

PANDEMIC OF LUNACY

*How to Think Clearly When
Everyone Around You Seems Crazy*



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To my grandfather, who asked the right question

. . . the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations . . .

—Isaiah 25:7

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Introduction

Some Crazy Ideas Are Deadly Serious



*In reading the history of nations, we find that, like individuals, they have their whims and their peculiarities; their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care not what they do. We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first.**

Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest—forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries.†

We need to face our society's problems cheerfully—but to face them cheerfully we need, above all, to face them.

I think most people know that. When I talk to groups about social topics, I am often asked two questions. “What’s wrong with us?” “Why are we going crazy?” The craziness of the culture has become so obvious to everyone in the room that they don’t have to explain what they mean. It isn’t necessary to go into the details of tampon dispensers in boys’ bathrooms.

* Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841).

† Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968).

This book is about the first of those two questions: the what, not the why. I think I can help understand our culture’s descent into lunacy. I think I can help explain how the descent can happen. I think I can say something about why it spreads and develops so quickly once begun. I think I can even help see through it.

But why is it happening at all? “It’s because of P.” “It’s because of Q.” Yes, yes. Any sane and competent thinker can list a dozen contributing causes without breaking a sweat. I’ve heard them all, from the absence of fathers to the trickle-down influence of the late-medieval philosophy of nominalism. Some of them are mentioned in this book. Yet what caused all those causes, and what made them come together all at once? No one knows that. No one could ever know that.

On the other hand, if we can come to a better understanding of *what is* happening—especially about what is going wrong with the way we think—then maybe we don’t need to know the “why.” After all, nothing *forces* us to swallow these delusions. Ultimately, we swallow them because we choose to be persuaded by them, even against better arguments. Maybe we can become a little saner. Now there is a happy thought!

People who come to my talks are a self-selected bunch who don’t need to be convinced of the lunatic mood of the times. But when I tell friends who are only moderately engaged with social issues some of the things taught in universities like the one where I teach, or which are abroad in elite culture, I get the opposite response. Many respond with disbelief or giggles, or they say, “That’s just a passing fad.”

It isn’t that they’ve never heard of such ideas, but that they can’t imagine that educated people really hold them, much less that they insist on them. *You can’t be serious. Nobody can really believe that there are ninety-five genders or that men can get pregnant!*

That’s the *wrong* way to be cheerful. Perhaps I shouldn’t carp, since I agree that these notions are crackpot. But when people in politics, scholarship, punditry, and everyday life treat “culture wars” as unserious—or as less serious than things like economics and foreign policy—I wonder how serious they are.¹

Take “gender” again, though gender insanity is merely one of the more bizarre of the many forms of craziness discussed in this book. I agree with the sane majority that not only do we come in two sexes but that deep down every one of us knows it. And yes, I know that some who don’t believe in the nonsense about innumerable genders and about people in the wrong bodies pretend that they do. Nonetheless, many of those who press such manias are deadly serious.

I don’t mean that they aren’t putting over a con. They may be grifters, capitalizing on mania to gain status, wealth, power, and attention—but it’s their mania, too. They work desperately to remain in denial, to avoid thinking of the obvious. The exhausting labor of self-deception pushes them into ever more extreme behavior. Just as lies beget lies, self-deceptions beget new self-deceptions.

Moreover, those who press these delusions have with them the universities, school boards, professional and athletic associations, the entertainment industry, many courts and churches, one of the major political parties, part of the other, and most of the media, including most of the social media. Although a barrage of presidential executive orders has weakened their hold over just one domain, federal agencies, these orders have been strongly resisted. Besides, the barrage mostly reversed the previous administration’s barrage, and so long as the underlying thinking does not change, a new administration could reverse the reversal. The constituencies of the delusionists are made up largely of people to whom nothing else matters, people who spend their time trying to wear the rest of us down (and often earning a comfortable living at it). Since the rest of us have other things to do, that isn’t difficult.

Unfortunately, derangement has real-world consequences. Against everyday delusions, everyday sanity is fighting for life, and the everyday lives of adults and children are increasingly disordered. Our age didn’t invent all these lunacies, but in ours they run riot.

Why isn’t it serious that we surgically disfigure children and pump them full of hormones to prevent the onset of puberty, then call this “care”? Or that medical journals publish articles discussing whether surgical amputation is

the best treatment for people with sound limbs who “identify as paraplegics” or are “distressed” by having all their fingers?² Or that “Drag Queen Story Hour” has become an accepted event in numerous public schools and libraries?³

Why isn’t it serious that so many of us pretend this isn’t happening, are afraid to speak up, or think that having a burning concern about it distracts us from more important things? The normalization of disorder and empowerment of lunacy are not to be taken lightly.

But we are not in normal times.

Perhaps to this point, populist readers will have cheered. Now I will lose some of them. Why?

Because the exotic ideas I criticize are not just the fancies of our managerial and opinion-forming classes, as we might like to think. Ordinary people who decry the lunacy of our times often accept humdrum versions of the same delusions, even while denying their implications. We want lunatic premises without lunatic conclusions. We want the poison apple, without the worm. I notice, for example, that moderates and conservatives who protest lunatic versions of “marriage” such as polyamory quite often believe that cohabitation without vows and with freedom to change partners is equivalent to marriage. Again, moderates and conservatives who would consider it totalitarian to forbid women to stay at home to raise their children commonly view women who do choose that way of life as dim bulbs. And vast numbers of moderates and conservatives who find the ideas I criticize crazy *try not to think so* because they have internalized the crazy idea that making any judgment about craziness is intolerant.

This is one of the reasons why insanity can make way so rapidly, for the knife of the premises has already been slipped quietly between our ribs—and we have slipped it there ourselves. And this is why, even though many of the outré symptoms which ordinary people find so ridiculous, offensive, or baffling will eventually fade, the underlying fallacies are likely to outlive them and produce new symptoms, perhaps equally outré. All too often what we mean in calling ourselves “moderate” is that we are only moderately lunatic; all too often what we mean in calling ourselves “conservative” is that

although we complain about *new* craziness, we want to conserve the craziness we have swallowed already.

In a bizarre way, some of lunacy’s critics tacitly collude with its boosters. For example, many who would agree with the proverb “A bad man cannot be a good statesman” merely accept another form of the same delusion: Your thug is a thug, but mine isn’t. Granted, a bad man or a bad woman might sometimes do something good. And rocks may sometimes fall from the sky. But we do not expect to cobble our streets with them.

Tacit collusion is nothing new. The possibility of being committed to beliefs without realizing it has been recognized for centuries. In the 1600s, political philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued that many people who think they believe in God are “atheists by consequence,” meaning that they claim God exists, yet embrace premises which imply that He doesn’t.⁴ Ironically, Hobbes himself seems to have been an atheist by consequence. As a materialist, he believed in something he called “God,” but for him it could be only the greatest material body—hardly what has classically been meant by God.

Is all this just lazy self-deception? It is self-deception, but let no one say it is lazy. It takes a lot of work not to think, for the human mind tends to follow the golden path of logical consequences. Eventually, it gets to the end. Once, when I pointed out in a magazine article that the premises which justify abortion also justify infanticide, my editor protested that “people are not that logical.” As he said, not many proponents of abortion want to kill born babies too! I see matters differently. People are very logical, but they are logical *slowly*. A conclusion of their premises which they don’t accept in their twenties, they may well accept in their forties. Even if they never do, it is likely that their children will.

Already infanticide is sometimes called “after-birth abortion.”⁵ Remark- ing that some people consider abortion murder, Bill Maher said on his HBO talk show: “And it kind of is. I’m just okay with that. I am. I mean there’s eight billion people in the world. I’m sorry, we won’t miss you. That’s my position on it.”⁶

It’s disturbing how quickly we come to take lunacy for granted. There are at least four other reasons why it metastasizes.

The first reason is that the mind which accepts one bad idea can become fertile ground for related bad ideas—even if they don’t follow from them logically. For example, a person who has become accustomed to dividing the world into hostile groups according to race may also be congenial to dividing it into hostile groups according to sex, and a person who overrates the importance of having money may be more disposed to think that those who have more of it than he does are keeping him down. Unfortunately, we use certain bad ideas to distract ourselves from the badness of other bad ideas. I may be so sure that all whites are racist that I can no longer think clearly about my own racism, or so convinced that all men are incipient rapists that I can no longer think clearly about sexuality.

The second reason is that bad ideas give rise to such unacceptable results that certain other bad ideas become more attractive than they would have been otherwise. For instance, radical individualism is often thought to produce strong individuals, but it actually produces individuals who are chronically dissatisfied and unable to accept discipline. One of the consequences is the disruption of family life, which disorders children. Another is widespread unrest, dishonesty, irresponsibility, and misconduct. If such effects become unendurable, citizens may begin calling for an excessively strong government to put an end to them. Thus, there can be a strange slide from radical individualism to authoritarianism.

The third is the revenge of conscience, which requires a bit more explanation. If I do something which at some level I know to be dreadfully wrong, I have two choices: Repent, or dig in. Repenting is difficult. Digging in is driven by powerful psychological needs not to believe myself capable of what conscience tells me I have done. For example, if I have treated you very badly but I refuse to be sorry, then to silence the voice of my conscience I may try to persuade myself that you deserved the way I treated you. But in that case, I am very likely to do terrible wrong to you again.⁷

The fourth, which makes clear thinking cruelly hard, is that every mistaken idea—even the craziest—has some grain of truth which makes it seem plausible. For example, unlimited wealth doesn’t make people happy, but many believe it does just because utter destitution and squalor obviously

make people *unhappy*. Actually, suicide rates are high among the poorest, drop in the middle, and rise again among the very rich. But the fact that lies and errors contain truths helps explain why ordinary people who are not at all deranged can come to hold some ideas which are.

Not all slippery slopes are imaginary. And that, perhaps, is the tale of our times. It would be a fallacy to suppose that everyone who has a beer will become an alcoholic, or that anyone who tells a lie will start lying all the time. But it isn't a fallacy to suppose that believing certain things may dispose me to believe certain others, or that pretending to myself that I don't know the wrong of what I did may give me a motive to invent elaborate excuses which also predispose me to further wrong.

Since some of the slopes are greased, we aren't lazily drifting into chaos. In fact, whether we mean to or not, we are propelling ourselves into it. We are entangled in a jungle of confusion, a spiraling vortex of error. Not every kind of conflict and sharp disagreement is bad. The problem isn't that we are "polarized," but that we are crazy.

I hope that by exploring our everyday delusions, this book may make a small contribution toward sunny sanity. True, someone who adopts his crazy views because of irrational motives can't be talked out of them by reasoning. Once upon a time, someone who held very odd ideas about sexuality asked me to explain my reasons for thinking differently about it. Afterward, he told me, "I find everything you've said completely persuasive. I can make no objection to any of it." "Then have you changed your mind?" I asked. "No," he replied.

Yet let us not lose that hope. Shedding more light on things may present to the imagination the winsome possibility of seeing them more clearly. Lunacy has its own gravitational pull, but never underestimate the attraction of a sane state of mind.

Although each fallacy I discuss contributes in some way to our lunacy, some are merely badly and dangerously mistaken. I've grouped the various delusions and very bad errors according to whether they concern morality and happiness, politics and government, family and sexuality, human nature, what is real and unreal, or God and religion. Priority goes to the mistakes which do the most damage, or which metastasize most readily.

Obviously, many follies are left out. Economic delusions like getting something for nothing seem to me to grow mostly from moral and political delusions driven by greediness. Fallacies about beauty, like the idea that the ugly and obscene are just “another aesthetic,” seem to me to grow mostly from the fallacy that good and evil are in the eye of the beholder. The notion that compassion is giving people whatever they want seems to me merely another form of thinking that nothing matters but our feelings. Social fallacies like thinking racism can be destroyed only by reverse racism seem to me merely a variation on the idea that we may do evil so that good will come. I talk about all those things already.

A friend wondered whether this book might be read only by those who don’t need it. I am a little more upbeat. True, the book may not be very helpful to those who are most deeply ensnared. But I would like to think it may be helpful to those of us who are merely troubled and confused—to those who are in twilight, wondering whether the world is going crazy or they are—to those who have touched the snare but are not yet ensnared—and to those who are beginning to consider getting loose. And there are a *lot* of those.

At one time I was one of them, and shared many of these delusions myself. For that reason, I know it is possible to get loose. And for the same reason, although I think my arguments are correct, I would not dare to offer this book in pride or arrogance. I know myself too well for that—though the knowledge was bought dearly.

This is a short book. If you have finished this introduction, you have already read one of its longest chapters—the average chapter is about the length of the typical op-ed. The book is intended for lay readers. It isn’t “lunacy for dummies”—how insulting that would be!—but it also isn’t a single evening’s reading. It is philosophical in the sense that it aims to elevate common sense, but not in the sense of being aimed at professional philosophers. It doesn’t exhaust the possibilities of argument, but it could have been twelve times the length and still not do that. I don’t throw out slabs of dripping red meat, but I don’t plan to leave you indifferent. Carry on!