

The Origins of Wokeness

paulgraham.com · Paul Graham · 2025-01 · [source](#)

| | |

|

January 2025

The word "prig" isn't very common now, but if you look up the definition, it will sound familiar. Google's isn't bad:

A self-righteously moralistic person who behaves as if superior to others.

This sense of the word originated in the 18th century, and its age is an important clue: it shows that although wokeness is a comparatively recent phenomenon, it's an instance of a much older one.

There's a certain kind of person who's attracted to a shallow, exacting kind of moral purity, and who demonstrates his purity by attacking anyone who breaks the rules. Every society has these people. All that changes is the rules they enforce. In Victorian England it was Christian virtue. In Stalin's Russia it was orthodox Marxism-Leninism. For the woke, it's social justice.

So if you want to understand wokeness, the question to ask is not why people behave this way. Every society has prigs. The question to ask is why our prigs are priggish about these ideas, at this moment. And to answer that we have to ask when and where wokeness began.

The answer to the first question is the 1980s. Wokeness is a second, more aggressive wave of political correctness, which started in the late 1980s, died down in the late 1990s, and then returned with a vengeance in the early 2010s, finally peaking after the riots of 2020.

What was political correctness, exactly? I'm often asked to define both this term and wokeness by people who think they're meaningless labels, so I will. They both have the same definition:

An aggressively performative focus on social justice. In other words, it's people being prigs about social justice. And that's the real problem — the performativeness, not the social justice.

[0]

Racism, for example, is a genuine problem. Not a problem on the scale that the woke believe it to be, but a genuine one. I don't think any reasonable person would deny that. The problem with political correctness was not that it focused on marginalized groups, but the shallow, aggressive way in which it did so. Instead of going out into the world and quietly helping members of marginalized groups, the politically correct focused on getting people in trouble for using the wrong words to talk about them.

As for where political correctness began, if you think about it, you probably already know the answer. Did it begin outside universities and spread to them from this external source? Obviously not; it has always been most extreme in universities. So where in universities did it begin? Did it begin in math, or the hard sciences, or engineering, and spread from there to the humanities and social sciences? Those are amusing images, but no, obviously it began in the humanities and social sciences.

Why there? And why then? What happened in the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s?

A successful theory of the origin of political correctness has to be able to explain why it didn't happen earlier. Why didn't it happen during the protest movements of the 1960s, for example? They were concerned with much the same issues.

[1]

The reason the student protests of the 1960s didn't lead to political correctness was precisely that — they were

student movements. They didn't have any real power. The students may have been talking a lot about women's liberation and black power, but it was not what they were being taught in their classes. Not yet.

But in the early 1970s the student protestors of the 1960s began to finish their dissertations and get hired as professors. At first they were neither powerful nor numerous. But as more of their peers joined them and the previous generation of professors started to retire, they gradually became both.

The reason political correctness began in the humanities and social sciences was that these fields offered more scope for the injection of politics. A 1960s radical who got a job as a physics professor could still attend protests, but his political beliefs wouldn't affect his work. Whereas research in sociology and modern literature can be made as political as you like.

[2]

I saw political correctness arise. When I started college in 1982 it was not yet a thing. Female students might object if someone said something they considered sexist, but no one was getting reported for it. It was still not a thing when I started grad school in 1986. It was definitely a thing in 1988 though, and by the early 1990s it seemed to pervade campus life.

What happened? How did protest become punishment? Why were the late 1980s the point at which protests against male chauvinism (as it used to be called) morphed into formal complaints to university authorities about sexism? Basically, the 1960s radicals got tenure. They became the Establishment they'd protested against two decades before. Now they were in a position not just to speak out about their ideas, but to enforce them.

A new set of moral rules to enforce was exciting news to a certain kind of student. What made it particularly exciting

was that they were allowed to attack professors. I remember noticing that aspect of political correctness at the time. It wasn't simply a grass-roots student movement. It was faculty members encouraging students to attack other faculty members. In that respect it was like the Cultural Revolution. That wasn't a grass-roots movement either; that was Mao unleashing the younger generation on his political opponents. And in fact when Roderick MacFarquhar started teaching a class on the Cultural Revolution at Harvard in the late 1980s, many saw it as a comment on current events. I don't know if it actually was, but people thought it was, and that means the similarities were obvious.

[3]

College students larp. It's their nature. It's usually harmless. But larping morality turned out to be a poisonous combination. The result was a kind of moral etiquette, superficial but very complicated. Imagine having to explain to a well-meaning visitor from another planet why using the phrase "people of color" is considered particularly enlightened, but saying "colored people" gets you fired. And why exactly one isn't supposed to use the word "negro" now, even though Martin Luther King used it constantly in his speeches. There are no underlying principles. You'd just have to give him a long list of rules to memorize.

[4]

The danger of these rules was not just that they created land mines for the unwary, but that their elaborateness made them an effective substitute for virtue. Whenever a society has a concept of heresy and orthodoxy, orthodoxy becomes a substitute for virtue. You can be the worst person in the world, but as long as you're orthodox you're better than everyone who isn't. This makes orthodoxy very attractive to bad people.

But for it to work as a substitute for virtue, orthodoxy must be difficult. If all you have to do to be orthodox is wear some garment or avoid saying some word, everyone knows to do it, and the only way to seem more virtuous than other

people is to actually be virtuous. The shallow, complicated, and frequently changing rules of political correctness made it the perfect substitute for actual virtue. And the result was a world in which good people who weren't up to date on current moral fashions were brought down by people whose characters would make you recoil in horror if you could see them.

One big contributing factor in the rise of political correctness was the lack of other things to be morally pure about. Previous generations of prigs had been prigs mostly about religion and sex. But among the cultural elite these were the dearest of dead letters by the 1980s; if you were religious, or a virgin, this was something you tended to conceal rather than advertise. So the sort of people who enjoy being moral enforcers had become starved of things to enforce. A new set of rules was just what they'd been waiting for.

Curiously enough, the tolerant side of the 1960s left helped create the conditions in which the intolerant side prevailed. The relaxed social rules advocated by the old, easy-going hippy left became the dominant ones, at least among the elite, and this left nothing for the naturally intolerant to be intolerant about.

Another possibly contributing factor was the fall of the Soviet empire. Marxism had been a popular focus of moral purity on the left before political correctness emerged as a competitor, but the pro-democracy movements in Eastern Bloc countries took most of the shine off it. Especially the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. You couldn't be on the side of the Stasi. I remember looking at the moribund Soviet Studies section of a used bookshop in Cambridge in the late 1980s and thinking "what will those people go on about now?" As it turned out the answer was right under my nose.

One thing I noticed at the time about the first phase of political correctness was that it was more popular with women than men. As many writers (perhaps most eloquently

George Orwell) have observed, women seem more attracted than men to the idea of being moral enforcers. But there was another more specific reason women tended to be the enforcers of political correctness. There was at this time a great backlash against sexual harassment; the mid 1980s were the point when the definition of sexual harassment was expanded from explicit sexual advances to creating a "hostile environment." Within universities the classic form of accusation was for a (female) student to say that a professor made her "feel uncomfortable." But the vagueness of this accusation allowed the radius of forbidden behavior to expand to include talking about heterodox ideas. Those make people uncomfortable too.

[5]

Was it sexist to propose that Darwin's greater male variability hypothesis might explain some variation in human performance? Sexist enough to get Larry Summers pushed out as president of Harvard, apparently. One woman who heard the talk in which he mentioned this idea said it made her feel "physically ill" and that she had to leave halfway through. If the test of a hostile environment is how it makes people feel, this certainly sounds like one. And yet it does seem plausible that greater male variability explains some of the variation in human performance. So which should prevail, comfort or truth? Surely if truth should prevail anywhere, it should be in universities; that's supposed to be their specialty; but for decades starting in the late 1980s the politically correct tried to pretend this conflict didn't exist.

[6]

Political correctness seemed to burn out in the second half of the 1990s. One reason, perhaps the main reason, was that it literally became a joke. It offered rich material for comedians, who performed their usual disinfectant action upon it. Humor is one of the most powerful weapons against priggishness of any sort, because prigs, being humorless, can't respond in kind. Humor was what defeated Victorian prudishness, and by 2000 it seemed to have done the same

thing to political correctness.

Unfortunately this was an illusion. Within universities the embers of political correctness were still glowing brightly. After all, the forces that created it were still there. The professors who started it were now becoming deans and department heads. And in addition to their departments there were now a bunch of new ones explicitly focused on social justice. Students were still hungry for things to be morally pure about. And there had been an explosion in the number of university administrators, many of whose jobs involved enforcing various forms of political correctness.

In the early 2010s the embers of political correctness burst into flame anew. There were several differences between this new phase and the original one. It was more virulent. It spread further into the real world, although it still burned hottest within universities. And it was concerned with a wider variety of sins. In the first phase of political correctness there were really only three things people got accused of: sexism, racism, and homophobia (which at the time was a neologism invented for the purpose). But between then and 2010 a lot of people had spent a lot of time trying to invent new kinds of -isms and -phobias and seeing which could be made to stick.

The second phase was, in multiple senses, political correctness metastasized. Why did it happen when it did? My guess is that it was due to the rise of social media, particularly Tumblr and Twitter, because one of the most distinctive features of the second wave of political correctness was the cancel mob: a mob of angry people uniting on social media to get someone ostracized or fired. Indeed this second wave of political correctness was originally called "cancel culture"; it didn't start to be called "wokeness" till the 2020s.

One aspect of social media that surprised almost everyone at first was the popularity of outrage. Users seemed to like being outraged. We're so used to this idea now that we take

it for granted, but really it's pretty strange. Being outraged is not a pleasant feeling. You wouldn't expect people to seek it out. But they do. And above all, they want to share it. I happened to be running a forum from 2007 to 2014, so I can actually quantify how much they want to share it: our users were about three times more likely to upvote something if it outraged them.

This tilt toward outrage wasn't due to wokeness. It's an inherent feature of social media, or at least this generation of it. But it did make social media the perfect mechanism for fanning the flames of wokeness.

[7]

It wasn't just public social networks that drove the rise of wokeness though. Group chat apps were also critical, especially in the final step, cancellation. Imagine if a group of employees trying to get someone fired had to do it using only email. It would be hard to organize a mob. But once you have group chat, mobs form naturally.

Another contributing factor in this second wave of political correctness was the dramatic increase in the polarization of the press. In the print era, newspapers were constrained to be, or at least seem, politically neutral. The department stores that ran ads in the New York Times wanted to reach everyone in the region, both liberal and conservative, so the Times had to serve both. But the Times didn't regard this neutrality as something forced upon them. They embraced it as their duty as a paper of record — as one of the big newspapers that aimed to be chronicles of their times, reporting every sufficiently important story from a neutral point of view.

When I grew up the papers of record seemed timeless, almost sacred institutions. Papers like the New York Times and Washington Post had immense prestige, partly because other sources of news were limited, but also because they did make some effort to be neutral.

Unfortunately it turned out that the paper of record was mostly an artifact of the constraints imposed by print.

[8]

When your market was determined by geography, you had to be neutral. But publishing online enabled — in fact probably forced — newspapers to switch to serving markets defined by ideology instead of geography. Most that remained in business fell in the direction they'd already been leaning: left. On October 11, 2020 the New York Times announced that "The paper is in the midst of an evolution from the stodgy paper of record into a juicy collection of great narratives."

[9]

Meanwhile journalists, of a sort, had arisen to serve the right as well. And so journalism, which in the previous era had been one of the great centralizing forces, now became one of the great polarizing ones.

The rise of social media and the increasing polarization of journalism reinforced one another. In fact there arose a new variety of journalism involving a loop through social media. Someone would say something controversial on social media. Within hours it would become a news story. Outraged readers would then post links to the story on social media, driving further arguments online. It was the cheapest source of clicks imaginable. You didn't have to maintain overseas news bureaus or pay for month-long investigations. All you had to do was watch Twitter for controversial remarks and repost them on your site, with some additional comments to inflame readers further.

For the press there was money in wokeness. But they weren't the only ones. That was one of the biggest differences between the two waves of political correctness: the first was driven almost entirely by amateurs, but the second was often driven by professionals. For some it was their whole job. By 2010 a new class of administrators had arisen whose job was basically to enforce wokeness. They played a role similar to that of the political commissars who got attached

to military and industrial organizations in the USSR: they weren't directly in the flow of the organization's work, but watched from the side to ensure that nothing improper happened in the doing of it. These new administrators could often be recognized by the word "inclusion" in their titles. Within institutions this was the preferred euphemism for wokeness; a new list of banned words, for example, would usually be called an "inclusive language guide."

[10]

This new class of bureaucrats pursued a woke agenda as if their jobs depended on it, because they did. If you hire people to keep watch for a particular type of problem, they're going to find it, because otherwise there's no justification for their existence.

[11]

But these

bureaucrats also represented a second and possibly even greater danger. Many were involved in hiring, and when possible they tried to ensure their employers hired only people who shared their political beliefs. The most egregious cases were the new "DEI statements" that some universities started to require from faculty candidates, proving their commitment to wokeness. Some universities used these statements as the initial filter and only even considered candidates who scored high enough on them. You're not hiring Einstein that way; imagine what you get instead.

Another factor in the rise of wokeness was the Black Lives Matter movement, which started in 2013 when a white man was acquitted after killing a black teenager in Florida. But this didn't launch wokeness; it was well underway by 2013.

Similarly for the Me Too Movement, which took off in 2017 after the first news stories about Harvey Weinstein's history of raping women. It accelerated wokeness, but didn't play the same role in launching it that the 80s version did in launching political correctness.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 also accelerated

wokeness, particularly in the press, where outrage now meant traffic. Trump made the New York Times a lot of money: headlines during his first administration mentioned his name at about four times the rate of previous presidents.

In 2020 we saw the biggest accelerant of all, after a white police officer asphyxiated a black suspect on video. At this point the metaphorical fire became a literal one, as violent protests broke out across America. But in retrospect this turned out to be peak woke, or close to it. By every measure I've seen, wokeness peaked in 2020 or 2021.

Wokeness is sometimes described as a mind-virus. What makes it viral is that it defines new types of impropriety. Most people are afraid of impropriety; they're never exactly sure what the social rules are or which ones they might be breaking. Especially if the rules change rapidly. And since most people already worry that they might be breaking rules they don't know about, if you tell them they're breaking a rule, their default reaction is to believe you. Especially if multiple people tell them. Which in turn is a recipe for exponential growth. Zealots invent some new impropriety to avoid. The first people to adopt it are fellow zealots, eager for new ways to signal their virtue. If there are enough of these, the initial group of zealots is followed by a much larger group, motivated by fear. They're not trying to signal virtue; they're just trying to avoid getting in trouble. At this point the new impropriety is now firmly established. Plus its success has increased the rate of change in social rules, which, remember, is one of the reasons people are nervous about which rules they might be breaking. So the cycle accelerates.

[12]

What's true of individuals is even more true of organizations. Especially organizations without a powerful leader. Such organizations do everything based on "best practices." There's no higher authority; if some new "best practice" achieves critical mass, they must adopt it. And in this case the organization can't do what it usually does

when it's uncertain: delay. It might be committing improprieties right now! So it's surprisingly easy for a small group of zealots to capture this type of organization by describing new improprieties it might be guilty of.

[13]

How does this kind of cycle ever end? Eventually it leads to disaster, and people start to say enough is enough. The excesses of 2020 made a lot of people say that.

Since then wokeness has been in gradual but continual retreat. Corporate CEOs, starting with Brian Armstrong, have openly rejected it. Universities, led by the University of Chicago and MIT, have explicitly confirmed their commitment to free speech. Twitter, which was arguably the hub of wokeness, was bought by Elon Musk in order to neutralize it, and he seems to have succeeded — and not, incidentally, by censoring left-wing users the way Twitter used to censor right-wing ones, but without censoring either.

[14]

Consumers have emphatically rejected brands that ventured too far into wokeness. The Bud Light brand may have been permanently damaged by it. I'm not going to claim Trump's second victory in 2024 was a referendum on wokeness; I think he won, as presidential candidates always do, because he was more charismatic; but voters' disgust with wokeness must have helped.

So what do we do now? Wokeness is already in retreat. Obviously we should help it along. What's the best way to do that? And more importantly, how do we avoid a third outbreak? After all, it seemed to be dead once, but came back worse than ever.

In fact there's an even more ambitious goal: is there a way to prevent any similar outbreak of aggressively performative moralism in the future — not just a third outbreak of political correctness, but the next thing like it? Because there will be a next thing. Prigs are prigs by nature. They need rules to obey and enforce, and now that Darwin has cut

off their traditional supply of rules, they're constantly hungry for new ones. All they need is someone to meet them halfway by defining a new way to be morally pure, and we'll see the same phenomenon again.

Let's start with the easier problem. Is there a simple, principled way to deal with wokeness? I think there is: to use the customs we already have for dealing with religion. Wokeness is effectively a religion, just with God replaced by protected classes. It's not even the first religion of this kind; Marxism had a similar form, with God replaced by the masses.

[15]

And we already have well-established customs for dealing with religion within organizations. You can express your own religious identity and explain your beliefs, but you can't call your coworkers infidels if they disagree, or try to ban them from saying things that contradict its doctrines, or insist that the organization adopt yours as its official religion.

If we're not sure what to do about any particular manifestation of wokeness, imagine we were dealing with some other religion, like Christianity. Should we have people within organizations whose jobs are to enforce woke orthodoxy? No, because we wouldn't have people whose jobs were to enforce Christian orthodoxy. Should we censor writers or scientists whose work contradicts woke doctrines? No, because we wouldn't do this to people whose work contradicted Christian teachings. Should job candidates be required to write DEI statements? Of course not; imagine an employer requiring proof of one's religious beliefs. Should students and employees have to participate in woke indoctrination sessions in which they're required to answer questions about their beliefs to ensure compliance? No, because we wouldn't dream of catechizing people in this way about their religion.

[16]

One shouldn't feel bad about not wanting to watch woke movies any more than one would feel bad about not wanting to listen to Christian rock. In my twenties I drove across America several times, listening to local radio stations. Occasionally I'd turn the dial and hear some new song. But the moment anyone mentioned Jesus I'd turn the dial again. Even the tiniest bit of being preached to was enough to make me lose interest.

But by the same token we should not automatically reject everything the woke believe. I'm not a Christian, but I can see that many Christian principles are good ones. It would be a mistake to discard them all just because one didn't share the religion that espoused them. It would be the sort of thing a religious zealot would do.

If we have genuine pluralism, I think we'll be safe from future outbreaks of woke intolerance. Wokeness itself won't go away. There will for the foreseeable future continue to be pockets of woke zealots inventing new moral fashions. The key is not to let them treat their fashions as normative. They can change what their coreligionists are allowed to say every few months if they like, but they mustn't be allowed to change what we're allowed to say.

[17]

The more general problem — how to prevent similar outbreaks of aggressively performative moralism — is of course harder. Here we're up against human nature. There will always be prigs. And in particular there will always be the enforcers among them, the aggressively conventional-minded. These people are born that way. Every society has them. So the best we can do is to keep them bottled up.

The aggressively conventional-minded aren't always on the rampage. Usually they just enforce whatever random rules are nearest to hand. They only become dangerous when some new ideology gets a lot of them pointed in the same direction at once. That's what happened during the Cultural Revolution,

and to a lesser extent (thank God) in the two waves of political correctness we've experienced.

We can't get rid of the aggressively conventional-minded.

[18]

And we couldn't prevent people from creating new ideologies that appealed to them even if we wanted to. So if we want to keep them bottled up, we have to do it one step downstream. Fortunately when the aggressively conventional-minded go on the rampage they always do one thing that gives them away: they define new heresies to punish people for. So the best way to protect ourselves from future outbreaks of things like wokeness is to have powerful antibodies against the concept of heresy.

We should have a conscious bias against defining new forms of heresy. Whenever anyone tries to ban saying something that we'd previously been able to say, our initial assumption should be that they're wrong. Only our initial assumption of course. If they can prove we should stop saying it, then we should. But the burden of proof is on them. In liberal democracies, people trying to prevent something from being said will usually claim they're not merely engaging in censorship, but trying to prevent some form of "harm". And maybe they're right. But once again, the burden of proof is on them. It's not enough to claim harm; they have to prove it.

As long as the aggressively conventional-minded continue to give themselves away by banning heresies, we'll always be able to notice when they become aligned behind some new ideology. And if we always fight back at that point, with any luck we can stop them in their tracks.

The number of true things we can't say should not increase. If it does, something is wrong.

Notes

[0]

This was not the original meaning of "woke," but it's rarely used in the original sense now. Now the pejorative sense is the dominant one.

[1]

Why did 1960s radicals focus on the causes they did?
One of the people who reviewed drafts of this essay explained this so well that I asked if I could quote him:

The middle-class student protestors of the New Left rejected the socialist/Marxist left as unhip. They were interested in sexier forms of oppression uncovered by cultural analysis (Marcuse) and abstruse "Theory". Labor politics became stodgy and old-fashioned. This took a couple generations to work through. The woke ideology's conspicuous lack of interest in the working class is the tell-tale sign. Such fragments as are, er, left of the old left are anti-woke, and meanwhile the actual working class shifted to the populist right and gave us Trump. Trump and wokeness are cousins.[2]

It helped that the humanities and social sciences also included some of the biggest and easiest undergrad majors. If a political movement had to start with physics students, it could never get off the ground; there would be too few of them, and they wouldn't have the time to spare.

The middle-class origins of wokeness smoothed its way through the institutions because it had no interest in "seizing the means of production" (how quaint such phrases seem now), which would quickly have run up against hard state and corporate power. The fact that wokeness only expressed interest in other kinds of class (race, sex, etc) signalled compromise with existing power: give us

power within your system and we'll bestow the resource we control — moral rectitude — upon you. As an ideological stalking horse for gaining control over discourse and institutions, this succeeded where a more ambitious revolutionary program would not have.

At the top universities these majors are not as big as they used to be, though. A 2022 survey found that only 7% of Harvard undergrads plan to major in the humanities, vs nearly 30% during the 1970s. I expect wokeness is at least part of the reason; when undergrads consider majoring in English, it's presumably because they love the written word and not because they want to listen to lectures about racism.

[3]

The puppet-master-and-puppet character of political correctness became clearly visible when a bakery near Oberlin College was falsely accused of race discrimination in 2016. In the subsequent civil trial, lawyers for the bakery produced a text message from Oberlin Dean of Students Meredith Raimondo that read "I'd say unleash the students if I wasn't convinced this needs to be put behind us."

[4]

The woke sometimes claim that wokeness is simply treating people with respect. But if it were, that would be the only rule you'd have to remember, and this is comically far from being the case. My younger son likes to imitate voices, and at one point when he was about seven I had to explain which accents it was currently safe to imitate publicly and which not. It took about ten minutes, and I still hadn't covered all the cases.

[5]

In 1986 the Supreme Court ruled that creating a hostile work environment could constitute sex discrimination, which in turn affected universities via Title IX. The court specified that the test of a hostile

environment was whether it would bother a reasonable person, but since for a professor merely being the subject of a sexual harassment complaint would be a disaster whether the complainant was reasonable or not, in practice any joke or remark remotely connected with sex was now effectively forbidden. Which meant we'd now come full circle to Victorian codes of behavior, when there was a large class of things that might not be said "with ladies present."

[6]

Much as they tried to pretend there was no conflict between diversity and quality. But you can't simultaneously optimize for two things that aren't identical. What diversity actually means, judging from the way the term is used, is proportional representation, and unless you're selecting a group whose purpose is to be representative, like poll respondents, optimizing for proportional representation has to come at the expense of quality. This is not because of anything about representation; it's the nature of optimization; optimizing for x has to come at the expense of y unless x and y are identical.

[7]

Maybe societies will eventually develop antibodies to viral outrage. Maybe we were just the first to be exposed to it, so it tore through us like an epidemic through a previously isolated population. I'm fairly confident that it would be possible to create new social media apps that were less driven by outrage, and an app of this type would have a good chance of stealing users from existing ones, because the smartest people would tend to migrate to it.

[8]

I say "mostly" because I have hopes that journalistic neutrality will return in some form. There is some market for unbiased news, and while it may be small, it's valuable. The rich and powerful want to know what's really going on; that's how they became rich and powerful.

[9]

The Times made this momentous announcement very informally, in passing in the middle of an article about a Times reporter who'd been criticized for inaccuracy. It's quite possible no senior editor even approved it. But it's somehow appropriate that this particular universe ended with a whimper rather than a bang.

[10]

As the acronym DEI goes out of fashion, many of these bureaucrats will try to go underground by changing their titles. It looks like "belonging" will be a popular option.

[11]

If you've ever wondered why our legal system includes protections like the separation of prosecutor, judge, and jury, the right to examine evidence and cross-examine witnesses, and the right to be represented by legal counsel, the de facto parallel legal system established by Title IX makes that all too clear.

[12]

The invention of new improprieties is most visible in the rapid evolution of woke nomenclature. This is particularly annoying to me as a writer, because the new names are always worse. Any religious observance has to be inconvenient and slightly absurd; otherwise gentiles would do it too. So "slaves" becomes "enslaved individuals." But web search can show us the leading edge of moral growth in real time: if you search for "individuals experiencing slavery" you will as of this writing find five legit attempts to use the phrase, and you'll even find two for "individuals experiencing enslavement."

[13]

Organizations that do dubious things are particularly concerned with propriety, which is how you end up with absurdities like tobacco and oil companies having higher ESG

ratings than Tesla.

[14]

Elon did something else that tilted Twitter rightward though: he gave more visibility to paying users. Paying users lean right on average, because people on the far left dislike Elon and don't want to give him money. Elon presumably knew this would happen. On the other hand, the people on the far left have only themselves to blame; they could tilt Twitter back to the left tomorrow if they wanted to.

[15]

It even, as James Lindsay and Peter Boghossian pointed out, has a concept of original sin: privilege. Which means unlike Christianity's egalitarian version, people have varying degrees of it. An able-bodied straight white American male is born with such a load of sin that only by the most abject repentance can he be saved.

Wokeness also shares something rather funny with many actual versions of Christianity: like God, the people for whose sake wokeness purports to act are often revolted by the things done in their name.

[16]

There is one exception to most of these rules: actual religious organizations. It's reasonable for them to insist on orthodoxy. But they in turn should declare that they're religious organizations. It's rightly considered shady when something that appears to be an ordinary business or publication turns out to be a religious organization.

[17]

I don't want to give the impression that it will be simple to roll back wokeness. There will be places where the fight inevitably gets messy — particularly within universities, which everyone has to share, yet which are currently the most pervaded by wokeness of any institutions.

[18]

You can however get rid of aggressively conventional-minded people within an organization, and in many if not most organizations this would be an excellent idea. Even a handful of them can do a lot of damage. I bet you'd feel a noticeable improvement going from a handful to none.

Thanks to Sam Altman, Ben Miller, Daniel Gackle, Robin Hanson, Jessica Livingston, Greg Lukianoff, Harj Taggar, Garry Tan, and Tim Urban for reading drafts of this.

|
|