

EXAMINING ETHICS

TRANSCRIPT – REBECCA ROACHE: THE ETHICS OF SWEARING
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I'm Alex Richardson, and this is Examining Ethics, a show designed to bring insights from the cutting edge of moral philosophy and ethics education to the rest of us. If you're anything like me, you enjoy a colorful swear word or phrase every now and then. Why do we love swearing? What is it, if anything, about bad language that tends to offend people? My guest today has a new book called *For Fuck's Sake, Why Swearing is Shocking, Rude, and Fun*. Amidst a clear examination of some of the semantic, philosophical, and fun puzzles associated with a good cursing out, she suggests that what makes swearing offensive or shocking doesn't actually lie in the words themselves at all, but rather in what we don't say around the edges. As a note for listeners, you're gonna hear some swearing on today's episode for the purpose of analysis. Rebecca Roache, welcome to the show.

Thank you very much. I'm happy to be here.

Sure. It's great to have you. Could you start by telling us a little bit about your work and your interests, and in particular, how you got interested in swearing?

Yes, so I'm an associate professor or senior lecturer in philosophy at Royal Holloway which is part of the University of London. I've pretty much always been a philosopher all of my adult life. It's what all my education was in, and it's what I've done for my career except for a couple of diversions. One was into IT, pretty ill advised, and the other was just having kids and bringing them up. Research wise, I've done a bit of everything over the years. So I started out being interested in metaphysics and philosophy of mind. I've done applied ethics, medical ethics, philosophy of psychiatry. And currently, I'm most interested in social and ethical issues in philosophy of language. So that has motivated my work on swearing and I'm also sort of getting into some other aspects now for my next book which is on indirect communication. I also do some coaching and I have a podcast called *The Academic Imperfectionist*, which is a sort of combination of philosophical insights and coaching insights. So sort of thinking about how philosophical analysis can help people live better lives. Yeah.

You talked about this a little bit in your introduction, but I'm interested in what sort of motivated you to write a book, not only on the one hand about the sort of semantics or art, if you will, of swearing, but on the other the sort of ethical impacts of the practice?

First of all, so why the topic? And I I talk about this in the book. I

first got interested in it when I came across, about ten years ago now, an article by like a joke article, really, by two American computer scientists that was called get me off your fucking mailing list. And it was sort of it was just that phrase repeated and repeated and formatted like a scientific paper. And, apparently, they just used to send it out to people who were spamming them. And it got submitted to one of these predatory journals. So one of the journals that will just publish anything in return for a a fee. And it got accepted. It didn't actually get published because they didn't pay. But this made the news. So, you know, the publishing practices in academia are not usually super interesting to the general public. But this was, I suppose, a fun way of bringing a spotlight onto these predatory journals and their practices. And the way it was reported in a lot of places online had the swear word censored so it was sort of get me off your F star star star mailing list. But at least the story I came across, it also was illustrated with a, like, a screenshot of a page from the article. So it was, you know, they'd censored the swear word in the report, but you could you could still see it on the screen. And, anyway, even if you couldn't, we all know what it said. So I was just thinking, like, how does this work? Because censoring swear words like that really does seem to make them less offensive. But, you know, how? And I thought, well, surely a philosopher has already thought about this. So I did a bit of looking around. And I found, to my surprise, that swearing hasn't really been written about much at all by philosophers. So I started working on it. You know, initially the thought was I would maybe write an article or two and then actually Nigel Warburton, who is host of the Philosophy Bites podcast, suggested that I do a book on it instead. And previously, I just hadn't thought of writing the book at all. I thought I suppose I finished my PhD and thought never again. Am I gonna write something that long? And as I as I've already said, I have quite a short attention span when it comes to research topics. But anyway, I sort of decided that was that was a good idea, and that's what I did. Took me a long time to finish it, much longer than planned, but but, yeah, there we go. So I wanna dig in a little bit and talk about context. Swear words can be taboo in one place and nearly meaningless in another, maybe in less formal contexts. From your perspective, how does culture shape what we label as offensive, and are there kind of patterns in how communities and societies decide what kinds of things are off limits linguistically? So when it comes to taboos, which are just things that we are not supposed to say or do, Kate Keith Allan and Kate Burridge have written a book on taboos called Forbidden Words, and they talk about something they call the middle class politeness criterion, which is basically the idea that when we're talking about stuff that we're not supposed to do, you know, stuff that would be rude or whatever, it's usually the middle classes that we're thinking about because everybody else is either too powerful to have to worry about it or they're, you know, so underprivileged that it's just, you know, a luxury that they can't afford. So when we're thinking about things like having good manners, we're talking about,

middle classes. And I think that's a very crude way of putting it, but there's some truth to it. Right? And I think a lot of the contexts where swearing is inappropriate because swearing is taboo a sort of taboo language. Swearing is usually inappropriate in kind of middle class polite contexts. Right? Say if you're in a job interview or, you know, if you're meeting your romantic partner's parents for the first time, this sort of thing. These are all contexts where we're not, we know not to swear. But there are lots of other contexts where you can swear, as you've noticed. And some of those would be places that you might think of as more kind of working class, so football match, in the pub, this sort of thing. Like these are all sort of I mean I'm really generalizing here, but contexts where you might expect to be a bit more relaxed with your language. I think this goes not just for swearing but for all forms of etiquette because we can think of swearing at you know, sort of not swearing in polite context as a, you know, a type of politeness. And that shows up in other types of politeness as well. So, you know, if you're in a sort of fairly formal context, you might be dressed quite formally. You might address people in a formal way, like sort of Mr. or Mrs. Whatever, rather than be on first name terms. Whereas in the sorts of contexts where you might, you know, where people are more relaxed about swearing, there also usually there's those contexts where you can be more informal in other ways. All of which is to say I think some of the, the rules about when you can and can't swear just kind of piggyback on these general judgments about which contexts are formal and which are less so. But also, I think, you know, different contexts have different norms associated with them. So just, you know, if you are in a group of intimate friends, then you you will all have established among yourselves expectations about the way that people will behave, the sort of language that people will use. And that might be very different from the way you would speak and behave with your parents or your grandparents, for example. So I think that kinda comes into play as well. You know, there can just be different norms in different situations, and often we don't even notice. But when it comes to swearing, we do.

So I wanna ask what might be a little bit of a selfish question as a political philosopher who studies civility. How do you think etiquette norms that govern something like swearing might interact with other norms that are maybe sort of normatively close by, things like civility or maybe respect. Is swearing the type of thing that comes across as merely a breach of etiquette or is it a kind of thing that can maybe more substantively harm?

So I think one thing to say about that is I'm not sure etiquette is so so etiquette has a lot to do with respect. If you look at some of the some of the philosophers who've worked on etiquette and manners, they often see it as closely linked to morality. You know sort of a lot of the time I think there's this idea that it's just trivial. It's just about, you know, what hand do you hold your knife and fork in and that

sort of thing. But actually it's a way of, in part expressing respect. And, you know, there's this view that it's that etiquette and morality aren't completely different things. They're actually on a continuum. And I think swearing can fit into that. You know, so sometimes when we swear inappropriately, it might be merely rude, but not actually an expression of disrespect. So that might be if you, you know, if you think you're in a context where everyone's relaxed about swearing and it's and it's actually not and a swear word slips out, then people might be shocked. They might find what you said inappropriate. But, you know, you might be really embarrassed, remorseful, horrified even. Right? So so you you're not expressing disrespect. You've just you've just slipped up. But I think in other contexts we can sort of inappropriate swearing can be linked with disrespect. And I think this kind of gets in a bit to different types of swearing. So if you're just peppering your speech with swearing, you know, if you say something like, what a fucking lovely day today, then, you know, that's probably not gonna offend many people. But if you say to, you know, if you say to somebody directly something like, fuck you, that's although that's using the same word, it's a very different way of swearing. But that is an if you if you could translate that expression, it is something along the lines of, I I disrespect you. I hold you in contempt. So something like that. So I think, you know, how you swear is a big part of this. And then also, you know, as we've talked about, there's the context as well. But I also think it's you know, there's all sorts of things going on. You know, if you were to swear if you were to say fuck you at a toddler, for example, you know, if your babysitter were to say that to your child and you were to overhear, I mean, that would be, I think, really worrying from a moral point of view. You might start to worry about, is this person actually competent to look after my child? Am I gonna use them again? You know, this sort of thing. Whereas in other contexts, we can think, well, okay, that's quite rude, but maybe not worrying in a in a moral sense. So I really think it's it's gonna depend on what else is going on.

So some of the distinctions made in the conversation so far kind of naturally lead me to what I think is an interesting question, which is about how particular words kind of capture our attention. So the word fuck, especially, holds a particular kind of notoriety. I'm guessing that's why it appears on the cover of your book. So why do you think this word and words like it have such persistent power and draw such persistent fascination? Why are they kind of lightning rods for controversy?

Yeah. Yeah. These are great questions. And actually, I I was surprised by how uncensored the word is on the book cover. Now I knew there were gonna be asterisks involved, but it was a pleasant surprise when because it's kind of uncensored. If you look at the cover of the book, you can see the censored letter. Yeah. So fuck is a classic, I think, when it comes to swear words. And I think so part of that is probably its versatility. I mean, it's notorious for being a really versatile

swear word. You can kind of bend it to say almost anything you like. I mean, Anthony Burgess used the example of hearing an army mechanic saying, fuck it. The fucking fuck is fucking fucked. We about a truck. And you can't you know, you understand the meaning. Right? But it's still it's still this one word, and there have been, you know, sort of numerous articles written by linguists on the versatility of that word. So I think that's part of it. Another aspect, I guess, is the fact that there's a sense in which swearing is a double taboo. So it's taboo in the sense that you shouldn't do it in polite context, and in some sense of shouldn't. But there's also another sense in which it's taboo in that the words that are actually swear words are words that relate to other taboos. So if you think about their literal meanings, they are words that relate to things like sex, lavatorial matters, sometimes, I mean depending on the culture, things like disease, blasphemy. And this is quite pervasive across cultures. So so these are all things that there are taboos around, and the words that tend to become swear words tend to be words that relate to taboo topics. So I guess that's part of it as well. And then also, I suppose it's a it's a word that is easy to say for people from different linguistic backgrounds. You know, I've had I've had people come up to me at talks I've given and so on and say, oh, you know, fuck is one of my favorite swear words. And even when I'm speaking in whatever it is, whatever other language it is, you know, it doesn't have a complicated sound in it or a weird consonant. So so that might be part of it too. But I suppose also there is there is something kind of self feeding about these things sometimes. You know, sometimes there's just no satisfying good explanation for why a particular word gets a foothold.

So this has me thinking about words which are maybe less versatile and more directly pointed, or maybe words or insults that sort of single out identarian sort of groups. So do you see a kind of moral distinction between swear words that merely offend polite norms and those that maybe genuinely harm or even marginalize certain groups? How do you think we should think about the boundary between casual rudeness on one hand and maybe deeper harm on the other?

Yeah. Yeah. So it sounds like there you're getting into slurs. So those are words that when you use them, you denigrate an entire group of people. So racist words, homophobic words, ableist words, and so on. Surprisingly, slurs is a topic that's fairly well covered by philosophers, much more so than swearing. Yes, I think it's much more compelling to make a case that using slurs harms compared to using swear words. And that is really because of the place that slurs has in a history of oppression of certain groups. So, I mean, I think in theory, you could have a slur against a kind of privileged group. And there are, you know, so, 'Tory' is a word that sometimes has the air of a slur, right, but against a group that's not historically oppressed. But, you know, when we think of slurs, we tend to think of the ones that are, directed against oppressed groups. And I think, you know, that the way the way it's harmful to use them is typically

because they tend to be used in a context where the speaker's expressing contempt against an entire group of people. I mean, that's a feature of slurs. Right? If you if you call one person, you know, if you say you and then a slur word, you're not merely insulting that one person. You're insulting them in virtue of belonging to this entire group, which is not something that swearing does. Right? If you say fuck you to somebody, you're really just targeting them. So I think, you know, there's the thought that slurring kind of stands for prejudice in general against whatever group it is. And the battle to be recognized as equal and so on isn't over yet. So so there's this there's this context of slurring that bit swearing doesn't have. I mean, there's also interesting examples, you know, because sort of having said that, you might be thinking, well, what if you're using a slow word in a positive way? So you see this, of course, with, I mean, I guess the most obvious example is the way that the n-word is used in hip hop culture where it's been, you know, historically a word that's been used, weaponized against black people and then some black people have reclaimed that and used it in a neutral or a positive way. So it does you know, it's possible to use them inoffensively or even positively. But and this is a kind of really weird feature of slurs compared to other categories of words. Only when you are a member of the group targeted. So it's very difficult to use the n-word, for example, in a positive way if you're not black. And I think, you know, lots of people would think, well, actually, you can't use it in a positive way unless you're black. There's something very problematic about that, even if you are, you know, trying to do it with the best of intentions. So I think, you know, a roundabout way of saying that, yes, swearing and slurring are different categories. They're different morally, and they're different in all sorts of other weird linguistic ways as well.

I think the directedness metaphor makes some good sense of this. Right? Swearing is kind of the generic fuck you, where slurs are a slightly less generic and more directed sort of fuck you, comma, because, insert some identarian considerations here.

Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of work done on what exactly makes slurs so offensive and harmful. And I quite like Geoffrey Nunberg's view, the linguist, he's no longer with us, but he said something along the lines of, slurs are offensive because they're the words that racists use. So it's almost like, you know, it's not it's not the word itself. It's the fact that in using it, you identify yourself as a racist. Or he's talking about, you know, a particular word, but you can substitute the equivalent for any category of slur, I mean. So it's almost like by using it, you are saying this set of attitudes is acceptable.

It's virtue linguistics.

Right. Yeah.

I wanna take us at a slightly different direction. A lot of people tend to swear automatically when they're hurt, stressed, or startled even, as though it's hardwired to some kind of psychological reflex. There's a whole fun genre of TikTok and Instagram ephemera that involves people being scared and then swearing really creatively. Can you say a little bit about the psychological picture behind this kind of reflex and why swearing in that way feels so cathartic?

Yeah. Yeah. So whatever I'm gonna say here is kind of secondhand because I'm not a psychologist. So there's a category of speech that psychologists call automatic speech, which is things like, saying, like I just did then, counting, reciting the days of the week, you stuff that you can just kind of spurt without really needing to think about it. And swearing is included in that category. So it becomes I mean, once you learn how to do it, it can become something that you are you're able just to kind of give vent to without really thinking about it, which I guess kind of explains why it's it these are words that you reach for if you've just trapped your hand in a door or something like that. And there's these weird cases of people who suffer a brain injury or a stroke and lose the capacity for speech by having a conversation or, you know, expressing their what they mean in sentences, but still retain the capacity for automatic speech. So, you know, some cases where people can still swear or utter swear words at least even though they lose other capacities for speech. So it looks like there is this you know, it's where the ability to swear occupies this special psychological category. And interestingly, I mean, when you look at some of the research that's done by broadcasters into what sort of language the public finds acceptable. So this is something that the broadcasting organizations in The UK do every ten years or so. They go out and survey the public. What language do you find offensive? What do you find less offensive? And then this feeds into regulations about what you can say on TV and at what times and in what context and so on. And it's interesting that people tend to be what what comes out of that research in part is that people are more understanding of somebody swearing if they do it kind of automatically, if they're surprised or if they're in pain or something like that. And presumably, not all of the people being surveyed are neuroscientists or psychologists, so they don't know this stuff about the way that we're wired to swear. But still, we just have this intuitive understanding that sometimes you just can't help it. You know, sometimes you'll say fuck if you hurt yourself. Whereas, you know, if you take something else, if you were to say something like guilty, for example, like something that's really likely to offend somebody, you probably wouldn't be able to tell a very plausible story about how you only said that because you just stubbed your toe or something like that.

We'll be right back with this episode of Examining Ethics after a short break.

AD BREAK: Feeling squeezed by the job market? You're not alone. With AI creeping in, inflation rising, and expectations always climbing, It's easy to wonder, are job seekers getting a fair deal? Longtime Prindle Post contributor Evan Arnet asks, what should a job offer in return for an honest day's work? How much hustle is too much just to stay employed? It's time to rethink the rules in Evan's latest, Reasonable Expectations for Good Jobs. You can read this piece and other recent stories now at prindleinstitute.org/post. The Prindle Post is a digital publication of public philosophy dedicated to examining the significant ethical issues raised by current events and popular culture. It's produced by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University, and its editor in chief is Doctor. Tucker Sechrest.

And we're back with Rebecca Roache talking about her new book, For Fuck's Sake, Why Swearing is Shocking, Rude, and Fun.

So I wanna pick back up with this idea that swearing can be fun. So in your view, what makes a bit of profanity add fun or humor or levity to a situation like this one, which might otherwise be a kind of professional context, and do this rather than, well, we hope, just coming across as kind of crude. What's the secret ingredient that makes swearing work well in certain jokes and conversations and maybe not so well in others?

Yeah. Yeah. I actually have a a an article coming out, any moment about this called Why is swearing sometimes funny? Yes. So part of the answer here is going to draw on theories about what makes anything funny. You know, why is anything funny? And there's been different thoughts about this over the years. And probably the most influential thought, which originally I think originally comes from Kant, is the idea that, something's funny when it's incongruous. So that might help explain why it's funnier to hear somebody, you know, somebody swearing when you just don't expect them to swear. You probably don't bat an eyelid if your best friend swears while they're kind of letting off steam about something. But I was gonna say, it would be different if you heard the president swear, but maybe if you think of another president, not the current one, but, you know, somebody who's sort of statesmanlike and, you know, I use this example again and again in my book of hearing a queen swear. Someone who is just you would normally take to be a a model for dignity and decorum. If you hear someone like that swear, it's it can be very funny. I mean, it can also be shocking depending on who you are. But, you know, according to this, the theory I mentioned, of comedy, a reason why that's funny is because it's incongruous. You know, it's unexpected. And I think there's there's some truth in that, but I, you know, I don't find it completely satisfying because there's plenty of things that are incongruous, but which aren't funny at all. But if you if you come home and your house is on fire, that's just that's incongruous but it's I mean presumably

you don't find it funny. So I think that's part of it. And I also think there is an element of so when I think often it happens. When somebody swears unexpectedly, it's funny, and it you know, it's incongruous. But I think also maybe what's going on is there's this sense of, god, what's gonna happen next? You know, this sort of, I thought things were gonna pan out in this particular way, but actually, you know, all bets are off now because somebody's just sworn. So I think that's part of what's going on there. And also, I think there's just a sort of probably, you know, the remnants of just a childish glee in rude words. You know, children adore swear words and rude words in general. And, you know, we I guess we sort of get tired of them as we get into adulthood. Or at least we think we shouldn't find rude words funny. But, you know, there's context where we still do. So I think it's probably a a range of things. Yeah. The sort of incongruity, the unexpectedness of what's gonna happen next and this sort of childlike glee.

Interesting. So this has kinda come up around the edges a little bit, but I'm wondering how you think about the idea of overuse, overusing swear words either morally or, I guess, even aesthetically. In some cases, I mean, you can imagine something like the word fuck as adding something clever or witty or humorous to a conversation. And you can imagine other cases like the one you mentioned earlier, "isn't it a fucking lovely day?" To add something a little bit more crude or less funny. How do you think we can distinguish between these things? And I'm curious what you think about this idea of overusing.

Yeah. Yeah. So there's a few topics we could we could talk about there. So so one is, I mean, if we sit the sort of humor angle, the idea of a cheap laugh in comedy. So the idea that, you know, sometimes a comedian will swear to get a laugh because it's incongruous or for whatever reason, but then that's kind of all they do. You know I think swearing in comedy can be done really cleverly so you know George Carlin's seven words gets about swear words is a great example there and people can find that on YouTube. But it's just you know he talks about these seven words that you can't say on TV and you can hear the audience is just laughing throughout, right? It's really not that he's just surprised them with these swear words and that's all he does. But I think sometimes in comedy, if somebody uses swearing as a cheap laugh and there's this sense of betrayal as an audience member, like, oh, God. You know? Is that all they're gonna do? And I think my thoughts about that is that they you know, so I mentioned before that sometimes when swearing is funny, it's because there's this it introduces this sense of, like, what's gonna happen next? You know, the usual norms of are not applying anymore. What's gonna happen next? So almost like a sense of anticipation. And I think if a comedian does that, if they swear, but then they don't do anything else that's clever, then this is sort of like sense of betrayal. Oh, god. I thought you were gonna you know, I thought you were kind of revving up to say some clever stuff, but actually, it's just swearing and, you

know, I can hear that anytime I like. Right? So I think that's part of it. That swearing is a sort of almost like a like a promise in comedy, promise that there's good stuff to come and so we wanna see that. Yeah. A couple of other things that sprang to mind when you were asking this question. So so you were talking about overuse, and I was thinking, you know, you used the example of someone saying, what a fucking lovely day, or was that my example? I can't remember. But, you know, just you swearing in a in a sentence where you wouldn't expect it. And I don't know. So so it reminded me I I had a I had a friend who used to do that, and they were Polish. And I found the you know, that they would just include swear words. I think what they were trying to do is speak in a sort of casual, informal way, but they they would include swear words that no British person would ever put in the places that they put it. And that was quite I used to find that quite entertaining. But, you know, it did carry an air of this person is kind of still getting to grips with how to use these words. So I think, you know, maybe that maybe it can be sort of jarring from that point of view where you might end up thinking, oh, god. Do you have you just learned this word? And you don't you don't you know, you're still kind of experimenting with it. But also I wonder whether there might be an element of it would just be weird to overuse any word. You know, if somebody was using the word printer in every single sentence, you know, just like you might end up being like, what are they what are they doing here? Are they trying to tell me something? Is this a joke? And it would just be puzzling. So I think, you know, that that that's probably that going on too.

This is what the Internet is calling brain rot words. Right?

Right. Okay. Yeah.

And I think another thing that sprang to mind is and this goes this goes back to the the censorship point that we were talking right about right at the beginning, where, you know, you'll see in print swear words that have some of the letters obscured by asterisks, which I call sanitization in the book. And that really does seem to reduce the sense of offense from readers, but only if it's not overused. So so there there has to be an air of, I really don't wanna use this word, but any interests of providing you with the information that I'm here to provide, I'm gonna have to. You know, if every sentence contains a sanitized swear word, then you kinda lose that sense of I'm trying not to offend you or, you know, I'm trying not to use this word, but I can't avoid it. So it kinda cancels out the work that they you know, what you're signaling with the sanitization because, you know, I think the way that sanitization works is you know what the word is, but the person doing the sanitization is is sending a signal that they care about your feelings and they're trying to protect you as best they can. You know, it's a difficult balance to strike, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And that attitude of consideration would get canceled out if you were then using the word too often.

I wanna shift gears a little bit and talk about some practical moral advice around swearing. It seems like listeners might think of swearing as the kind of thing they should probably do less of or maybe at least a thing that they should do a little bit more intentionally. So what kind of shape might advice that comes from you have about either swearing less or maybe swearing better?

Yeah. I mean, I think this is something that the way people swear usually varies with context. So people that think they swear too much and they want to cut down, at least based on my experience, I don't know if anyone's actually researched this, that they're usually capable of keeping a lid on it in certain contexts. Like, maybe they don't swear in front of their kids or they don't swear in front of their parents or while they're at work or whatever it is. And it's just in some context where they do the swearing. So I'm wondering if it's a bit like, you know, someone that wants to cut down on the amount of alcohol they drink. You know, some of the usual advice there that you'd expect is, like, maybe go to the pub less often. Avoid the contexts where you're gonna have all these cues about, you know, how this is something that you need to do. So I suppose and this, I guess, would be not super attractive advice is, you know, if there's groups of friends that you usually swear a lot in the company of, then maybe you could avoid them. Or if you don't want to do that, maybe you could get them on board with trying to reduce swearing and you could all do it together. But I think, you know, sort of avoiding the queues is probably part of what's going on here. I mean, it's kind of advice about how you break any habit, really, isn't it?

That makes sense to me. I kinda wonder if you think that there's ever the converse, like a place where we should desire to swear more.

There's gonna be very few situations in which you ought to swear in the sense that it would be morally impermissible for you not to swear. It's possible to imagine such situations, and I have, some of them in the book, but, you know, you kind of have to work hard. I think I I talk in the book about, you know, if you're an undercover police officer and you're investigating a gang who happens to do a lot of swearing, then, you know, if you were to refuse to try and adopt their the way that they talk, you might jeopardize the investigation, and that could potentially be a situation which is impermissible to refuse to swear. But I think that's not really something that's going to affect even most of the undercover police officers amongst us, let alone the rest of us. But I think there are there are sort of more watered down situations. I think so something like if you're introduced to a group of friends like a new group of friends, if you're invited to join a new group of friends, and they're all really relaxed about swearing, I don't think I'd wanna say that it would be impermissible for you not to swear. But I think, you know, in a general way, the the the polite thing to do is just to try and fit in

and try and you know, they've welcomed you into their group, and you are going to try as best you can to sort of fit in if you wanna carry on hanging out with them. And that might mean, you know, being more relaxed about how often you swear, among other things. But, yeah, I think that's, you know, if we were to take the lesson from that as you ought to swear in this situation, I mean that would be quite an abstraction. I think it's more about, you know, in general, it's it's polite to kind of reflect people's norms or, you know, if you're invited into a new group to try and adopt the norms that seem to govern their interactions.

It's ironically polite to swear more.

Yes.

So here's a good kind of summative question for you. The trick about researching or thinking about language is that it's pretty constantly in flux. It's always changing. It's evolving. So what do you see on the horizon for swearing and profanity in the future? Do you anticipate the rise of new swear words, or do you think some of our greatest hits will keep their stronghold in our vocabulary?

Yeah. Yeah. This is a fun question. So so it looks like in general, the rudest words tend to track the values of a society. So the sexual swear words like fuck and other sort of sexual swear words really came you know, became really offensive during Victorian times, you know, where there's this culture of prudishness. So so before that, they wouldn't be crude, but they, you know, they wouldn't have been swear words. I mean, there's examples of the word cunt being used in, what is it, like, fifteenth century medical textbooks? You know, stuff like that. Street names like we had a Grope Cunt Lane in Oxford and in other sort of cities in the in The UK. So, yeah, you know, not words that you'd say in a polite context, but not swear words either. I mean, you don't want swear words straight on the street signs, for example. And as you say, that's that fuck is quite an enduring swear word. But there are other expression other ways of swearing that we can detect a bit more, you know, going in and out of popularity. So a good example is the word damn, which is quite a, like, really mild word now. Like, you wouldn't say that if you hurt yourself, probably. But, I mean, in the nineteen thirties when the movie Gone With the Wind came out, there was that line in it, frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn, which was a really powerful expression back then. You know, there was some discussion about whether Rhett Butler should say something else. You know, maybe he should say, frankly, my dear, I don't give a hoot. I think that was something that was considered. Whereas now, that's just a very mild thing to say. But in contrast, what wasn't being discussed back in the 1930s around Gone with the Wind was the horrible betrayal of black people. You know, the way that slavery was it was sort of a period of time when, you know, it was still normalized that, black people were second class citizens.

Whereas now, you know, if you want to watch *Gone with the Wind*, you're not going to notice the dam as something that is worth getting offended about. But I think, you know, modern audiences would remark on the portrayal of people of different races. And I think that's a nice illustration of the way that values have changed. You know, we care less in, you know, at least countries like The UK and The US, fairly, I'd say The UK is probably more secular than The US, but we care less about blasphemy and much more about racial equality. And I think that's reflected in the sort of language that we find offensive. So, you know, even a few decades ago, casual racism was, you know, something that people could do in polite company. But now there's much less tolerance for it. And you find this in the research I mentioned earlier done by broadcasting organizations here in The UK where they'll sort of ask audiences about the words they find offensive. And if you look at the the report, I mean the reports come out about once a decade, and if you look at the last few, you can see that audiences have much lower tolerance for racial slurs than they used to twenty or so years ago. So I think, and quite rightly, I think, we are sort of moving away from focusing on words that are, at least in my view, you know, offensive, liable to shock in some cases, but not actually sort of seriously morally wrong and towards being intolerant of the right sorts of things. So I think, you know, as regards to sort of looking at where we're going now, I'm thinking that probably we will come to view there's certain words that we use now or we culturally are more or less acceptable now, which will become less acceptable. And I think we can see that happening with the word prostitute. You know, there's this there's been this move in the last decade, well, more than the last decade, towards using the term sex worker and in general sort of talking about sex workers with respect whereas, you know, a decade a decade or two ago, these were just sort of, you know, people just didn't think twice about holding sort of fairly contemptuous attitudes. And I think also I mean, it's interesting to think about the way that I have. I've got two children and while I was writing this book, when I first started it, they were, I don't think they really knew any swear words, but during the process they kind of discovered more and more rude words. And I was sort of thinking, oh God, I've got to have this, I've got to make sure I've got a respectable attitude towards this. So it was all quite reflective. And I found that I'm not that bothered about them swearing as long as they understand that it's context dependent. You know, don't do it at school, etcetera, etcetera. Don't do it when you're talking to grown ups other than me. And also, you know, that I I won't have them swearing at each other, so I won't have them saying fuck off, fuck you, that sort of thing. But there's plenty of words that I won't allow them to say, which and at some, I was surprised at myself. So so they don't use you know, I've never heard them even want to use any slower words, thankfully. But words like stupid and dumb, I really don't like them using. Anything where they're commenting on somebody else's appearance, so calling somebody or describing somebody as fat or ugly in a negative way, I I really don't like. I'm not necessarily

because of the words they're using, but just because of the disrespectful attitudes. So it's really been it's like there's been this mirror held up to me, about, you know, my own attitudes towards rude words. So I think, you know, I hope that what's happening has a background to all this is that there is a trend towards just viewing people in general with more respect. But perhaps that's just wishful thinking. I don't know.

This has been a conversation with Rebecca Roach, author of *For Fuck's Sake, Why Swearing is Shocking, Rude, and Fun*, available now from Oxford University Press. Rebecca, thanks so much for coming on the show.

Thanks very much. I've loved being here.

Examining Ethics is hosted and produced by Alex Richardson and brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. The views represented here are those of our guests and don't reflect the position of the Prindle Institute or of DePauw University. Our show's music is by Blue Dot Sessions. You can learn more about today's episode and check out supplementary resources at examiningethics.org. As always, you can contact us directly at examiningethics@depauw.edu. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.

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