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We Asked an Ethicist if It's OK to Punch Nazis in the Face



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Screenshot via YouTube

"No. You don't get to punch people in the face."

President Donald Trump's inauguration brought up **a lot of fiery emotion in people**, and if the left's anger and frustration can be distilled into a single image, it's that clip of white supremacist and **Trump supporter** Richard Spencer being decked by an anti-fascist protester while giving an interview on camera. (**Here is a primer** for those wondering why someone would want to punch him.) You've probably already seen the video, but here it is again:



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Unsurprisingly, people on the internet **really, really liked this**, setting the video to music and generally rejoicing in this bit of violence that was part World Star Hip Hop, part **Captain America**, and part, "eh, whatever, fuck that guy."

But this punch **inspired a lot of debate**. If you think nonviolence is generally the answer, is it OK to hit someone if you really, really don't like them? On the other hand, if you disagree with socking Nazis in the face, are you giving a pass to literal fascists? If you're conflicted about all this, is it still OK to giggle at the whole thing?

To settle this, I called up Randy Cohen, the former ethicist from the *New York Times Magazine*, and the person I generally ask when confronted with moral quandaries.

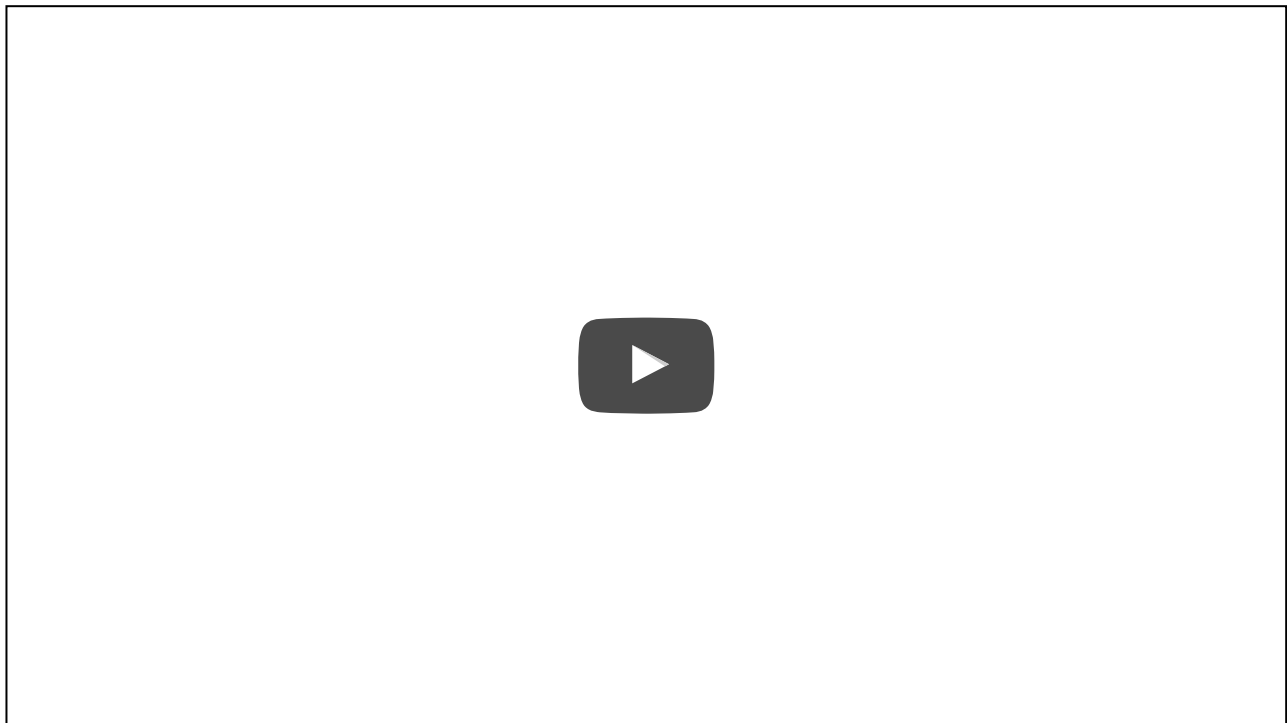
VICE: So—punching Richard Spencer in the face, OK or not OK?

Randy Cohen: No. You don't get to punch people in the face, even if their ideas are odious. You don't. We want a civil society, where ideas are met with other ideas. We don't want a society that encourages thuggish behavior, where if someone has politics different from yours, you get to beat them up. Aside from it just being morally wrong in itself to assault people, there's the practical consideration that in a society where ideas are met with fists, one is as likely to be the punched as the puncher, and it's no fun to be punched in the face.

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Not for speech. Even though he's encouraging actions that we find horrible, he's not our moral teacher, we're not supposed to imitate his methods. We don't do that. There is no tipping point there—you don't respond with violence. You do have the right to defend yourself if physically attacked, but that's not what this was.

Watch the VICE News interview with Richard Spencer:



Certainly there must be a tipping point.

There's a point at which encouraging violence becomes a crime. There are harassment laws and laws against assault. Inciting violence is a crime in many jurisdictions. But, no. The response to that is still not physical violence. The great example here is still Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement of the 60s. It was a nonviolent movement, which was a profoundly moral act. That was a group of people who had the courage to uphold a nonviolent stance even when attacked. They would not fight back, which is so impressive and so powerful, and something that we ought to aspire to.

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There are no thought crimes. So it's hard not to feel some glee when a proponent of physical violence against others is himself the victim of the very act he prescribes. I'm not saying you don't get to feel good when someone punches Richard Spencer in the nose. You would have to be superhuman and a more moral person than I not to feel some happiness that he received just the treatment he was advocating for others. But that doesn't make it right to do it.

Is it OK to laugh privately at the video? What about share it?

That's a little iffy, because that's when it's on the brink of encouraging such actions. It really is important not to do this, and to not be a violent movement. Violence against unpopular ideas is not permitted. I would not circulate them, but if in the recesses of your heart, you feel a moment of glee at seeing Richard Spencer punched in the nose, I would not criticize you. Not for your feelings, but for your actions if you encouraged other people to punch him.

So what should you do if you see a Nazi then? Certainly there's value in shaming them.

It's not just what you're supposed to do at that moment; it's what you're supposed to do before you see the Nazi. It's organizing for social change, it's struggling, it's resisting, it's being aligned with progressive social movements, it's being out on the streets marching, it's writing your local representatives. There are a hundred things you're supposed to be doing, and what you do if you happen upon some nitwit is a trivial question. You can yell at him; you can verbally confront him. And in a way, that's good. It's good to remind people that some ideas are so odious that they have no place in decent society, and that [if you have them], you will be scorned. But you ought not be met with punches.

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