Cynical Theories: Giving it more time than it deserves.

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1 Introduction

In 2018, it came to light that three academics attempted to recreate Sokal's hoax, but on a grander scale; a "Sokal Squared" as it would later be called. The three, James Lindsay, Helen Pluckrose and Peter Boghossian produced 20 papers covering a range of topics they considered "Grievance Studies." By the time the hoax was revealed, "seven of their articles had been accepted for publication by ostensibly serious peer-reviewed journals. Seven more were still going through various stages of the review process. Only six had been rejected."[1] They claim that this shows the academic bankruptcy of various disciplines, including queer studies, fat studies and disability studies. There are a multitude of problems with this, obviously, though that will have to wait for a different video, if we ever cover it on this channel. This video is about something they did afterwards.

In 2020, two members of Sokal Squared, Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, released a book called **'Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—And Why This Harms Everybody'**.

Like Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's *Fashionable Nonsense*, the book is meant to be a debunking of postmodernism, or rather, 'reified postmodernism', something Pluckrose and Lindsay see as the modern, 21st Century mutation of the old theories the prophet Sokal tried to warn humanity about.

But that's . . . not all the book does. Like *Higher Superstitions* by Gross and Levitt, it's a book explicitly targeted at the supposedly anti-science academic left. It aims, like Sokal, to show that the underlying philosophy is nonsense, but it also has another aim: to defend Liberalism itself from postmodern attack and to protect society from what it sees as a genuine existential threat.

Cynical Theories is an open call for a 'return' to Liberalism. Liberalism here means the political philosophy of liberal democracies—things like separation of powers and individual liberty, and we're not talking about the 'my liberal cousin who won't let me say slurs'. The Liberal political spectrum, in this sense, stretches from people we call Conservatives to people we call Social Democrats. Pluckrose

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[1] Mounk, *What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia*.

and Lindsay are on the right wing of this spectrum. Everything in Cynical Theories is evaluated in terms of a common sense Liberalism. It is a very political book, sometimes accidentally. That makes it good to discuss on this channel, because it's an excellent example of how Liberalism and Oedipalization combine together through what we might, after Gilles Deleuze, call "the orthodox image of thought."

We'll learn what that is as the video unfolds, and along the way we'll learn a little about some other philosophers that Pluckrose and Lindsay, rather dramatically, paint as threats to the foundations of western civilization.

2   Good Faith is Hard to Come By

Before we begin, there's something of a methodological problem we need to confront. In the opening chapter of Cynical Theories we are presented with this:

> This book, then, ultimately seeks to present a philosophically liberal critique of Social Justice scholarship and activism and argues that this scholarship-activism does not further social justice and equality aims. There are some scholars within the fields we critique who will be derisive of this and insist that we are really reactionary right-wingers opposed to studies into societal injustice experienced by marginalized people. **This view of our motivations will not be able to survive an honest reading of our book.** More scholars within these fields will accept our liberal, empirical, and rational stance on the issues, but reject them as a modernist delusion that centers white, male, Western, and heterosexual constructions of knowledge and maintains an unjust status quo with inadequate attempts to incrementally improve society. [. . .] Then there will be a few scholars in these fields who believe our criticisms of Social Justice scholarship have some merits and will engage with us in good faith about them. These are the exchanges we look forward to and the ones that can set us back on the path of having productive and ideologically diverse conversations about social justice.[2]

Pluckrose and Lindsay are making a move to cut off a political critique of their clearly political project. Asking for an "honest reading" of a text, requesting that we see the "merits" of their argument, and reminding us to be in good faith, are usually reasonable expectations on a reader. The problem is, there is no way to honestly evaluate the positions of Pluckrose and Lindsay politically and not conclude that they are heavily in bed with the far right. Consider the following:

- Their involvement with the 'Sovereign Nations' conference in 2019, led by noted Christian nationalist Michael O'Fallon.[3]

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[2]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 20, emphasis mine.
[3]Myers, *The grift, oh the grift*.

- The fact James Lindsay's new project, 'New Discourses' is owned by the same Michael O'Fallon.

- The fact the other Sokal Squared fellow, Peter Boghossian has appeared on Stefan Molyneux's now deleted youtube show[4] many times before.

To put it bluntly, while I can believe that Helen Pluckrose is a UK liberal in the vein of J.K. Rowling, I do not find it remotely credible that Lindsay is anything other than a far right asshole. This book is thus, at least in part, a far right screed against minority studies in general, and minority studies by minorities themselves in particular.

It is not a book that stands up to an honest reading. I am not going to ignore the politics in the book just because they pretend it isn't there. To the extent that I'm going to engage with the book in good faith, is through the errors I think it makes (and it makes a LOT of them) which are interesting and worth talking about. They highlight not only Pluckrose and Linsday's lack of curiosity about the philosophy they claim to be debunking, but they also quite often allow us see the horror beneath the mask of the conservative side of Liberal politics, because they're so incompetent they often forget to put on the damn mask.

I'm reminded of what Jacques Derrida said about the previous generation of bumbling debunkers:

> Sometimes, for fun, I also take seriously the symptoms of a campaign, or even of a hunt, in which badly trained horsemen sometimes have trouble identifying the prey. And initially the field.[5]

And so, just for fun, let's try to take Pluckrose and Lindsay seriously. We will find a pair of hunters who have found their field, found their prey, but seem to think that one can hunt with a fork. And who seem to think that by dressing as vegetarians, we won't see what they're trying to do.

3 History and Oedipalization

One area where Pluckrose and Lindsay show their utter incompetence is in their discussion of historical advancements by minority groups. They are quick to ascribe everything, Civil Rights, Gay Rights, suffrage, and so on, to Liberalism, to Liberal "reforms" that brought more people into the warm embrace of the Liberal State.

This, of course, is revisionist bullshit. A good reply (written 21 years prior) is Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*, a deeply moving and compelling book I can't do justice to here. Please, go read it. If you do, you'll discover what Pluckrose and Lindsay are so fucking desperate to hide; that queer radicalism in the USA wasn't about "decriminalizing homosexuality" or even Gay marriage.

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[4]McClernan, *Quillette - Molyneux connections*.
[5]Derrida, *Paper machine*, p. 71.

It emerged as a response to police brutality and the AIDs crises. It broke with the earlier, Liberal-reformist "Homophile" movement and embraced direct action and the production of a radical subjectivity that fought, often physically, like at Stonewall, against their own oppression. Liberalism was literally letting queer people die at the hands of an epidemic. Often, figures in power would laugh at the "Gay Plague." It is inhumane to claim that queer activists gained their rights through Liberalism.

A similar thing can be said about the claim that,

> Throughout these earlier periods, institutions like, first, monarchical rule and slavery, then patriarchy and class systems, and finally enforced heterosexuality, colonialism, and racial segregation were challenged by liberalism and overcome.[6]

Liberalism didn't end slavery. First, it's not really gone; slavery still exists across the world, just hidden in places where the law doesn't reach—where it often *intentionally* doesn't reach. Even if we limit ourselves to American chattel slavery, it is absurd to claim that Liberalism "abolished" slavery from above. While the Confederate States of America did fight to preserve slavery, that doesn't imply that the United States fought to abolish it. The USA fought to preserve the Union, not to end slavery. The concern over slavery had been brewing for a long time in the USA, and was tied up in various insurrectionary activities that slaves and abolitionists had been involved in for a long time; Nat Turner's rebellion and John Brown's fights (which extended beyond Harper's Ferry) both have more to do with the abolition of slavery than any "Liberalism."

This use of Liberalism to deny how Black people have fought for their own liberation extends to the Civil Rights movement:

> Their overall message was strongly (if imperfectly) liberal, individual, and universal, and it succeeded by appealing to empathy and fairness. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character," said Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., appealing to white Americans' pride in their country as the Land of Opportunity and their sense of fairness, and making common cause with them in their hopes for the next generation.[7]

Like this is fucking rote by now. It's a goddamn script. A conservative cites that one part of MLK Jr.'s I Have a Dream speech. I cite the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* in reply:

> I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more

[6]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 38.
[7]Ibid., p. 258.

devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.[8]

Like, Dude, this is obvious. Using King to argue for colorblindness is just dishonest and clearly dishonest at that. Pluckrose and Lindsay aren't serious, they **can't** be serious. They know they're not serious; look at the footnote that accompanies their attempt to use this quote:

Of note, critical race Theorists sometimes consider this quote as a cherry-picked example of King's thought that white people use to control black people who espouse critical race Theory or who criticize "whiteness."[9]

Let's be clear, I know this is a cherry-picked quote, 'cause it's fucking obvious. I don't care about allegations of 'control.' It's not really about control; reactionaries don't really use discourse in that way to control radical movements. No, this is about making people who oppose modern movements for racial equality feel better, like they're siding with King. It's so obviously preaching to the choir and dishonest that they fucking said as much in an endnote! They say nothing about how it isn't cherry-picked. They say nothing about other sources that argue King thought what they say he thought.

Throughout the book, they aim to bring these movements for liberation under the "slow and steady" progress of Liberalism. This is something that Deleuze and Guattari would consider **Oedipalization**.

Oedipalization forms a major concern of Deleuze and Guattari's first book, *Anti-Oedipus*. It's a bit harder to explain than some other terms because it's both an immanent process, that is, we need to consider it *as it actually happens in the world* and related to dominant structures of social meaning. Let's take something of an easy example, where the term "Oedipalization" comes from; Melanie Klein's analysis of her son, Richard "Dick" Klein:

The first time Dick came to me ... he manifested no sort of affect when his nurse handed him over to me. When I showed him the toys I had put ready, he looked at them without the faintest interest. I took a big train and put it beside a smaller one *and called them* 'Daddy-train' and 'Dick-train.' Thereupon he picked up the train I called 'Dick'

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[8]King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail".
[9]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 322.

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and made it roll to the window and said 'Station.' *I explained*: 'The station is mummy; Dick is going into mummy.' He left the train, ran into the space between the outer and inner doors of the room, shutting himself in, saying 'dark,' and ran out again directly. He went through this performance several times. *I explained to him*: 'It is dark inside mummy. Dick is inside dark mummy.' Meantime he picked up the train again, but soon ran back into the space between the doors. While I was saying that he was going into dark mummy, he said twice in a questioning way: 'Nurse?' . . . *As his analysis progressed* . . . *Dick had also discovered* the wash-basin as symbolizing the mother's body, and he displayed an extraordinary dread of being wetted with water.[10]

Dick didn't give a shit about Mommy and Daddy in that moment; he was playing trains. Every word, every movement had to be interpreted in the "Daddy-Mommy-Me" triangle. Not just that; Melanie Klein expected her son to understand himself in terms of that triangle, to express himself in terms of that triangle. That's Oedipalization. It kind of has two heads when it pops up in Psychoanalysis; first, it is an assumption of analysis. "Well, Oedipus is a universal, so we need to understand the patient in terms of Oedipus." This is bad enough in my opinion; it's a shit assumption. Second, and more sinister, is the demand that *the patient understands themselves in terms of Oedipus*. To quote Deleuze and Guattari on the topic: "Say that it's Oedipus, or you'll get a slap in the face. The psychoanalyst no longer says to the patient: 'Tell me a little bit about your desiring-machines, won't you?' Instead he screams: 'Answer daddy-and-mommy when I speak to you!'"[11] There's a reduction, a *forcing* involved. The subject of analysis must speak in the analyst's terms, must conform themselves to the dominant ways of understanding the subject. For Freud and later psychoanalysts, that was through the Oedipal triangle. For Pluckrose and Lindsay, it's liberalism.

The idea of queer people demanding the ability to construct their own publics, their own ways of living with each other—maybe not married, maybe in something other than a "family," their own ways of living without having to justify themselves to straight society or "convince anxious social conservatives that they had no 'agenda' to destroy the family, heterosexuality, masculinity, or femininity"[12] is incomprehensible to Pluckrose and Lindsay. No, queer activism must have always been focused on merely "decriminalizing homosexuality" and convincing people that they were "normal." The bricks thrown at Stonewall, that roving streetfight that lasted several days, is forgotten in favour of a revisionist history where liberals were always right, and demands were always phrased in the Oedipal language.

This question of language is perhaps best explored through the liberalism they say grounds it.

In the tradition of other recent defenders of Truth and Enlightenment such as

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[10]Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 45.
[11]Ibid., p. 45.
[12]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 260.

the Epsteinly insightful Steven Pinker of, Pluckrose and Lindsay are an example of what political scientist Jeremy Fortier (2018) terms 'Hobbesian Liberalism', a philosophical system which reverses the Aristotelian dictum that man is a political animal and instead says humans are not born fit for society.[13][14] We are unsociable by our very nature, but each of us must nonetheless find a way, against our natural inclinations, to "accommodate [ourselves] to the rest"[15] if we are to have any hope of living in a peaceful society. To make the connection clear; Hobbesian liberalism demands Oedipalization as a prerequisite for "civil society."

The terms aren't meant to be read morally; "unsociable" isn't just a substitute for "bad" or "evil." It's intended as a naturalistic claim about human nature. 'Unsociable' simply means that humans are naturally disagreeable and, as a result, prone to conflict and violence.[16][17] The Hobbesian Liberal considers "our natural human psychology" to be "discordant and quarrelsome", as something which inevitably "[draws] us into self destructive patterns of behavior".[18] Society and community are not natural products of humans doing what they do; they are something we have to work for against our naturally unsociable inclinations, hard won and easily lost. "Sociability is [. . .] an achievement, an ethos that has to be developed and worked at, even though it runs contrary to many of our most natural human instincts."[19]

But why are we supposedly so disagreeable? Put simply: it's because we can talk. Unlike the humble bee or the industrious ant, creatures that (according to Hobbes, anyway) live peacefully together and are naturally sociable,[20],[21] humans have the power of speech. With speech comes reason, but at a terrible cost, a terrible risk. We gain subjective experience of the world and, as such, the external reality we all share ceases to hang together harmoniously in quite the way is does for a bee or ant colony:

> For though the nature of that we conceive, be the same; yet the diversity of our reception of it, in respect of different constitutions of body, and prejudices of opinion, gives every thing a tincture of our passions[22]

We all live in the same reality, but, because of our differing personalities and circumstances, see it slightly differently and, more importantly, make different value judgements about this otherwise shared reality. Bees cannot choose not to go out for pollen today because they find flowers repulsive, but humans can.

[13]Pettit, *Made with words: Hobbes on language, mind, and politics*, chap. 7.

[14]Hobbes, *De cive*, chap. 1. par. 2.

[15]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 15. par. 17.

[16]Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined*, chap. 2.

[17]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 13.

[18]Fortier, "On Steven Pinker's Hobbesian Liberalism", p. 476.

[19]Ibid., p. 483.

[20]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 17. par. 6.

[21]Hobbes, *The elements of law*, chap. 19. par. 5.

[22]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 5. par. 24.

Our "private judgements may differ, and beget controversy."[23] This controversy threatens the social order; the cacophony of different voices threatens to shake society to dust.

For Hobbes, language is an inherently shared activity through which we use stable concepts to engage with the world,[24] but this is constantly threatened by a problem of indexicality, that is, a question of where the meaning of words comes from. He thinks it a requirement of language that we share in index in common and all track the same meaning with the same words, but that we are driven by our nature to index the meaning of many words, especially those involving judgements such as 'good' or 'right', to our own subjective standpoint.[25] Thus we mistakenly think we are making an objective judgement to which we can hold others to account when we call something 'right' or 'wrong', but are speaking only from our own values, values that we are inclined to think of as morally superior.[26][27] Either that, or we recognise the indexicality problem but have no natural way of resolving the resulting differences in practical dispositions,[28] for competing subjectivities cannot come to a conclusion about who is right. Both options lead to a conflict that cannot be resolved and, ultimately, violence. For the Hobbesian liberal, we need to avoid this happening. As such, "the task of government must be to shape how citizens understand themselves, to socialize them, making them less assertive, less attached to pride and glory."[29]

Words, especially morally charged words, therefore need to be indexed to something outside our subjective judgement, with mutually recognised authority over their meaning, so that there is hope of finding solutions to disagreements about what we mean and what we are talking about. It cannot be left to subjectivity to sort out who is right and wrong, or our irreconcilable standpoints will perpetuate endless conflict. We must, Hobbes says, "by [our] own accord, set up for right Reason, the Reason of some Arbiter, or Judge, to whose sentence [we all will] stand, or [our] controversie must either come to blowes, or be undecided."[30] That is, we must agree on *how to speak*. If we can't agree on the definition of racism, we can't agree on what *is* racist, and thus society falls apart among an irreconcilable difference.

Hobbes himself wanted to give his Sovereign not just political but linguistic authority: it is the role of the Sovereign to establish terms with common meanings and to enforce the consistency and completeness of them so that humans, disagreeable creatures that we are, have some common and stable ground by which to orient ourselves.[31] Giving the government control over language is not something

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[23]Hobbes, *The elements of law*, chap. 29. par. 8.
[24]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 4.
[25]Ibid., chap. 6. par. 7.
[26]Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined*, p. 84, p. 382, p. 622.
[27]Fortier, "On Steven Pinker's Hobbesian Liberalism", p. 465–66.
[28]Pettit, *Made with words: Hobbes on language, mind, and politics*, p. 86.
[29]Fortier, "On Steven Pinker's Hobbesian Liberalism", p. 472.
[30]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 5. par. 3.
[31]Pettit, *Made with words: Hobbes on language, mind, and politics*, p. 121.

any Liberal could support; the Hobbesian Liberal is so named because they agree with his theory of human nature, not with his solution: they are Hobbesian, but also Liberal. As such they must find a different solution to this pressing problem of social conflict. Hobbes' contemporaries in the field of Renaissance rhetoric studies sought to solve this problem by indexing words to the order of nature,[32] that is, to the implicit authority of science. The world itself keeps meaning consistent, for reality is nothing but reality; it cannot change its mind. In objective reality we can find the common and constant measure necessary to give our words stability. Hobbesian Liberalism accepts Hobbes' claims about language and conflict but rejects his political solution in favour of this naturalist one. As Pluckrose and Lindsay say, "society [is] formed of individuals interacting with universal reality" which is "a *stable* reality that we can discuss straightforwardly".[33] We must give over language to the authority of objective reality. Civilization as a project demands it.

Outside the rule of such authority is "the empire of the passions, war, fear, poverty, nastiness, solitude, barbarity, ignorance, savagery", while within it is "the empire of reason, peace, security, wealth, splendour, society, good taste, the sciences and goodwill."[34] Were it not for the postmodern snakes in the garden, those serpents with the forked tongues who speak of structural oppression and marginalization, this Liberal paradise would continue into the future to develop morally and scientifically within the safety of its own walls and by the power of its own principles, a shining city upon a hill at the end of history.

We can now see why Pluckrose and Lindsay consider postmodernism such a threat to society. Postmodernism, they argue, indexes judgement of right and wrong to mere standpoints: the exact thing that Hobbes warns leads to conflict. Worse, by reducing truth to a language game, it not only gets rid of reality, our impartial judge, but by turning everything into a matter of language it enhances the cause of human conflict, thus making the problem of our nature worse while jettisoning the solution. It's letting those fools and madmen get away with whatever they want!

Hobbes tells us that "The Light of humane minds is Perspicuous Words, but by **exact definitions** first snuffed, and then **purged from ambiguity**."[35] The rest of this paragraph continues, echoing a message that Pluckrose and Lindsay repeat throughout their own book, with this:

> Reason is the pace; Encrease of Science, the way; and the Benefit of man-kind, the end. And on the contrary [. . .] senslesse and ambiguous words, are like [will-o'-the-wisps] and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, **contention, and sedition, or contempt**.[36]

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[32]Skinner, *Visions of politics. 3: Hobbes and civil science*, p. 124ff.
[33]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 29 & p. 108, my emphasis.
[34]Hobbes, *De cive*, chap. 10. par. 1.
[35]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 6. par.20, my emphasis.
[36]Ibid., chap. 6. par. 20, my emphasis.

Hobbes could be speaking directly to Derrida here: the idea of language as an irreducibly ambiguous site of unending play is a dangerous concession to our unsociable nature, one that risks enhancing our differences instead of giving us the needed common ground on which to meet and adjudicate inevitable conflict. Language must be tied to truth, that is, to direct representation of the world, to the reality that we all share, so that objective reality itself can be our impartial judge and society can flourish.

To link it more fully back to Oedipalization, Hobbesian Liberalism is a dull vision of a world in which we are forever at odds and in which language and knowledge are not joyful social activities but learning by rote; it is an infantilising vision that sees us as unruly children and reality as the schoolmaster, or the delusional patient and reality the sane, reasonable psychoanalyst, that directs us to correct conduct. Being able to understand ourselves on our own terms isn't possible if we want to keep society running. Those differing understandings will conflict, shaking society to dust. As such, all that creativity, that production of understandings, must be brought to heel. We must all speak the same terms so we can figure out who is in the right, who in the wrong, and adjudicate the conflicts. Understanding reality? That's not something with which we can creatively engage, because creativity will only lead to war.

But they claim we don't need this creativity, we can make do with the liberal order we've been given. Again and again in the text, Pluckrose and Lindsay say that liberalism has the capacity to argue against oppression:

> There is nothing that postmodern Theory can do that liberalism cannot do better, and it's high time we regained the confidence to argue for this, applied liberalism to correct its past shortcomings and orient it towards future challenges, and got on with things.[37]

Liberalism has the basics down. It just matters that the application is correct. This is implicit in their discussions of what they consider Foucault to have gotten right:

> The postmodern knowledge principle nevertheless provides us with a larger kernel of value. From Foucault's complaints about the misapplication of scientific claims about madness and sexuality to the critical race Theorists' insistence that the problems of minorities aren't being taken seriously, postmodernism is full of calls to be less brash and *to listen*.[38]

Note the word choice when they talk about Foucault's insights: they are "complaints" about the "misapplication of scientific claims." Science is assumed to have an innate normativity. But this is a fragment, perhaps a slip of the tongue. Let's look somewhere slightly different, to an example of this "misapplication" in practice:

[37]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 251.
[38]Ibid., p. 252.

This is important because naturalism and science were rapidly becoming a knowledge-production, thus idea-legitimizing, methodology the likes of which the world had never seen. It is the legitimatizing authority of science that, ultimately, postmodernism rails against most vigorously. The rise of the sciences and of an intellectual and political culture that accepted science as legitimate together with the horrors of colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade, led to new social constructions of race. This, we hear from Theorists today, is the "scientific origin" of racism, which can be taken to mean that these discourses that misapplied very preliminary results from science allowed the first socially constructivist racists to come into existence. In other words, with this oversimplified, overreaching, and self-serving scientific categorization came social constructions associated with extremely low-resolution categories: being black ("blackness") and being white ("whiteness"), to which value judgments were soon attached. Enter racism as we understand it today.[39]

Again, Pluckrose and Lindsay engage in revisionist history the moment that they try to dig in deeper. They get the context right, they get the claim from "Theorists" right, but there's something you might miss. The claim that the categorizations were "oversimplified, overreaching" and "extremely low-resolution." This is simply put, at least misleading if not outright false. To quote from Stephen J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*:

> [J.F.] Blumenbach's final taxonomy of 1795 divided all humans into five groups defined by both geography and appearance in his order, the "Caucasian variety" for light-skinned people of Europe and adjacent areas; the "Mongolian variety" for inhabitants of eastern Asia, including China and Japan; the "Ethiopian variety" for dark-skinned people of Africa; the "American variety" for native populations of the New World; and the "Malay variety" for Polynesians and Melanesians of Pacific islands, and for the aborigines of Australia. But Blumenbach's original classification of 1775 recognized only the first four of these five, and united members of the "Malay Variety" with the other people of Asia whom Blumenbach later named "Mongolian."[40]

This isn't the binary that Pluckrose and Lindsay present. And, I should note, it leaves out important elements. For example, it doesn't mention Jewish people, an important element of European racism. That points to a deeper element; these were only the coarsest level of racial classification here. The finer gradations were much more complex, tied up not in either what Gould terms the "geographic" classification of Linnaeus or the "linearized" classification of Blumenbach, involving statistical methods, data collection and cultural expectations of what the data

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[39]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 113.
[40]Gould, *The mismeasure of man*, p. 402.

should show. These nuances are by far too complex for me to get into, but they're there. I do wonder if this has anything to do with the modern promotion of race science by some of Pluckrose and Lindsay's *favorite* people, like Stephen Pinker and American Social Psychologist, Jonathan Haidt.[41] The claim that these were early misapplications of scientific results opens the door for race science to sneak back in.

This is part of a more general whitewashing of their favorite things; Liberalism, for example, is purged of its history with racism. We saw it earlier in their revisionist history surrounding Civil Rights and queer fights for liberation. Instead of being honest about the radical nature of those movements, they're whitewashed into the idea of a somewhat harmonious progress of liberalism. For Pluckrose and Lindsay (at least in this book) liberalism and science operate on the same basic principle; incrementalism, reform within a certain framework. Things that break that framework from the outside need to be Oedipalized, turned into sanitized versions that don't threaten to destabilize the system. That don't threaten to become Hobbes' famous bellum aeternum (eternal war). Things that break that framework from the inside need to be washed away. The complicity of liberalism in violent colonialism is ignored, in favour of talking about the warm and fuzzy shit, the "rights of man" and all that crap.

4   Liberalism as the Metaphysics of Unfreedom

In this ode to Liberalism, and the "imperfect emulation" of it, we can work through to distill something of an idea of what Liberalism is for Pluckrose and Lindsay. We could take them at their word on page 244:

> This is a good way to understand liberalism as opposition to illiberalism. While liberalism might be hard to define, illiberalism is easily recognizable in totalitarian, hierarchical, censorious, feudal, patriarchal, colonial, or theocratic states and in people who want to bring about such states, limit freedoms, or justify inequalities.[42]

But this isn't a very good definition or understanding. My cat isn't totalitarian; but I wouldn't call him part of Liberalism. And, Liberalism inscribes its own hierarchies into it; hierarchies of wealth, for one. No, we need a more positive definition. Perhaps page 240 will serve us better:

> Liberalism is also hard to place. It makes little sense to speak of when it began or how it developed, even though we can name philosophers who have articulated its essence, most of whom lived in the West in modern times. These thinkers include Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Francis Bacon, Thomas

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[41]McClernan, *Four Koch toadies defend race science*.
[42]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 244.

Paine, and many, many others. They drew inspiration from earlier thinkers in other traditions, reaching all the way back to Classical Greece two thousand years earlier, and provided concepts and arguments that continue to persuade and inspire liberals to this day. They did not, however, invent liberalism, which belongs neither to a historical period nor to a geographical location. The underlying impulse toward liberalism can be found in every time and place, whenever people want to modify an existing system in order to keep the good bits and eradicate the failures especially when such failures constrain, oppress, or hurt people. It exists in tension with other impulses, particularly those that don't trust an impersonal system to solve any problems.[43]

This one is just silly; the liberalism that Pluckrose and Lindsay spend so long defending isn't this amorphous "slow and steady progress." It is a particular cultural artifact that emerged out of the Enlightenment. They say as much elsewhere, that these ideas trace back to the Enlightenment. Just because J.S. Mill liked some Greek philosophers doesn't mean that the Greeks were Liberal. They pretty clearly weren't; there wasn't any methodological liberalism, something that Pluckrose and Lindsay endlessly focus on in their definitions of sexism, racism and other bigotries as *purely personal opinion*. No, their definition of Liberalism is better encapsulated by how they approach all of this. Liberalism is social reform that is comfortable for the privileged. It isn't *loud*, it isn't *angry*, it doesn't make *demands*, it isn't skeptical about dominant narratives about truth, and most of all it is "*constructive*." Not constructive in the way that the Black Panthers were, constructing dual power in Black communities with breakfast clubs, community clinics and so on. No, "*constructive*" here means that it offers solutions that reinforce dominant power relations, and offers to expand them. Gone is crusing and the culture of gay sex; instead, we have Gay Marriage and the "victory" of being comfortable discussing your partners at work. It's "*constructive*" in that it's accepting handouts while groveling, thankful to the impersonal God, Liberalism, that benign system that will give you everything provided you pray correctly and wait for it. Liberalism is pure ideal form; it is the absolute optimal political organization.

We've actually seen this "ideal form" component of Pluckrose and Lindsay's Liberalism before:

> This form of liberalism holds that science, reason, and human rights are the property of every individual and do not belong exclusively to any set of people whether they be men or white Westerners or anyone else.[44]

This ignores that on a factual level, science and human rights aren't the property of everyone. I might have the ability to get a degree in chemistry, but that's

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[43]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 240.
[44]Ibid., p. 75–76.

conditional on a lot of things. I need to be able to afford university, I need to not have any chronic conditions that make getting a university degree impossible for me, and so on. Sure, we could say that I could still study chemistry on my own, but there are still high costs involved in procuring chemicals at the right purity, safety equipment, not to mention getting trained in the right safety procedures so I don't poison myself. If you are poor, live in a place where there isn't an option to go to university for chemistry, or have a disability that keeps me from participating in the production of knowledge in chemistry, how can we say that chemistry is my property? On that note, how can we say someone starving in the streets has human rights as their property? Both the right to housing and the right to food are human rights according to the UN, but I don't get those when I'm homeless or starving. No, Pluckrose and Lindsay must mean that we have these rights and science in an ideal sense. This ideal sense is present everywhere. The claim that liberalism is a "process" something that arises anywhere as an "underlying impulse," all of these are used to cloud their actual project.

Because Pluckrose and Lindsay are so bad at providing definitions for anything they really talk about, we will have to use one from elsewhere. I think the post-Hegelian philosopher, Max Stirner, gives us a good one.

> With the time of the *bourgeoisie* that of *liberalism* begins. People want to see the "rational," the "timely," established everywhere. The following definition of liberalism, which is supposed to be said in its honor, describes it perfectly: "Liberalism is nothing other than rational knowledge applied to our current conditions." Its goal is a "rational order," a "moral behavior," a "limited freedom," not anarchy, lawlessness, ownness. [. . .] Also in the religious realm, the most extreme liberals go so far that they want to see the most religious person regarded as a citizen, i.e., the religious villain; they want to hear nothing more of heresy trials. But no one is to rebel against the "rational law" ; otherwise he faces the harshest punishment. They do not want a free movement and currency of the person or of me, but of reason, i.e., a rulership of reason, a rulership. The liberals are *zealots*, not exactly for the faith, for God, but for reason, their master. They'll tolerate no impertinence, and therefore no self-development and self-determination[.][45]

It hits all the points that Pluckrose and Lindsay miss. The "rational" the "evidenced" must be established everywhere. The "rational knowledge" of liberalism must be applied everywhere; there is a "moral behavior" that must be admitted. Take this section:

> Rauch expresses the fundamental difference between liberal science and the two postmodern principles, especially as seen in applied and reified postmodernism, concisely: "liberal science insists absolutely on

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[45]Stirner, *The unique and its property*, p. 122.

freedom of belief and speech, but *freedom of knowledge it rejects absolutely*" (emphasis in original). People in liberal systems are free to believe anything they wish, and they're free to argue for anything they want, but to claim that such beliefs are *knowledge* and demand they be respected as such is another matter.[46]

That limited freedom. That demand that it not be "lawless" or else we confront a tyranny of petty kings. That demand instates that there is no free movement of persons, a free movement of ourselves where we come to understand ourselves and the world around us on our terms, but instead a hue and cry about us breaking the "rational law." There is no "freedom of knowledge." To use Stirner's favourite turn; knowledge isn't free. It is instead constrained by the liberal's good and common sense. Everyone can submit to the law! It's racist to say the law advantages and disadvantages people based on race! Justify yourself to me before you speak of racism, of ableism, of class, of sexism!

And thus, we arrive at the terminus of the quote; Pluckrose and Lindsay will tolerate no impertinence. They demand that self-determination must be made with the liberal in mind. That we express ourselves on their terms, in ways that they can understand. So, as they rail against the "heresy trials" they have noticed or constructed, we should not let it be lost that their "rational law" is the grounds for their criticisms.

5   Truth and Good Sense

Pluckrose and Lindsay consider their book to be the light guiding people back from the mire of postmodernism and into the warmth of common sense and objective truth. Truth is the heart of this book. We need to believe in truth, they say, or we cannot have science, knowledge, or, most importantly (as we saw in the discussion of Hobbesian Liberalism) even a political community. Liberalism, Pluckrose and Lindsay tell us, requires the notion of truth as objectivity, of truth as *accurate description of reality*.[47] They call this the correspondence theory of truth, and oppose it to the relativism they claim has overrun universities.

The correspondence theory of truth, Pluckrose and Lindsay tell us, is "the position that there are objective truths and that they can be established as true by their correspondence with how things actually are in the world", adding that "there are real truths about an objective reality 'out there' and [we] can come to know them."[48] It's a profoundly common sense vision of what it means for something to be "true." Truth is when what's up here agrees with what's out there.

The problem here is that Pluckrose and Lindsay don't appear to understand what a philosophical theory of truth is. It's not the claim that things can be true, it's an explanation of *how* and *why* they are true. There are many theories

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[46]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 250.
[47]Ibid., p. 238.
[48]Ibid., p. 33.

of truth other than correspondence: the identity theory, the redundancy theory, the coherence theory, the verificationist theory, the various pragmatist theories. We don't need a 'correspondence' theory to understand how truth might be 'out there', we have a range to choose from—maybe Pluckrose and Lindsay should have done the reading.

Worse, a correspondence theory of truth is actually a bad explanation of what Pluckrose and Lindsay are trying to explain, namely, how we can know about the world as it actually is in 'truth'. It sounds like common sense to say that something you've said is true if it corresponds to how the world is, but when we try to philosophically understand what that means we end up far from common sense. We even lose touch with reality, the very thing Pluckrose and Lindsay are accusing postmodernism of doing.

To see why, let's go into details. What is the correspondence theory of truth? In a more technical register it says no more than this:

> **The Correspondence Theory of Truth**: 'Truth' is a relation of correspondence between truthbearers and truthmakers.

To be less abstract, we might say that a truthbearer is a sentence like 'there is a chair in my room', and a truthmaker is a fact in reality, such as my chair's being in my room, and 'truth' is a relation that maps truthmakers onto truthbearers that have the same shape as them (that is, they somehow 'correspond', or match).

This is fine as it goes. It seems pretty commonsensical, even. We still have the concept that what's "up here" matches what's "out there." But it's rather metaphysically heavy: It requires that the external world contains not just objects like chairs or rooms, but some extra 'things' called facts, such as 'chair-being-in-room', which have the appropriate form to 'match' the complex propositional content of sentences like 'the chair is in the room' in a way that scattered objects themselves do not. Think about it; for the matching relation to work, something in the world must have the same shape as propositions; objects themselves do not, but facts do. Thus, the universe does not just contain things, it also contains the way these things are arranged, a new sort of ontological category over and above the things themselves. In the case of 'Jupiter is larger than Mars', we now have three objects: Jupiter, Mars, and the fact that Jupiter is larger than Mars. It also raises the question of what falsity is. Are there 'negative' facts that correspond to false sentences? Jupiter, Mars, and 'smaller-than-Mars'? If there are not negative facts, then why are falsehoods like 'Jupiter is smaller than Mars' meaningful at all, given that language is supposed to just represent reality? So negative facts must exist to correspond to false judgements just as positive facts exist to correspond to true judgements; now we have two separate kinds of fact living in the universe along with all the objects. Man, we'd better keep this away from Occam. . . .

It might very well be the case that this is how truth works, but now we've wandered far from common sense and have surrendered our ability to understand truth to academic philosophers, because now we need a detailed philosophical theory of what these 'facts' are, how they are held together, how they are different

from the objects that compose them, the difference between positive and negative facts, and also a philosophical theory about what the 'correspondence' relation is and how it works. That seems odd, right? I don't need a philosopher to explain to me how it's true that my chair is in the room when I'm right here sitting on it. I know it's true already.

Speaking of knowing things, there's actually a larger problem with correspondence theories than this ontological bloat. A correspondence account of truth might lead us to a kind of external world scepticism,[49][50] that is, the belief that there's maybe no world 'out there' because we can't get at it from inside our thoughts. When Pluckrose and Lindsay say their interest in truth is about a world being 'out there' for science to discover, their devotion to the correspondence theory might actually conflict with this interest.

How so? Well, if thought and reality must be linked together such that our thoughts (or speech) can be about reality, can be representations of it, then reality itself must somehow be *thinkable*. What does it mean for the world to be thinkable? Literally just that it is the sort of thing we *can* think, such that we can, as it were, catch reality in our net. It has to be the sort of thing we can *catch* at all. Nets cannot catch water, for example, no matter how accurate we make them.

But that means we have a problem in our correspondence account of truth. The content of the truthbearer (the sentence 'there is a chair in my room') and the content of the truthmaker (the fact consisting of a chair, my room, and the relation 'being in') are different. Obviously they're different! They're different types of thing: chairs are not made of thought, and when I think about chairs a literal chair is not lodged in my brain. The fact contains objects; the thought contains concepts. My chair is not the concept 'chair'. That is, reality on this account must be completely different from anything we can think or say, unless we want to claim it is made of thoughts or words. This opens up an ontological gap between the sort of thing that one can think and the sort of thing that can be the case,[51] meaning that facts (the sort of thing that can be the case) are completely *unthinkable* by us are they are in themselves. Therefore, if we define truth as something indexed to these facts, truth becomes inscrutable to us. It is not that we no longer know what is true: my chair is still in my room. Rather, it's that these truths can only be truths about something thought-shaped and we have no guarantee that the facts we are aiming to capture have such shapes because we can't talk directly about them. The only thing we know for sure is thought-shaped is *thought*. The circle has closed; we have cut ourselves off completely from reality, scuppered by our own ontology.

Thus, far from being the solution to a postmodern philosophy in which we are supposedly trapped inside language with no way out into the 'real' world, the correspondence theory is itself committed to the idea that we are trapped in the realm of thought with no way out. Pluckrose and Lindsay are actually endorsing

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[49]David, "The Correspondence Theory of Truth", §9.2.
[50]Hornsby, "I-The Presidential Address: Truth: The Identity Theory".
[51]McDowell, *Mind and world: with a new introduction*, p. 27.

the idea they claim to be rejecting! Pluckrose and Lindsay, Arch Defenders of the Unthinkable Thing-in-Itself. Behold, Kant Lives!

These flaws in the correspondence theory led some of the most respected mathematical philosophers of the 20th century, among them Gottlob Frege (inventor of multiple generality in mathematical logic) and Frank Ramsey (inventor of Ramsey Theory), to reject it in favour of either an identity or a redundancy account of truth (depends on one's reading of Ramsey and Frege), both of which end up closer to our common sense understanding of what we mean when we say something is true.

But Pluckrose and Lindsay don't need Frank Ramsey, they have a better ally: the British Idealist and Hegelian philosopher, J. E. McTaggart. *He* believed in the correspondence theory! Remember the problem from before, that there's a gap between what we can think and what facts are because they're made of different stuff? Well, McTaggart closed that gap by saying chairs are made of thoughts. He endorsed a correspondence theory of truth in which the facts that true judgements correspond to are 'out there', true enough, but what is out there is constituted by Mind and nothing really 'exists' but perceiving selves! This quaint view is not an aberration; it is a fine example of the correspondence theory in action. Nothing in McTaggart's Idealist definition conflicts with the claims about truth put forward by Pluckrose and Lindsay, but I doubt they would find it acceptable, suggesting they ought to think more carefully about what they want out of a theory of truth.

Actually, what *do* they want out of a theory of truth? They seem to want it to be the case that reality is straightforwardly 'there' and that we can come to know about how it actually is in itself. But a theory of truth is nothing more than a definition of the word 'true'; it says nothing about how we come to know such truth, or even if truth so defined is possible to know at all. Why then do Pluckrose and Lindsay appear to think that the correspondence theory of truth has something to do with the idea that we can come to know truths about an objective reality, something they claim postmodernism rejects?[52] They appear to be under the same misconception as the third musketeer in their trio, Peter Boghossian, that the correspondence theory is a "commitment to the idea that there are better and worse ways to come to knowledge about an objectively knowable world".[53]

We can make the problem clear by drawing an important philosophical distinction. 'The world is knowable' is an **epistemic** claim (a claim about how we know things), while 'truth is a relation of correspondence between facts and sentences' is an **alethic** claim (a claim about what it means to be 'true'). These are not the same kind of claims. The philosopher Liam Bright brings out this distinction with the following example:

> Suppose I say 'there are 9 rocks in this bucket', pointing to a bucket in front of me. What it means for this to be true presumably has something to do with buckets, numbers of rocks, and the relationship

[52]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 59.
[53]Boghossian, *Welcome to the Culture War 2.0: The Great Realignment*.

of being inside of. How I would know it is true, what sort of observations I would make or whether I can in fact come to know as much, are quite distinct from this. To see that, one could suppose that our bucket with (perhaps) 9 rocks in it were located on some far away exoplanet. Now what I would have to do to come to know the truth of my claim, and indeed whether I can know it at all, are very difficult questions, whose answers may well be different from when I said that of a bucket in front of me. Yet, what would make the claim true (or false) does not seem to have changed: the bucket and the number of rocks therein being the only thing that matters for that.[54]

To say the world is knowable is not the same as having a particular theory of truth. In fact because these things are different, we can pull them apart: you could, like myself, deny that 'truth' is anything substantial at all, or that it is indexed only to a particular discourse, without thereby denying that the world around us is knowable. This goes in the other direction too: as we showed, the correspondence theory is flawed because it explains what truth is but thereby renders the world unknowable. In philosophy this is known as 'the Integration Challenge', or the puzzle of how we get our account of reality (our metaphysics) to line up with our account of how we know about it (our epistemology). Just saying "reality is 'out there', and we know because science and reason!" is not a particularly enlightening solution to this ancient problem.

So, the scandalized claim that Pluckrose and Lindsay make, that postmodernism rejects the correspondence theory of truth, is no scandal at all. Pluckrose and Lindsay want a realist account of reality: other theories of truth can provide a better account of this, and a correspondence theory is entirely compatible with the idealist or anti-realist accounts that Pluckrose and Lindsay consider laughable. Worse, correspondence might cut us off from reality completely. Nothing about correspondence is inherently scientific or realist, and nothing about its rejection is inherently anti-scientific or reality-denying. One could even argue that rejecting the correspondence theory is a better way to understand things like the success of science (more on that later in the video).

They have completely missed their target here because they have no understanding of philosophy. Where is the rigor they keep claiming is at the very core of the Liberal values they are out to defend? Why demand a rational debate about the philosophy when you clearly don't understand any of it? These are the questions a fool who thinks Pluckrose and Lindsay are arguing in good faith might ask. But we, armed with Deleuze, know what's really going on here.

They're not doing philosophy; they're trying to dogmatically assert 'common sense' over all of philosophy and, in particular, minority studies. For Deleuze, all of Pluckrose and Lindsay's ideas about thought works together in what he calls "dogmatic, orthodox or moral image"[55] of thought. Most commentators talk

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[54]Bright, *Truth in the Culture War*.
[55]Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 131.

about it as "dogmatic" but I'm gonna use "orthodox" here, just cause I think it will be more illuminating. This orthodox image of thought is how we usually think about thinking.

> According to this image, thought has an affinity with the true; it formally possesses the true and materially wants the true. It is in terms of this image that everybody knows and is presumed to know what it means to think.[56]

Now, Deleuze is going after Descartes, Kant and Hegel in this section, and in particular how they consider philosophical beginnings. We need to warp and cut across Deleuze's work here to construct a new understanding of the orthodox image of thought that can help us understand Pluckrose and Lindsay's approach to the 'cynical theories.'

The first thing to note is that the orthodox image of thought is an attempt to ground philosophy. When Descartes says "I think, therefor I am" he is presupposing that everyone already knows what it means to *think*, and who the *I* addresses. In Descartes, it is a claim to philosophical innocence; you get rid of all presuppositions you have about the outside world—what Deleuze calls objective presuppositions, but you keep the assumptions you have about the unity of the thinker, and that everyone knows what "thinking" is. Everyone should be able to recognize "thinking" and "I" easily. That grounds the universal nature that Descartes wants to claim:

> everybody knows what it means to think and to be. ... As a result, when the philosopher says 'I think therefore I am', he can assume that the universality of his premisses namely, what it means to be and to think ... will be implicitly understood, and that no one can deny that to doubt is to think, and to think is to be .... *Everybody knows, no one can deny*, is the form of representation and the discourse of the representative. When philosophy rests its beginning upon such implicit or subjective presuppositions, it can claim innocence, since it has kept nothing back - except, of course, the essential - namely, the form of this discourse.[57]

It's the two terms, "recognition" and "representation" that we should focus on. Recognition forms part of *how* the orthodox image of thought works, and representation forms part of *what* the orthodox image of thought *does*.

Recognition is when multiple "faculties" agree on a common object; in fact, they produce an identity of the object through a sort of harmony. A "faculty" is something Deleuze has stolen from Kant, but he's clearest when talking about Descartes.

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[56]Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 131.
[57]Ibid., p. 130.

> Recognition may be defined by the harmonious exercise of all the faculties upon a supposed same object: the same object may be seen, touched, remembered, imagined or conceived …. As Descartes says of the piece of wax: 'It is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, which I picture in my imagination, in short the same wax which I thought it to be from the start.'[58]

Recognition is rediscovery. For example Pluckrose and Lindsay are clear that they rediscover sex through statistics:

> The problems with the assumption that all gender differences can be explained by social constructivism are also profound. By centralizing social constructivist ideas of gender from radical feminism and queer Theory, biological explanations for why, on average, men and women make different life choices, display different degrees of psychological traits, have different interests, or exhibit different sexual behaviors cannot be included within intersectional feminist analysis. As there is considerable evidence that such differences exist and that they actually increase when women are free to make their own choices.[59]

> An understanding of science and mathematics in particular, basic statistics reveals just how mistaken the call to obliterate categories really is. Biological reality is such that, cognitively and psychologically, men and women are massively overlapping populations with somewhat different distributions of average traits a fact that allows us to predict trends, but can tell us very little about any specific individual.[60]

Not only does this miss the point of a large amount of queer theory (for example, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* asks questions about "being" a certain sex or gender, not about the existence of statistical averages surrounding pre-existing categories) but it also fails to argue for why these categories should remain. If they are "massively overlapping populations" then why does it matter so much that we organize massive sections of our society around them? But that's also not what Pluckrose and Lindsay are arguing for here. Not really. What they've done is *rediscover* sex via statistics; they have recognized sex in the statistical data. Everyone knows what sex is, just like I know that the wax in my hand is the same as the wax I'm thinking of!

To expand the connection between the two: the wax has certain qualities. These qualities I already think of as being contained in the concept "wax." Wax is light, it burns, it feels a certain way in my hands, I'm thinking of wax right now. When I "investigate" wax philosophically, I end up rediscovering that same collection of qualities. Now, consider the concept "woman" as understood here.

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[58]Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 133.
[59]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 157.
[60]Ibid., p. 254–55.

A "woman" again, has certain qualities; longer hair, a certain body shape, XX chromosomes, certain psychological dispositions, the "correct" genitalia, and so on. It is exactly this statistical model of "woman" that they have rediscovered, and sanctioned under the sign of "science." They never discuss the *actual* differences they are so adamant exist between the categories of "men" and "women"; just like I never defined "wax" for you. No, we're supposed to know what we're already finding. Gone are considerations of what it thus means for someone to "be" a woman, if that fact "can tell us very little about any specific individual"? What are those few, little things? Those questions are swept under the rug because we've just discovered what "we" already "knew"; sex is real and it tells us things, and those damn queers are just denying reality!

It just needs to be *justified* via statistics so that common sense is re-established in the face of the queer critique. We will see the same thing again and again; things are *recognized* and that is sufficient to cut off the minority critique. For example, racism:

> When they speak of "racism," for example, they are not referring to prejudice on the grounds of race, but rather to, as they define it, a racialized system that permeates all interactions in society yet is largely invisible except to those who experience it or who have been trained in the proper "critical" methods that train them to see it. (These are the people sometimes referred to as being "woke," meaning awakened, to it.) This very precise technical usage of the word inevitably bewilders people, and, in their confusion, they may go along with things they wouldn't if they had a common frame of reference to help them understand what is actually meant by the word.[61]

Ignore for a moment the absurd hyperbole of saying that defining "racist" as a property that can be attributed to structures or system is a "very precise technical usage of the word." What matters more is that Pluckrose and Lindsay don't *recognize* it. They have a definition they *recognize* and it goes against their good sense to classify something like a school admission program or a system of restrictions on voting as "racist." Therefore it is held at a distance throughout the text. Whenever they discuss racism as something to be addressed—actually, any term like sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. it is always in terms of personal prejudice. I would argue this is part of the other thread I wanted to mention; "representation."

Representation is part of the universalist assumption of the orthodox image of thought. Philosophy is founded on

> the presupposition that there is a natural capacity for thought endowed with a talent for truth or an affinity with the true, under the double aspect of a *good will on the part of the thinker* and an *upright nature on the part of thought*. It is because everybody naturally thinks that

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[61]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 15.

everybody is supposed to know implicitly what it means to think. The most general form of representation is thus found in the element of a common sense understood as an upright nature and a good will.[62]

It is exactly the universalist moral claim that everyone is capable of rationality, everyone is capable of conforming themselves to this natural idea of thought.

This form of liberalism holds that science, reason, and human rights are the property of every individual and do not belong exclusively to any set of people whether they be men or white Westerners or anyone else.[63]

This conceals something. These subjective assumptions about what it means to be a subject, or in Pluckrose and Lindsay's phrasings, an individual, undermines the universalism that Liberalism claims to aim for. Let's put aside that "reason" is one of those terms that just kinda floats around, never really defined in these kind of texts. Everyone can think reasonably, after all, right? As such, it doesn't matter *who* is doing the rational thinking. Pluckrose and Lindsay even implicitly hold this position with regards to politics:

Perhaps most famously, the liberal progressive philosopher John Rawls laid out much philosophical theory dedicated to the conditions under which a socially just society might be organized. In this, he set out a universalist thought experiment in which a socially just society would be one in which an individual given a choice would be equally happy to be born into any social milieu or identity group.[64]

A fundamental component of Rawls' political theory is to perform a reduction; he assumes a universal human via rationality and thus, since every human is rational, they all would react to being placed in the universalist thought experiment the same way. There is now no more need of a committee to design that society, instead it can be performed by a single rational actor. Every possible person is *represented* by that single rational actor insofar as they are rational. We may set aside the cultural baggage of "rationality" here. Instead, we should ask; where does this leave people with mental illness? When I am stuck in the deepest depression, I'm not rational. Perhaps I am apathetic about what position I get; I would be just as "happy" to be a king as a slave. I am no longer represented by Rawls' thought experiment.

But here and there isolated and passionate cries are raised. How could they not be isolated when they deny what 'everybody knows .. .'? And passionate, since they deny that which, it is said, nobody can deny? Such protest does not take place in the name of aristocratic prejudices:

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[62]Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 131.
[63]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 75.
[64]Ibid., p. 13.

it is not a question of saying what few think and knowing what it means to think. On the contrary, it is a question of someone - if only one - with the necessary modesty not managing to know what everybody knows, and modestly denying what everybody is supposed to recognise. Someone who neither allows himself to be represented nor wishes to represent anything. Not an individual endowed with good will and a natural capacity for thought, but an individual full of ill will who does not manage to think, either naturally or conceptually.[65]

These individuals exist, and they refuse to see themselves, to recognize themselves in their representatives. The theories that Pluckrose and Lindsay rail against in this book are exactly those produced by people "full of ill will," with savage claws sharpened by the reality of their social oppression. When:

Many people have an interest in saying that everybody knows 'this', that everybody recognises this, or that nobody can deny it. (They triumph easily so long as no surly interlocutor appears to reply that he does not wish to be so represented, and that he denies or does not recognise those who speak in his name.)[66]

We finally can recognize Pluckrose and Lindsay. They are those trying to reassert the orthodox image of thought against minorities; they want to constrain them to representation via something that is recognizable. For all their proclaiming that science and liberalism are about progress and development,

We have not advanced a single step, but remain imprisoned by the same cave or ideas of the times which we only flatter ourselves with having 'rediscovered', by blessing them with the sign of philosophy. The form of recognition has never sanctioned anything but the recognisable and the recognised; form will never inspire anything but conformities.[67]

6 Language and Freedom

Cynical Theories is structured around explaining the details of, and the dangers of, what it takes to be the two core principles of postmodernism:[68]

- **The postmodern knowledge principle**: Radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism.

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[65]Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 130.
[66]Ibid., p. 131.
[67]Ibid., p. 134.
[68]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 31ff.

- **The postmodern political principle**: A belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.

But there is nothing wrong with either of these principles, except perhaps in the way they have been sneakily misworded here. If we rephrase the 'knowledge principle' as something like: 'scepticism that the notion of 'truth' as a semantic relation to reality is intelligible at all', and we are clear that constructivism is not a commitment to the claim that our beliefs about the world have causal efficacy (that is, it's not a commitment to the idea that merely believing something makes it happen), then this principle is fine. The 'political principle' is fine as it is, if we're clear about what it means (as we'll see, it's to do with linguistic rules and their role in our lives).

Unlike the philosophically challenged authors of *Cynical Theories*, however, I don't just assert something and assume you'll agree. I want to *convince* you there's nothing wrong with these principles. And we can do that by looking at something Pluckrose and Lindsay are confused about, a confusion at the heart of the use they make of these 'postmodern principles' in their argument.

Postmodern theory, they inform us, "promotes the idea that truth is a 'language game' and that words, ultimately, only point to other words and can never correspond concretely to reality",[69] and imply that this makes knowing about the world around us, a basic assumption of science, impossible.

This quotation actually contains a rather interesting error. It runs together three separate issues—what truth might be, the game analogy for language, and whether signifiers relate to the signified—into a sort of Frankenstein doctrine. If Pluckrose and Lindsay actually understood postmodern philosophy and were not simply trying to make it look silly, this is not an error they would have made. Let's clear this up. Words referring to other words is Derrida's concept of *différance*, while 'language games' is a concept out of Wittgenstein (borrowed by Lyotard, the real target of Pluckrose and Lindsay here). To be fair, both of these ideas are similar in one key way: they both deny that there is anything outside the rules of language to which the rules of language are answerable. For Wittgenstein, grammar (the rules of meaning and sense), is autonomous, that is, not accountable to any reality: "you can't get behind the rules, because there isn't any behind",[70][71] while for Derrida there is nothing outside text, nothing beyond the play of language with authority over the rules of the game.[72] For both philosophers, language is free standing; it has no foundation in being a 'representation' of things in reality.

Both resist what Derrida called "the instituting question of philosophy":[73] the Socratic 'What is...?' ('tell me friend, what is piety?'). Wittgenstein, while developing what became known as his 'later' philosophy, said that his new method

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[69]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 238.

[70]Wittgenstein, *Philosophical grammar*, par. 244.

[71]Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript, TS. 213*, par. 184.

[72]Derrida, *Of grammatology*, p. 158.

[73]Ibid., p. 19.

was best summed up by saying it was the exact opposite of Socrates.[74] When Socrates asked Euthyphro what piety was, he was seeking after the *essence* of piety, the non-linguistic thing which all examples of piety are examples *of*, or, to put it crudely, the 'meaning' of the word, the thing behind language that gives it content. Words, spoken or written, are just random noises or scratches on paper: *something* must give them meaning, for they have none on their own. The traditional account of this 'something' is that words represent bits of reality, that the essence of a word is what it *stands for*. Indeed, Pluckrose and Lindsay themselves say this traditional account is nothing but common sense.[75] But both Wittgenstein and Derrida reject this idea that the essence of a word can be found by searching for that thing in the world for which it stands, as if words were little pieces of reality wearing linguistic clothes. Language, instead, is self-animating: there is nothing under the sheet.

Beyond here, however, the two philosophers diverge somewhat. I brought them together for a moment because I think it is clear that what Pluckrose and Lindsay are objecting to is not Derrida himself, but the very idea that language is a game whose rules are not answerable to reality. Since the details of his philosophy are easier to explain in a YouTube video, we'll stick with Wittgenstein and let Derrida go back to haunting the nightmares of Jordan Peterson.

What does this rather strange sounding idea of language as a mere game actually mean? I mean, if I were to claim that the language of physics is nothing more than a game made up by the physics community and has no link at all to reality, I'm not just saying something false, I'd sound as if I was denying obvious reality. Pluckrose and Lindsay rely on this non-technical reading of 'language game' to push their rhetorical point: "Theory assumes that objective reality cannot be known [and] 'truth' is socially constructed through language and 'language games'".[76] Thus while "the claim that 'we make reality with our cultural norms' is not the same as the claim that 'we decide what is true/what is known according to our cultural norms,' *in practice this is a distinction without a difference*."[77]

All of this is a misunderstanding of what a language game is. To say the rules of language are not answerable to reality is not to say that we do not have access to the world around us. Pluckrose and Lindsay are here missing an important philosophical distinction. Just as they earlier confused the alethic and epistemic, now they are confusing the **normative** (to do with what is correct, and thus with what one *ought* to do or say) and the **causal** (to do with causes).

To explain what this means, let's motivate the game analogy a little more. Why say language is a game? This is just a way of working out the thought we mentioned earlier that words don't 'stand for' objects in reality. The meaning of a word does not reduce to some object which the word stands for, but to a rule for the *use* of the word. Understanding what a word means is understanding

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[74]Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein: understanding and meaning*, p. 210.
[75]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 40.
[76]Ibid., p. 47.
[77]Ibid., p. 32, my emphasis.

the rules for its use. The words we use are meaningful because we use them in a rule-governed way. To illustrate this, let's turn to the favourite staple of nerdy philosophers: chess. What is the meaning of a pawn? Do pawns represent something outside the game, something that determines which moves are correct for this piece? Of course not, "the pieces do not go proxy for anything. One could really say that the 'meaning' of a chess piece is the sum of rules that determine its possible movements".[78] Understanding a bishop in chess is nothing more than understanding the rules according to which it moves. It is possible to be wrong here, to move a piece in a way that is against the rules, but right and wrong—normative notions—are entirely internal to the rules themselves. What counts as acting in accord with a rule is entirely determined *by the rule*. Whether or not one has gone wrong in a game of chess, and what moves one ought to make to count as playing at all, are questions internal to the system of rules and not imposed from outside—there *is* no content left to impose, we have all we need. Normativity here is free standing: if you move a pawn three squares you are wrong in relation to the rules of chess, but the rules of chess are not themselves right or wrong in relation to anything else. Or, to be clearer, normativity is free standing in relation to *reality*, but it is embedded in our life with language, in human activity. We are only tempted to think of words or signs as 'dead' things into which reality must breathe life because we forget that they were never dead at all: they live as we do, as part of *our* lives. Meaning is an *activity*, like a game. Right and wrong, true and false, are artefacts of the game itself and arise from it alone—they are not intelligible notions at all outside the rules of a particular game.

That being said, however, games and reality are not completely separate. We do not play chess with pieces too heavy to lift, or that melt when we try to move them, because it would be **impractical** to do so. And what is practical or not is determined by the kind of world in which we live, including the biology of the kind of creature we are (we can play chess on a flat surface in contrasting shades because of the kind of visual system we have, for example). So reality does have a kind of *causal* connection to the rules of chess. The rules are given a sort of salience, an importance, by the way the world actually is.[79][80] If we lived in a different reality, our rules might no longer make any sense, or lose their purpose.[81] For example, in a universe where objects flashed in and out of existence at random and changed spatial position, a chessboard could not work the way it currently does; we could no longer go on playing chess as we did before.[82] But these are not constraints *on* the games, we can create any rules we like. Rather, they are the constraints *within which* our games evolve and within which we construct our rules, the scaffolding within which the rules make sense to have.[83]

[78]Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein: understanding and meaning*, p. 47.

[79]Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the foundations of mathematics, Cambridge, 1939*, p. 246.

[80]Wittgenstein, *On certainty*, par. 558.

[81]Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, par. 142.

[82]Wittgenstein, *On certainty*, par. 617.

[83]Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, par. 350.

This is what is meant by there being a distinction between the normative and the causal. The way the world actually is may be the *cause* of our having the rules that we do, but it is not the *ground* for those rules;[84] the rules neither have, nor need, any sort of external grounding. One cannot appeal to physics to explain why it was correct to have moved a piece in chess the way one did; correctness is entirely internal to the rules. But nonetheless if physics were different the rules might also be different, or we might not play any such game. Reality is not *in* the rules, but it *is* the context in which the rules happen. We have not cut ourselves off from the causal (the world) by indexing what is correct (the normative) to rules we created.

Notice that this has nothing to do with relativism. The rules of chess are not my subjective opinion: I can still be *wrong* about *chess*, even though the rules are completely autonomous from reality. Also notice that this does not render anything unknowable. I can still *know* how to *play chess*, even though the rules I know have no foundations and cannot be justified by reference to anything other than themselves, and could in theory be changed at any time. We can, and do, have perfectly intelligible notions of what it means to know something, what it means to be correct or incorrect, and what it means to justify a claim we have made, without giving Reality any normative role in our rules at all.

The game analogy works for language in the same way as it does for chess. We can summarise this as the claim that "though the world causally constrains what we can say, it has no normative role in our linguistic practices",[85] that is, bare reality itself does not determine what is true or false, because what is correct or even intelligible follows from a practice, a way of using words, and not from Reality. Something is true or false only with reference to a particular set of rules, only with reference to the *normative*, not the causal. We do not find the former ready-made inside the latter: what is normative is determined by *us*. When it comes to what it makes sense to say, or which concepts we choose to make use of or discard, there is, as Richard Rorty put it, "no authority called Reality before whom we need bow down".[86]

But . . . don't we want our concepts to be useful? If the language of something like medical science is governed by rules we made up and could change at will, why then does medicine *work*? Surely it works because it's *true*, and is true because Reality is *directly* responsible for the content of rules we deploy, and not our own disposition?

This question does mark something important. By denying that something called 'Reality' has authority over us we might have appeared to be neglecting the fact that science . . . *works*. That mathematics *works*. That most of our beliefs about the world, in fact, *work*. But we have not neglected this at all. We had a perfectly good explanation of it all along. Recall the point earlier about the rules of

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[84]Wittgenstein, *On certainty*, par. 474.

[85]Hütter-Almerigi, "Two Forms of Realism: Making Sense of Rorty's Controversy with Brandom and Ramberg over Objectivity", p. 2.

[86]Rorty, "Response to Ramberg", p. 376.

chess becoming not false but *impractical* if physics were to change. We have the rules we do because they're *useful*. But useful is not a normative notion: it does not mean 'correct', and it may very well be context dependent or even subjective in a way that 'objective truth', by definition, is not.

Language has been shaped by our reality, cast in its mould, as it were,[87] such that our linguistic rules have a touch of both the arbitrary and the non-arbitrary.[88] There are things about us or about the world that make it **useful** to have a given rule as part of our means of description. Our rules are tools for doing things, for adjusting means to ends, and not attempts at representing reality.[89] But tools that could not do any kind of job would be no tools at all; a chocolate teapot is never anything more than a novelty. Wittgenstein's charming way of putting this was that the colour of trousers is arbitrary, sure enough, but grass-green trousers would hardly sell (Wittgenstein himself exclusively wore grey trousers). Richard Rorty, whom Pluckrose and Lindsay apparently did not read at all, put it more concretely like this:

> What is true in pragmatism is that what you talk about depends not on what is real but on what it pays you to talk about. What is true in realism is that most of what you talk about you get right.[90]

But the 'get right' here is not simply reinscribing Truth under a new name. What is right is indexed to rules and not to Reality. Nor are we recreating any kind of Cartesian epistemology: rules are *social*; there are no 'my' rules. What it means is that we can aim for 'getting it right' without supposing that experience of the world teaches us what concepts we should have. 'Should' implies we could get it wrong in an absolute sense; wrongness is a normative notion and, as we have seen, the world is only causal, the normative is up to us. We can reject the 'should' without rejecting the idea that we can in fact aim to get things right about the world with the concepts we are free to invent, because we can separate the normative and the causal. But the 'we' is important here: concepts are tools, and tools are something we make and use together for particular purposes in our shared lives. Getting things right is fundamentally social and fundamentally an activity: truth is something we *do*, together, in the world.

This section was dedicated to showing that there is a distinction where Pluckrose and Lindsay deny one, and to demonstrate how it works, rather than rebutting their many, many false claims about individual philosophers. But, lest I be accused of being unfair, let's take a peek at someone they do talk about a great deal. Foucault's name is mentioned over 100 times in this 300 page book, and of him Pluckrose and Lindsay make this claim: "Foucault didn't deny that a reality exists, but he doubted the ability of humans to transcend our cultural biases enough to get at it."[91] Here our friends Pluckrose and Lindsay are making the same error

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[87]Wittgenstein, *On certainty*, par. 558.
[88]Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, par. 358.
[89]Rorty, *Pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism*.
[90]Rorty, "Response to Ramberg", p. 374.
[91]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 34.

we've been discussing this whole section, and are denying a meaningful distinction in Foucault's work between making up concepts and making up reality. So what does the man himself have to say about this topic?

> Behind the completed system, what is discovered by the analysis of [discourse formation] is not the bubbling source of life itself, life in an as yet uncaptured state; it is an immense density of systematicities, a tight group of multiple relations. Moreover, these relations cannot be the very web of the text – they are not by nature foreign to discourse. They can certainly be qualified as 'prediscursive', but only if one admits that this prediscursive is still discursive, that is, that they do not specify a thought, or a consciousness, or a group of representations which, a posteriori, and in a way that is never quite necessary, are transcribed into a discourse, but that they characterize certain levels of discourse, that **they define rules that are embodied as a particular practice by discourse**.[92]

This is nothing less than a spelling out, in Foucault's admittedly rather more difficult terminology, of the distinction between the normative and causal that we have been discussing for this entire section. When Foucault denies that the prediscursive (the reality outside discourse) is 'the very web of the text', he is drawing the same distinction as Wittgenstein between a *cause* and a *ground*: reality may end up being part of the characterisation of rules, their colour if you will, but it is not part of the structure to which we appeal to justify the truth of a particular claim, because justification is internal to discourse. People can have different brains that work in different ways, and that bit of reality may influence us to draw distinctions between people, but that is not what determines the truth of the claim 'this man is mad!'. That is entirely internal to discourse, to language, just as a correct move in chess is internal to chess. 'A man who hallucinates is not sane' is not an empirical proposition about psychology the way 'there are twenty books by Wittgenstein on my shelf' is an empirical proposition about my bookshelf; it is a *grammatical* claim about our rules, a statement about how to correctly apply the word 'sane'. Who counts as sane is a political choice about our rules, not something dictated by reality. But brains nonetheless go on existing and being different.

Foucault's claim here, that "this prediscursive is still discursive" does not, therefore, mean that language invents reality, or that we may as well say it does. What it means is that we can, as it were, deploy ideas only from where we are, that we pick up objects with the thick gloves of language. We are able to begin talking about something at all, able to begin to have any sort of concept of aiming toward 'getting it right', only by introducing it into our system of rules. When Judith Butler (mentioned over 50 times by Pluckrose and Lindsay) says that sex is a gendered category, that is, that both sex *and* gender are socially constructed,

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[92]Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, p. 76, my emphasis.

this is precisely what they are saying. Sarah Richardson's[93] work on showing how scientific research on the human genome has projected our cultural understanding of gender onto the biological structure it is trying to understand, and is now reading it back as if it were always there, bears this out. Things are "always already [. . .] interpreted by cultural meanings".[94] This is not merely an anthropological claim about what we are inclined to do as humans (though it is also that), it is a *logical* claim: correctness and intelligibility are artefacts of a practice, of acting in accord (or not) with rules; they make no sense 'outside of the rules of language' because without language, they don't exist. We read gender into the structures we are trying to examine with the supposedly clear lens of science, because *of course we do.* Who counts as a woman or a man is a political choice about our rules, not something dictated by reality. But the biological mechanisms we attempt to capture in our biological vocabulary nonetheless go on existing and being different.

Thus, when Pluckrose and Lindsay say that postmodern theory is committed to the claim that "reality is ultimately the product of our socialization and lived experiences, as constructed by systems of language"[95] they are displaying a confusion. To say that the normative is indexed to our social life with language and open to change whenever we please is not to say that reality itself is in the control of language, nor is it to say we have lost touch with reality. The normative and the causal are different things; as with the alethic and the epistemic, we can pull them apart when an explanation demands it: we can say that normativity, and thus truth, are social constructs, without thereby committing ourselves to saying that reality is a social construct. There is quite literally a universe of difference between our being able to make up concepts and our being able to make up reality itself.

As long as we're clear about all of this, we can see that Pluckrose and Lindsay's 'postmodern principles' are not frightening at all. Knowledge is not a vassal of truth; reality has no authority over meaning. That is not a denial of reality: it is simply the most coherent way of working out the notions of knowledge and meaning.

That is not to say we cannot aim at virtues other than capital-T Truth in the kind of stance we take on the world, such as a kind of epistemic conscientiousness or honesty.[96] It is also not to say that we cannot take ethical responsibility for the kinds of rules we create and the discourses they generate.[97] But it **is** to say that these things are completely within our control; no schoolmaster is going to give us the answers. Such freedom is terrifying to those who would impose upon us a cultural and intellectual infantilism, but without taking responsibility for ourselves, we will never grow. If we take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself.[98]

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[93]Richardson, *Sex itself: the search for male and female in the human genome*.

[94]Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 12.

[95]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 30.

[96]Brandom, "Why Truth is not Important in Philosophy".

[97]Medina, *The epistemology of resistance*.

[98]Rorty, "Response to Conant", p. 343.

7   Conclusion: Pluckrose and Lindsay Aren't Serious

Pluckrose and Lindsay attempt to cover their asses with this:

> Disagreement is rarely tolerated, now that the postmodernist assumptions have been reified. This can be seen in the fact that disagreement is often regarded as, at best, a failure to have engaged with the scholarship correctly, as though engagement must imply acceptance, and, at worst, a profound moral failure. This kind of claim is more familiar from religious ideology—if you don't believe, you haven't read the holy text properly or you just want to sin—but applied to what is supposed to be rigorous academic scholarship.[99]

Nobody thinks it is a moral failure to misunderstand philosophy. Some of the philosophy referenced here is difficult and goes against the grain of common sense; it is bound to be misunderstood by even the most intelligent reader, because sometimes philosophy is a difficulty of the will, or of empathy, and not merely difficulty in the abstract details of one theory or another.

But a basic claim like 'you have misread this admittedly difficult philosophy book, perhaps you should take another look and think about it more' becomes, to Pluckrose and Lindsay, a moralistic commendation. Maybe they're just tired of hearing it; I imagine they hear it a lot with their level of reading comprehension and philosophical skill.

No, what Pluckrose and Lindsay have done here is not morally wrong; it's fucking embarrassing. I turned page after page to see what would come out of the clown car next. What philosophical misunderstanding have you for us today, Pluckrose and Lindsay? Oh, Derrida thought language was meaningless, did he? Rorty thinks there's no world 'out there', huh? Every one would be an expertly crafted joke if it wasn't intended to be taken oh-so-seriously.

To pretend to understand philosophy well enough to explain it to a layperson, as they claim to,[100] and then be so profoundly—and so publicly—wrong in every last claim made, is tragicomedy on a beautiful scale. These second-rate Dawkins clones lack a grasp of even the most basic undergraduate philosophy, such as what a theory of truth is and what it is for. They continually get the most elementary terminology wrong, sometimes with hilarious results like their utterly deranged implication, based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of 'normativity', that the gays are out to destroy the concept of statistical averages.[101] They make the most absurd fallacious arguments, like their assertion to the effect that 'truth is necessary to get along politically, we want to get along politically, therefore truth exists'. We do indeed want to get along politically, but this is no more an argument for the existence of truth than saying 'unicorns are necessary for my being happy,

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[99]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 198.
[100]Ibid., p. 19.
[101]Ibid., p. 94.

I want to be happy, therefore unicorns exist' is an argument for the existence of unicorns—a fallacy so ridiculous I'm not even sure it has a name.

Pluckrose and Lindsay argue that they themselves are liberals and thus reject illiberal solutions to the evils of postmodernism such as banning theory by law or starving universities of funding.[102] As such, a liberal solution is required: postmodernism must be *philosophically* discredited in the marketplace of ideas. This, they claim, is the purpose of their book.[103]

But they have not done this. They can't, for they don't understand the philosophy. Not a single claim in this book is actually argued for. Everything is assumed to be common sense, its opponents rendered as irrational moralists. Each and every claim Pluckrose and Lindsay make amounts to the holding aloft of (a usually bad faith interpretation of) a postmodern idea and inviting the audience to throw peanuts. Indeed, as we saw, even philosophy itself must be considered suspect, devious by its nature in challenging common sense notions about knowledge. "Nothing I say needs an argument, arguing for one's points is an ideological move; if they were so correct as you claim, they'd be as obvious as common sense." And yet it moves, Pluckrose and Lindsay. And yet it moves.

Wittgenstein once said a philosophy book could be written consisting entirely of jokes. This is not quite what he had in mind, but Cynical Theories is about as serious. It's a bad joke, poorly told, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

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[102]Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical theories*, p. 262-3.
[103]Ibid., p. 19.

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