

POL S 334 A - Paul Bloom, The Psychology of Tribalism

[00:00:00.00] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:01.47] - You're listening to a podcast from MeaningofLife.tv.

[00:00:08.82] - Hi, Paul.

[00:00:10.15] - Bob, good to see you.

[00:00:11.49] - How are you doing?

[00:00:12.84] - I am doing very well. I am in Toronto, where we're having a nice day, unusually so. And how are you doing?

[00:00:19.44] - I have no complaints whatsoever. Let me introduce us. I'm Robert Wright, as you know. But some people don't. This is The Wright Show, available on both streaming video and via audio podcast, such is our technical sophistication. You are Paul Bloom, the Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Yale. Is that true?

[00:00:40.24] - That is exactly right.

[00:00:41.73] - Now, is it the case that people who have these kinds of titles are superior to people who don't in the hierarchy at Yale? Like if you have one of these endowed chairs, are you held with reverence in a way that others aren't?

[00:00:54.00] - Superior is such a value-laden term.

[00:00:57.00] [LAUGHTER]

[00:00:57.82] - OK, let's just say better.

[00:00:59.40] - I wouldn't call it superior.

[00:01:00.04] - Let's just say worthy of more money, prestige, and all.

[00:01:08.47] - Some of my colleagues with these named professorships, like Nicholas Christakis for instance, or Marcia Johnson, really deserve them. And they get them because they are better than the rest of us. Then for others, it happens to be often a matter of luck. It happens to be a matter of luck and something that we're rewarded for or a competing job offer. Or sometimes there's somebody who wants to endow professor, and it so happens it's just an area which I work in, which is what happened to me.

[00:01:39.84] - I see.

[00:01:39.99] - [INAUDIBLE]

[00:01:41.55] - Have you met Brooks and Suzanne Ragen?

[00:01:44.04] - I have actually. I went out for dinner with them afterwards. Brooks, who's this guy who lived this amazing life, sadly passed away. But I'm in touch with Suzanne. I think they're both terrific people. So I'm really happy to have their name attached.

[00:01:58.23] - Nothing critical you want to say about Suzanne while you have the chance?

[00:02:01.17] - Not in the slightest. There are people who have the weirdest named professorships. And occasionally, you get a named professorship of somebody who ends up being indicted for child molestation or engaged in mass genocide.

[00:02:13.35] - Are there any Jeffrey Epstein chairs?

[00:02:16.11] - I was just thinking that that would be uncomfortable.

[00:02:18.96] - Well, he's been known to use his money to make social connections in academia. It's just I don't know that he's endowed any chairs. And for people who don't recognize the name, he's the guy who was-- oh, Google it-- sex with underage women whom he seems to have paid for the privilege.

[00:02:39.84] - The awkward thing is he is extremely interested in cognitive science. I've never met him, but some friends of mine who are the nicest people in the world of photographed looking uncomfortable with his arm around them.

[00:02:53.07] - Oh, not only that, I mean, I know that he had made a habit of-- I won't mention any names. But and it isn't just psychology. I know people in other disciplines who are kind of celebrity intellectuals.

[00:03:03.45] And he would-- I know of at least one case of the first they heard from him was getting a \$10,000 check saying this is in appreciation of your work. I don't know if they cashed it. I don't know. But he used his money to make connections. And that's all I will say.

[00:03:22.68] - I want to take advantage of this public forum to say I have never been on a plane with him.

[00:03:27.18] - That's the safest. That's the best kind of relationship to have with him, not get on the-- we have former presidents who can't say that.

[00:03:36.00] - Yes, yes.

[00:03:38.46] - We have law professors at Harvard who can't say it.

[00:03:40.77] - Yes. And now we're sort of courting libel very carefully.

[00:03:44.85] - I think strictly speaking it would be slander since it's oral and not written.

[00:03:48.69] - [LAUGHS] There we go.

[00:03:51.38] - But maybe it means it's time we change the subject. So moving on down your resume, Against Empathy-- The Case for Rational Compassion is a book you've written. So is Just Babies, with the modest subtitle, "The Origins of Good and Evil." And good and evil is not unrelated to-- well, neither book is unrelated to what we're going to talk about.

[00:04:09.15] We're going to talk about the so-called psychology of tribalism, which, of course, plays out these days, it is said, in the context of political polarization, sectarian conflict, national conflict. But it's said to be a big problem in America today. And who better to talk to about this than you? I think you and I share broadly the same perspective in the sense that both of us are sympathetic to evolutionary psychology.

[00:04:42.16] - Yep.

[00:04:42.51] - So we can talk about how we think human nature relates to the problem of tribalism. First of all, do you think tribalism is a good term? What does this mean?

[00:04:55.47] - Yes, tribalism is a great term.

[00:04:57.72] - Do you think so?

[00:04:58.65] - I mean, it captures the general idea. You could call it ingroup/outgroup thinking, groupishness. But we're all talking about the same thing, which is the human propensity to break the world up into us versus them.

[00:05:14.95] - Right. Within evolutionary psychology, there could be debates about-- there are debates about group selection versus individual selection. And the term tribalism might seem to connote group selection more than individual. But I don't think we need to get into that. I don't think any of us doubt that human nature includes these psychological mechanisms that are kind of designed by natural selection to mediate group relations.

[00:05:46.43] - That's right. There's a mistake that some people make which is they think because we have group-based emotions, we then have been evolved through group selection. And that's a simple fallacy. Putting aside whether or not group selection has merit, there's all sorts of individual standard Darwinian or even Dawkins-like explanations for how you get group-based emotions.

[00:06:07.92] - Mhm. And if you wanted to get more technical, or continue to be technical, there's also the fact that we think of human nature as basically having taken shape in a hunter-gatherer environment because until 10,000 or so years ago, that's all there was. And actually, anthropologists when they talk about tribes, they are actually usually talking about more structurally-complex societies, agrarian societies and so on. But I will leave that aside. That's a nit pick.

[00:06:42.84] - And some of it turns out to be relevant in interesting ways, though. So there was a paper published a while ago called "Can Race Be Erased?" And the starting point was we naturally-- when we see the world, we break people up. And we remember people's age, their gender, and their race, basic social psych 101.

[00:07:02.61] And from an evolutionary point of view, age and gender matter tremendously for all sorts of reasons. But the argument and stuff you're familiar with is that when we were in hunter-gatherer societies, we actually didn't encounter people who looked differently, who fell into what we'd call race. And so what the claim that some evolutionary psychologists make is, to the extent we attend to race at all, is because it's a proxy for social group.

[00:07:25.22] And then what this paper did was it showed people, white participants, pictures of white people and black people. And they naturally broke them up into two groups. But then they showed them the people in the context of a basketball game, colored jerseys. And then all of a sudden, they broke them up into the teams. And the race just went away. So this is sort of of the debate over the psychological centrality of race. I think it's one way in which evolutionary psych could actually say some interesting, maybe non-intuitive things.

[00:07:57.26] - Which is that racism, per se, is not in the genes.

[00:08:00.38] - That's right.

[00:08:00.77] - But what is in the genes are psychological mechanisms for distinguishing between groups ingroup and outgroup, and these can manifest themselves in a context of race. But as you said, to continue with the basketball example, when a fight breaks out on the court, the teammates identify with each other regardless of race. And that is some serious tribalism when they're like messing each other up.

[00:08:26.48] - Yes.

[00:08:27.48] - So I don't know. I have some views on this. But I assume you do too. What do you-- do you agree that we have an unusual-- the problem has reached an unusual degree in American politics. I don't know about Canadian politics. Since you're from Canada, even though you don't live there now, you may have some views on that as well.

[00:08:54.44] - Yeah, Canadian politics is substantially less tribal.

[00:08:59.02] - A stereotype it certainly is, but I thought maybe relatively speaking, they were more amped up these days. But they're not?

[00:09:06.92] - I don't know. There's nothing the equivalent of the divisiveness centered around Trump. That's, I think, unique in the politics of United States and in Canada and everything like that.

[00:09:21.92] I've been persuaded by Steven Pinker and others that the world is getting better and better and that people who reflexively say, oh, my god, these are the worst of times, those

people are often not looking at the evidence. They're often biased. But there are exceptions. And I think tribalism within our country is one exception. And I think we are now in a situation in which we have never had before where the members of different tribes now have their own information sources.

[00:09:49.88] So I feel that when Watergate happened, everybody read roughly the same newspapers and watched the same TV shows. Now if the equivalent to Watergate would happen, half the country would say, wow, this is the most astounding revelation. And the other half would say fake news.

[00:10:08.39] And so the different information sources takes these tribes and pushes them apart. And John Haidt has data on like, it used to be Democrats and Republicans used to get along, more or less. And now if you ask a Democrat would you want your daughter to date a Republican or vice versa-- are you any friends with Republicans-- the schism is sharp. So these in some ways are the worst of times.

[00:10:34.80] - Yeah, although back in those 1960s, if you would ask people about their child marrying across racial lines or even religious lines-- I remember when my family was southern Baptists. And if somebody is marrying a Catholic, it was a little bit of a thing. It didn't lead to some kind of big tribal breach, but it was worth noting.

[00:10:58.56] And so maybe some of that stuff is better. But as you say, it's been replaced by ideology. I remember it well, the idea that we-- there was a consensus on reality.

[00:11:17.39] There were only three TV networks. They had essentially the same views. Of course, that was a brief technological era in a sense. I mean, 50 years earlier when people were relying on newspapers, you would sometimes have 10 newspapers in a single big city.

[00:11:32.58] - No, it's true. And the UK was quite different there. There was a period, I think, where each sort of political party had their own newspaper to a much greater extreme than the US. You're right. In some way, maybe this isn't a gradual trend. Maybe I'm comparing it to a time which was historically unusual.

[00:11:54.91] - Well, I also think the Cold War kind of congealed America until Vietnam, until the late '60s when things started getting a little weirder. But it's interesting that what kind of sealed the deal on Vietnam was Walter Cronkite, one of the official mediators of reality, one of the three anchor men. He turned against the war. LBJ said if you've lost Cronkite, you're toast. And it was true.

[00:12:32.96] But since then-- and then it's not long after that you get cable TV, and then after that, you get the internet. And so things technologically divided, and the rest is history. And here we are.

[00:12:43.41] - So now we have no Cronkite. There's no equivalent now. Is it Sean Hannity for half the country? Is it Stephen Colbert for the other half? There's no--

[00:12:55.47] - And not even the other half. If you look at the numbers, it used to be that tens of millions of people were tuning in to, say, The Ed Sullivan Show on Sunday night when the population of the US was half of what it is now. Bernie Sanders did this thing on Fox, and they said he took advantage of a huge audience, two million people. I mean, that used to be nothing. But you're certainly right that Fox represents the reality as perceived by whatever the percentage is kind of reflected in Trump's approval rating, 35%, 40%.

[00:13:43.94] - Not according to Trump.

[00:13:45.89] - What's that?

[00:13:46.55] - Not according to Trump. He tweets higher numbers. But it's interesting. I think America has-- there are sports figures and rock stars and athletes, musicians, and so on, actors, who everybody can get behind and kind of like. But when it comes to-- I can't think of examples outside of entertainment which is like that.

[00:14:14.60] - Even entertainment is more polarized because these entertainers will say things on Twitter that are-- tons of people in Hollywood have said anti-Trump things. And there goes a third of America. So long.

[00:14:27.97] - Yeah. And Trump has James Woods, and that's about it.

[00:14:32.58] - He does have James Woods. And what's the name of that comedian? It's something. Is it something Miller? Who is it?

[00:14:41.45] - Dennis Miller.

[00:14:42.23] - Dennis Miller, yeah. He's got them. So now do you see the tribal? First of all, do you feel yourself drawn into it? Or do you feel that you're able to observe tribalism on both sides from the detached perspective that we associate with social scientists?

[00:15:09.11] - So that's what where we get-- you're setting me up for something, because you wrote this article which we have discussed before where you said a lot of people claim not to be tribal. But you look at them closely. You used the example of Sam Harris. And you say he claims not to be tribal. But look how tribal he is.

[00:15:25.24] And in some way, it's a trap. Because of course I'm tempted to say, well, I'm not. I don't do group think. I think I'm independent. I'm a social scientist and so on.

[00:15:35.23] But yeah, I'm a member of my tribes. I'm kind of the same tribe as you are. And I don't doubt that they seriously distort my views. My tribal expectations and background seriously distorts my views in all sorts of ways.

[00:15:48.65] I will say that it's kind of relative, that people are affected by their tribe to different degrees. I like to think that I do a fair job of trying to understand the other tribe and trying to

look at things neutrally. Some evidence is that in some ways, I agree with other, say, members of my academic community. In other ways, I don't, suggesting that something is going on.

[00:16:11.94] But you know, what else am I going to say? What about you? Do you transcend tribalism?

[00:16:19.46] - I think by nature I fluctuate between being intensely tribal and reflecting on how tribal I was. I think by nature I actually am kind of intense in this regard. It's a lot. I don't know. But I certainly think I am more than some other people on team anti-Trump.

[00:16:53.15] Well, I feel I see a lot of cognitive warping on my side. And not everyone does. As you know, I started this newsletter, Mindful Resistance Newsletter. Part of the premise was that the resistance is not very mindful.

[00:17:13.22] And just to give you an example, the whole Russiagate thing, what we were saying in the newsletter was-- we didn't know. We were agnostic. The evidence wasn't in.

[00:17:24.44] But we kind of said, if you just harp on this eternally, all you're doing is raising expectations for how bad the Mueller report, how damning the Mueller report is going to be. And that can't actually help you regardless of what the Mueller report finds. I think that guidance has been, to some extent, for now.

[00:17:45.59] But anyway, I am definitely-- I could cite chapter and verse of how I myself have been. Even in newsletters, I'll put out an issued newsletter and then realize three days later that I actually didn't have enough detachment when I wrote about something.

[00:18:09.90] - Yeah, and I appreciate. One argument you've long made is that one of the benefits of mindfulness exercises and meditative training and everything is to give you a little bit of detachment, to make you escape your tribe to some extent. I buy that.

[00:18:26.53] - You don't do it, but you buy it.

[00:18:28.40] - [LAUGHS] I don't do it. I don't do it. [INAUDIBLE] We don't need to talk about my efforts at meditation, the meditative practice.

[00:18:40.00] I read people like you who do it. So that's kind of approach it. It's almost like meditating, actually, just reading.

[00:18:46.75] - Yeah, it's contagious. Yeah, you can just hang out with us and get 90% of the benefits.

[00:18:52.44] - So here's one way, since it makes for good viewership if we argue, there's a pessimism, at least in this article you wrote, that we're always going to be number of some tribe or another. How do you transcend that? But I actually think that there are methods to transcend it. And I think I look at something like science shows you the way.

[00:19:16.06] So I have my theory. You have your theory. How in the world can we ever make progress since I'm going to see the world as right, and you're going to see the world as right? And so the answer is slowly, painfully, erratically, we argue.

[00:19:31.72] We have rules for argument. There is a constant audience around us that's shifting. And out of this could come some changes. People could change their mind. Or if not, they just die. And other people take their stead.

[00:19:45.40] And what happens is as individual beings-- so here's the punchline. In the individual beings, we are sharply limited. We think we're rational. We try to be rational. I'm really up on rationality. But we are biased.

[00:19:56.74] But if you put us together under the right circumstances, we can transcend our biases. I really think to Mueller report is going to show this. We really think it's that. We argue. And together as a community of arguers, we get [INAUDIBLE].

[00:20:11.46] - You think that's really going to happen with the Mueller report?

[00:20:14.20] - No.

[00:20:14.92] - Of course not.

[00:20:15.97] - No, it isn't going to happen.

[00:20:16.75] - It's enough. And that's actually a relatively-- you would think that's relatively conducive to this kind of convergence. Science, of course, is in its own realm in the sense that the claims made are about the nature of objective reality. But they are made in a way that specifies a test whose outcome you know will-- no single test will settle the matter, but the point is that hypotheses are supposed to be testable.

[00:20:52.66] And over time, they get tested enough. And the results are undeniable. But that's a special realm. And in fact, we've seen in your own field of psychology how the system is not foolproof.

[00:21:08.80] You were the first person to-- several years ago, you were the first person to tell me there's a crisis brewing in social psychology. It's turning out some of these experiments, when they try to replicate them, they're not being replicated. It's turning out that experimenters are unconsciously in most cases-- it's usually not fraud. It's unconsciously biasing the experiments.

[00:21:30.82] It doesn't work out the first time. And you think, oh, I know what we did wrong. And you do it again. You do it again. Well, eventually you're going to get the result you want. And that's the one you write up.

[00:21:38.45] So things like that happen. And some other things can happen. But and I will say. That's being kind of straightened out. There's more value being attached to doing the

replications, which just wasn't being done enough. But at the same time, all I'm saying is it's kind of hard enough in the realm of science.

[00:22:03.38] - And in science, are you saying in science there is ultimately going to be an [INAUDIBLE].

[00:22:07.12] - There's a test. There's a test.

[00:22:08.43] - Right. So I think doctors washing their hands is ridiculous. You think it's lifesaving. We have our separate groups. Maybe there's more of me than you.

[00:22:17.59] So ultimately, you do a bunch of studies, and ultimately, because we are also rational beings, I say, jeez, I guess washing your hands is a good idea. Or even if I don't, other people say, well, your side won.

[00:22:32.76] And this is true, certainly, for empirical domains. But you've argued more than most people I know, and correctly, for moral progress. And so I'm the tribe that's pro-slavery. You're the tribe that's anti-slavery. And you win. You win.

[00:22:51.93] And the world knows. Everybody knows that slavery is a monstrous institution. So there we're transcending ideology. We're transcending tribalism. We're coming to a higher moral truth through interaction and through trying things out and so on. So it's not just science.

[00:23:10.93] - No, no, it's not. I mean, I do. Yeah, in a separate realm, I agree that there has been on balance a certain kind of moral progress. Peter Singer wrote this book *The Expanding Circle*, which, he said, 2,500 years ago, even one Greek city-state considered people in another Greek city-state subhuman.

[00:23:29.20] Then they decided, no, all Greeks are human. It's just the Persians who aren't human and so on. And there's been expansion. And even though there is still racism and bigotry and everything, it at least is no longer said in polite society, this religious or ethnic group is not deserving of decent treatment. By and large-- we're facing maybe a test of that norm more than usual recently.

[00:23:52.42] But still, no, I think there's certainly been progress. I think some of it is driven by economic interdependence. It's hard to do business with people while at the same time saying they deserve to be slaughtered. And then I think there's been genuine, as Peter Singer would himself have said, genuine rational progress, which rests on certain human intuitions about like cases. Well, I won't get into it, but Peter has his argument.

[00:24:22.72] And so yeah, there has been that. But then you see these things erupt like the time we're in now. And even though nobody is departing from their professed belief that everyone deserves decent treatment, you do hear these casual generalizations now. Like from my side, like Trump supporters are racist, exactly the kind of essentialism that in other contexts people on my side deny and get indignant about.

[00:24:59.27] But then you have these beliefs about members of entire groups. A number of people now have them about Muslims, I would say. And so at best, there is backsliding, let me say.

[00:25:19.16] - That's fair enough. And I think to a large extent, we live in something-- and I maintain this in a positive way-- a very unnatural society where tribalism is de-emphasized. Most of the world and most of human history, you casually talk about different groups and valued them relative to each other and say, well, the Jews do this. And the Spaniards do this. And we don't like that group, and we like this group.

[00:25:45.14] And now people in our communities don't talk that way. It's even using phrases like, oh, he's a Jew, some people find that that's a weird thing to say, to talk about that about your gay friend. With the exception of Trump supporters and religious people, we push away from that sort of essentializing. I think that that might be fragile. And I think that if society goes one way, we simply go back to becoming more and more tribal.

[00:26:18.05] - Yeah. Do you think that's a good thing, the aversion to describing people by ethnicity? I remember one time I was talking to a guy in a YMCA locker room. He was black.

[00:26:30.05] And I was trying to remember the name of like some athlete. And I was thinking. So I was start describing the guy, and the guy I was trying to describe was black. But I was kind of going out of my way not to say that. It would have been a very helpful way to identify him. And finally, the black I'm talking to just looks at me and says, black guy? Exactly, that's what I was trying to say. And then he knew who I was talking about. [LAUGHTER] Then he said, oh, I know who you're talking about.

[00:26:52.27] - You were living through a Curb Your Enthusiasm episode.

[00:26:55.08] - Yeah. So there is a conversational efficiency sometimes. But do you think--

[00:27:00.20] - There's actually one experiment in the developmental literature where young kids do better than older kids. And that's the experiment. You give an array. You see an array. I see an array. We don't-- and I have to describe so you find the person.

[00:27:14.61] And then what happens is younger kids, you can sort of say, oh, it's the black person. But older kids say, it's the person like right next to this guy who's wearing a hat. Because at a certain point in our society, they know they shouldn't ever say that. They can't designate people based on race.

[00:27:32.04] - But 60 years ago, they might well have. That shows you how subtle and powerful the norms are. They just absorbed them.

[00:27:40.52] - And it's complicated. I think it's oversimplifying morally this talk about a dissolving of tribes and dissolving of human groups. I think this is something that Kwame Anthony Appiah has always argued, which is that to some extent, we are tribal creatures. And

that's not essentially bad. It might be that the kindness we give to each other is best done in a within-group way.

[00:28:08.49] It's Thursday now. And tomorrow, I'm going to a Passover Seder. And I'm not convinced that the idea of a community like Jews that does things and gets together and feels an affinity towards one another is essentially a bad thing. I'm not convinced that in the best world we can live in that this affinity translates into an antipathy towards other groups. And so I wonder whether in this sort of utopian world 200 years from now we might still have Muslims and Jews and Swedes and black guys and white guys. We might still have that. We just treat each other a lot better.

[00:28:46.63] - Yeah, you need communities. People need communities for mental health. They need tribes, at least in a metaphorical sense, to belong to, right?

[00:28:56.06] - Right. And people who call themselves cosmopolitan, typically all that means is that their community is lawyers or philosophers or other academics.

[00:29:04.70] - Right, it's a vocational tribe or a hobby tribe. Yeah, to some extent, I guess what cosmopolitan means. And I think-- I guess I would say it would be better if the tribal lines are not particularly incendiary, right? If a world of vocational and hobbyist tribes and Game of Thrones fan tribes and so on is less likely to lead to nuclear war, then I guess I'd like more of that, yes. [LAUGHS]

[00:29:47.25] - Yeah. And one thing we know from psychology is, in that way, we are fighting against human nature. There was an experiment that came out yesterday from Yale, a brilliant graduate student, Kate Yang, one of my colleagues, [INAUDIBLE]. And this has been done before, but they did it in a very nice way.

[00:30:02.05] You take young kids, like five and six-year-olds, and you put them in different groups, a red group and a green group, by flipping a coin. You say, I'm going to flip a coin in front of them. They actually take steps to make sure kids know flipping a coin is random.

[00:30:14.96] And then you ask the kid who's in the red group. OK, here's another kid from your group, red, another kid from green, how do you distribute money and toys and everything? And they favor their own group.

[00:30:26.76] We call them minimal group study. Even in the most arbitrary ways, once you cut people into different groups, it's as if a system in the mind is triggered. And then you favor your own.

[00:30:39.17] - Well, don't they also-- in other experiments, when the kids put on the yellow shirts and the blue shirts, haven't they shown that they evaluate one another differently? Their moral evaluations of their own team are more flattering.

[00:30:52.87] - Yeah, so you find that different experiments do it different ways. But yeah, they rank their team as intelligent, better looking, kinder. They tend to degrade and lower down their estimation the other team.

[00:31:07.98] And it suggests that to some extent the world that anybody really wants right now, any rational kind of person, fights the fight against that trend. There's been work on babies. And they watch two puppet characters.

[00:31:25.57] - Maybe we should plug your book again, Just Babies.

[00:31:27.53] - Just Babies, still available at better bookstores everywhere, although this work came out after my book, unfortunately. So this is--

[00:31:35.00] - Oh, never mind.

[00:31:35.90] - This is work done by Karen Wynn at Yale. And you have these babies. And babies like one food over another, either crackers or Cheerios. Then they watch as puppets, and one puppet likes their food. The other puppet likes a different food.

[00:31:48.44] Babies really like the puppet who likes the same food as them so much so that when someone else beats up on the puppet, if they beat up on a puppet that liked the different food, they're kind of happy. They don't mind a person [INAUDIBLE] beating up. It's this super ingroup/outgroup thing early on.

[00:32:05.58] And I think the miracle of modern society is, for the most part, we don't have it. At least along ethnic lines, we don't have it. But along political lines right now, it's very salient.

[00:32:20.08] - Yeah, and it's funny the way it's happened. Once it's in motion, you see the dynamics that sustain it, right? Well, in the modern technological environment, you see that if you want to build up your number of Twitter followers-- and who among us doesn't?

[00:32:39.87] The surest way to do it right now is to ridicule the other tribe. And one way to do that is pick the stupidest thing said by any member of the other tribe, even if it's some person who's like they have like seven Twitter followers. It's not like--

[00:33:01.50] But you pick it out, and you make fun of it. And then you get a lot of retweets. And so there's two things. There is the incentive. The way to gain status within your group is to deepen antagonism with the other group, A.

[00:33:15.16] And then B, there's an incentive to highlight the craziest thing being said on the other side, which then people on your side, the uncritical people, take as typical. And this is what kind of makes me despair is you see that once you get to a certain level of tribalism, the incentive structure does so much to reinforce and deepen the cleavage.

[00:33:39.31] - And I've seen this. A little while ago, there was a clip of the AOC when she started dancing. And so nobody cared. You're dancing. But then, of course, some dope with

seven followers says something like, oh, she's dancing. What a stupid person she is. Extremely prominent people on my side of things say, look, the conservatives are all deeply upset. And what fools they are. And so it goes.

[00:34:05.82] Jay Van Bavel at NYU has researched, has ways to analyze tweets that will tell you what tweets are going to have a lot of likes and responses. And it's exactly what you're saying. Moral terms, moral condemnation, ridicule, offensive generated-- the sort of tweets you and I do, which are all respectful but incredibly witty, don't get the purchase that they deserve.

[00:34:27.20] - The only kind I've ever done, yes. And as long as we're showing off about how much we transcend tribalism, let me criticize someone in my own tribe. I think AOC-- she may have even gotten better. And I don't even know that she handles her own social media feed. These are probably just her people.

[00:34:42.78] She herself does this thing in her tweets, or did, as of a month ago, where she would take something said by some Republican and say, "GOP believes--" No, GOP doesn't. We don't know that. We just know one Republican said this. But look at her following. In the sense of increasing her influence, she knows what she's doing.

[00:35:10.20] - Yeah, and there's an incentive structure there. In the end, she's not competing with Donald Trump. She's competing with Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and so on. Those are the people.

[00:35:24.36] - More than that, I would say she and Donald Trump are playing a non-zero sum game. This is the other dynamic is that people-- there's an incentive toward extremism in the situation. I'm not saying they are extremists. But in political situations, it's like BB Netanyahu and HAMAS. They're both keeping each other in power. And somewhat similarly-- and no, I'm not comparing either AOC or Donald Trump to either BB Netanyahu or HAMAS.

[00:35:59.53] - Oh, I was going-- there's a great tweet coming up.

[00:36:01.57] - You have to do those disclaimers. But they're good business for each other, because-- I don't have to elaborate.

[00:36:13.98] - Yeah, and Trump knows this more than anybody else.

[00:36:19.24] - Oh, totally.

[00:36:20.46] - I think for a while there was the thought that there were such norms that by violating the norms, he was going to incur a cost. But after his thousandth ridiculous tweet, nobody believes that anymore. And now he does what he pleases. And his group likes it. Everyone else is appalled. But the people who are appalled weren't going to vote for him anyway.

[00:36:41.66] - Well, in general, it seems to me the modern media environment, by which I mean to include social media, is more amenable to gaining stature and influence by just being

outrageous, right? It's an amazing attention-getter. And there are YouTube stars who every once in a while they get slapped on the wrist because they're so darn outrageous, but it's working for them.

[00:37:10.06] - And that's one side of it. There's another side of it, which I've written about, which is the sort of cruelty that you find on social media, where moral outrage feels good. It's a wonderful way of advertising your moral authority and your moral sanctity. And so people go on rampages.

[00:37:31.34] Now, if the target is Donald Trump, maybe it's wrong to make fun of Donald Trump in the background. But he's doing fine. He's doing very well. He has tremendous support.

[00:37:41.25] But sometimes it's targeted at some schmo who gets caught on camera for the worst 10 seconds of their life. And then people have no restraint. The one bit of-- after reading Jon Ronson's book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, I still say all sorts of dumb jokes and crap on Twitter. But I make it my habit not to pile on. And maybe this is my own moral advertising. But I think people should just stop piling on.

[00:38:14.53] - I try to avoid it. Every once in a while, I get so outraged.

[00:38:19.50] - Some guy shoots a lion. Some guy makes fun of immigrants. Somebody calls the police on an African American.

[00:38:28.88] - And I guess I try to lay off of like people who you'd never heard of until they became the subject of outrage. But the virtue signaling, we kind of alluded to this. Is that a term that actually originates in the social sciences? It sounds like an evolutionary psychology word almost. It's become a common term.

[00:38:50.67] It is apt because it does drive a certain amount of this, right? In other words, showing off in front of our own tribe, that's virtue signaling. Was that an academic term before it became a popular term?

[00:39:03.25] - That's a good question. I don't know. I would think so. I mean, the language of signaling is very popular among animal people and an evolutionary psychologists. But I don't know where the term came from. Recently, some philosophers have sort of tried to rename it as moral grandstanding, which is, I think, essentially the same.

[00:39:20.71] - It sounds like it.

[00:39:22.99] - But I don't know where it came from. [INAUDIBLE] I see a lot of it, and I tend to sort of think of what I see on social media in terms of virtue signaling. On the other hand, I don't think it's incompatible saying people have deeply held moral views.

[00:39:38.14] I think sometimes the language of virtue signaling has been used to dismiss something. So I say, oh, it's terrible how so-and-so was treated. And then everybody says, oh,

you're just virtue signaling. But sometimes we can do both. Sometimes we actually are virtuous, and we just want to signal it too.

[00:39:54.72] - Yeah. So do you want to talk about your empathy book? So you wrote this piece telling us that virtual reality-- I don't know if you wrote this headline. But it's a killer. You wrote a piece in The Atlantic. This is now a couple of years old.

[00:40:17.49] But the headline is "It's Ridiculous to Use Virtual Reality to Empathize with Refugees." And it actually, as incendiary as that sounds, in a way, it understates, because you wind up-- people might think you're saying, oh, it's not going to work to empathize with refugees. But actually, you're also saying that empathy itself is overrated.

[00:40:45.59] - So I've written things that were less popular in that article in terms of the numbers of people responding negatively. But calculated on proportion, this is the article I think people hated the most. I really offended a lot of people very into virtual reality. But look, let's suppose it's actually a good thing to really feel the suffering of another person. I've argued that it biases us. But let's put aside that.

[00:41:12.07] The virtual reality argument is, in some sense, separate. I think virtual reality gives us-- it does a terrible job of telling us what it's like to be in a different situation. And there's a number of examples. There's a whole field where you try to get people to understand what it's like to be blind or in a wheelchair or hard of hearing or old through virtual reality techniques. A simple one is you just blindfold somebody and, say, make him walk around for an hour. People do it in classes. Well, now you know what it's like to be blind.

[00:41:48.59] But it turns out, when they take off the blindfold and you say, so now you know what it's like to be blind, and they say, yeah, if I was blind, I'd blow my brains out because this has been a horrible hour. I walk into walls. I can't see anything. It's terrible.

[00:42:02.44] But that's not what it's like to be blind. You're not simulating what it's like to be blind. You're simulating what it'd be like to suddenly become blind. Similarly, or take another example, during the whole Abu Ghraib thing, many journalists, including Christopher Hitchens, got themselves waterboarded.

[00:42:22.10] And in some ways, it's courageous that you get some feeling for what it's like to be waterboarded. You see the films on YouTube and everything. But there's a video of Christopher Hitchens being waterboarded.

[00:42:31.04] - I know. I've seen it.

[00:42:32.28] - People are yelling at him. This is the safe word you could use. Oh, you're holding these things. If you are in distress, drop them. You have [INAUDIBLE]. Real waterboarding doesn't have that.

[00:42:46.31] And part of what's so terrible about waterboarding is that it's done to you by people who are not your friends, who don't care, who want you to suffer. The terrible thing about

being a refugee isn't that you're looking around, and you're surrounded by water and whatever. The terrible thing about being a refugee on a boat is the idea you might die, and you don't know where you're going. There's terrible uncertainty.

[00:43:16.19] And so VR things for homelessness, for refugees, are video games. People come out of it, and they say that was fun. Make me homeless again. I want to try to sort of get around this alley in a different way. The things about these conditions cannot be captured by simulating the sensory environment.

[00:43:38.75] I don't think it's impossible. I think novels actually do a much better job. But nobody cares about novels.

[00:43:44.28] - Or even a documentary where the person in the situation you're talking about is talking about being in the situation, after all, that's the way it's natural.

[00:43:53.67] - That's right.

[00:43:54.24] - You calibrate your level of concern for someone is to observe them, and there are situations in which our concern will deepen. But it's actually not natural to literally assume the place of someone or the perspective of someone and actually literally see the world from their eyes. Ironically, the way we learn to see the world through someone's eyes is through something other than seeing the world through their eyes.

[00:44:22.54] - Yes, yes. And so I have all these complaints about empathy. But put them all aside. The idea that we are that good at seeing the world through others' eyes is this form of arrogance that's sort of shocking. Somebody like me, I read Hillary Clinton once wrote, and very well-intentioned, talking about the murder, the killings of African Americans by police saying, what we have to do now is people who are privileged white people have to know what that's like to be black in America [INAUDIBLE].

[00:44:56.79] But my response is, I can't. I can't imagine what it's like in any real sense to be a black teenager who's afraid of the cops. And I can't imagine what it's like to be a woman who's catcalled. I can't imagine what it's like to spend the rest of my life in a-- to have spent 10 years in a wheelchair or solitary confinement.

[00:45:15.72] To assume that I can, A, to assume that I can is arrogant, B, when people do assume that they can, often it leads them to dismiss the problems because they, oh, I can handle that. And then so it comes down to-- boy, I'm really speechifying. What you're saying is right, which is if you want to know what it's like, just talk to somebody who's in that situation. And don't try to simulate it but just try to appreciate their concerns. Take their word for it, to some extent.

[00:45:45.00] - Right. So you can increase your awareness of what it's like and get a somewhat clearer idea. And that can lead to sympathy.

[00:45:54.39] - Yes. Like for instance, I know it's really bad for many women to be catcalled because they say so. They say, this really sucks. And maybe I can't imagine what it's like, but if they sincerely say, this really sucks, that weighs in favor of being bad.

[00:46:12.12] - Of course, separate from that, again, you have your skepticism about how reliably empathy is a good thing, period, assuming. And here, we need to distinguish, I guess, between so-called cognitive empathy, just understanding how the world looks, and then emotional empathy, actually identifying with the suffering or with whatever feeling they're having. And I think it's emotional empathy in particular that you think is overrated. Not that it never does anything constructive, but you think it leads us astray.

[00:46:43.63] - Yeah, my argument I get in my book and other places is that when it comes to feeling the pain of others or feeling the pain we think they're having, we're very biased. We tend to zoom in on people who are similar to us. I think since I wrote the book, anybody who thinks empathy makes us better people has to reconcile that with everything Donald Trump has said about immigrants.

[00:47:09.70] Because when Donald Trump talks about illegal immigration, sometimes legal immigration, he tells stories. And these are always stories of innocent victims, about rape victims, about victims of drugs, about murder victims. He tells these moving stories.

[00:47:24.21] He did a televised broadcast just on the topic of immigration, and it was nothing but horror stories designed to make you feel bad for people. And the idea is, as he knows-- we know this from the lab. He knows this instinctively that if you feel empathy for a victim, it makes you want to strike out against the person who caused this pain.

[00:47:44.05] - At one State of the Union address, I think he had a family in the gallery who'd lost a-- had somebody killed by immigrants or something. Maybe I'm imagining it.
[INAUDIBLE]

[00:47:53.89] - No, you're not.

[00:47:54.42] - But then meanwhile, the other side is cultivating empathy for the migrants, for the people trying to get in. And so they're both using the same tool, which just goes to show the tool itself doesn't have an inherent kind of ideological orientation to empathy.

[00:48:13.53] - That's right. And to be fair, there's this weird trope in State of the Union speeches. Trump did not invent it. Obama used it. Bush used it.

[00:48:21.59] - Reagan invented it. Lenny-- Lenny-- do you remember Lenny?

[00:48:25.45] - Oh, no, who is Lenny? Remind me.

[00:48:27.13] - Lenny Skutnik or something, Lenny was a guy who did something heroic. I think he saved some people who were in an airline accident. Something, I don't know what it was. But Lenny, I'm pretty sure I've got this right.

[00:48:41.92] And Reagan brought him to the gallery so that he could celebrate an American hero, I think. I believe that's the guy. Anyway, I think Reagan is generally credited with starting this whole tradition, which has only gotten more and more grotesque over time.

[00:48:59.22] - Yeah, so you know I have a health care plan. I'm President. I say, look in the gallery. There is Moe. Moe has no arms or legs because his health care was inadequate to care for him. And you should [INAUDIBLE].

[00:49:11.29] And this is Mary. Mary had all of her children murdered by this regime. We're going to go to war against them next Tuesday. And this is standard. I'd like to have a world where when politicians try this, people boo. I would like [INAUDIBLE].

[00:49:29.59] - Just on principle, just on principle, like with the first Iraq War or the Persian Gulf War, there was this congressional testimony where they brought this woman on. And she said something like she was a nurse in an Iraqi hospital. There was something. I forget.

[00:49:43.39] And Saddam Hussein's regime had unplugged the incubators of babies. It turned out to be a total lie. It turned out to even be a lie that she was even a whatever she said she was. She actually worked for a PR firm that was trying to get us into a war.

[00:49:57.91] And but I agree. And you couldn't have known that at the time. But that's why I agree. I would just like to see-- I mean, in general, empathy is reliably deployed in that realm as well when people are trying to get you into a war. And I agree that just reflexive booing would be in order.

[00:50:17.81] - This may be a false memory. But I remember in roughly the same time that Time Magazine had a big cover picture of a woman whose nose had been cut off by one of the regimes we were supposed to go to war against.

[00:50:28.90] - I think that may be true. Ugh, I am grimacing just reflecting on it, because I did see it. And I don't remember exactly the context. On the other hand, again, this is consistent with your view that these things can do good or bad.

[00:50:46.64] There's a famous picture of the child who was a victim of a napalm bombing in Vietnam. And I think most of us would say, yeah, the Vietnam War was a mistake.

[00:50:58.50] - Yeah, no, it could be deployed for good causes. In World War II, to get America into the war, there were a lot of stories. And some were not exactly true. But I look at it, and I say, well, it was a good cause.

[00:51:12.83] But so it's a tool. It's just my objection isn't what people-- some people could say correctly it's a tool that could be used for good. It just is the tool could be deployed in all sorts of ways. And again, Trump is a master at deploying that tool.

[00:51:28.70] - Now, on the cognitive empathy front-- and this gets at my view that when we talk about the psychology of tribalism, we should pay a lot of attention to a couple of cognitive

biases. One of them is the very famous confirmation bias. Obviously, if you've got your tribe's ideology, confirmation bias is going to ensure that you pay more attention to and attach more significance to information that seems to support your view than information that opposes it. I think [INAUDIBLE]

[00:51:59.29] - Jon Ronson, by the way, on Twitter said-- the best line says, "ever since I heard about the confirmation bias, I've been seeing it everywhere."

[00:52:06.24] - [LAUGHS] Well, there's that. There's no escape. There's no escape from the matrix. But I think another one is attribution error, which in its kind of fully fleshed out form involves attributing-- originally, they thought attribution error consisted of overestimating the extent to which people were motivated. People's behavior was attributable to their essential nature.

[00:52:32.59] So see somebody who's being a jerk in a checkout line, you go, oh, he's a jerk. That's just the way he is. He'll be a jerk tomorrow or next day. You don't consider the circumstantial possibility that he just got some bad news. He's in a bad mood, whatever.

[00:52:45.79] It turns out that actually the bias is less generic than that. With our friends and allies, if they do something good, we attribute it to their nature, not just circumstance. With our enemies and rivals, if they do something bad, we attribute it to their nature, their essential nature.

[00:53:07.54] And what I want to ask you is, do you see if we switch to cognitive empathy? OK, that is just understanding the perspective of people. I think the tendency toward attribution error sometimes impedes that. And I have in mind, for example, people on my side looking at people on the Trump side and going, they're just racists. That's the way they are. And if you start bringing up circumstantial explanations of their behavior like, well, some of them are unemployed, or their sons are having trouble getting the kind of high-paying job they used to get, and OK, they're blaming it on immigrants, but actually, they look down and see that the people working at the meatpacking plant for low wage actually are from Latin America, and so on.

[00:53:57.24] I mean, if you start coming up with circumstantial explanations of behavior considered bad of your enemies, people don't want to hear it. They just want to hear the essentialist explanation. They are racist. It's in their nature.

[00:54:12.96] - I think that's right. I think there's a couple of things going on. There's another bias which particularly impedes cognitive empathy. It's something like the outgroup homogeneity bias. So the idea is, why did people vote for Obama? Well, there was many reasons. We're complicated, this, that, and other. Why did people vote for Trump? They're racist.

[00:54:34.29] And the idea is when dealing with an ingroup, for me, psychologists, Jews, Canadians, Americans, it's really complicated. We're complicated people, all sorts of things. When dealing with an outgroup, it's all the same. And that really gets in the way of some cognitive understanding.

[00:54:51.02] What you're talking about, I think many people have a view that to explain something is to excuse it. And to explain something in any way other than pure evil-- this came up a lot after 9/11 where there people with an analyses of the motivations of the terrorists. And many people wouldn't have any of it.

[00:55:13.64] There's a Republican debate where Ron Paul is saying, you've got to understand these people have been abused over time and all that. And the crowd is about ready to tear him apart. And Rick Santorum says, essentially, that's a horrible answer. These people are pure evil. And then he gets a standing ovation.

[00:55:33.33] - Right. No, I think-- and I've been on the receiving end of a certain amount of that because I have emphasized circumstantial contributors to radicalization-- and I've been called like an apologist for terrorists and stuff. But I totally agree that the tendency to equate explanation with exculpation is not only a tendency. I think it's deep-seated. And I would like to-- I think there's a Darwinian explanation for it. I think it's part of our evolved psychology that we do tend to equate the two.

[00:56:16.10] There's a reason that we have the intuition that to know all is to forgive all. But it's really a tendency that needs to be overcome, because it systematically impedes actually understanding what's going on. You try to explain why any bad behavior happens, and people immediately jump on you.

[00:56:35.61] - Yeah. But here, I'll say-- and I struggle with thinking about this. It's not entirely clear it's mistaken. Which is, if I start to explain your activities in terms of the situation you're in and so on, in some way, personally I'm saying that if I was in your situation exactly, I would do the same right, that this follows.

[00:56:57.84] And it also says, it's not some pure evil, monstrous evil. It's rather emotions and beliefs and desires that people might normally have and so on. And in the course of it, maybe people are right to worry that as a consequence of explaining others in depth, you start to see them as less purely evil.

[00:57:20.94] Now there is a certain response to that saying, well, good. There's no such thing as pure evil. Everything has an explanation in terms of background environment. And you shouldn't be so quick to condemn. [INAUDIBLE] very Buddhist.

[00:57:34.77] But I think I think there's a truth that there is a connection between explaining and excusing. And you could take that in different directions. If I want people to really hate a group, I'll say, don't explain what's happened. Don't talk about their motives. They're just pure evil. Shut up if you try to say more.

[00:57:55.65] - But see, I think the only reason that there is, in fact, a certain kind of peril in explaining bad behavior is because of another intuition that I think is kind of built into it, which is the idea that punishment is never in order unless there is a kind of deep-seated moral culpability. In other words, they did something that you wouldn't have done in their situation.

And I think that's built into us too. And I think we have to kind of-- my view is punishment should never be done for retributive reasons.

[00:58:36.81] It's never good in and of itself. It's only good to the extent that it's kind of good for the world in some sense. In other words, it deters future transgressors, or it helps rehabilitate the person you're punishing or just keeps them off the street so they won't do it again.

[00:58:59.29] In a rough way, the idea that punishment is retribution and it's appropriate when the bad deed was a result of free will and wasn't really compelled by circumstance, in a lot of ways, that is a proxy for what I'm describing, the kind of punishment I'm describing. And a lot of times, those two conceptions of punishment lead to the same outcome. But they don't always. And anyway, my view is that two things are mistaken-- the idea that we should equate explanation with exculpation and the idea that punishment should be retributive to begin with.

[00:59:40.28] In other words, I think the suffering incurred via punishment is always regrettable in and of itself. And that's what people don't want to face. They would like to think that, well, it's actually good that they're in jail suffering. That's actually good in and of itself because they're bad people. And I just think that's not a sophisticated view.

[01:00:02.84] - You're a good person. [LAUGHS]

[01:00:05.24] - On paper.

[01:00:08.71] - On streaming video. But when the Harvey Weinstein case was big, I read a lot of-- I had this almost masochistic fascination with details of things. And it's somewhat struck me as just so cruel. And these criminal charges against him, and it was so cruel.

[01:00:26.54] And so I guess my end to it-- I accept your point as sort of a moral point. But to me, a solution to the situation that involved him being just as happy and living this wonderful life isn't the right solution. I would want him to suffer.

[01:00:42.17] - Well, yeah, but you can argue for that on pragmatic grounds. You don't want men treating women the way he treated them. So you have to punish them to, first of all, get him out of the company of women. There's some benefit in that if he's going to keep doing this, but set the example, both in the sense of establishing that there will be consequences for criminal conduct but also in the sense of reinforcing a norm.

[01:01:09.53] That's one of the things that's happening with MeToo is the rules are changing. I think they should. And you can argue that it's unfair. I mean, again, my view is that in a certain sense, punishment is always regrettable. But the fact is there has to be a certain kind of suffering in order to make it clear that the rules are changing.

[01:01:30.05] - Yeah, and the evolutionary story here, which is, I think, what you're sort of nodding at, is, our psychological intuitions of punishment are often de-ontological. It's in the sense that you did something wrong. You should pay.

[01:01:44.90] But this might be the way in which our psychologies have kind of snuck in a utilitarian. Because often, they come up, everybody agrees the rapist should be punished. And the way we talk about it is because he did something wrong, he should pay. He should suffer.

[01:01:57.92] It so happens that this matches up with a perfectly utilitarian reason, [INAUDIBLE] to stop him from doing it, deter it for him, and that's an example for others. But you can now imagine cases where you pull these apart. So Weinstein went to some therapy for a week in New Mexico or something. And--

[01:02:19.28] - That ought to do it.

[01:02:20.70] - [LAUGHS] But imagine it did do it. Imagine, actually, in some magical world, that we really are good at that kind of thing. And he would leave the therapy feeling no desire at all to exploit or humiliate other people. He would never do it again in his worst dreams.

[01:02:34.78] And still, shall we put him back at the head of this company and everything? Well, you might say he would be a bad example for others that we let him [INAUDIBLE].

[01:02:45.87] - Right, I would.

[01:02:46.32] - Does that make sense? That's not why I want to punish. I could think of consequentialist reasons. But even if you took away the consequentialist reasons, I still want to punish. I'm not defending this view. I'm just saying that this is--

[01:02:58.16] - Oh, yeah, that's the way we all are.

[01:02:59.42] - --common sense psychology.

[01:03:00.44] - Even I when I was processing the news of Weinstein, I'm like feeling, yeah, he deserves to suffer. And it's funny, in a way, because he's like not a very attractive person, it's almost easier to think what a grotesque monster. And yet the other way that could work is if you imagine him in his formative years, in middle school or whatever, in high school, it's like he's not the prom king. And it would not surprise me if that part of his history factored into him becoming the kind of person he is.

[01:03:45.20] What I want is a world where you can talk like that and say, well, maybe this is why he became the way he is and first of all, not be expelled from society for wanting to explain the behavior. And secondly, say, nonetheless, as sad as it is-- it's sad that in our society adolescents who aren't attractive get x, y, and z, and it's sad that it can make them this way-- but as a practical matter, he has to be punished. He did something bad, and there are utilitarian reasons. That's what the world I want.

[01:04:19.81] - Owen Flanagan tells a story, a philosopher guy friend, where he's [INAUDIBLE] to meet the Dalai Lama, because the Dalai Lama spends all his time meeting with neuroscientists and philosophers. And you get to ask the Dalai Lama one question. And he had a good one.

[01:04:35.06] He says, if he had a chance to kill Hitler right before World War II, would you? So this gets translated. And they're talking back and forth. And the answer was yes, but I would not be angry at him. I would do a great regret, and I would not be angry at him.

[01:04:50.56] - That's right, that all punishment, strictly speaking, is regrettable in and of itself. But sometimes it has to be done. Of course, it was Hitler, the kill Hitler in the cradle argument is different cause he hasn't done anything bad yet, and it's pre-emptive intervention. I mean, I'd still do it, but it's different.

[01:05:14.52] - Yeah. I agree with what you're saying. And I agree with what the Dalai Lama is saying. It just goes so much against human psychology. And we see this in the [INAUDIBLE] I don't know how many people voted for Trump. But there were a lot of them. And I know some of them.

[01:05:31.40] - I'm related. Three of my four siblings voted for Trump.

[01:05:34.97] - Wow, you're closer than me. I do not know that many, and they aren't that close, in comparison to John McCain, which I know a lot of people voted for him. And we are now in a case. This is not Hitler. This is not Harvey Weinstein. But still, certain people say anything but these are racists, often on fairly flimsy arguments. Like Trump was racist, is racist, which I think is true. Therefore, if you voted for Trump, you've got to be racist, which seems to be poor logic.

[01:06:09.23] Here's a theory for why people voted for Trump by somebody who voted for Trump. It's a very simple theory. He was Republican, and they were Republican. That explains an enormous amount of voting pattern. We could elect Harvey Weinstein as a Democratic nominee, and a lot of Democrats will vote for him because he'll be the Democrat.

[01:06:30.71] - Well, this gets back to you-- what were you saying it's called, the homogeneity of the outgroup fallacy? What is it called again?

[01:06:36.88] - There has to be a better name for it. But I just remember it as the outgroup homogeneity effect.

[01:06:40.83] - And is that considered a discrete cognitive bias in its own right?

[01:06:44.06] - Yes.

[01:06:44.24] - It may be intertwined with others, right? But it is actually studied as such.

[01:06:48.68] - Yes, it is studied as such.

[01:06:50.12] - Because just among-- I mean, you're right. I think there's a tendency to simplify and essentialize in explaining the behavior of Trump voters if you're on the anti-Trump side. But just looking at my siblings who voted for Trump, they're radically different motivations.

[01:07:05.36] In one case, like Evangelical, the abortion issue is everything. And so there you go. It's decided.

[01:07:11.72] And in another case, it's, quote, "I just wanted to throw a wrench into the works." And that's just a deep dissatisfaction with the political system as it works. And who could blame? We all identify with that to some extent.

[01:07:28.85] But that's a very different kind of motivation. And neither of those motivations is about immigration. And there was a lot of that. So it is complicated.

[01:07:41.72] - It is complicated. And I think even-- I think it's morally wrong to accuse people and reduce their goals to some sort of pure evil. It's also instrumentally wrong. Like suppose the Democrats want-- they don't want Trump to become a two-term president. I think it is really important that you know why people voted for Trump, because they're going to want to make some of them not vote for Trump. And if they're irredeemably evil, well, just concede the election to start with. But people have complicated motivations.

[01:08:19.73] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[01:08:21.51] - --the other sense, you hear this argument. Is it racism? Is it economic circumstance? Which is it? Well, you can certainly imagine economic circumstance giving rise to or deepening racism.

[01:08:34.92] In other words, hey, you didn't have any beef with Latin Americans until you felt you lost your job because of their presence in the local workforce or whatever. And my point is just that these are two variables that are not in totally separate categories. And if you talk about racism as if it's just this fixed, eternal, essential part of people and isn't susceptible to any kind of manipulation via other variables, then you're never going to do it. You won't know what to do to try to reduce it.

[01:09:14.66] - Yeah, even racism itself, a lot Trump voters had voted for Obama previously, which would complicate the narrative. But let's take those who are racist. Well, that can get unpacked too.

[01:09:28.12] You could be racist for religious reasons. You could be racist because you're afraid. You could be racist because you're ignorant. You could be racist because you feel that this other race is competing for your other resource.

[01:09:37.62] There's a lot of-- if you just say, well, that's some sort of original sin that we could only respond to it by shunning you, it's bad morality. It's just also bad politics. So if Bernie Sanders or Kamala Harris is going to be running for president, they're going to have to get some racist votes, or else they're not going to win.

[01:10:00.06] - And just to drive home how, again, these cognitive biases play out, it's like people on my side ideologically, some of the very same people who insist on looking for the root causes of terrorism-- and I insist on that-- if you start talking about the root causes of xenophobia

among Trump supporters or racism or whatever, if you start talking about root causes, things that gave rise to these attitudes, some of these people at least, the very same people who want to do this explanatory exercise in one context don't want to hear any of it. And of course, the same thing exists on the other side. The very same people who are saying, pointing to the economic variables on their side are some of the people don't want to hear about what makes terrorists be terrorists.

[01:10:58.60] - Now, these are examples of sort of the ingroup thinking confirmation bias and so on. And once you look for them they're-- the New York Times, I know when Brett Kavanaugh came up, the New York Times had had articles saying that basically witnesses from the past who would tell stories from their past are never mistaken. And really, if you do something terrible as a teenager, you're going to be a terrible guy throughout. Now, those are two moral positions you might have.

[01:11:24.87] - Wait, these were OpEds or what?

[01:11:26.85] - These were OpEds in the New York Times. But of course, New York Times, in cases of mass incarceration, would also talk about how inaccurate witnesses are for crimes and how you shouldn't hold somebody responsible for something they did 15 years later. And I imagine you can find these things pages apart just from different weeks of reporting depending on who they're talking about. They're both coherent views you could have. But you'd only flip from one to the other if it's not the views driving but the desire to make a point.

[01:12:02.64] - Yeah, I mean, we all do-- I do this. I'm just highlighting the cases where I've noticed it happening in other people. I'm naturally less inclined to notice it happening in me.

[01:12:17.91] - I only notice things happening in me if I think about things I've done in somewhat of a distant past. Like if I look at old emails I've sent or old arguments, it's like, did I really believe that? That was awfully harsh of me, I'll think.

[01:12:30.60] - But sometimes it doesn't take long sometimes with me. It was like I said. In this newsletter I put out, I'll turn around the next day and go, I was being too tribal. It happened with the last one.

[01:12:47.06] - Scott Alexander, who's one of my favorite writers, a little while ago had something on bias. And he reported all these psychology experiments on implicit bias and unconscious bias, finding these small but you could debate it effects of how we think of people of different races and different ethnicities. But then some studies compared those to political biases.

[01:13:07.70] What do liberals think of conservative, conservatives of liberals? Those are enormous. Those are enormous. With the sort of liberal population, you have to use all sorts of ways to eke out any signs of racial bias. If you want to get ideological bias, just ask people.

[01:13:23.75] A friend of mine did a study where he surveyed prominent social psychologists and asked, what would you do if you found out a colleague of yours was conservative? And not a

majority but a substantial minority would say, well, I would vote against him for tenure. I wouldn't want him to get grants. I would try to reject his papers.

[01:13:43.03] It was anonymous. But you'll never find anything for ethnic bias. It's very hard to find somebody within our sort of group who would say, I don't want my kid to marry somebody of a different color. But for political, people are quite free to say this. In fact, I'll say this. I have two unmarried sons. And I would rather them not marry a Trump supporter.

[01:14:05.00] - Well, you'll be happy to know the siblings of mine that voted for Trump were already married. So you don't have to worry about that happening. That's two off the market. So now, speaking of that, I assume you accept the idea that in the social sciences, in North America at least, there's a pretty strong liberal-- well, most social scientists are liberal, disproportionately liberal.

[01:14:31.28] - Yes, certainly by American standards, most of them are Democrats, vote Democrat. But most of them have the views like they are pro-choice. Most of my colleagues are liberal.

[01:14:43.59] - Now that's getting more comment.

[01:14:44.75] - [INAUDIBLE] yes.

[01:14:45.22] - Is there any reason to think it's going to change because of the comment or it is changing?

[01:14:51.80] - People like John Haidt have commented on this. I don't think it's going to change. For better or worse, I think this is just a liberal community. It's not-- I think more liberals want to go into it for whatever reason. It's often a pleasant environment for conservatives. Conservatives have other-- they have certainly a lot of other parts of society. So it's not so one-sided. They have most of the military, big business, even other parts of the university can lean more. But social science is very liberal, and it's probably going to stay that way. I'd like to see--

[01:15:28.64] - I'm curious to why that came to be in the first place. I mean, the theory of a lot of liberals is, well, these are smart, well-educated people. That's what you get in academia. And if you were smart and well-educated, you'd be a liberal too because you'd see that liberalism is better.

[01:15:42.91] - I have heard that theory. I don't know how it came out that way. I've read somewhere that it wasn't always that way, that like in 1910 or something it was quite different. But the idea that everybody in my department are going to vote for the Democrat except for some who will vote for the Green Party, that isn't always-- if you looked at my department 100 years ago, it wouldn't be true.

[01:16:09.44] It's in some way, I'm not-- I have some skepticism about a sort of affirmative action that says, well, the government should force us to hire some conservatives. It is what it is. I just think we have to be careful it doesn't mess up our science. And sometimes it does.

[01:16:27.10] - Well, absolutely it does. And here we get back to the problems in social psychology. And a lot of these-- in some of these cases where-- I mean, I say it absolutely does. I don't know. I haven't studied this systematically. But certainly, in some of these, you would say that some of these experiments do have an agenda, that they-- there's certainly been an emphasis on the malleability of people in psychology, which is kind of a liberal doctrine, going back to BF Skinner at least who considered us infinitely malleable.

[01:17:08.89] - Yes, although the most liberal social scientist of all, Noam Chomsky, has argued that that's a doctrine which is ultimately-- that infinite malleability means we're the victims of whatever fascists or totalitarians want to manipulate us.

[01:17:27.28] - Well, in fact, BF Skinner's novel, Walden Two, have you ever read that?

[01:17:31.69] - Yes, I have.

[01:17:32.06] - That's like an authoritarian paradise, right? It's like the philosopher kings or the scientist kings maybe have laid down these rules for how we're going to give people positive and negative reinforcements that expunge jealousy and hatred and everything. But you've got to put them in charge first.

[01:17:53.65] - I think your point is right. I'll give an example, which is there's a lot of studies, say, where they put out false resumes, some with a male name, some with a female name. And many studies find a bias in favor of men and favor people with white names and favor people with white faces. And you see these over Twitter, social media, New York Times coverage. And because it's a support study, the editors [INAUDIBLE] a racist and sexist society of holding people back.

[01:18:18.73] But there are also a lot of studies that find either no bias or the opposite bias. There's some studies finding that people have a strong bias to hire women over men in some fields, in part because some people are sort of self-consciously trying to be diverse. And when these come out, they're often exposed to scrutiny, accusations, or simply not talked about. And social psychologists are people.

[01:18:42.04] And when things work out the way you want them to, you kind of cheer about it. And when they don't, you get upset. And again, there are a lot of exceptions and a lot of people who do really good work that isn't biased in this way. But the bias exists.

[01:18:55.99] - Yeah, I wonder if one thing is that social scientists more and more do their work, not all of them, but kind of with the press release in mind, kind of aware that a lot of social scientists get their names in the New York Times by having certain kinds of findings.

[01:19:19.71] - I think that that's true. I think that that's part of it. It might be that we tend to overestimate how much this is a motivating force, because we only see the fraction of the 1% who are in the New York Times. Most of us are just kind of worker bees doing our stuff.

[01:19:33.90] But it's not necessarily being in the New York Times. It's also coming to sort of the result that when you go to a conference, people say, I liked that result. And typically, we say you liked that because it's scientifically interesting. But sometimes we like that result because it fits our politics.

[01:19:48.60] If I had a study showing-- here's a hypothetical. I do a study, very simple study, showing Trump voters are far less intelligent than Clinton voters versus a study showing the opposite. Well, if I had the first study, I could imagine people liking it. Yeah, they're dummies. If I had the other study, people would say, well, I'm not sure you tested it right. And you're focusing too much on intelligence, and you didn't use a big enough sample size, because nobody wants to hear our side is dumber.

[01:20:19.44] - Yeah. And just to get back to the broader theme of infinite malleability, some of the studies that have come into question were these priming studies, I think the kinds of priming that work, but in other words, the unconscious, how you can through unconscious cues transform someone's behavior. You hand them a cold glass of water on the way in as opposed to a cup of coffee, and they will behave more coldly toward people and stuff, which never made sense to me. I don't know if that one in particular has been borne out. But that's a whole genre of studies that is only partially holding up, right?

[01:20:57.73] - I think that's fair enough. Daniel Kahneman wrote this book, Thinking Fast and Slow. And he talked about a lot of social priming studies. And then he sort of led a critical attack on them.

[01:21:08.44] Some of them didn't show up. Some of them failed to replicate. Others have replicated, so it's complicated. I have colleagues who work on this. And there's an enormous debate in psychology, actually, a very interesting debate. I think it's premature to say social priming doesn't exist.

[01:21:27.34] - Oh, yeah, I got to think it does.

[01:21:31.14] - Yeah, but it's interesting the politics of it. So Jesse Singal, who I don't know you had-- if you talked to on the show.

[01:21:42.13] - I haven't, but he's been on Bloggingheads and/or MeaningofLife.tv. He writes for-- is it for New York Magazine he writes?

[01:21:49.91] - Yeah, a column on science. And he's written on other issues. And he's known for his views on different topics.

[01:21:55.60] But he's working on a book now where he argues that the social priming, social psychology work that you're sort of critical of is actually politically taking us in the wrong direction. The idea is that socially ecologists tend to think we often have these hacks, these quick fixes, to make us better people [INAUDIBLE]. And it's drawn us away from deep systematic social problems.

[01:22:22.52] So think of the literature on stereotype threat, which suggests that if you give minorities a test-- on the extreme version, it said if you give minorities, who typically do worse on tests, in a situation where the race is not made salient, there is no ethnic differences. And so if that's true, then you could solve a lot of the education bombs in America trivially.

[01:22:48.19] But it's not true. And our desire to think that it is true is sometimes bottled up in a desire to not deal with difficult and expensive problems but use sort of psychological tricks to bring things back.

[01:23:00.96] - Yeah, I actually heard Jesse on RadioLab, I think, talking about stereotype threat. They were calling in questions. So speaking of books, we've been at it quite a while so we should probably wrap up. But are you working on another book yet? You're like always working on another book, aren't you? You [INAUDIBLE]

[01:23:18.58] - I like working on books. When they come out, nobody reads them. But they're fun to write. I like to kind of focus on them and think about them. So I'm writing a book on suffering and why we like it.

[01:23:31.25] - Speak for yourself. But go ahead.

[01:23:33.17] - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, I'm talking to a man who's been on extended silent meditation retreats involving psychological pain and physical pain. And it gets something out of him, something profound.

[01:23:45.83] - That's the case for this reward. That's not the same as like masochism. You also focus on cases just like liking really spicy food, right, things that inflict to any degree? Well, you tell me. Does it range all the way from true masochism to all of these modest forms?

[01:24:08.24] - It does. So in some way, the book has two parts, which I've only discovered over the last month while I'm writing it. But one part is when we take pleasure from pain, BDSM and hot curries and horror movies, things that are normally aversive psychologically or physically, but we like it. And I try to explain why and talk in terms of contrast and different neural systems.

[01:24:31.73] And then I'm also interested, though, and becoming increasingly interested in the idea that I think we feel that the good life involves some degree of struggle and difficulty and sacrifice. And so I think people are trying to engineer their lives so that they are doing things which are hard, like training for a marathon or writing a book or working on a relationship, which could be complicated. And so in some way, the overall theme of this book is that we are not hedonists. We are driven by other deeper motivations, and I am trying to explore these motivations.

[01:25:09.91] - OK, again, speak for yourself.

[01:25:13.67] - [LAUGHS] We'll see. We'll see.

[01:25:15.27] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[01:25:16.05] - I have a whole [INAUDIBLE].

[01:25:16.98] - And it takes strenuous effort to be anything else.

[01:25:22.05] - OK, well, we'll see.

[01:25:25.35] - Yeah, OK, well, I'll let you get back to that book then. Thank you so much, Paul. Oh, remind us what your Twitter handle is. Is it @paulbloomatyale?

[01:25:34.02] - @palebloomatyale. Yes.

[01:25:36.96] - Long handle-- it has about as many letters as mine, which is @robertwrighter, W-R-I-G-H-T-E-R.

[01:25:45.08] - Follow us both.

[01:25:46.25] - What's that?

[01:25:47.04] - Follow us both.

[01:25:47.91] - Everyone should follow us both.

[01:25:49.59] - Because you'll never see any virtue signaling on @robertwrighter or @paulbloomatyale.

[01:25:53.82] - No, I am brainless. And where else can people find your stuff? They should just Google you, buy your books and Google you.

[01:26:04.50] - Just come by and visit. Just knock on my door, and I'll talk to you.

[01:26:07.29] - Yeah, you're in Canada.

[01:26:09.21] - I'm in Canada now.

[01:26:10.10] - Just go to Canada.

[01:26:11.01] - I'm at an undisclosed location. I'm somewhere in Canada.

[01:26:13.65] - Go to Canada and ask for Paul Bloom.

[01:26:15.60] - Exactly, exactly. I'm in an igloo or something, [INAUDIBLE] far away.

[01:26:20.07] - OK, well, thanks a lot, Paul.

[01:26:22.21] - Thank you for having me, Bob.

[01:26:23.25] - OK.

[01:26:23.62] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[01:26:24.87] - Before you go, a quick message from the suits at MeaningofLife.tv. Meaning of Life will always be free for you to watch or listen to. And we don't even go to the NPR route of guilting you into donating during pledge week.

[01:26:35.71] But we do have a small request. If you enjoy Meaning of Life programming, rate and review us on iTunes. The iTunes algorithm weighs positive reviews heavily, so taking a few minutes to rate and review us will help more people find out about our shows. Also, of course, we encourage you to subscribe to our Twitter and Facebook feeds. Thank you.

[01:26:52.95] [MUSIC PLAYING]