

The Discovery of Humanity

By

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In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt begin by outlining the three “Great Untruths” they believe have in recent years become widespread. You can read the book if you want to know all three, but today I want to focus on just one, the Untruth of Us Versus Them: “*life is a battle between good people and evil people.*”¹ Remarkably, no matter which side we’re on, we all think ours is the good side, which makes those on the other side the evil people.

In ancient times this instinctive mistrust of others may have genuinely protected small clans and tribes from dangerous outsiders, but as the numbers in human societies grew and diversified, this tribal mistrust shifted to ideological differences. There are good ideas and evil ideas, and we always think that ours are the good ideas, which makes those that aren’t ours the evil ideas.

To be clear, I’m not talking about the practical nature of our ideas, which does make some ideas better than others, but about the feelings of moral righteousness that often accompany our beliefs and moral disdain toward the ideas of others. These sentiments can lead to ridiculous upset, even among friends and family, over trivial disagreements, and they can lead to brutal persecutions and bloody wars, as they have throughout human history and continue to do today.

Here's how I believe we come to moralize our opinions and beliefs:

- Like most creatures, our first instinct is toward safety. As cognitive therapist Paul Gilbert says, “the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not.”² So the first thing we want to do is feel safe.
- To feel safe, we rely upon our instincts to tell us what to do next, stay put, proceed with caution, run like hell, or fight like the devil! And, like all creatures, we are creatures of habit, so we tend to feel safer by repeating the behaviors that have so far kept us safe. This is why certain behaviors come to define certain creatures. Dogs bark, spiders makes webs. owls hunt at night, and so on.
- And because our particular species is a thinking species, our feelings are often expressed as ideas. “It is not safe to get off the trusted path,” we might think to ourselves and then say to others. So, the first this we do when we hear a new idea is to determine if it makes us feel safe or not. As habitual creatures, we are habitual thinkers, which means we instinctively prefer our traditional beliefs and are fearful of new ideas.
- And because we are also social creatures and instinctively want to keep those we care about safe, especially our own offspring, we teach and pass on our old ideas. “Don’t stray from the path.” “Don’t talk to strangers.” “Look both way before crossing the street.”
- We then come to consider our subjective feelings, translated into thoughts that are often expressed as rules to live by, to be objective truths. And because we think they are objectively true; we believe they ought to be held and observed by everyone. Those who

don't observe them are considered evil because they have ideas that could lead to danger—ideas that are considered “harmful.”

- Hence, we have reached the point of moralizing our beliefs and feeling morally justified—righteous—about imposing them upon others through culture, education, discipline, reward, and punishment. “Don't stray from the path,” becomes, “Don't stray from the one true path.” These once rules of thumb become our laws and dogmas that get written on decrees and etched in stone, which is another attempt to make them objective realities that exist independently of our subjective thoughts and feelings.

In short, what begins as a subjective feeling and personal opinion becomes projected as objective truth and is then moralized, which justifies us forcing our ideas on others whether they agree with us or not. Our ideas are not only right but righteous, or so we think. And because we are wedded to our ideas and beliefs because of instinctive and unconscious drives, we hold them to be true before we have any good reasons for doing so. They initially emerge for psychological reasons rather than logical reasons. This is why we turn them into laws and doctrines, which are forbidden to break or openly disagree with without severe repercussions, because many of our beliefs are rooted in nonsense and can't be rationally defended.

In their new book, *The Canceling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and his new coauthor Rikki Schlott further argue that our widespread commitment to the Great Untruth of Us versus Them has become exacerbated today because of the failure of academia and the recent advent of social media, resulting in what is often referred to as “cancel culture.” This term refers to intolerant college students and graduates who use social media to collectively demonize and dehumanize those they disagree with or who disagree with them, in an effort to ruin their reputations and get them fired from their jobs. “[O]ver the last several decades,” they write, “many of the institutions tasked with teaching us how to argue productively have failed in their duties—most notably, American higher education.”

And, just as higher education began to fail in that mission, an epochal technological shift took place that shook the foundations of society—and made everything worse ... Personal attacks, dismissive clichés, and an ever-growing body of taboos abound in virtual discourse. Rules of arguing that bring society closer to the truth are pushed to the wayside in favor of techniques that let you off the hook from actually engaging with your opponents. These destructive methods of argumentation caught on like wildfire for a simple reason: they help people assert moral superiority and ‘win’ arguments by simply shutting down the other side.”³

Lukianoff and Schlott also remind us that a similar period of social disruption happened nearly six centuries after the invention of another disruptive technology, the printing press, led, they say, to “cataclysmic changes in Europe: religious conflict, an expansion of the witch trials, and revolutionary civil strife.” Some of this strife was caused by the authorities struggling to put the genie back in the bottle, but lots of ordinary people also felt threatened and hostile to those expressing new ideas, just as those who expressed them felt hostile towards those with old ideas, or those with other new ideas. But it wasn't all bad. Literacy rates nearly doubled in Western

Europe between the 1450s and 1650s and have been increasing globally ever since. Again, as Lukianoff and Schlott, say, “Thanks to hindsight, we know the result of these growing pains would eventually be a flowering of science, art, and reform.”⁴ They are speaking, of course, about the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods that soon followed the Printing Press and the widespread distribution of differing ideas it created.

One of the most important new ideas emerging from this tumultuous era was the discovery of humanity. That might at first seem a perplexing statement: how could human beings not already have known about the existence of humanity? Surely they recognized that other people were also people, but they didn’t understand that all people share a common humanity, that there is something about each of us that is the same that makes us all related. They held to the Untruth of Us Versus Them. They were still tribal in their mindset, connected to others not because of their common humanity, but because of their common King, their common kingdom, their common religion, their common ideas, decrees, and dogmas, but nothing so universal as a belief that all human beings are fundamentally the same regardless of our many individual and cultural differences.

The printing press initially only made things worse. Bringing more voices into the public sphere only increased intolerance and the brutal and unjust lengths to which people would go to suppress them. The authorities pointlessly and violently struggled to regain control of the conversation, even as millions of others tried to force their own ideological tribe’s righteous ideas upon everyone else. And this was the turbulent atmosphere out which the Enlightenment arose. With more literacy, more voices, and more ideas came more societal intolerance, suppression, and hostility.

Until then, Christianity had only one major dispute, leading to the Great Schism of 1054 CE and to the establishment of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. But between the invention of the printing press and the end of the Enlightenment period, several other denominations emerged—Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Anabaptists, Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, Universalists, and countless split-off groups from these—each with their own specific beliefs about what Christianity is about—all of which led to religious wars and persecutions that made this one of the darkest periods in human history.

There can be little wonder why some Enlightenment thinkers began calling for tolerance, which meant, at the very least, live and let live, it meant stop killing each other over our beliefs. As philosopher Susan Neiman writes, “the Enlightenment emerged from a blasted landscape, on a continent soaked with blood ... It was a history of waves of plague without cure, and ever-returning religious wars in which countless people died ... Women were regularly burned alive as suspected witches, men thrown chained into dungeons for writing a pamphlet ... Small wonder that no era in history wrote more, or more passionately, about the problem of evil. Into this landscape the Enlightenment introduced the very idea of humanity...”⁵

Prior to this, the dominant belief was in Us versus Them, our tribe, our kingdom, our religion, our beliefs, versus everyone else, the others, the outsiders. Prior to the European Renaissance, its people only thought and spoke in orthodox Christian terms. Any other way of seeing the world was considered heresy and was strictly forbidden. But at the very start of the Renaissance, as people began questioning Church dogma, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), born in 1304 CE, became known as the Father of Humanism, because he emphasized the *studia humanitatis*, studying all the works of humanity. As Neiman says, “Enlightenment thinkers insisted that everyone, whether Christian or Confucian, Parisian or Persian, is endowed with innate dignity that demands respect.”⁶

This is what led to Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant’s categorically moral imperative that no person should be considered a means to another’s ends but should be considered an end with themselves. Kant’s argument that a Ruler’s authority “rests on his unification of the people’s collective will in his own”⁷ is what eventually resulted in the idea of Democracy, and to human rights, and to individual worth and dignity. In modern times, it was this belief, as expressed in the U.S. Constitution, that “all men are created equal” and are born, merely by being human, with “inalienable rights,” that inspired the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights after World War II, and fueled the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., and gave hope and courage to great reformers like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and it is why we have continued to widen our circle of inclusion to those who have been on the margins (most recently to gays and lesbians), and it is why we know we must continue to broaden our awareness of our brotherhood and sisterhood to every person on the planet.

Still, even knowing all this, and believing in it, and aspiring to make it a reality in my own life, I was struck by Neiman’s particular turn of phrase, that “the Enlightenment introduced the very idea of humanity.” Modern human beings have been on Earth for 200,000 years or more.

The Enlightenment began just 350 years ago. Yet it was only then, such a short time ago, that we first began to understand that all people belong to one humanity, that we are all related, that we are all brothers and sisters, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” as Dr. King put it, “tied in a single garment of destiny.”

There’s a pattern here that is as remarkable as it should be obvious, that the solution to conflict and injustice is the discovery, or rediscovery of, humanity. The violence and brutality in the Dark Ages only resulted in unspeakable suffering and misery. There needed to be a better way of resolving our differences. But the days of forcing everyone to share one idea were over, thanks to the social media of the day. Instead of one mind and one voice, people needed to recognize their shared humanity and, because everyone is fundamentally alike, everyone deserves to be treated as equals, which, at a bare minimum, meant tolerating their many differences.

The same thing occurred again in the U.S. following a series of brutal wars—the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. War wasn’t working, not even with nuclear weapons on hand. Instead of more war, some hoped to end all wars by establishing the United Nations, which immediately (in 1948) created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in recognition once again of our common

humanity. Its preamble begins by acknowledging “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

And Dr. King also used this common humanity ethic in his appeal for civil rights and ending some of the worst impacts of racism in the U.S. He wrote the words I cited earlier while locked up in the Birmingham jail. Here’s a bit more context:

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.⁸

King was struggling to bring a divided nation together by appealing to the greater sense of our common humanity. But as he also understood, humanity often has trouble fulfilling its highest aspirations. In calling upon this nation to “make justice a reality for all of God's children,” he was only asking that we fulfill the promise encoded its own Constitution and Declaration of Independence by guaranteeing “the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for every person.

Today, I need turn only to the news of the wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe to point out that we still have not learned this great lesson, that we are all part of one human family and, therefore, deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, and to live peacefully together no matter our differences. I refer to ours as an Age of Endarkenment for this very reason, because intolerance has become so widespread. As with the printing press in the Middle Ages, social media has vastly democratized communication, so much so that we are all trapped in a chaotic cacophony of conversations all happening at once, constantly drowning each other out, even as each voice struggles for dominance. As a result, many of us, too many of us, are reverting to our tribal instinct to destroy those who hold ideas we disagree with, those we feel are a threat to our safety. If we can’t arrest them or take away their lives, we’ll discredit them on social media with *ad hominem* attacks and take away their livelihoods.

But I wonder if, and I hope that, all of this intolerance, injustice, and violence is a precursor of what must inevitably follow, the recognition that it isn’t working, that all voices and ideas will continue no matter what, and that the way to establish peace isn’t through groupthink and force but through the tolerance that comes after we acknowledge the Great Truth of our common humanity. This can occur again, as it did 350 years ago, as people grow weary of the discord and unrest, and more of them begin using social media—just as the Enlightenment pamphleteers used the printing press—to begin calling for tolerance rather than vying for dominance.

So I call upon everyone who might be listening, whether you cling to liberal or conservative ideas, whether you vote for Republicans or Democrats, whether you produce a podcast in your basement or write articles on Substack, whether you write letters to your local editor or are a columnist for a major paper, whether you like to blog, or express yourself on Facebook, or X, whether you are a pundit on Fox News or MSNBC, or occasionally join a group or club to discuss the world's problems, please use your voice, your power, your passion to help re-introduce all of us to humanity.

For if the notion of Us versus Them is a Great Untruth, the great truth is that violence and injustice and war is always a matter of Us versus Us, Us against ourselves. Putin is fighting himself. Israel and Hamas are fighting themselves. Social media trolls are canceling themselves. As the Buddhists saying goes, "Every murder is a suicide." If, like me, you are weary of this miserable and futile approach, let's work together to create a world of Us for Us instead. As we step now into the promise of a New Year, let's remember our common humanity, the only means of establishing peace on Earth and goodwill to all.

¹ Lukianoff, Greg and Haidt, Jonathan, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 4.

² Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory*, **Journal of Religion and Health** (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.

³ Lukianoff, Greg; Schlott, Rikki. *The Canceling of the American Mind: Cancel Culture Undermines Trust and Threatens Us All —But There Is a Solution* (pp. 5-6). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Neiman, Susan. *Left Is Not Woke* (pp. 33-34). Polity Press. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Konigsberg in Prussia, September 30, 1784.

⁸ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter to Birmingham Jail