

The Ayatollah of Climate Change: Greta Thunberg

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (September 2019)



Moonrise on the Yare, John Crome, circa 1811

Poor Greta Thunberg! She is to self-righteousness and self-satisfaction what Mozart was to music, namely an astonishing youthful prodigy. Unlike Mozart, however, she is a very unattractive child, her unattractiveness arising not from her natural physical endowment but from the sheer grimness of her humourless puritanism which is inscribed on her face for all to see. She has succeeded in adding a new vision of hell to

the many that I already have, namely being preached at by her for all eternity without intermission.

It is said that she suffers from a psychiatric condition, but whether or not this is so, her awfulness (of which, of course, she is blithely unaware) is not really her fault. Her transformation into a celebrity is the work of adults. It is they who have turned her into the Ayatollah Thunberg, the Khomeini of climate change.

In the days when reaching old age was exceptional, almost implying some kind of personal virtue, it was the elderly who were accorded respect and regarded as the repositories of wisdom. But as the old begin to outnumber the young, it is the young to whom falls the mantle. This is because we value the rare. No only does little Greta belong to a minority, but to a minority of that minority, for no one can deny that she is articulate, however monotonous, programmed or lacking in spontaneity her lines might be.

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Adolescence in particular is now regarded as the acme of human existence, from which only decline is possible (and Greta exudes an air of permanent adolescence). I still have not quite made up my mind whether our age is the first of the geriatric adolescent or that of the adolescent



geriatric, but I not infrequently notice around me seventy- and even eighty-year-olds who try to dress and comport themselves as if they were still about eighteen or nineteen. I find it sad, for of course the march of time is inexorable in its effects, albeit that it is true that it has slowed somewhat and people now age more slowly than they once did thanks, ultimately, to the material prosperity brought about by the creative destruction of capitalism. Nevertheless, the pretence that we have not aged is futile, though it is not futile *only*: it is both sad and shallow, in that it implies that life subsequent to adolescence has not brought its own rewards, and moreover that one has in effect learned nothing in the meantime, that the very best that can be hoped for is that one's knowledge and wisdom, which plateaued at the age of eighteen, have maintained that elevated level ever since.

Based upon my experience of the elderly, I view the arrival of the adolescent geriatric, or the geriatric adolescent, with some consternation or trepidation. From a very early age I have had a liking for the elderly, often preferring them to the young, especially the young of my own and subsequent generations, but I have to admit that when an old person is nasty or querulous, he or she tends to be very nasty or querulous indeed, and exceedingly difficult to handle. In so far as adolescence is an age of egoistic querulousness, therefore, the prospect is daunting of an increase in bad-tempered geriatrics, angry that, despite their wish that they

should remain adolescent forever (a wish that they are likely to confuse with a right because they have lived through a period when wishes rapidly transformed themselves into rights), they continue to age and will one day die. The Bible might tell us that there is a time and place for everything, but in the worldview of the geriatric adolescent, there is no time or place for old age.

The exaggerated respect in the world, or at least in Europe, with which little Greta's pronouncements have been received will, I hope, be a matter of wonder to future generations (if any). She has addressed not only crowds but parliaments, where she has been accorded a mixed status of guru and performing animal—guru because she has uttered the main tenets of a powerful *doxa* that so many thirst to believe in any case, and performing animal because she is so young to perform so unexpectedly well.

Of course, little Greta's humourlessness (possibly a symptom of her alleged psychiatric condition) is far from a handicap, indeed it is a great asset in the modern world, for when earnestness is mistaken for seriousness and gaiety for frivolity, as increasingly they are, a sense of humour is not only unlikely to flourish, indeed is more likely to be reprehended. Literal-mindedness has become so general a psychological phenomenon that jokes, many or most of which are directed against someone, are sure to be taken in their most literal meaning and to reflect the joker's real opinion of the person or persons joked about. Thus, when the late Peter Bauer, the distinguished development economist, raised his champagne glass and toasted 'Death to our enemies!', there would be those who would claim that this revealed a secret desire to be a mass-murderer, a desire that they would claim likely to be fulfilled in the right (or rather the wrong)

circumstances. Lucky little Greta doesn't have to worry about making jokes that will upset someone, because the very idea of a joke seems alien to her. Of course, I am only speculating here, not having actually met her, but I suspect that she is one of those persons who is puzzled when people laugh, as no doubt the tone deaf are when they watch people enraptured by music.

Humour has become dangerous and the making of jokes is one of those activities that can now only be done safely between consenting adults. It is entirely possible that one day one will have to be licensed to make a joke, or to warn third parties that one is about to make a joke which some might find offensive, or at any rate feel that they *ought* to find offensive, which these days is more or less the same thing. There will have to be special shelters for people who do not get jokes, so that they are not exposed to the offensive mockery that often lies not very far beneath humour.

It is my impression that public figures are less inclined to make jokes than ever before. On the assumption that this is actually so—no doubt some humourless sociologist could prove it—the question naturally arises as to why this should be so: for behind every observation, there are more observations to be made.

No doubt there are many possible answers, but I would like to propose that at least one of the reasons is the mass spread of tertiary education together with the rise of psychology as a field, if not of free enquiry exactly, at least of activity and preoccupation.

The effect, if not the intention, of the study of psychology, which is now one of the most popular courses in colleges and universities, is to increase the notions of the individual as vulnerable to all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Life becomes a series of hazards with deleterious consequences, the slightest of which can have lasting adverse effects, delayed by many years but lasting for ever, for those who experience them. A word, a glance, an implication intended or not, can traumatise and do lasting and even irreparable damage. We are all made of eggshells. Nietzsche said that what does not kill us makes us stronger, but we say what we do not like or approve of kills us.

And, of course, further education has vastly expanded the range of what we do not like or disapprove of. Whole swathes of further education have been transformed into schools of grievance and resentment turned into the guiding principle of life. Few are the people who, with a little encouragement, cannot become aggrieved. Almost everyone is a member of some group or other that can claim to have been ill-used at some time in the past, the effects of ill-usage being multigenerational and to increase with the passage of time as they are examined ever more closely. In these circumstances, we become ever more sensitive, or rather hypersensitive. A joke becomes the equivalent of a lynching and a remark, or even a true statement, the same as the pulled trigger of a gun.

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What has been called the hermeneutics of suspicion has become, under careful tutelage, general, a kind of default setting of the mind. With this default setting, the most anodyne or even generous of actions can be made to seem the very opposite, a sinister machination of an oppressive power. Of course, it is certainly true that human motivations are often mixed, and there is such a thing as passive-aggression, so that seeming goodwill is actually disguised malevolence. But the existence of such a phenomenon does not mean that it is overwhelmingly prevalent everywhere, so that for example when citizens got together to fund a hospital, they were actually seeking to hide or disguise or paper over the terrible conditions by which they were surrounded rather than trying truly to improve them. Marx and Freud encouraged the hunting out of *true* motives, as (more importantly in the sense of his actual effect or influence) did Foucault. In their worldview, no one was ever moved by such emotions as compassion or pity or generosity: and perhaps it is not a coincidence that none of them was conspicuous for his personal generosity towards others. All, on the contrary, were conspicuous egotists (here, I admit, I indulge in a little hermeneutics of suspicion of my own). Their suspicions were the disguise of their own psychological peculiarities.

We should not fail to recognise that the hermeneutics of suspicion—the finding of motives for everything—is good fun and suits our lizard brains. It is gratifying to accuse others of wickedness, bad faith, dishonesty and so forth. It is much less gratifying to recognise the complexity of things, and to recognise that the best laid plans of mice and men can go awry without anyone intending them to do so. And this is without counting the necessity to examine one's own failings and failures, which is much less enjoyable, indeed is much more painful, than blaming others.

In the absence of religious belief, which encourages a person both to accept his own agency and to look inwards, there is no countervailing mental force to the hermeneutics of suspicion that turn everyone into a self-proclaimed victim. This is not to suggest, of course, that there *are* no victims; there are even victims who have done absolutely nothing to cause or contribute to their victimhood. But it is far more common that, even under conditions that are objectively unfavourable, people make at least *some* contribution to their own downfall, sometimes a very large one that is entirely predictable in its consequences. Misled by political leaders who parasitize human weaknesses, they then concentrate not on what they can do themselves to alleviate their condition, but on what society as represented by the government (that they now believe is wholly responsible for their travails) can, ought and must do for them.

These are not the conditions in which good humour will flourish, which require give and take and a certain mental resilience. Ill-temper increases, even among those who oppose the hermeneutics of suspicion. They become suspicious themselves.

Hamlet thought that all occasions, that is to say events and circumstances, conspired against him. Greta Thunberg could say the opposite (if ever she stopped to think about the reasons for her astonishing ascent to fame). How all occasions conspire in her favour! She encourages people to blame nebulous others, she appeals to grievance, she is radically humourless and therefore deemed to be serious. She is therefore a heroine—if one is still permitted to use the female form of the word *hero*—for our times.

Of course, the world will chew her up one day and spit her out. She is, after all, a bore, and bores, however correct their *doxa*, soon lose their attractiveness to a world eager for new phenomena. Few prodigies remain prodigious in any way to retain the short attention span of the world. I sincerely hope that little Greta takes her fall from fame in good part.

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