DarkHorse Podcast with Greg Lukianoff and Bret Weinstein (19...

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**SPEAKERS**

Bret, Greg Lukianoff

**Bret** 00:07

Hey folks, welcome to the Dark Horse podcast. I have the honor of sitting today with Greg lukianoff, who is president of fire the foundation for individual rights in education and co author with Jonathan Hite of coddling of the American mind. He is also I believe the recipient of the 2008, playboy freedom of expression award. Is that correct? Yes, well done.

**Greg Lukianoff** 00:32

It was a, it was an honor. If you read coddling, you might have heard that I had a pretty rough 2007. And I was in a pretty big low and getting that really helped. I could use the moral support in 2008.

**Bret** 00:45

But it did not require the production of any photographs that you now fear being released or anything like that.

**Greg Lukianoff** 00:52

This is a Christy Hefner runs a lot of the the free speech awards. And I actually was pleased to hear a elderly recipient of one of the awards, say what the rest of us were thinking. It's like, why don't we get invited to any of the fun playboy, but it was it was very upscale, very, very respectable, almost to the point of being like mildly disappointing.

**Bret** 01:16

Got it? All right. Well, there's so much to talk about, I don't hardly know where to start.

**Greg Lukianoff** 01:21

Yeah. This is booming, we might have missed it.

**Bret** 01:25

Right? How are you enjoying the collapse of Western civilization? Is it going about as you expected,

**Greg Lukianoff** 01:32

luckily, given my family history, and you know, my father was born in 1926. in Yugoslavia, his father then died when he was six. And I've always had that to compare myself to, you know, it's kind of like, Am I an orphan with rickets in Yugoslavia in the 1930s, about to be killed by Stalin or Nazis. But it's I mean, and the thing is, like, I don't usually say very over the top things, but like I tweeted in the past six months, this is this is as bad as I've seen it like I would have, I would have thought, if you told me five years ago, even though we are way ahead of the curve on talking about free speech issues on campus and runaway ideology, I would still think you were making stuff up because it is everything has gone nuts.

**Bret** 02:20

Well, that's very interesting to hear you say that, I should say, I get a lot of credit for having predicted what was going to happen. But you and and Jonathan Hite were well ahead of me in terms of predicting this and to hear that you are surprised. I must say, I can't be terribly surprised at what has happened but I'm certainly surprised at the speed with which it is happening.

**Greg Lukianoff** 02:42

Exactly. So in an original article in 2015, we were predicting that there was going to be an increase in anxiety and depression and you know, we thought it would be a modestly measurable you know, little thing on a graph like Oh, see here, it's a we're talking about, you know, graphs that go off up like hockey sticks when it comes to mental health. So basically, we saw a lot of this stuff coming. We didn't expect it to come like next year.

**Bret** 03:06

Yeah, it's, it's interesting. I wonder what it is that sounds like caused us both to be caught off guard by the speed. What is is there an accelerant in here that we might have, might have perceived if we had looked at it?

**Greg Lukianoff** 03:21

Um, you know, definitely social media has sped everything up. It's sped up polarization spread up sorting it sped up mental health issues, you know, we argue in the book at least, but definitely, I'd say Trump, I feel like the the ridiculous political era we're in has sped up all the all the political processes we talked about and coddling the American mind, because one of the things we did did say that was one of the reason why Generation Z was so different was because the polarization politically was hotter than ever. And that just went through the roof and 2016

**Bret** 03:56

Yeah, it really did go through the roof. Now you of course, focused in codling on the degree to which online dynamics do amplify these processes. So that didn't come out of nowhere, that that was definitely a big part of your model.

**Greg Lukianoff** 04:14

And I did write something in 2014 called freedom from speech, which talked about how I think that as other and the thing is, you know, ultimately, in a lot of ways I'm I'm a Steve pinker optimist, I would rather live now than 100 years ago, you know, I'm excited about space elevators, and carbon nanotubes and all that and having nanites in my blood, and all that kind of stuff. But one thing that I did want to add some nuance to the argument of things getting better, which was really almost like there was a sugar high in the early part of the of the teens. That there are some things that get worse precisely because of the things are getting better. So technological advantage advancements that let you live in communities that reflect your values or even find those communities. And if you don't live close to them, you know that sounds lovely at but also, as you know everything from you know, psychoactive drugs that that decrease pain, frankly, we're having what I call them the book of problem of comfort that essentially we're in, you know, self reaffirming groups both in our real lives physically we've moved to more isolated areas. And online, they pat you on the back for that. And my argument and freedom from speech was essentially, there's a category of things that will get worse precisely because some of the things are getting better. And I do think the situation for free speech, as things get worse is going as things get better, technologically is going to get worse. I think people become more non non compromising in a situation where, you know, 500 people agree with me, I can't be wrong, why? Why should I compromise on this stuff, having to remind people that compromise and democracy is good.

**Bret** 05:59

So I want to run something by you. It's a model I've been playing with. And forgive me if I'm reinventing something that you have already described. But I have the sense that the online environment that what we have, in fact seen is a phase transition, where we are now dealing with a critical mass of people for whom the online environment is primary. And the online environment is, of course, not actually primary. But if you were to mistake it as primary, it might result in certain dynamics that I think we are now seeing unfold. So in short, what I would say is if I'm having a discussion with evolutionary biologists online, if I'm in a chat about evolutionary biology, presumably I have the right or we have the right to exclude young earth creationists, it's not that they don't have the right to speak about young earth creationism. But if we are to have the ability to talk about evolutionary biology anywhere, there has to be a place where we can simply say, actually, we're not going to entertain young earth, creationism here. And so that, right, whatever it is made of, looks to me like it has been extrapolated to all sorts of things where it doesn't belong. So for example, online, we are told that if one has any skepticism about the claim, that a man who declares himself a woman is in fact a woman upon that declaration, if we have any doubts about that, then we are we are turfs, we are trans exclusionary radical feminists, and therefore we have committed a sin, a grave, right? Wrong. Yeah, a grave moral wrong. And we are to be driven out. And so I have the sense that this, I mean, it's obvious nonsense. I'm a biologist, I know that the fact that you may declare yourself female doesn't make you female. And that, you know, we might agree that that's the way you should be treated, but it doesn't change certain underlying biological realities. Nonetheless, if you imagine that people see the internet as a space in which they are allowed to establish this rule, in the same way that I, as an evolutionary biologist might establish the rule that young earth creationism is, isn't to be discussed in this, you know, in this subreddit, or whatever, that you would get this behavior where the point is, you have to exclude those who violate the rule in order that the conversation can progress as normal.

**Greg Lukianoff** 08:37

I think there's a lot of truth to that. And it's actually a is a lot where my head is about two different things. The first is that one of the reasons why I think things have gotten so hot in 2020, in terms of hyper polarization and ideology, run wild is that because of COVID, and because we're home all the time, we have become our avatars. We become our online personality, 24 hours a day, and without face to face contact without the you know, the rigmarole of daily life. People in their avatars in they're much less reasonable. They're much more ideologically pure, they're much braver, of course, because you're not actually you're not actually facing people. So I think that we're seeing the distortion of what, because at first, I remember like during COVID, it was kind of nice to see everybody online, you know, like the and we all spent way more time online. It was like Hi everybody, how you doing? There was this kind of honeymoon period, and then that weird kind of spiral of, of ideology took over. But here's here's, here's the least probably popular or uneasy thing I'm probably gonna say is that I feel like what's happened to our entire society is that tactics for winning arguments in dormitories in the night and in departments in the 1990s have become treated as if they are the law of Solomon that essentially you You know, any dissent from from theories of privilege, any dissent from theories about sexuality, if they're serious about sexual identity, that's just a great moral sin. And that doesn't have to be have to be dismissed. But all these things they weren't meant to actually be true. They were supposed to give you a rhetorical advantage in arguing, but you know, if you do assume they're 100% true. I mean, that was one of the reasons why, you know, and this goes beyond what fire does. But why I was concerned about the 1619 thing is because that the 1619 argument, the argument that is all was only ever just about slavery, and nothing else was something that you would hear on campus sometimes. And it was, you know, debated as it should be. But then it just got treated suddenly, just in the past couple. It was it was said this year, that

**Bret** 10:50

as believe it was about a year ago long

**Greg Lukianoff** 10:52

here. Yeah. So but that argument got being treated as if it was gospel fact, I was like, wow, okay, we've really, we've really, we these arguments have won, but not, not because they're true, because they're rhetorically useful and taken for granted by a certain group of former college students, or current college students.

**Bret** 11:17

Well, I wonder if our models are about to converge here. Because the way I sound like they could, yeah, I think I think they're headed in this direction. So what what I'm imagining is that people from our generation, and my right, Gen X, yes. Whoo, whoo. Yes, we should we for those of us who still remain in this tiny generation should gather for a reunion at some point. But absolutely. So what I'm imagining is that people from our generation, and those above are misunderstanding something about the arguments that are being deployed, because they come couched as arguments about matters of fact, which is very confusing, all right. But in fact, what I suspect they are is gambits in a negotiation, that, in effect, if you take my model that basically there is a, a generation or several generations now that are playing with the idea that the online environment is in fact, in some sense, deeper, truer, more real. And, you know, I can steal man, that point, although it's obviously wrong in the end, but right, if you imagine that people are proceeding from that starting point, then there's a question about establishing the rules of that environment going forward. And if you believe, as I do, and I would presume you do, that. The US, for example, is not perfectly fair with respect to race, that there are, in fact, historical biases that echo through to modernity, then the point is, well, those need to carry no weight online. Right, we can actually neutralize them. Yeah, for real. And it's not that difficult. What we do is we set out the rules by which online discussion proceeds. And you can see this in the case of the gender question, because at some level, if we're talking about how you are to be treated online, if you say you're a woman, you're a woman, right? That's plausible online, it becomes implausible when you go to see your doctor, right, or when you commit a crime, and we have to decide which prison to send you to, or we have to decide whether or not you can enter a race in a women's category rather than compete against men. But online, there's no need for any of those things to be relevant, we can just simply decide the sexes are equal. You are what you say you are, let's go. And so we can neutralize issues of class, we can neutralize issues of race, we can neutralize issues of gender, online. And that when we are told that, if I say, Well, no, there's an issue of gamete size that you there's no amount of surgery that can correct for it. And it has implications, right? I've just said something I don't think it's controversial at a biological level. But if I say that online, and the point is I have to be punished because I've violated the proposed rule and that in effect, the vast pylon of people who will call me a turf are really basically enforcing the new rules of how of essentially etiquette of how we are to interact in the online environment. So then the problem comes that the outside world actually is primary, it is real, and they wish to

**Greg Lukianoff** 14:48

export real

**Bret** 14:50

well. If you're gonna push me to the philosophy, I'll say we cannot be perfectly certain but it would be it would be pointless to worry about it. But 1619 is effectively the online rules, right in which we are to treat we have been told that we are to treat the United States as if it was exclusively about slavery, that that was 100% of the project, we are to treat that as real, I would argue is some sort of compensation. Right that there has been a historical blindness to the importance of slavery. And so now there's going to be a compensatory over emphasis. That's the rules of the online environment, but they're now being exported into the world, we are now going to teach them to children as fact. Right, rather than them being the rules of the discussion online.

**Greg Lukianoff** 15:39

Yeah, and one last wrinkle on it is the place that I, you know, height, his primary area of scholarship is on what's called moral foundations, which I'm sure you know, all about. And, you know, when we were working on the book, I was asking, Are you saying that this, some of this ideology is an analogous to religion, or is taking the place of religion and he says, it's taking the place of religion flat out, and that's that, that some of these rules, because they have this sort of moral heat behind them that basically your brain is supposed to shut off? If they're violated it really like? Like the word used before? It really does have all the markings of of sin?

**Bret** 16:20

Yeah, it does. And then I would add my evolutionary wrinkle to, to your work in John's work here. And I would say the problem is that it is functioning as a literal religion, but without the one thing that religion brings to the table that makes it more or less safe with forgiveness and mercy. No, but though these would be downstream products of that, it would be the fact that whatever religion if it's a true religion, right, it's long standing. Right? So you know, it's not riddled with fatal errors, it may be riddled with untruths. Oh, okay, yeah, I get it. So at some level, what we're facing are, is the invention of a new religion. And there is no one alive who can tell you it doesn't end in gulags, or gas chambers or starvation, or, you know, nuclear exchange. We don't know what happens, because this one is, you know, it's a prototype. Yeah. And, you know, it's playing with all of the most important tools, we're watching it sweep through, you know, governance, which means that suddenly, you know, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is dealing with the question of whether or not, you know, presumably, fusion is a process born of white supremacy, or who knows what, right? So that's very dangerous. Oh,

**Greg Lukianoff** 17:36

yeah. And it's kind of funny because I mean, we're both left leaning people and and that's and we, you know, I used to work at this program called the environmental project in the 90s. We work with inner city, high school kids to do environmental justice work. And I've I got all my democrat friends together back in 2003, to say, listen, really, what we should we should be focusing on is energy. And to see, you know, my side of the spectrum actually saying, we care about, we care about global warming, but we want to get rid of fracking and no nuclear. It's like, what are you serious about this? And that gets treated like it like an article, like an article of faith. And we're all arguing with the same kind of one upmanship and grandstanding that people argue in dorms.

**Bret** 18:19

Yes. Now you and I might come out different places on fracking and fission, just I don't know. But yeah,

**Greg Lukianoff** 18:26

nonetheless, I'd love to be spending astronomical amounts of money on fusion, to be called

**Bret** 18:31

me to that that's exactly where I think we should be investing. And it's possible that we need some upgraded kind of vision to get us there. Because we don't know when,

**Greg Lukianoff** 18:39

right and just for now, it's better than the other options. And we're not gonna we're not going to get to where we need to be. But the but really, I think we should be spending Apollo project type money on fusion.

**Bret** 18:51

I agree. I've argued we need a Manhattan Project for fusion. Because know that it's actually the one it's the one technology that I think plausibly saves us going forward. That said, I think if we, if we invented it today, if it got announced this afternoon, it would make things worse, not better.

**Greg Lukianoff** 19:09

Yeah, I can actually think of a lot of ways or at least we just figure out a way to argue ourselves out of it. I mean, this, this has already started happening with some of the super carbon materials like that I got excited about, you know, like, I was amazed at how fast people were talking about, you know, the potential of particulate matter, you know, to be very harmful to people's lungs. But as if that's why we shouldn't pursue it. It's like this could be this could change everything this gives, you know, if we have this, can we try to figure out that issue, you know, later? Well, we, and I don't know, it's like the precautionary principle that they have, you know, currently in the European Union, which is just which is just a formula for stagnation and not be able to fix any of the problems you currently have.

**Bret** 19:53

Well, so, Heather, and I have a book that will be coming out next year. Tell me, and it is going to include in it the argument that we need some version of the precautionary principle. But that the problem with the precautionary principle is that everything depends on how you instantiate it. Because if you instantiate it narrowly, you're right, you bring everything to a halt, because you can't be totally certain of the safety of anything. Sure. So anyway, there's a I think there's a more sophisticated way to pursue it. But yes, it is something we would have to agree to broadly. And in fact, you know, you're an interesting person to be talking to about this, because it is, I think, clear to both of us that we are actually watching a very dangerous breakdown in civilization, that is, in some ways, the downstream consequence of new technologies whose danger we didn't anticipate.

**Greg Lukianoff** 20:52

Do you mean, you mean, specifically social media?

**Bret** 20:56

Well, I mean, you know, social media, I mean, feed algorithms, search algorithms, I mean, focus groups, and the ability to predict behavior and to modify it with sophisticated propaganda. All of these technologies have caused a, a breakdown, in our sense making and in our sense of allegiance to each other. And that's, that's obviously at one level, the root of the problem, which I think is part of the argument you deploy in coddling. Yeah. So how do you square that, with your sense about the precautionary principle was there a place where we needed to look at what was unfolding and say, wait a minute, this could be so dangerous, that we have to put the brakes on it in some way.

**Greg Lukianoff** 21:47

Um, you know, if we had a precautionary principle for social media, like it, let's say that was part of the culture already, social media still would have gone ahead, because really, people didn't see any harm in it, it's like it show cat pictures, and hey, you get pat on the back for, for what group you're in, I think I think even a strong version of that still would have led to the existence of Twitter and Facebook and the sorting algorithms. And of course, you know, since I'm a civil liberties guy, you know, I think in terms of, but my biggest fear, of course, is centralized power. And so when I was working on the book with height, when we were finishing up our recommendation sections for social media, you know, he definitely had a lot more faith in top down solutions. But I know what top down solutions are gonna look like it's gonna be, you know, the president of Princeton, shouldn't pick on Princeton actually know that you shouldn't pick on the professor Pat's thing was actually pretty bad. And it always turns out to be whatever is in the interest of power. That's the thing that gets banned. And people say, Please, have more censorship to protect the downtrodden. It's like, Yes, we'll take that. And now I'm going to shut up my critics, you know, it is the way it works. So my hope is that we start developing cultural norms around use of social media, I think that's really the only way out is is some process of developing norms around, I feel like I've seen some glimmers of reasonability and little enclaves on Twitter, or on Facebook, for example, maybe I'm just completely, completely spoiled. So I don't think there I think that the cautionary principle wouldn't have known far enough into the future, what the downside would have been Meanwhile, I am not. And this is something I've been saying for a long time. But I still really think it. Twitter is the closest to looking at the way the human mind works, and probably any technology that's ever been developed. And what's better is, or better in the sense of more interesting is that it's immediate, and it's for hundreds of millions of people. So it's kind of like looking into the collective unconscious of the entire species. And if that doesn't get people excited as a research opportunity, you know, it's one of the reasons Nicholas Christakis and I have been friends ever since actually since well before the incident at Yale. But he gets really excited about this stuff, too. And there's so much to learn about human nature and tribalism, and that kind of stuff from this technology. If we can just survive its initial impact. I feel like we're in the period. You know, sometimes people will say, Oh, look, Jonathan Hite, you know, people said the same thing about the printing press. And it's like, you chose a bad example there. Because it led to you know, hundreds of years of religious war became pretty much directly out of it. So I think right now we're in the religious war I just hope it's not hundreds of years, right or fatal to the species that would be bad that would be unfortunate.

**Bret** 24:38

But Alright, so this is this is interesting. You are You are hostile to the idea of structures that would be and I agree would be abused by people to shut down their critics. I mean, we're already seeing this. I would challenge your sense about a view into collective unconscious. Okay, great, because I believe Twitter would be that if Twitter were an unmanaged platform.

**Greg Lukianoff** 25:10

So it's more like the super ego. Now, since there's so many powerful norms.

**Bret** 25:15

It's just, it is downstream of many things, but one of them is Twitter's perverse incentives. Yeah, right, right. And so the problem is, it's like a glimpse into the unconscious of a propagandized person, right here propagandized population, and therefore, what we think on Twitter is heavily edited, not just by our distorted fear of a pylon. Oh, right. Right. The fact that 100 people piling on you in an ugly way, is enough to dissuade you from from saying something when in fact, 100

**Greg Lukianoff** 25:55

are for leaving the house.

**Bret** 25:58

Right, exactly. But the point is the the way people pile on and the way people have now organized themselves to pile on more effectively to modify what gets said is a distortion of the view into the unconscious. And then there's Twitter's obnoxious policy of deciding, you know, for example, that that COVID-19 that SARS Cove two, is inherently that the consensus scientific consensus that it is a natural virus that emerged from bats is so secure, that we can declare anything that doesn't adhere to this consensus as a kind of unforgiveable thought that will label things. Yeah. Right. What that does is it tamps down the fact that you've got lots of people who are looking at the fact even just the basic facts and saying, that doesn't add up. And there's this other hypothesis that does add up and it doesn't seem like we know enough to know which origin it has. Yeah, so well,

**Greg Lukianoff** 27:08

and that's one of the it's kind of funny, kind of the gateway drug to censorship in a lot of cases are conspiracy theories. And I take two different approaches to that as being a free speech person who isn't particularly bothered you know, by this is one, even if they're false conspiracies move the world it's important to know what people really think full stop this, this is the this is my free speech, radicalism and comes down to something very simple. It's always important to know what people really think, period. And so for example, like we would have such a poor understanding of where the anti semitism came from before World War Two, if we didn't understand the protocols of Zion, it'd be being this huge, you know, fraud, and hit, but understanding like people's paranoia and superstitions, all this stuff is, is so incredibly important. But also the other part is, there's always a possibility that it could be true. And I mean, we've given you know, my family had to flee the Soviets, you know, it's just one conspiracy after the other. So this is funny, Brett, this room doesn't think I'm here. So I occasionally have to do this.

**Bret** 28:12

Well, maybe you should just take up gesticulating as a more central part of your communication modality.

**Greg Lukianoff** 28:18

Oh, I'm actually really tamping it down right now. This is the one that I seem to do for everything. According to my wife, it's it's an atom or the galaxy, or, you know, like, there's so many things that actually it's like, well, this is going to happen. And it's like, yeah, without even realizing it.

**Bret** 28:33

Its arguments in 2020. Yeah.

**Greg Lukianoff** 28:38

There's a certain roundness to that argument. There is a certain Yes, there was a favorite law school professor said that one time trying to be nice, but I thought that was great.

**Bret** 28:48

So let me take you back to two things you just said here. Cool. One, I want to talk to you about conspiracy theories. Yes. Because I feel like we're missing the boat on this one. Okay, great, there is a very obvious way to deal with conspiracy theories. And that is not to traffic in them, right. But there's a way to deal with the possibility of true things. And it just so happens that we have the most excellent system you could possibly want for dealing with them, which is science. So I want to be very clear, and I have been very clear with my audience. That theory has a precise meaning. That means it has withstood rigorous tests, there should only ever be one theory at a time. Right? That is to say, the theory of natural selection is the theory of natural selection, because we have so thoroughly tested it and there is no competitor, right? Before it was tested. It was a hypothesis. And so I would say the responsible way to deal with the conspiracy issue is to say these are hypotheses. The fact that one advances a hypothesis doesn't mean you even believe it's true, right? You can have all kinds of hype As this, you know, our conversation could be taking place in a simulated universe. I don't believe that's true. But I do regard it as a hypothesis. And to the extent that it makes predictions, it's testable. So. So I think the point is, we have been sold a bill of goods, we've been led into a dangerous territory by thinking in terms of conspiracy theories, when in fact, they are hypotheses, they make predictions, and we can treat them exactly as seriously as you would a proposed scientific idea that hasn't been tested or has, you know, given mixed results.

**Greg Lukianoff** 30:35

Well, here's why you get in trouble. Thought experimentation, Devil's advocacy are absolutely essential to the production of ideas, and I save this stuff on campus. And people like what people have to take the other side have different arguments. I'm like, Yeah, actually, ideally, you'd have someone who actually believes the other side of the argument, because they're going to know the most arguments for it, and they're going to be able to, they're going to be able to defend it. But if not, someone in your team should pretend that they are willing to throw out these other hypotheses on what actually happened. And I haven't seen, I'm seeing a situation on campus, where that's been sort of obliquely threatened. And now it's being very directly threatened. We just had a case at St. John's, were provided to do not just one, but I don't think so this is this is a case where a professor was in a history class was talking about the Columbian Exchange, you know, the, all the wonderful things that the rest of the world got from Columbus's, quote, unquote, discovering the new world. And of course, that includes things as basic as potatoes and tomatoes, like that alone would have made it an incredibly important exchange. But this is a serious historical question, kind of, like for all the horrors that came out of the triangle slavery and all this. And the murder and the exposure to smallpox and all these horrible things. The question is, you know, wasn't worth any serious intellectual, any serious. Students should be able to go Hmm, you know, and puzzle through that and come down, be able to come down on a side, but it's treated in this case, so much like heresy that the professor was suspended at St. John's, and I think this I think he still is, he was relief from teaching. And I'm seeing more and more cases, because I saw a ton of cases for years, whereas professors saying something on Twitter, would that would get them in trouble. absolutely free speech issue. absolutely important, but it's moving closer and closer to the classroom. Although you might know something about that.

**Bret** 32:35

Well, yes. It does seem to be I encountered something a few years back, I'll see if I can remember what it was. Yeah. But okay, so I totally agree with this thought experiment is an essential tool, right? And the ability to voice a thought experiment, even an obnoxious thought experiment, right is part and parcel of how, you know, we do moral philosophy, among other things, I mean, trolley problems, right? If you couldn't talk trolley problems, because you're killing innocence. Well, then, you know, you're robbed of this important tool for, for the advancement of, of ethics. But okay, so we, but I want to I want to take you back to that second thing before we lose the thread. Sure, sure, sure. So you are very skeptical about top down solutions to our online problem. And you agree that we are dealing with very dangerous downstream consequences of technologies that we couldn't foresee the hazard as they were invented. So that some sort of precaution word possible might have saved us from that, but maybe no conceivable precaution could have existed. But here's the question. Isn't the solution for on line and upgrade to our constitutional protections that have worked so well for speech in other realms?

**Greg Lukianoff** 33:58

So like, what would that look like?

**Bret** 34:01

Well, I think it would look like exactly what you have just described, which is a radical commitment to keeping the space open to ideas, including obnoxious ones, because the consequence of trying to shut it down and leaving only respectable ideas is unthinkably terrible on very short timescales.

**Greg Lukianoff** 34:20

Yeah. And that's been that's been my people like David French's argument that essentially if you're going to start regulating speech, guess what, you have this absolutely brilliant body and I'm the obnoxious American, my mother's British slash Irish, my father grew up in Yugoslavia, but is Russian and you know, you're taught from a pretty early age not to go over there with thinking your values are superior. But I totally break that norm when I go to other countries and talk about first amendment because I and I, and what I explained is I know you guys think we're not but in this country, you know, any practically any country in Europe, you're going after speech, because if someone finds it offensive In our country, one of the major differences between us and everybody else is actually relatively small. But it's that we have a bedrock principle that it can never be merely because someone finds it offensive, that doesn't make cultural sense that these norms change from period to period. They're different from from economic class, economic class, from nation to nation, from men to women, in some cases. So the principles that actually are, have been thought out, quite frankly, some of the best minds in US history. I mean, you know, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis, we're not we're no slouches on this stuff. And that it presents this really sensible body of law, and actually, philosophy and how you actually deal deal with speech. And I think that would be ideal way to regulate speech, to use those standards regulate speech on the internet, I can't quite bring myself though, to want to give up the freedom of association and expressive rights that these companies have in the first place. But I do think that if there was if there was a place that actually applied these rules, it would be applied them very, very firmly, it would be a healthier environment for one, even though there'd be some nastiness, of course, to be expected about the direction that Twitter and Facebook are currently going. I think that it's going to start looking like the absurdities that you see in Europe, and worse, it's going to also involve things and and you know, one of the reasons why nobody wants to even do the thought experimentation. What if this actually was a biological weapon? Well, because of the power, wealth and influence of China.

**Bret** 36:34

Well, that's true, I should say, just point of clarity. That it was a biological weapon is a hypothesis it?

**Greg Lukianoff** 36:41

No, I and I assume that and the funny thing is, I know people on the on the interwebs would would be like, well, you claim this and I'm like, Yeah, no, I totally understand his hypothesis.

**Bret** 36:51

It's a hip hop. Well, that wasn't the one that so I personally believe. The most robust hypothesis, we don't have a theory of its origin yet, we really don't know. But the most robust hypothesis is a lab leak, but not a weapon. Yet, this was a virus that had picked up capacities through what's called gain of function research, and then escaped, presumably infected a worker and would have gotten out that way, though, that's not the only path. But in any case, these are competing hypotheses, right? I haven't seen any support yet. For the bio weapon. hypothesis, though. It's a hypothesis whether there's any evidence for it or not, the point is right weren't true, it would, it would make certain predictions about the way it behaved.

**Greg Lukianoff** 37:39

But the whole time bomb aspect of it, the ability to transmit it asymptomatically and then you get walloped by it, you know, two weeks later is that's clever. And that's definitely one of the reasons why I think people think it, you know, sometimes go to it being a weapon is just so perfectly designed to spread.

**Bret** 37:56

I would say, That's not a prediction, though, that is an observation of its nature, which leads to the hypothesis, right? It could be a bio weapon, in which case, it would have to have other features. But But in any case, I guess, my only point is, it just so happens that we have the most robust system ever devised, I believe, the most robust system possible for figuring out what's true. And it's already the bedrock of Western civilization. Why do we exclude conspiracies from its application? Why do we leap to calling these things theories rather than start with the idea that they're hypotheses? You know, and, you know, to your point about thought experiments, the beauty of this system is that it is a formal feature of it, that the fact that you are advancing an explanation for something and positing predictions that would come from that explanation has nothing to say about whether you believe it's true, right? In fact, when you're working scientifically, the right thing to do is to generate as many hypotheses to explain an observation as you can, and then test to see which of them is correct, which means that you've got simultaneous simultaneously advanced, mutually exclusive ideas. That's part of the part of the nature of the work. And so if we simply brought the discipline of this hypothetical detective thinking, to questions of conspiracy and collusion, we free ourselves from the madness that happens when, you know, even voicing a conspiracy is now taken to be an embrace of it. And that is taken to be a sign of some sort of mental failure.

**Greg Lukianoff** 39:37

Yeah, well, and that's what I was getting out by saying, you know, what your problem is kind of jokingly, but it does seem that so much progress comes from us. Trying to get into our prefrontal cortex, you know, basically kind of like putting our assumptions to one side and trying to actually bring it forward based on evidence and that kind of stuff. But it's really important to remind everyone you know, like, There's a reason why, you know, rational thinking was a radical idea of when it was proposed, you know, by by Greek thinkers or Buddhist thinkers, you know, for example, the discernment, you know, as it's called in the Buddhist Buddhist tradition, because everything about human beings, you know, almost everything pulls us against, we're superstitious, we're tribal word, we're gonna sing our own biases, and blindness, all this kind of stuff. But which also, you know, it's a little digression, but it's something I care a lot about. It's funny in these arguments that you see on campus is you can see things that basically say, we only recently discovered this thing called bias. And by bias, they mean prejudice. And that's kind of amazing, though, that they put it in the language of bias, because it's kind of like what do you think the Constitution is about? What do you think separation of powers is about? What do you think all of these things were partially because we were lucky enough to be founded as a country during a period where there was a lot of rational thinking about how badly and well we make decisions and therefore splitting things up and having checks and balances and all this kind of stuff. Apps. Absolutely brilliant.

**Bret** 41:05

Well, so when you said earlier that you depart from the, the norms by advocating for the idea that our principles are superior, I'm not shy about this. I mean, to me, it seems like another empirical question. I mean, on the one hand, it is certainly true that our system was counter intuitive on its founding, and has spread. Yeah, right. People have seen what it does, and they have embraced it in large numbers. Yes. So that suggests something about it. I would also argue that you know, you to say whether it is superior or not, one has to identify a criterion that you are, or several criteria that you are trying to maximize. But I think it would be hard to do better than realized liberty, right? that to the extent that a human being is a fantastically capable creature that can engage in incite innovation, compassion, the creation of beauty, and all of these things, that it's wonderful when a system liberates us to do that. And that, therefore, there is some basis to judge our system. And to the extent that there are others out there that do very well on those evaluations, most of them are building on the prototype that was set up here.

**Greg Lukianoff** 42:33

Yeah, yeah. And it's interesting, because I've always been someone who's like a big fan of David Hume, and a lot of the Scottish Enlightenment, I've always been pretty hard on the romantics. And I think that a lot of the evil of the world came out of the post, you know, the post enlightenment period. And I still think that, however, I have developed a little bit of a soft spot in my heart, you know, for what it must have been like for those early days of liberty that basically kind of like, what, what can I see about the beauty and complexity of the world and about my own nature, if I'm freed from a narrow expectation of religious expectation of what every single person in the world should be like, and I get at an emotional level, how powerful that must have been. And interestingly, at the same time, she's interestingly, at the same time, we got to learn more about human nature because of that. So what happened was interesting feedback loop, the rationalist keep on kind of studying, but once they actually see what a full flowering of humanity could look like, with everybody from, you know, Walt Whitman to Oscar Wilde, Einstein, it got we in this core relationship of liberty and learning, we got to learn a lot more about human nature.

**Bret** 43:39

Absolutely. Now, here, I actually have no idea what you'll think of this, but my sense, yeah, well, we'll see about that. So my sense is that the founding structures of the US were an absolutely brilliant prototype, flawed, in many ways short, but every prototype will be

**Greg Lukianoff** 44:03

cynical and pessimistic at the same time, that's quite cynical and optimistic at the same time, sorry,

**Bret** 44:07

well, they had the correct tensions identified for the most part, well, they couldn't possibly have anticipated the technological world that these protections would need to, to function in. And so in some sense, I have the feeling that as brilliant as the founding documents are, that they are inadequate to our modern puzzle that they point in the right direction to what problems we should be trying to solve. But for example, I think the founders were keenly aware of the danger of, of malignant governance. They were not nearly frightened enough of the kinds of scaling effects that the internet would bring about and the fact that the kinds of power that they feared might not be in governmental hands at the point that we face The next battle with them that they would be in private hands, which I think is the problem that you were grappling with a moment ago about well, but but

**Greg Lukianoff** 45:06

but but to be clear in defense of the of the founders, one of the things that they added besides tremendous optimism about human nature and realism and pessimism about what what we're actually liking groups was flexibility was the ability to actually change it. And that's something that, you know, no religion, you know, would would allow for is like, well, we're kind of assuming we're not right about everything, and that that epistemic humility they had from the beginning, we're gonna make it hard to change it, but it's not impossible to change it to adapt to new to new to new changes, so that they basically anticipated the fact that they couldn't possibly have known everything and allowed for changes just they had to be that it has to jump through a series hurdle. And what is on us is that we're too partisan divided to actually be able to, you know, to make any of that those kind of supermajority type situations, they're basically impossible in the current environment.

**Bret** 45:59

Alright, two points. One, I agree with you about their farsightedness with respect to building in a self correction mechanism I still think we may have outstripped the capacity of that mechanism is at least as it's understood, and that there's a huge danger. So I think, you know, we do effectively need the upgraded constitution, but we dare not open the process that we create it because it would be a disaster if

**Greg Lukianoff** 46:24

we did get so many stupid things. We've missed amendments you've ever seen in your Yeah, so we.

**Bret** 46:29

So the mechanism is, is not up to the challenge of modernity. But I do want to point out, you might want to are you sitting down, Greg? Better, okay, good. Now you can stand up, but you might want to hold on to something because what I'm about to say is so mind blowing that it could result in a disequilibrium. The religions also have an update capacity. But it's an it's an evolutionary one. And so, for example, Martin Luther, nailing the 95 theses on the church door results in a well what in biology, we might call a speciation event, what in computer science, you might call a forking event, right. And basically, it creates a new version of Christianity, which then forks into a bunch of different versions of Protestantism. And the point is sectarian disagreements over how things are to be understood, what traditions are to be held, which ones are to be jettisoned? That is the fodder that selection functions on and what we see his religions are constantly in battle to figure out, you know, you know, does your version of Christianity listen to the pope? Or not? Right, you can keep your Catholicism, but you jettison the Pope and you become, you know, the Greek Orthodox church or something like this. So become American Catholics. Well, American, and that would be one of many different versions where, you know, the book is

**Greg Lukianoff** 48:08

the same as by the way raised Catholic just, I'm picking on my own people,

**Bret** 48:11

picking on your own people that it's it's, it was at least forgivable until five minutes ago, I don't know if it's still within the rules. But But in any case, yes, the update mechanism is different. In the constitutional case, the founders gave us a conscious mechanism for intentionally changing the structure in the religious case, what we have is an evolutionary and unconscious mechanism for update. But I would argue they amount to something very similar.

**Greg Lukianoff** 48:40

Hmm, interesting. Yeah, I like it. I'm happy, john, Jonathan Roush on your show. Now, not yet. He's coming out with a book. That is awesome. And I'm totally jealous of it. It's called the Constitution of knowledge. And, you know, like the some of the stuff you were describing before, it just made me think of his theory of liberal science. Just the idea, and I think it deserves theory rather than the hypothesis in this case, just just the idea that the Enlightenment produced a system for deciding things. It's not quite the scientific method, actually, you could kind of include the scientific method as a sub part of liberal science. And it's, you know, something that he wrote in his 1993 book, kindly inquisitors, but he's really expanding on that now. And he's, what I like is he's taking on both, you know, academia and journalism, you know, with a left facing threat, but then the epistemic disaster. That is the Trump administration. And he's, he's taking it from both directions I've got I've gotten to read some of it so far, and I think he'd love it.

**Bret** 49:43

Awesome. Well, so I'm now speaking without knowledge of the topic on which we were talking, but I would say it sounds I would argue that we have the scientific method, but that that method is embedded in a larger method, which you might call liberal science. Yeah. And the fact is many features of that larger informal agreement are essential for it to work well. In other words, nowhere in the scientific method, will you see the process by which we innovate our way out of a cul de sac. Right? It's not captured there. It's captured in the habits of mind and discussion amongst the sorts of people who become fixated on the way fields get stuck. All right. And so getting a field unstuck is an unruly process in which you entertain all sorts of outlandish possibilities, most of which are simply wrong. And you then end up finding some sort of path out of your off your local optimum onto a higher peak. Yeah. So anyway, yes. I would love to see if somebody has captured that and described it properly. I would love to see the sort of expanded scientific method understood well, because frankly, it only does do so much good to teach students, you know, observe or hypothesize, predict test, right? That that's part of it, for sure. But it ain't the whole thing by a longshot.

**Greg Lukianoff** 51:15

No, absolutely not.

**Bret** 51:18

Yeah. So all right, if we maybe switch topics just a little bit. Can I ask you, you and I met in must be late. 2017. Is that sound right? It was

**Greg Lukianoff** 51:29

at the fire at the fire Professor conference.

**Bret** 51:34

Yeah, the fire Professor calm.

**Greg Lukianoff** 51:36

Our speaker was was at L trigger.

**Bret** 51:40

Yes, it was a striker. She was great. Man. It was a great talk.

**Greg Lukianoff** 51:44

You know what came out of that conference. By the way, Brett, there were two professors there. One was Italian one was Spanish, and they were so inspired by how lively it was. And then they also they also really stumbled on my heights working got really excited about it. And they invited me over to a conference in Italy. I thought just to be on a panel and then I found out that they had made this giant like exhibit you know, based on and I was like completely floored I'm like, are we are we big in Italy suddenly like it was so the fact that the the the spirit of the of the fire Professor conference gets people all riled up just makes me it just makes me very happy.

**Bret** 52:29

Yeah, well, it was it was a great conference. And I can absolutely see if somebody wasn't deeply steeped in your way of thinking them showing up at that conference and being stunned by it makes makes perfect sense to me. Let me ask you, though. So you and Jonathan Hite had done your initial article. And you were already thinking very deeply about the hazard of what was taking place on college campuses. And you had formulated the idea of IGN the basically the internet generation and the fact that they were cognitively seemingly quite different from the generations that had preceded them. At some point, the Evergreen debacle happened yeah. Do you remember? This was before we knew each other? Do you remember your encounter with that material and what you thought in light of what you had already imagined was taking place

**Greg Lukianoff** 53:30

this and your debacle that was the spring of 2017 right?

**Bret** 53:34

It started may 23 of 2017 just before 10 in the morning Wow.

**Greg Lukianoff** 53:40

Um, I remember hearing about it and by that point, I was so shocked and sad and jaded because you know, the Milo riots which we covered in some detail in the book, I don't care what you think about Miley innopolis. But that was insane. And then we had, you know, the wonderful Allison Stanger assaulted you know, defending a professor she disagrees with Middlebury, you have the surrounding of the of the place where Heather McDonald was speaking at Claremont McKenna. And so basically, like when that started happening to you, I was already so sad and cynical. But yeah, I remember that being especially outrageous and wanting to and it's interesting because sometimes the cases that are the most spectacular are the ones that fire gets very cautious around because there just seems to be too many moving parts and we're very serious about making sure we had our facts straight. And honestly, Brett your case was really hard to keep track of how many freaking things were happening at the same time on a wave. There was a there was like said, I use I use actually now in my slideshows to talk about, you know, I talked about the different threads that create problems on campus. I talked about legal issues, I talked about polarization issues, I talked about, you know, things related to social justice. And then at the very end, I actually put yours in psych. And by the way, all of these things were happening at the same time with the Brett Weinstein case.

**Bret** 55:00

Yeah, it. So I, you know, I don't know that it was the most what word did you use? I don't know, I forgotten what we're doing is something to the effect of it being the most dangerous. I don't know that it was I think it certainly was the most colorful. And I you know, it's interesting to hear that it was kind

**Greg Lukianoff** 55:20

of comprehensive because it just included, you know, because you even had sort of backlash from right wingers you had, you know, administrators showing acting like administrators it was it was, it was like a symphony.

**Bret** 55:32

Yes. It had it all. I think I think Benjamin Boyce is actually writing a musical about it, which I think will be it's it's the perfect way to do it, I think but but yes, it was it was all inclusive. It had all of the the layers, and the it had an obsession with documentation. Right. So you remember the canoe meeting? Yes. Yes. The wonderful canoe meeting.

**Greg Lukianoff** 55:59

So that is the one of the weirdest, saddest, it and the administration, so many cases that they acted like, and I don't mean this. I mean, this is a very literal sense, like children,

**Bret** 56:10

or like, cult members who have been reduced to this infantilize state, old bread. But as I was sitting in that meeting, I was having this this, I wouldn't say despondent, but it was next door to the feeling of this despondent sense. Because I didn't think I was going to be able to explain the absurdity of the situation to anyone, right, I thought that it was going to be impossible for me to even I was even concerned, I wouldn't be able to explain it to Heather, right, who was only a couple blocks away at the time. And I realized that they evergreen had these very fancy, they have basically a television studio, and they were recording the meeting. And I thought, Oh, no, they're going to record it. But they're going to realize how bad this makes them look, and they're not going to release it. Is there anything I can do to force them? to release it? Right? And I was pondering that question. And it turned out Nope, they didn't realize at all what they had filmed. And they put it out and was like, well, thank goodness, at least now I don't sound like a crazy person. Yeah, right. Because it actually happened. They caught the whole thing. Yeah. Yeah.

**Greg Lukianoff** 57:23

I had a similar situation, because I was the one to videotape Nicholas Christakis. If you are that was me. Yeah. In the Solomon quad. Wow, leading by the way to like horrifying, kind of like conspiracy theories, like how did Greg lukianoff end up in this? And it's like, well, it's pretty simple. Erica, who I adore, and Nicholas had invited me to speak there. I just, it's true, I ended up in the middle of a firestorm kind of kind of shocked. And so I was videotaping it. And the reason why I released it was because there was at least a dozen other people videotaping it, including the Yale Daily News. And they should forever be ashamed of themselves. Because I was told that night by someone who worked for the news, but was critical of this, that they were planning to release the footage of the confrontation in a way that will make Nicolas look back. And it's like, oh, I guess I have to post my video now. So I put I posted the video showing him showing, you know, absolutely amazing composure in the face of such shoddy nasty treatment. And keeping in mind also the coming after his wife, you know, they were going after his kids who were there, they asked his son to sign a generalization of his mother. And he's still like, somehow Nicholas was just amazing. He just, he just held it together. And so yeah, for very different reasons. Like they they didn't the the Yale Daily News refused to put anything up because they they thought it made the students look bad. But of course, it made them look bad, because they were not behaving very well.

**Bret** 58:57

Yeah, no, it revealed. It's not It's not that it made them look bad. I mean, yes. And so this was the thing that was completely missing at evergreen was there was no awareness that what they were revealing what looked in the world, right? It didn't need anybody to editorialize about it, it was self evident what was going on, and it had a lot of elements of, you know, cult and bullying and this really heavy coercion. And, obviously, you know, so many things that were said were just completely at odds with the evidence. So thank goodness, at least that it has happened in a couple places where I mean, I guess, wow, what would the what would the Yale situation have looked like if you had not captured that?

**Greg Lukianoff** 59:43

Yeah, no, it was Yeah, it would have been hard to convey what was really going on there. And that was something that was frustrating because for years fire had been saying that, you know, students are kind of apathetic, you know, that they're not all that political. be motivated. And then, you know, we sort of watch what we asked for, because we got it. But so we suddenly have this explosion of student protests in the in the fall semester of 2015, you know, organized all around the country. But then to you know, we're like, Alright, cool protest and like, oh, but they're demanding less free speech. They're demanding that this newspaper be shut down, that these administrators be fired. And it was very clear that they're following the pattern of, you know, find a provocation, no matter how, how small or tenuous and then make it into a big deal on demand that you know, the UMass newspaper be shut down, or Dean Spellman get fired or Nicholas Christakis. I mean, and that's the killer is like those students didn't have a better friend on campus than Nicholas and Erica Christakis. They were truly, there's some of the best and smartest people I've ever met. Yeah, and I think that one thing that they weren't expecting, though, was the fact that since you could actually see some of this, it didn't, it didn't look as good on film, as they thought it did.

**Bret** 1:01:07

Or it did in the venues that they, you know, if they were playing to an online audience that they knew then these looked like wins. But they couldn't help but it being broadcast to a larger world that understood it was way off.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:01:20

Yeah, nothing like that. Oh, and while we still have some time, I did want to plug one thing while I'm on here. Oh, please, and I think you'll dig it. So one thing that fire really tries to do is, you know, we tried to spread the good word of free speech and due process and academic freedom, but we tried to also be creative about it, or we're most known for our for the individual incidents cases where students get in trouble. Professors get in trouble and that's our bread and butter, so to speak. But we always tried to do more creative thing so we did the documentary Can we take a joke about canceled culture, but made in 2015? We did you know, freedom from speech we did coddling the American mind, which I'm really proud to say is still reaching people. But my former assistant who's now the Vice President of communications, because he's amazing. went out and he's not a filmmaker went on his own to make a documentary specifically about the life and times of IRA Glasser, who was the head of the ACLU right after Skokie, all the way up through 2001. And it it's amazing, like the film that they that they actually made, and this was just a labor of love by non filmmakers. But it comes out I think today and it's I really recommend it to everybody because it's really inspiring because they shows they show someone who's politically liberal, that is willing to like debate bill Buckley even take bill Buckley to his first football first baseball game, who talks about the relationship between free speech and diversity and inclusion, frankly, in the, in the context of Jackie Robinson. And of course, even being willing to defend the Nazis in Skokie, who, by the way, you get to see by them being revealed. They look like absolute, like the absolute idiots they were if they weren't allowed to, you wouldn't have known how ridiculous they look, there's a moment when, when this idiot is organizing this Nazi rally, where he's just kind of there's little things wrong. And it looks like he's just about to yell out, you're returning this Nazi rally into a disgrace. Like, it's absolutely comedic when you get to see what this guy looks like in real life. But yeah, it's called the mighty IRA, and we're really psyched about it.

**Bret** 1:03:21

Awesome. I am definitely going to check that out. I must say, it's not no surprise that you and I would agree on this. But yeah, they're right cure for obnoxious speech is to let it be aired so people can see what it actually is. And yeah, unfortunately, you know, it's very clear that this era in which censorship is back with a vengeance is also an era in which we are losing agreement on the most basic stuff, you know, whether or not two plus two equals four, whether or not men and women are different, like we have lost the ability to agree on anything. And I think people do not fully appreciate the danger of that.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:04:03

Yeah, no, I, it worries me. And yeah, I remember when people were saying, Oh, well, you know, when these students get to the real world, that'll straighten them out. And we were definitely saying from the very beginning, it's like, well, no, if there's enough of them, they'll change the real world into a very strange place. And what, what drives me nuts is that I hate and I have people who are in charge of all sorts of different companies come to us and say, it's like, Listen, we've got a crop from this elite school, or these elite schools. And it's dysfunctional, like things that used to be just interpersonal tensions have turned up immediately going to human resources. And then like almost complete parallelization of some organizations. But they always say, but you can't say what's what organization This is, but it's gonna bring it's gonna bring organizations down. It probably already has, you know what, what happened at the at the New York Times James Bennett that was absolutely this dynamic. You know, definitely there were older, older people as well who are against them. But the whole dynamic of just the, you know, if it's, if we can call it will you make a strong argument that somehow this is and of course, they rhetorically use the this is threatening our lives argument, which is the ultimate rhetorical cards you can play to get rid of eight editor who is specifically hired to try to rock the boat back in 2016. It's this summer, I hope that I feel like the fever starting to break a little bit, at least this current fever, and that maybe things aren't as illiberal and scary as they were, maybe in, say, August, but it's gonna come back. At some point, if we don't do something about it.

**Bret** 1:05:44

Well, it's gonna come back and a lot is riding on the election. And it's not clear that either path actually addresses the issue. But so, yeah, it's interesting that you see it as possibly the fever having broken I certainly hope that's the case. I think we're in a great deal of danger. But we

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:06:03

are just, I feel like there is at least some amount of pushback that I'm seeing where people aren't immediately getting fired for saying, you know, what would have once been considered mildly controversial stuff?

**Bret** 1:06:15

Yeah. So you said it's going to bring down institutions, I think, if anything, you're being too cautious that, at some level, the game theory is very, very clear. And to the extent that you have different if you had universities with different commitments to wokeness, those that were woke would fail, because they would be producing inferior graduates who were less capable of thinking clearly about all of the things that college is supposed to arm you to think about. But when every college does it, the point is, everything downstream of those colleges is going to suffer those flaws, which means that the private sector firms that depend on those graduates will be hobbled relative to any presumably foreign competitors that aren't similarly hobbled. So effectively, you're looking at everything at the higher scales being jeopardized simultaneously, which ultimately means the nation will be rendered incapable of fending off its competitors abroad, which could restructure the way the whole planet functions. And frankly, it could restructure the level of commitment to liberty that the planet has, because the US has been bedrock to that commitment to labor. Yeah,

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:07:31

that's really funny, you should say that, because that's exactly what one of the things I'm working on an article about right now about how just by having an increasing incidence of actual, you know, papers being withdrawn and research really being seriously called into question, at a time, when higher education has already, there's already a lot of skepticism about it, because people are realizing they can do this stuff online, they can do this they can do they can do this stuff at home, and it's ridiculously expensive. Why not do it in other places. And I think that the, the the downstream effects of American higher education, turning into something of a laughingstock, you know, globally will have very dire results for the commute the the, the community, the educational community, and well, and we'll be on

**Bret** 1:08:20

and well beyond, because at some level, even if you acknowledge as you and I both did, at the top of this discussion, that there is plenty of inequity in the US and that it is not evenly distributed. The fact is killing the goose that lays the golden eggs, even if those golden eggs are not evenly distributed is going to be a loss for everyone. And you know, who's going to lose worst, are the most downtrodden people, the people who get the shaft every time. So, yeah, this is an incredibly foolish squandering of the power and position that we have. And it's not going to create a better world for anybody downstream of it.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:08:59

Yeah, no, I, I am worried to say the least. And I got a two year old and a four year old, which makes me all the more paranoid.

**Bret** 1:09:09

Yes. Although that's young enough, that maybe the dust will have settled and will be on to something smarter than this by the time you need to send them into the world.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:09:19

Well, if something can't continue the way it's going, it won't.

**Bret** 1:09:21

Yeah, well, that's, yeah, it's a very frightening thing you've just said. Alright, I want to ask you about a couple last things before I let you go. So I want to talk to you about the observation about the relationship of what we might have called social justice warriors. Back in 2015, we might now call wokeness. And the relationship of that belief system to cognitive therapy.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:09:55

Oh, they're just completely incompatible. In what way? Well, why And it's one of the things you know. As I explained in my book, I had anxiety and depression, cognitive behavioral therapy saved my life. But as I was studying cognitive behavioral therapy, it's perfectly given what I did it was blazingly obvious that campuses seem to be teaching everybody to engage in these cognitive distortions. And this includes binary thinking, which is either or thinking, mind reading, assuming that you know where someone's coming from. Probably the biggest one is overgeneralization is a cognitive distortion. And as you're teaching yourself, all of these, all of these habits, hold on again. Wow, it won't turn back on anyway. As you're teaching yourself all of these habits, particularly working on campus, it was as if universities and administrators were saying, do overgeneralize do engage in binary thinking and, and they are that's exactly what a lot of this ideology comes down to. And I think that's actually one of the reasons why CBT has been shown to be somewhat less effective with this generation. Because there are too many dogmas that rely on overgeneralization required binary thinking attack catastrophizing, for example. So the two, that the cognitive, cognitive behavioral therapy and getting over cognitive distortions, which is also a better way to argue a better way to think a better way to understand the world better is to try to address these in yourself. A lot of the social justice stuff the most toxic of it relies on these things. So they're completely they're like matter and anti matter. And unfortunately, what I see happening is rather than go with the, you know, the reality based approach, people are rejecting the obvious lessons of CBT.

**Bret** 1:11:44

It's so interesting. So a, I find this a very provocative insight and an important one, it fits exactly with what I've encountered, and so many others have, as well. But there is some incredible process by which everything functional is being turned on its head, it's almost as if there's some algorithm that seeks that which works to invalidate it. So I remember, you know, before evergreen melted down, I remember the first time I was in a faculty meeting, and I said something about the hazard of what was taking place to enlightenment values. I didn't think the idea of enlightenment values being a good thing could possibly be controversial in a roomful of academics. But what I got back was pushback that enlightenment values were this oppressive system, and I was just stunned the first time I heard it. But then, you know, downstream a couple years, and we're looking at the invalidation of basic arithmetic, we're dealing with the invalidation of the idea of a colorblind society, we're dealing with the invalidation of the idea that there is something logical that is independent of power. It's just like every single thing on which you could start a reboot to some sort of agreement is being sabotaged. Right. And, you know, I think you're what I find so compelling about your, your point about cognitive behavioral therapy, is that you're talking about the basic ability of the mind to cope, is being sabotaged by an ideology that is going to make people weaker, more vulnerable, more volatile. I mean, it's crazy.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:13:40

Yeah, now it's at, and here's, and here's where I actually edit because I, I work in a job that can make you very angry. And that's one of the reasons why you see me compulsively cracking jokes on Twitter is because it's just like, you know, it's, it's a coping mechanism. But one thing that I've tried to do, since we are really trying to change the culture, is when I write something, I tend to take out all the, all the anger, you know, I get rid of the adverbs, you know, I go after everything that shows anger. But there's one thing that I am very angry about, and I didn't say in the book, is we know, this generation has higher levels of anxiety and depression. We know this generation has higher levels of suicide. Now, I think that some of that ideology that creeps in early is playing a part in it. But also I think things like, you know, the wealth stratification and there's other other factors at play, but to know that, and then have students show up on your campus and to tell them, I Oh, yeah, I know, you have really high rates of suicide and depression and self harm. By the way, here's an ideology in which you are evil. And you almost all of you, with some exceptions are both oppressed and oppressors. And there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. Other than feel deep, deep guilt, guilt and shame. You should isolate yourself from other people. You These are your characteristics. You have no luck. self control, you have no individual identity, have a nice day. And there's something really messed up about particularly when you know, these kids are already coming in really sad and really kind of like suffering to tell them something that hopeless, but also that you need to do something about it, but you'll never actually fix it. Well, I've never, I've never seen that sort of sadder, less productive ideology. I mean, actually, no, I've seen lots, I've seen downright harmful ones. But as far as one that doesn't seem to want to get you anywhere. So like laughter George Floyd that I was gonna immediately being kind of like, Well, look, there's, you know, definitely there's police reform that we definitely need to do, there's logical steps that we could actually take that we've been meaning to, so maybe this is the chance, and instead that opportunity being squandered and turned into something about, like, let's get kids kicked out of college, let's get professors in trouble for four paws, essentially, it's like, we've wanted this opportunity to help people in the real world to participate in this weird, pointless, sad, full dance.

**Bret** 1:16:04

Yes, and in fact, what we saw was that students who figured out how to achieve were actually socially punished by there would be peers, for doing so there's this belief, you know, that achievement is itself you're having capitulated to the system, rather than you empowering yourself to do good in the world. And, you know, I mean, you, you don't deliver the the punchline of the setup you just gave, but basically, you're arguing that this is going to kill people, that you're taking people who are already vulnerable, because they already have anxiety and self doubt. And you are creating an unwinnable circumstance, which is exactly the kind of hopeless situation that does lead people to hurt themselves. And I agree with you, you know, I, as a professor, I very keenly felt an obligation to see students and to help them see clearly in part because things do look pretty hopeless until somebody helps you. I don't know, navigate the world and understand where you where you fit in it and just to see a movement, undoing that kind of work in some sort of generic blanket across the board. Super rapid way, is very frightening.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:17:25

Yeah. Yeah. And ultimately relying on tactics to win arguments indoors in the 1990s.

**Bret** 1:17:31

Yeah. Once you say that, you're right about that. All right. Last question. Where do you think we're headed?

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:17:38

Oh, I hope I was always I always hope the last question will be, how dare you? Where do I think we're headed um, I'm definitely a lot less confident in that prediction. that I that I would have been maybe five years ago, things are gonna get worse before they get better. For sure. I am so optimistic about the upcoming election that my family and I are getting out of DC for the entire month of November. And I love my I love this town like I like DC as a city in its own right. And I'm scared about what November is gonna look like and people are like what specifically I'm like when you can think of 14 different possible possible scenarios it might be time to take your kids and go in the short term I think things are going to be in the next I'm not looking forward to the next six months if there is a landslide that would help because what certainty one way or another would help but the idea that we actually have you know someone saying a president saying that the the election is flawed, there's going to be that's going to be radicalizing like the the old McVeigh types you know from the 1990s who blow up stuff to so that's going to be incredibly ugly so basically I'm predicting things are going to be very ugly for the next six months. I don't really know what things are going to look like after after COVID the you know, I'm super I'm hopeful that 20 2021 will be a better year I think it almost statistically has to be a better year. But you know, when it comes to the the the long scheme, long scheme of thing, I'm bullish on the human race. I think as long as we don't kill the golden goose of not just of producing wealth and growth, which we desperately needed to keep, which is much more essential to our society that then people seem to get us perfectly in some in some of these circles. I'm also very excited about you know, technological progress. And I do think the long term health of free speech is better than you would think given all the all the things conspiring against it for one very simple reason that you alluded to before. It works really well. societies that actually can talk about their problems tend to do better. But for the next six months If I could get a crock I cracked a really long convoluted joke on Twitter about this about how time travel is possible. And we know that if you can, you know get any fragment of the speed of light, you start actually having noticeable time shifts, and therefore, I'd like the country to take the sacrifice and move me and my family into I don't know, like may of next year's possible.

**Bret** 1:20:23

I like it. Oh, yeah, I agree with yet it seems like there's an awful lot of potential energy built up in the system.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:20:30

Yeah, I read David French's book divided we fall. And I also have to remind my fellow left of center people, it's like, this is one of the few people who's right of center who was actually trying so don't don't kick them away. But he made such a plausible case for for the country dividing. And one thing that he did that I think was really important that people tend to, you know, forget is what the consequences for world peace would be if suddenly the US were divided. And the number one, number one and two powers in the world. Were China and Russia.

**Bret** 1:21:04

Yes. So can I ask you, I have looked at the map. And unfortunately, the cities are kind of distributed about the place in such a way that they can't really secede from the rural parts of the US. Have you ever noticed this?

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:21:20

Oh, yeah. I talked about population density, and how much of how much of a predictor it is of, of where you are politically, and you're right. I do think that probably the most plausible one would be some kind of like California, secession was the one that I think would that seems most plausible to me,

**Bret** 1:21:39

California. Well, please. Okay. Yeah. I mean, we talk sometimes, I think mostly jokingly about Cascadia up here. But yeah, I must say, I'm stuck with the recognition that there's not a geographic mechanism to divide the country that solves the puzzle as it stands.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:22:00

Well, that's one of the reasons why I like I like David French's closest thing to a conclusion, which is, let's get comfortable with federalism again, you know, essentially, like if the states are going to be this different, let them be that different, you know, within the Bill of Rights, of course, because, you know, they should be obliged by that. But you know, if countries, if states want to experiment with everything from health care to, as they already are, you know, medical marijuana and that kind of stuff, then we should definitely remember that we, you know, we've been pretty disparate before. And as long as you, as long as you allow for something that allows a lot of internal diversity, we can actually potentially weather it, but if we, if we try too hard to have impose uniformity, we're gonna snap.

**Bret** 1:22:48

Do you think we could give the woke revolution a state, or loan it to them, and then when they discover how dangerous what they're playing with is maybe we could be generous and welcome them back and start over?

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:23:01

I wouldn't wish that upon my darkest enemy.

**Bret** 1:23:04

I hear Yeah. Yeah, now that I hear myself say, it's a terrible idea.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:23:08

It's a I mean, my my, here's my family story, my great grandfather was a serf, he bought his way into freedom in 1858. And immediately lukianov started doing very well. We became professors and lawyers and judges and landowners and all this kind of stuff. We were peasants who made good and in every any other country, that would be considered commendable. And instead, there was an ideology that my family had been fighting, you know, ever since we could read essentially said that was over simplistic, and that was usually by intellectuals, first generation educated people. And meanwhile, the peasants were like, actually, I'd like things to be 15% better, you know, it'd be lovely if I could own a couple more things and have some more time off. But the but the intellectuals wanted the perfect revolution. So for example, in 1862, was that they assassinated Tsar Alexander the second on his way to create a Duma on his way to create a parliament, because these radicals thought that that wasn't gonna that that would be too good. And people wouldn't want their glorious, you know, Bolshevik Revolution at that point. So the end so like, the progress of Russia was stalled by people who by this category of people, and they wanted to shoot people like me and my family in the back of the head because we were educated but didn't agree. And that's one of the reason why we had to get the hell out of there. And I've seen what these ideologies can do once they take on that religious fervor. And having to fight it again, terrifies me, but hopefully, you know, people will not let that happen again.

**Bret** 1:24:40

Well, I have to say, I can't help but hear an echo of evergreen and so many other places in what you just described, you know, the idea of you becoming a villain because you're educated and you don't agree. Yeah, that feels like exactly what happened. I will say, Greg, I'm not all that hopeful about where We're headed I agree with you about the danger of what's coming. But I'm really pleased to have you on the right side.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:25:08

Absolutely, Brett, and I'm looking forward to seeing you again. I'm really I really hate the fact that we had to miss the professor conference this year that like, that's become a highlight of my year.

**Bret** 1:25:19

Yeah, the, the restrictions on travel and gathering are more dangerous than I think people have yet spotted. I mean, even just the fact that Americans are going to be sidelined from collaborating internationally in person, if you know, other parts of the world, figure out how to solve this, and we just decided to give up. But, anyway, yes, hopefully, hopefully, 2021 doesn't decide to teach 2020 a lesson by being even more dramatic.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:25:53

Well, Real pleasure. Let me know when this is up, and, you know, stay in touch. And of course, if you know anybody who gets in trouble on campus, because I'm sure they come to you send us

**Bret** 1:26:04

Oh, my God, you should see my Well, you know, you don't need to see my inbox because you've got your own inbox full of the same stuff. Okay. Well, thanks, Greg lukianoff. This has been a real pleasure and very eye opening, I look forward to our next meeting. And if not that, our next discussion, where can people find you?

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:26:21

At the fire.org. That's my organization and I also have a blog on it. That's just for me called the Eternally radical idea,

**Bret** 1:26:30

eternally radical idea. And people of course, if they haven't read, coddling of the American mind, they should not pass go. They should not collect $200 they should go get a copy of this book and read it immediately.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:26:40

I'm very I'm very proud of it. I'm doing a series called catching up with coddling updating the data. And unfortunately, most of the trends we saw back then are shockingly worse.

**Bret** 1:26:50

Oh, well, that's, that's not lovely. No, no, no. All right. Thanks so much, Greg. Absolutely. Thanks, everyone. We'll see you next time.

**Greg Lukianoff** 1:26:59

Great chat.