

CANCEL CULTURE PROBLEM

Kirill Patyrykin¹

¹ORCID ID: 0009-0004-5844-1578

Abstract

The onset of the digital era, often viewed as a liberating influence for democratizing expression, has resulted in a paradoxical phenomenon: the rise of "cancel culture," a powerful, technology-driven method of social sanction. This article transcends the term's contentious and controversial application to examine its significant impact on the dominant ethical culture. The author presents a specific intensional definition, contending that "cancel culture" is not simply a new form of shaming but unique phenomena. It is defined as (1) a widespread campaign (2) advocating for third-party condemnation of (3) an alleged moral violation, which is justified by (4) a rhetorical invocation of "victimhood culture". This study contends that this framework flourishes in an established context of "normative volatility" and "emotivism," exacerbated by a "hypersensitivity culture" that values emotional comfort above intellectual discourse. The article's primary conclusion is that "cancel culture" operates as an opposing ethical paradigm for discourse, fundamentally incompatible with both conventional liberal-consequentialist ("marketplace of ideas") and classical virtue-based (parrhesia) forms of communication. The study suggests that the phenomenon's primary result is not the instrumental success of any individual cancellation, but rather the widespread "chilling effect" on expression. This serves as a novel moral education that praises conformity, incentivizes performative morality, and intentionally hinders the development of individual character, integrity, and courage. This indicates a systemic crisis in contemporary moral discourse.

Keywords: Cancel Culture, Victimhood Culture, Moral Acceleration, Emotivism, Character Formation, Virtue Ethics

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it appeared clear that the Internet's decentralized, peer-to-peer network would improve individual freedom of expression and facilitate the unrestricted distribution of information, as it considerably hampered government control and democratized publishing, allowing anyone connected to the Web to gain access to their own platform.¹ Few could have predicted at that time that the Internet could evolve into a mechanism for suppressing freedom of expression. Freedom of speech, or freedom of expression, is widely considered as a fundamental human right. In reality, it is not generally maintained as an indisputable right; even in the United States, where the First Amendment enshrines freedom of expression, legal precedents have consistently affirmed that this right has boundaries and may be restricted with valid reasoning. It is important that freedom of expression is not enumerated among the inherent and inalienable rights (such as the right to pursue happiness) in the Constitution but rather established as a constraint on governmental authority. Serious theorists and advocates of free speech typically depend not on human rights theory, but on pragmatic principles (asserting that freedom of expression is an ethical need owing to its beneficial consequences) and virtue ethics (maintaining that exercising freedom of expression amidst opposition cultivates and exemplifies encouraging virtues). Understanding these distinct approaches is vital if we are to comprehend the extent to which they are challenged and compromised by Cancel Culture.

Although the Internet existed, the years before the new century saw the rise of Web 2.0, a collection of technologies allowing seamless integration of user-generated comments and material across public websites, including forums. Web 2.0 ultimately evolved into the social media platforms and applications recognized today. These advancements implied that, for the

¹ Cerf V. (2002). The Internet is for everyone. Retrieved from <https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc3271.html>

very first time in history, everyone could swiftly access a broad public. This also appeared to be

a significant advancement in freedom of expression. This highly promising future was viewed by many as a continuation of the seemingly unstoppable decline of censorship that commenced in Renaissance Europe, boosted significantly by Humanist learning and the invention of the printing press. In the centuries after its invention, Gutenberg's portable printing press catalysed an unprecedented flourishing of diverse expression. It significantly weakened the exclusive authority of elites for regulating knowledge and was arguably a key element in the rise of modernity. The Internet, Web 2.0, and social media appeared to offer a comparable, if not more democratic, upheaval in the new millennium.

To a certain degree, all of this has transpired – various forms of information, both legal and illegal, are accessible online in ways that were unthinkable a generation prior. Simultaneously, the Internet, especially social media, has engendered an exceptionally opposing phenomenon. Starting around 2010, numerous public efforts have emerged to stigmatize specific forms of speech and to expel speakers or their statements from the public domain. This phenomenon is currently referred to as "Cancel Culture." Cancel Culture efforts rarely succeed in eradicating the intended discourse. In some instances, attempts at cancellation unintentionally generate increased publicity for the individual and their views, thereby attracting further attention to them, a phenomenon referred to as the Streisand Effect.² The individuals facing cancellation typically do not remain out of the public eye for extended periods, with few notable exceptions, such as Harvey Weinstein. Nonetheless, a lack of effective cancellation does not imply that Cancel Culture has not substantially impacted global culture, particularly ethical culture. The explicit nature of cancellation campaigns typically relates to particular injustices, but the overarching ethical principles about public discourse remain quite vague. Researchers have endeavoured to elucidate the implicit assumptions to comprehend the novel aspects of Cancel Culture ethics and its relation to traditional ethical concepts of freedom of expression, fairness, and integrity. This article outlines the main ways in which the moral assumptions underlying the phenomena conflict with alternative ethical frameworks of expression and offers a practical explanation of Cancel Culture.

Definition

The concept of "cancelling" an individual in its contemporary interpretation originated in the 2010s. Scholars agree that it was initially employed to signify the expulsion of a friend or acquaintance from one's life. By 2015, it was already employed in its contemporary meaning: to exclude an individual, typically a celebrity, from public life as retribution for a moral infraction. That year witnessed extensive demands for the cancellation of Amy Schumer, an American actress, following her purportedly racist remarks against Latina women.³ The term "Cancel Culture" later evolved to define the practice. The word has primarily been employed by critics to denounce what they perceive as a malevolent activity. This indicates that its application in "natural language" is unlikely to be consistent, and to analyse it effectively, we must first understand the various contexts to which it may belong. The phrase can be defined in at least three distinct manners: by intention, by extension, and in relation to its moral or normative implications.⁴ The three types of definitions frequently intersect and coexist in

² NPR. (2008, February 29). 'Streisand Effect' Snags Effort to Hide Documents. NPR: Technology. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2008/02/29/87809195/streisand-effect-snags-effort-to-hide-documents>

³ Saint-Louis H. (2021). Understanding cancel culture: Normative and unequal sanctioning. *Firstmonday*, 26(7). Retrieved from <https://constellation.uqac.ca/id/eprint/7698/>

⁴ "Intension and extension | Definition, Example, & Facts | Britannica" n.d.

natural language, resulting in ambiguities and uncertainty when they diverge in edge circumstances. A formal definition typically comprises a set of qualities that an object or concept must possess to qualify as a member of the specified class. This is referred to as definition by intention. Natural language notions can be described in this manner; however, they frequently operate in alternative ways as well. One of these is "extension" - the list of the class members. The term "planet" is commonly perceived by the public as denoting any entity from the recognized list of planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and possibly Pluto.

Intentional and extensional definitions frequently conflict, and each may evolve separately. For example, some years ago, the International Astronomical Union voted on and formalised a new and exact intensional definition of a planet. According to that definition, Pluto no longer qualifies as a planet since it fails to meet the condition of possessing sufficient gravitational pull to clear its orbital vicinity of debris. Many casual observers struggle to accept or comprehend the assertion that Pluto is not classified as a planet, as their definition remains extensional, relying on a list of entities that includes Pluto. Others accept the revised meaning as definitive without comprehending the alterations made. Terms can also be defined normatively, meaning they incorporate a value judgment. In such instances, determining class membership may rely more on our ethical understanding than on the factual attributes of the subject in question. For instance, "murder" is typically defined in normative terms. It is not merely the act of one individual killing another (which may be classified as "homicide," for instance), but rather an unlawful killing. Even when an individual is ruled guilty of murder by a court and the case's facts are unequivocal, we may still contest whether murder occurred, as our perspectives on morality may differ. The several definitions of "Cancel Culture" are significant, as individuals employ the phrase in all three interpretations. The extensional or archetypal definition encompasses the principal issues and individuals that have been the focus of prominent cancellation campaigns. Candea, Heywood et al. enumerate: "BLM (Black Lives Matter), transgender rights, decolonization of the curriculum, no platforming, blasphemy and Islamophobia, right-wing populism, COVID, and Gaza." This definition of the issue effectively delineates a historical moment. Nonetheless, its analytical utility is constrained. The concerns on this list have been the focus of several campaigns. Individuals have faced public condemnation for "misgendering" or for declining to criticize Israel's conduct in Gaza; nevertheless, these matters have also been addressed through judicial avenues.

Intensional definitions, constructed from a compilation of essential qualities that distinguish Cancel Culture, may provide a foundation for examination. The disadvantage in this instance is that, by consolidating the list of traits, we may inadvertently omit examples from the category that most individuals engaged with the field would have included, like how the IAU's revised list of planets is disconcerting for many people unfamiliar with it. That is not an issue if we acknowledge that any definition we use is a pragmatic concession to the complex nature of natural language. This method adheres to Popper's critique of methodological essentialism as articulated in *The Poverty of Historicism*, 2013.⁵ However, developing a functional intensional definition presents a challenge too. Does Cancel Culture genuinely denote a novel phenomenon? The most prominent features are silencing, humiliating, and ostracism; yet these phenomena are not novel. Clark contends that the contemporary notion of cancelling, as understood in the context of social media, originates from Black American culture, where practices such as "dragging," calling out, and boycotting have historically served as mechanisms of communal social regulation, indicating that this phenomenon is not fundamentally novel. If that is accurate, then there is nothing novel about it.

⁵ Popper, Karl. *The poverty of historicism*. Routledge, 2013.

Other scholars believe that cancellation transcends ordinary humiliation. Hervé Saint-Louis advocates for differentiating between cancellation campaigns and cancellation power, wherein a third party with authority imposes sanctions following pressure from a public campaign. He cites the popular cancellation campaign against JK Rowling for her position on gender theory as an example. In 2020, Rowling remarked that she has experienced cancellation four or five times. She was alluding to internet firestorms of condemnation, accompanied by demands for a boycott of her work. Saint-Louis observes that despite the extensive and severe shaming, Rowling's publisher and the filmmakers of her films remained supportive of her.⁶ In contrast, he cites the example of a Florida man who, during the mask mandates of 2020, obstinately refused to wear a mask and responded with anger when confronted by members of the public. A Twitter influencer recorded the interaction on video and shared it online. The video became viral, resulting in the man's termination from the Insurance Company where he was employed. This individual was not merely a target of a social media cancellation campaign; he was effectively cancelled due to his employer's sanctioning actions. Donald Trump and Kevin Spacey were targets of Cancel Culture online, but only Spacey had been cancelled by a powerful third party.

Saint-Louis asserts that opponents of Cancel Culture are mistaken in seeing it as inherently demotic – akin to mob rule – since cancellation is effective only when an authority enacts definitive measures against the target. The pertinent authority may be governmental – such as enforcement officers or other state entities but could also encompass several other authoritative categories, including employers, advertising, licensors, or even business partners. He contends that the involvement of third parties, alongside humiliation, punishment, and ostracism, distinguishes contemporary Cancel Culture. According to this perspective, the components of an intensional definition encompass public shame, a third party with authority over the target, and a consequence enforced by that third party upon the target. Saint-Louis aids in explaining one important component of Cancel Culture. Gigi Foster has noted that the interplay of social humiliation and official consequence has transpired repeatedly throughout history. It was seen in the Third Reich and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, among other recent instances; she contends that it was similarly observed in the response to dissenters of lockdowns and compulsory vaccination during the COVID crisis.⁷

Is there something truly exceptional regarding the relationship between crowds and influential third parties in modern Cancel Culture? A compelling piece by sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, published in 2014, prior to the widespread adoption of the term "Cancel Culture," provides insight. Campbell and Manning examine a phenomenon that predates but is associated with Cancel Culture: the regulation of "microaggressions" on university campuses, primarily in the United States. "Microaggression" is an activist word, first introduced in the 1970s, denoting recurrent tiny indignities that may appear trivial to outsiders, yet cumulatively instill a sense of alienation in marginalized groups within their own country. During the 2010s, this phrase proliferated on university campuses, where platforms were established for individuals to document instances of microaggressions they experienced. The objective was to garner the sympathies of influential authorities, typically university administrators, and to compel them to impose sanctions on alleged wrongdoers.

Campbell and Manning suggest that micro-aggression campaigns are efforts to address conflict. They inquire about their similarities and differences with other conflict management

⁶ Saint-Louis H. (2021). Understanding cancel culture: Normative and unequal sanctioning. *Firstmonday*, 26(7). Retrieved from <https://constellation.uqac.ca/id/eprint/7698/>

⁷ Foster G (2025). *The Manipulators' Playbook* ★ Brownstone Institute. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from <https://brownstone.org/articles/the-manipulators-playbook/>

tactics. They delineate two further methodologies for conflict management: cultures of honor and cultures of dignity. In the former scenario, individuals had few options for engaging third-party authorities; to resolve issues, they must confront their wrongdoers directly, often resorting to violence to seek restitution. In the latter, third-party dispute resolution is well-established, potentially manifesting as the legal system, for instance. The authors observe that these two methods of conflict management are linked to distinctly different ethical principles. In a culture of honor, individuals must exhibit bravery, showcase their power when necessary, and possess heightened sensitivity to perceived offenses. These are the attributes that will dissuade violations against them. Conversely, in a culture of dignity, self-restraint and forbearance are esteemed. Addressing a transgressor incurs significant expense and demands considerable effort, leading to the dismissal of trivial complaints.

Campbell and Manning contend that micro-aggression culture represents a distinct and novel form of ethical culture, which they characterize as a “culture of victimhood.” In this scenario, akin to the culture of dignity, individuals resolve conflict by relying on a formidable third party instead of confronting the culprit directly. In contrast to a culture of dignity that promotes a resilient tolerance, victimhood culture fosters heightened sensitivity. In this regard, it shares similarities with honor culture. While honor culture prioritizes strength and resistance to adversity, victimhood culture drives individuals to highlight their own vulnerability and subordinate position relative to the purported offenders.

Conclusions about Cancel Culture can be drawn from Campbell and Manning's observations regarding the conditions that may precipitate campaigns against microaggressions. Firstly, there are one or more third parties capable of imposing sanctions on possible campaign targets. If this requirement is not fulfilled, the discussion would be to humiliation rather than cancellation. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, universities in numerous countries increasingly met this requirement as administrators became more inclined to regulate personal and moral matters formerly deemed outside their jurisdiction. Similarly, this applies to other influential organizations in society, given the growing significance of Corporate Social Responsibility. Corporate Social Responsibility mandates that firms address moral dilemmas within their sphere of influence, rather than relegating them to personal concerns, as was often the case throughout much of the twentieth century. The second criteria are that social interactions within the society where campaigns occur must be comparatively weak. In societies characterized by robust social networks, such as those structured around kinship or clan affiliations, alliances are pre-established. In the event of a conflict, individuals are inclined to perceive themselves as supporters of one of the opposing parties. According to Campbell and Manning, moralistic campaigning predicted on victimhood would be ineffective in such conditions. The method for such contexts would rely on relational arguments: you are more closely related to me than to my adversary, hence you should endorse my cause. In an environment of fragile social bonds, appeals to empathy and equity can grow more effectively. Many modern cultures exhibit remarkably fragile social connections due to urbanization, fewer family members, and the deterioration of communal life or associationism.⁸ Over the past two decades, the proliferation of social media has resulted in a significant increase in the number of weak connections accessible to individuals. If Campbell and Manning are correct regarding the significance of weak social connections and social media in microaggression campaigns within universities, it is probable that these same factors have intensified Cancel Culture on a worldwide scale. The third condition posits that domination and power asymmetries are seen as intrinsically unjust. In numerous communities, inequality is perceived as inevitable or even

⁸ Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital: Originally published in *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1), 1995." *Culture and politics: A reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000. 223-234.

esteemed. In contemporary liberal democratic cultures, where equality is revered, the concept of victimhood culture is rationalized. Advocates are prepared to present themselves as of low status, and this aspect enhances the credibility of their assertions. In a hierarchical culture, inferiority is not a debate; it is merely an acknowledgment of weakness. Campbell and Manning contend that, paradoxically, heightened equality may render individuals more acutely aware of ongoing inequities, as grievances over injustice appear more justified.

The victimizing mentality that supports online cancelling campaigns is particularly aligned with the political left. Left-wing politics prioritizes the values of equality and rectifying injustices to a greater extent. It may be suggested that Cancel Culture is inherently leftist in its definition. Nonetheless, individuals on the right have frequently employed similar tactics by asserting victim status.

A complex definitional inquiry is whether Cancel Culture is uniquely Western, contrasting with cultural practices in other regions of the globe. Marc Orlitzky contends that the contemporary understanding of integrity, defined as adherence to prevailing social norms rather than the defines of personal convictions, is emblematic of WEIRD societies. “WEIRD” is a phrase employed by psychologists to characterize present Western populations and cultures: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. Olitzky is likely correct that the artificial kind of integrity he critiques is characteristically WEIRD, and that the original significance of integrity has been somewhat diminished. However, that statement does not imply that other cultures inherently possess a notion of integrity that safeguards them against succumbing to Cancel Culture. Bureaucratic values advocating adherence to procedure, epistemic values necessitating the repetition of official doctrines, and virtue ethics prioritizing obedience and submission are prevalent ethical frameworks in non-Western cultures that may compromise integrity as defined by Orlitzky and facilitate Cancel Culture.

This notion appears credible as non-Western nations and cultures are occasionally singled out by leftist online activists for purported ethical transgressions (recent instances include Israeli military operations in Gaza and the ban on the Pride march in Budapest), mirroring the dynamics of Cancel Culture. Nonetheless, non-Western nations have also shown multiple cases of cancellation schemes. We may reference efforts originating in Egypt or Pakistan against individuals considered to have offended Islam. If we were to embrace an extensional definition of Cancel Culture, grounded in the specific motivations that led to its emergence in American universities—such as campaigns against microaggressions and issues of consent in sexual relations—we might concur that Cancel Culture is normally Western. Nonetheless, as demonstrated, this description is simultaneously excessively restrictive, omitting evident instances of Cancel Culture instigated by conservatives, and too expansive, as it would encompass campaigns on these issues that utilize legal methods to attain their objectives. Adopting the proposed intentional concept evidently accommodates numerous non-Western cases. Islamic, Chinese or Russian cancelation campaigns frequently align with the victimhood culture criterion, highlighting emotional distress and the systemic basis of injustice, whereby minor grievances assume exaggerated significance.

In summary, Cancel Culture is a complex notion to define due to its organic development, normative or rhetorical usage, and inconsistent application. Numerous apparent traits lack distinctiveness and are prevalent across all historical epochs, potentially amplified by the advent of the Web and social media. A valuable intensional definition has been suggested, derived from the research of Campbell and Manning on microaggressions. This definition of Cancel Culture encompasses instances where (1) there is widespread outcry, usually online, (2) advocating for punitive measures by influential third parties against an individual or group, (3) for an alleged moral infraction, and (4) where the justification for the outcry highlights the vulnerability and diminished status of the offended parties.

Fluidity of Moral

A fundamental and dangerous aspect of the contemporary environment is the pace and volatility of ethical transformations, facilitated by digital media and highly mobilized, interconnected societies. In both ancient and contemporary civilizations, ethical transformations develop gradually and are initially established through institutional frameworks and discourse (philosophy, religion, law), facilitating communal discussion and coherence. The current situation, especially concerning social media, enables ethical standards to evolve almost immediately, often triggered by a singular incident, such as a viral video, or a compelling tale that evokes profound emotional resonance. This degree of moral acceleration jeopardizes the foundational principles of ethical reasoning and undermines the essential public consensus required for effective justice. In the absence of firm values, judgment is replaced by emotional overflow. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre notes that contemporary ethical discourse has regressed to emotivism, wherein moral assertions lack intellectual foundation and are essentially manifestations of emotional reactions.⁹ This subjectivity results in ambiguity. He asserts that this position permits ethical arbitrariness, resulting in increased moral fragmentation and rendering consensus on moral principles nearly impossible.¹⁰ As a result, when morality is arbitrary with fewer rules, collective moral judgment becomes substantially more difficult. The norms of judgment function increasingly through emotional reaction and public pressure rather than through reasoned interaction, discussion, and public logic.

Haidt and Lukianoff contend in *The Coddling of the American Mind* that a culture of hypersensitivity is altering contemporary ethical discourse, particularly in educational and media contexts. They assert that prioritizing emotional comfort over rational discourse undermines intellectual resilience and threatens the core principles of liberal democracy, including the freedom to dissent, debate, and reconsider one's views.¹¹ This culture of hypersensitivity enables individuals to perceive competing viewpoints as detrimental, so exacerbating polarization and diminishing tolerance for ambiguity and dissent. This concern is reinforced in additional research. Mounk cautions in *The Identity Trap* that the swift evolution of progressive ethics engenders moral whiplash, complicating the ability to act or communicate without transgressing newly established social boundaries.¹² Evans and Reid assert in *Resilient Life* that a modern ethical culture prioritizes performative fragility above moral reasoning, so jeopardizing autonomy and critical thinking.¹³ Consequently, we inhabit a culture of ethics wherein moral evaluation is devoid of philosophical foundation and is dependent on trends, popularity, and fear of consequences. The forthcoming reality will not embody a culture of justice, but rather one of fear—moral integrity will be dictated by algorithms, and any dissent will be dismissed not as a vital aspect of democratic discourse, but as heretical. The likes, shares, and retweets transform into social capital, prompting individuals to reiterate moral phrases rather than seeking a profound understanding of the issues they promote.

Ethics

⁹ MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed.). University of Notre Dame Press.

¹⁰ MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed.). University of Notre Dame Press.

¹¹ Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin Books.

¹² Mounk, Y. (2023). *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*. Penguin Press.

¹³ Evans, B., & Reid, J. (2014). *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*. Polity Press.

In *Areopagitica*, Milton advocated for a more open press by employing Classical and Biblical references. In contrast to the consequentialist perspective of Milton, Enlightenment scholars and classical liberals adopt a markedly different stance on the issue of free speech. Consequently, they convey a distinct perspective on Cancel Culture. While contemporary authors advocate for free speech primarily based on its societal implications, ancient philosophers emphasized character and particular virtues. These attributes may be identified as steadfastness, honesty, integrity, courage, and frankness, referred to by the Greeks as *parrhesia*.

The ancient Greeks possessed another term that can be translated as "free speech": *Isegoria*. This pertains to the equality of discourse, asserting that every citizen ought to engage in public debate on equal footing. Notably, in contrast to *parrhesia*, this concept shares similarities with the rationales of Cancel Culture as a means of creating an environment where all individuals feel secure to express themselves. The difference between the two ways of thinking is evident in the comparison below. Utilitarian free speech is successful solely in the absence of censorship and punishment; only then can the marketplace of ideas operate optimally. *Parrhesia* is only evident when speaking candidly incurs significant risk. In an ideal Habermas *Ian Public Sphere*, courage would be unnecessary, and the distinction between those possessing integrity and those devoid of it would be undetectable.

These ancient virtues are known in modern day society. Virtue ethics has significantly influenced contemporary moral philosophy since the 1970s.¹⁴ Prior to that period, certain Romantic intellectuals glorified heroic traits in opposition to the egalitarian and rationalistic tendencies of the Enlightenment. Friedrich Nietzsche was a significant thinker, and his work *Zarathustra* features a superman figure who defies convention. From Nietzsche to Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams, generations of virtue-inspired moral philosophers have been warning that modern ethics have lost an essential part of human experience by reducing moral questions to law-like debates about rules and consequences, while ignoring the importance of character. Marc Orlitzky argues that the virtue of integrity requires alignment between an individual's internal moral intuitions and their speech and deeds, which contrasts sharply with contemporary bureaucratic interpretations of public morality.¹⁵ He articulates that postmodern ethics, which Alasdair MacIntyre criticized as "expressivist," is perceived as external to the person residing inside the society. Corporate Social Responsibility, which has significantly influenced firms to become compliant participants in social media cancellation efforts, aligns closely with this moral paradigm. For socially responsible firms, doing good entails providing advantages to shareholders and adhering to the prevailing community standards of the present. Orlitzky demonstrates that integrity contrasts with mere adherence to fluctuating social standards, indicating that there is no space for integrity or character under the framework of corporate social responsibility. Neoliberal governance approaches similarly aimed at transforming policy discussions into matters of expert knowledge, shifting them from the individual to a collective of specialists.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mair J. (2023). *Virtue Ethics*. In J. Laidlaw, *The Cambridge handbook for the anthropology of ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.es/books?hl=es&lr=&id=y-a-EAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1962&dq=mair+virtue+ethics+laidlaw&ots=AcKrHskY1k&sig=Crc3JmCgqw1LHUFWo99TfuLEGo>

¹⁵ Orlitzky M. (2017). *Virtue signaling: Oversocialized "integrity" in a politically correct world*. In *Integrity in business and management* (pp. 172–187). Routledge. Retrieved from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315750477-9/virtue-signaling-marc-orlitzky>

¹⁶ Lockie S. (2017). *Post-truth politics and the social sciences*. *Environmental Sociology*, 3(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2016.1273444>

Cancel Culture deeply impacts moral experience, potentially undermining character, particularly the virtues of courage and truthfulness. A recent study illustrated the impact of integrity loss on American university students. Forest Romm and Kevin Waldman performed 1,452 interviews with undergraduates at two American institutions as part of their research on virtue signalling. The students were asked, "Have you ever faked more progressive views than you genuinely support to achieve social or academic success?" A total of 88% of respondents indicated that they had. The study's authors assert that this poses a substantial issue for the psychological development of the cohort. Youth, they assert, is a crucial phase for character development and the integration of various personality traits. "However," they assert, "when belief becomes prescriptive and ideological divergence is perceived as a social risk, the integrative process ceases." Instead of developing a resilient identity through experimentation, reflection, and experience, pupils acquire the skill of fragmentation. This division between external appearance and internal belief not only disintegrates identity but also prevents it from developing. One pitfall of these advancements is the possible impact it will have on leadership. Pawel Tarasiewicz has noted that leadership is defined by the capacity to render genuine judgments aligned with virtue. Thomas Carlyle described leaders as individuals capable of altering the trajectory of history. To achieve this, mere obedience is insufficient; it is essential to cultivate original ideas and advocate for them.¹⁷ Original ideas inherently oppose societal conventions, necessitating boldness and character – qualities that Cancel Culture often condemns.

Ethics becomes authoritarian when it lacks a logical base, resulting in a disjunction between "what is right" and "what is just." This concern is similarly evident in the work of G. E. M. Anscombe, who advocated for the use of the term unjust instead of the broader concept of moral wrong.¹⁸ Her argument underscores a vital point: an action may appear ethically justifiable to the majority, yet nonetheless perpetrate injustice, especially when executed by a mob. Cancel culture amalgamates moral zeal with ethical uprightness, undermining critical thinking in favor of impulsive judgment. This approach prioritizes performative morality over genuine fairness. If our view of Cancel Culture as a manifestation of moral reasoning rooted in victimhood culture is correct, it undermines a virtue-focused approach. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche contended that contemporary Christian morality subverted Classical paradigms of virtue.¹⁹ Whereas the heroic virtue of Homeric myth exalted power and triumph, Nietzsche referred to "slave morality," which perceived strength as a menace and instead glorified weakness and suffering. Acceptance of Nietzsche's binary perspective is unnecessary in recognizing that the glorification of suffering and the victim mentality hinders the cultivation of desirable character traits such as strength, leadership, and what Nietzsche termed the "will to power." Similarly, transforming campuses and the Internet into "safe spaces" is unlikely to foster the cultivation of desirable virtues such as courage and resilience in students or others. Levitt offers an eternal reminder regarding the perils of moral absolutism and unrestrained virtue: "Nothing is more corrupting than self-righteousness, and nothing is more intolerant than an ardent man convinced by his affiliation with angels."²⁰ Levitt's perspective cautions that unbridled righteousness is not a remedy for injustice; rather, it is its counterpart, bearing a more

¹⁷ Tarasiewicz P. (2012). Some Philosophical Remarks on Educating Genuine Leaders. *Studia Etckie*, 14(1), 57–67. Retrieved from <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=85194>

¹⁸ Anscombe, G.E.M. (1958). *Modern Moral Philosophy*. Available at: <https://sites.pitt.edu/~mthomps/ readings/mmp.pdf>

¹⁹ Nietzsche F. (1887). *On the genealogy of morality*. Broadview Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.es/books?hl=es&lr=&id=BJrKEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA5&dq=on+genealogy+of+moral&ots=DKtgA1y2-8&sig=7u1IJKALmZifO4xFgSnJLjRi3_Q

²⁰ Levitt, T. (1958). *The Dangers of Social Responsibility*. Available at: <http://57ef850e78faed47e42->

appealing facade. Aziz et al. offer deep psychological insights into the agents of cancel culture, especially in digital contexts. Their research emphasizes that online connections, particularly among adolescents, give a sense of psychological safety owing to the anonymity they confer.²¹ This decrease in perceived danger mitigates social restraints and reduces the emotional burden of confrontation. In this setting, the screen serves as a facade, enabling individuals to articulate fury, criticism, or aggression without apprehension of real-world repercussions. This anonymity cultivates a form of moral recklessness. Those who may refrain from expressing severe criticisms in person now feel empowered to publicly embarrass, cancel, or malign others without consequence. The digital realm thus transforms into a venue for ethical cleansing, when individuals participate in public condemnations not solely to promote moral principles, but to acquire social validation, display virtue, or express personal discontent. Furthermore, the design of social media platforms amplifies this effect. Algorithms favor content that provokes significant involvement, frequently through indignation, debate, or conflict, hence intensifying demands for the cancellation. The system favors impulsive condemnation over fostering intelligent dialogue or restorative justice. A digital culture has emerged that incentivizes moral grandstanding, while nuanced understanding is obscured by viral fury. Howling highlights the harmful effects of unconstrained institutional authority, particularly when ethical power is centralized. "When significant and exceptional powers are conferred upon an individual, safeguards must be established to avert their misuse."²² Cancel culture circumvents all such protections. It is extrajudicial, algorithmically driven, and propelled by public emotion. Checks and balances have become obsolete in the media, academia, and the workplace. Tarasiewicz advocates for "authentic leaders" capable of enduring the tempest of conformity. However, existing frameworks incentivize conformity rather than valour.²³

Conclusion

Cancel Culture is a moralistic phenomenon characterized by the deliberate provocation of extreme outrage, frequently in response to trivial misdeeds. The phenomenon's unique composition ensures that nothing evades this moralistic scrutiny. Campbell and Manning contend that the desire to garner sympathy from prospective allies may lead to the inclination to connect seemingly trivial occurrences into a comprehensive narrative of injustice, so ensuring that nothing evades the scope of moral perception. This intense moralistic aspect may readily cause us to overlook the alternative moral ramifications of Cancel Culture, which are potentially more significant. Cancel Culture embodies a speech ethic that opposes conventional liberal and virtue-based frameworks, posing a risk to their integrity. A crucial step in comprehending the true implications of Cancel Culture is thus to clarify the many ethical interpretations of free speech — this has been addressed above. The Enlightenment fostered liberal concepts of freedom of expression, particularly within Anglophone and Francophone cultures. They underscore the significance of unrestricted idea exchange to ensure the dominant status of the most superior concepts. The concept posits that this process will result in advancements in science and wisdom, hence enhancing happiness. This represents a consequentialist and utilitarian stance. Censorship may be acceptable under some conditions within the liberal perspective; nonetheless, the fundamental principle is that it is ethically

²¹ Aziz, M., et al. (2025). Depression, Stress, and Anxiety Versus Internet Addiction in Adolescents. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01659-z>

²² Howling, W. (2018). The Supreme Court & A Tale of Two Judges Separated by Centuries.

²³ Tarasiewicz, P. (2012). Some Philosophical Remarks on Educating Genuine Leaders. Available at: <https://philarchive.org/rec/TARSPR>

advantageous to engage in discourse that one opposes. Cancel Culture wholly denounces this stance, asserting that numerous viewpoints are unacceptable and that permitting them equates to condoning actual violence against underprivileged groups.

A virtue ethics perspective on free speech, while frequently confused with the liberal viewpoint, is truly different. The liberal perspective seeks a harmonious Public Sphere, but virtue ethics acknowledges that candid discourse can occasionally pose risks. This peril presents an opportunity to cultivate and demonstrate values such as courage, candor, and integrity. By prioritizing ethics centered on the repudiation of power, Cancel Culture significantly diminishes the space for this virtue. Members of dominant collectives are anticipated to remain silent, while members of marginalized collectives are perceived to necessitate a "safe space" devoid of challenge to articulate their voices. The substantive rejection of virtue ethics may be overshadowed by Cancel Culture's detrimental impact on free expression. Cancel Culture fosters a climate of apprehension regarding candid expression, which can hinder character development, even when individuals privately dissent from its principles. Encouraging social conformity and the recitation of socially accepted platitudes, while penalizing candidness, is likely to significantly impact the cultivation of integrity, honesty, and courage, particularly in youth during their developmental stages. While it possesses several innovative characteristics, Cancel Culture might be perceived, to some degree, as an extension of the veneration of victimhood and fragility that Nietzsche criticized as "slave morality" - an additional element that undermines the development of character. The nonconformist liberates themselves from acclaim and pursues the truth. Nietzsche posits that moral advancement is not founded on mindless compliance; rather, it necessitates moral fortitude and the prerogative to contest inherited standards. Cancel culture exposes a dilemma in contemporary moral discourse, necessitating a return to: (1) Contextual analysis instead of immediate outrage; (2) Restorative justice as opposed to punitive measures; (3) Dedication to free expression, even in frustration. John Stuart Mill contended in *On Liberty* that "The worth of a state over the decades is determined by the worth of its citizens."