrong about the facts, but that is what the sentence means for me. For most people, however, the sentence seems to be synonymous with:

I hate those bloody [n-word redacted]

My point is that while speaking with the provocativeness of unabashed objectivity would be appreciated by me and many other persons on this list, it may be a less effective strategy in communicating with some of the people "out there". I think it is laudable if you accustom people to the offensiveness of truth, but be prepared that you may suffer some personal damage.

I completely repudiate this disgusting email from 26 years ago. It does not accurately represent my views, then or now. The invocation of a racial slur was repulsive. I immediately apologized for writing it at the time, within 24 hours; and I apologize again unreservedly today. I recoil when I read it and reject it utterly.

What are my actual views? I do think that provocative communication styles have a place—but *not like this!* I also think that it is deeply unfair that unequal access to education, nutrients, and basic healthcare leads to inequality in social outcomes, including sometimes disparities in skills and cognitive capacity. This is a huge moral travesty that we should not paper over or downplay. Much of my personal

charitable giving over the years has gone to fighting exactly this problem: I've given many thousands of pounds to organizations including the SCI Foundation, GiveDirectly, the Black Health Alliance, the Iodine Global Network, BasicNeeds, and the Christian Blind Mission.

Are there any genetic contributors to differences between groups in cognitive abilities? It is not my area of expertise, and I don't have any particular interest in the question. I would leave to others, who have more relevant knowledge, to debate whether or not in addition to environmental factors, epigenetic or genetic factors play any role.

What about eugenics? Do I support eugenics? No, not as the term is commonly understood. Some of the most horrific atrocities of the last century were carried out under the banner of eugenic justifications and racist rationalizations. In contemporary academic bioethics, the word "eugenics" is sometimes used in different and much broader sense, as including for example the view that prospective parents undergoing IVF should have access to genetic screening and diagnostic tools (as is currently the established practice in many countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom). There is a rich bioethical literature on these issues (see e.g. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/eugenics/>), and it involves many complex moral considerations that cannot be captured in a single word or a slogan. I would be in favor of some uses and against others. Broadly speaking, I'm favorable to wide parental choice in these matters, including for some applications that would qualify as "enhancements" rather than "therapies"—to the extent that this distinction makes sense. I have written several papers about the ethics of enhancement, e.g. "[The Reversal Test: Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics](#)" (*Ethics*, 116, 2006); "[Cognitive Enhancement: Methods, Ethics, Regulatory Challenges](#)" (*Sci Eng Ethics*, 15, 2009); "[In Defense of Posthuman Dignity](#)" (*Bioethics*, 19, 2005), and one edited volume "[Human Enhancement](#)" (Oxford University Press, 2011).

I think for people interested in the societal consequences of genetic medicine, or in the ethics of preimplantation genetic diagnosis, selection, or engineering, or in human enhancement ethics more generally, either on the side of pro or con, we are more likely to improve our collective understanding and wisdom and by open-minded and thoughtful engagement with the arguments and the existing literature, rather than by name-calling or sloganeering—let alone by idiotic and offensive emails like the one I wrote 26 years ago, and for which, again, I truly and sincerely apologize.

Nick Bostrom
9 January 2023

Outcome of investigation by Oxford University (10 August 2023):

“we do not consider you to be a racist or that you hold racist views, and we consider that the apology you posted in January 2023 was sincere. ... we believe that your apology, your acknowledgement of the distress your actions caused, and your appreciation for the care and time that everyone has given to this process has been genuine and sincere. We were also encouraged that you have already embarked on a journey of deep and meaningful reflection, which includes exploring the learning and self-education from this process.”