

The Age of Cant

by Theodore Dalrymple



Cant, or humbug, is far worse than hypocrisy: for if by hypocrisy, we mean a failure to live up to our professed moral ideals, most of us are hypocrites, and thank goodness for it. A society in which everyone lived up to his moral principles unswervingly would be intolerable, regardless of whether those principles coincided. Apart from the fact that no mesh of such principles could ever be fine enough to catch all of life's infinitely variable exigencies, a person of no moral weakness whatever, while perhaps admirable in the abstract, would be an uncomfortable, even frightening, person to meet. It is good not to be a liar; but never to lie is to be an unsocial being, with as much feeling as an automaton.

Without hypocrisy, there would be no gossip; without gossip, there would be no literature and precious little conversation.

The dose of hypocrisy necessary to maintain social intercourse is a matter of judgment, for while many individual instances of hypocrisy are reprehensible and properly the subject of adverse comment, and some instances are beyond the pale, hypocrisy is as necessary to human existence as love or laughter. We should never forget La Rochefoucauld's dictum that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue: but at least he knows that there is a difference. The only effective way to eliminate hypocrisy entirely from human affairs is to have no moral standards.

Cant is more destructive than hypocrisy because it is harder to expose and because a humbug deceives himself as well as others, while a mere hypocrite retains some awareness; he is a rogue rather than a villain. Cant is the vehement public expression of concern for others, or of anger at an opinion casting doubt on some moral orthodoxy that is not, and cannot be, genuinely felt, its vehemence being a shield for insincerity and lack of confidence in the orthodox opinion. Doctor Johnson defined cant as "a whining pretension to goodness, in formal and affected terms." Cant is contagious, and, when widespread, it creates an atmosphere in which people are afraid to call it by its name. Arguments then go by default; and if arguments go by default, ludicrous, bad, or even wicked policies result.

I think that we live in an era of cant. I do not say that it is the only such age. But it has never been, at least in my lifetime, as important as it is now to hold the right opinions and to express none of the wrong ones, if one wants to avoid vilification and to remain socially frequentable. Worse still, and even more totalitarian, is the demand for public assent to patently false or exaggerated propositions; refusal to kowtow in such circumstances becomes almost as bad a sin as uttering a forbidden view. One must join in the universal cant—or else.

Wherever people are punished, legally or socially, for expressing an opinion contrary to some recently adopted

orthodoxy, or for failing to express the tenets of that orthodoxy, cant is bound to flourish; further, people who begin with an awareness that they are uttering cant come to believe that it is true because no one likes to think that he has spoken only from mere conformity or pusillanimity, or to avoid unpleasantness and the ruination of reputation. Hence, cant spreads rapidly once it takes hold in a society, and it becomes difficult to challenge, let alone eradicate.

Cant also has a built-in tendency to inflation. When it becomes generalized, it's necessary for anyone who desires to distinguish himself from the majority of people in some way to go even further in his own cant. It is like fundamentalism in Islam: you can always be outflanked by someone more orthodox than thou. Once a new canting doctrine becomes orthodox, it will, in turn, be outflanked.

Leaders in cant are not inquirers after truth but seekers of power, if only the power to destroy, which is often a delight in itself. Cant is the weapon of the ambitious mediocrity, a class of person that has become much more numerous with the extension, but also dilution, of tertiary education. Such people believe that social prominence is their due.

Britain has long been a world leader in cant. The historian Macaulay said that nothing was so ridiculous as the British in one of their fits of morality, by which he meant cant rather than obedience to the moral law or genuine reflection on the ethical basis of action. Dickens memorably portrayed characters whose main feature was cant: Pecksniff, Uriah Heep, Mrs. Jellyby, Mr. Podsnap. Clearly, cant is not a new invention. Often accused of caricature, Dickens replied (in his preface to *Martin Chuzzlewit*) that what seemed like caricature to some was to him the unvarnished reality. And I think it true that the habit of canting can reduce people to a single, or highly predominant, characteristic. It makes people's opinions seem like a scratched record that causes the needle to jump and replay again and again the same snatch of

song.

Cant takes over minds and reduces their ability to consider other points of view, take in contradictory evidence, or sympathize with anyone not in total and unconditional agreement. It is therefore, in its essence, intolerant. It promotes monotony and eradicates subtlety, nuance, and irony; it does not recognize a tragic dimension to life. It is inherently utopian because it assumes that perfection, especially moral perfection, can be reached. It is boring. It achieves its victories over others by use of what Napoleon called the only effective rhetorical technique—namely, repetition (though frightening vehemence also plays its part). It intimidates by gathering crowds, by anathema, and excommunication. It is devoid of humor, one of the saving graces of human existence; indeed, humor is its enemy, perhaps its greatest enemy. That is why jokes are the particular object of its obloquy.

Unlike hypocrisy, then, one can say nothing whatever in favor of cant; but where having the supposedly right opinions is taken as the larger part of virtue—much larger a part than actual conduct—cant has little to oppose its spread and much to encourage it.

Cant rots institutions from the inside. The case of Sir Timothy Hunt, the Nobel Prize-winning researcher, is instructive in this respect. In 2015, he was asked to give an impromptu toast at a lunch in South Korea for scientific journalists, mostly women. In the course of his brief remarks, he said:

Let me tell you about my trouble with girls [in scientific research]. Three things happen when they are in the lab: you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticize them they cry. Perhaps we should make separate labs for boys and girls?

One of those present, Connie St Louis, not a science journalist but a university teacher of science journalism in London, reported these remarks on Twitter, saying that they had ruined the event, so dreadfully sexist were they. This went viral; in short order, no libel on Hunt's name was too extreme to be repeated, and the effervescence of indignation against him was so great that he felt constrained to resign from his honorary posts (he was 72 at the time) at University College, London, the Royal Society (one of the oldest and most venerable scientific societies in the world), and the European Research Council, which he had helped set up. University College had demanded that he resign—his wife was a professor at the college—or face being fired.

Hunt's apologies for his remarks, according to the Royal Society, were not as abject as it thought necessary; but it turned out, on a little investigation that none of his detractors waited for, that the woman who started the storm was a habitual exaggerator, whose only known accomplishment was self-advancement based on almost no real achievement—a common type these days in academia. According to at least some witnesses, Hunt prefaced his allegedly awful remarks as follows:

I say something about the importance of women in science. I also pay tribute to the capable female scientists I know, by saying some nice things about them. And I now acknowledge the contribution made by female science journalists. It's strange that such a chauvinist monster like me has been asked to speak to women scientists.

No full transcript of the speech exists, but it is likely that Hunt said something that indicated to any person of normal intelligence—at least one not looking for a career-boosting opportunity to be outraged—that his ill-fated remarks were meant ironically. What virtually proves it are his concluding words, of which a recording exists: “So congratulations,

everybody, and I hope—I hope—I really do hope there is nothing holding you back, especially no monster like me.” Connie St Louis, the teacher of future science journalists, omitted to mention this, though she must have heard it. A fine corrupter of youth!

Several eminent women scientists whom Hunt had trained came forward to defend him as always having behaved well toward them, but neither his actual conduct nor his eminence as a scientist was enough to save him. University College, demonstrating its close attention to the teachings of Uriah Heep, issued a statement: “UCL was the first university in England to admit women students on equal terms to men, and the university believes that this outcome [Hunt’s resignation] is compatible with our commitment to gender equality.” With all the courage of its own cowardly cant, it stuck by its decision even after the further evidence emerged, saying that Hunt’s reinstatement would be “inappropriate”—inappropriate being the nearest they could come to the word “wrong.”

Hunt and his wife left England for Japan. There is thus room in English academic life for unscrupulous apparatchiks of cant but not for Nobel Prize winners in science who make a few relatively innocent remarks that do not even rise to the level of being off-color. Poor Tim Hunt—by all accounts, a decent person. Self-stimulated outrage by an evident mediocrity was enough to bring down an eminent man of evident distinction.

One swallow doesn’t make a summer, but unfortunately, there is more than one swallow. Consider the cases of Germaine Greer and J. K. Rowling, now the objects of obloquy and excommunication for having dared to utter a truth so obvious that it would not long ago have been derided as a cliché—namely, that sex-change men are not women *simpliciter*. Their wealth and fame have protected the two women to a large extent from the consequences of their outspokenness, though Rowling, for example, has had to endure being disowned by actors and actresses who owe their good fortune to her

creations.

For those neither famous nor in a position to ignore their own economic interests, and who do not wish to be martyrs to an outcry by the canting Twitterers, fear of repercussion has now entered into anything that they say about an increasing number of subjects. Even conversations in private are constrained, due to fear of denunciation to the relevant authorities. As the Soviets and the Nazis found, private denunciation was one of the pleasures of totalitarianism.

A 73-year-old part-time lecturer in engineering in Southampton had a conversation in the university cafeteria with a colleague: a private conversation that led to his dismissal, subsequently upheld by a cowardly minor judge. Stephen Lamonby had met his superior, Janet Bonar, in the cafeteria. During their discussion, he said that Jews were the cleverest people in the world, though they were much maligned for it, and that Germans were good at engineering, which he ascribed to their being part of a society that had long valued and promoted engineering. Bonar was so offended by what he said, even though it was not in a public forum, that, according to Lamonby, she started to shout. In an act worthy of the NKVD, she subsequently reported him to the authorities.

In the university hearing into the matter, the vice chancellor, Julie Hall, said that Lamonby did not understand that what he had said was offensive, and he was dismissed for "gross misconduct"—gross, mark you, not minor. Bonar said that she was "concerned" about students being taught by someone with his "entrenched racist views." It was not alleged, however, that he was incompetent in his teaching, nor even that he was anti-Semitic: he was not one of those conspiracy theorists who will grant that the Jews are clever but use their cleverness to take over the world.

The judge later said, in turning down Lamonby's appeal: "For the avoidance of doubt, I find that it is at least potentially

racist to group nationalities, races, ethnic or religious groups, by entire categories and to ascribe certain abilities or talents (or the opposite) to them, when, of course, as with any such group, talents or abilities will vary widely from individual to individual." He rejected Lamonby's argument that he was employing a positive stereotype. With an astonishing lack of logic or attention to the meanings of words, the judge ruled that a Jewish physicist might take offense at his success being ascribed to the fact that he was Jewish rather than to his own individual ability or hard work. But since being Jewish and working hard are not mutually exclusive—indeed, eminence in most fields is inconceivable without hard work, such that Mozart, a genius if ever there was one, worked and studied extremely hard—no one worth worrying about would ascribe brilliance in physics simply to the fact of being Jewish. The judge said that the positive stereotype—he did not deny that it was positive—was nevertheless "potentially offensive to the recipient."

Note here the use, for the second time, of the word "potentially" in what the judge said in finding that Lamonby was rightly dismissed. Potentially, this use of the word "potentially" could usher in full-blown totalitarianism, for it implies no requirement for any harm to have been caused by a person for him to be punished but only the potential for him to have caused harm. As Kafka put it, "Someone must have traduced Josef K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning." And what is the harm that Lamonby potentially caused, in the judge's opinion? In addition to any offense to Jews, non-Jews might also be offended, even "grossly" offended, because they might feel that some characteristic—presumably undesirable, though the judge didn't specify what—was being ascribed to them.

The judge was enunciating what might be called the eggshell theory of the human psyche. If someone takes offense against something someone says, that is sufficient to be a justiciable

harm. Gone is the “reasonable man” of traditional English jurisprudence, in assessing whether behavior is threatening or so insulting as to constitute mitigation for a loss of temper: one is threatened, bullied, insulted, offended if one says that one is, and that is enough to be actionable at law. Feelings become legislators.

In his final sally against freedom of speech, this greatest judge since Pontius Pilate said of Lamonby’s views that anyone might be offended because he spoke about things that “were none of his business.” The judge appeared not to realize that, if people were to be denied employment for saying something that was none of their business, the world unemployment rate would be close to 100 percent, except perhaps in North Korea. Nor did he make any distinction between what is said in public and what in private.

In a world ruled by the judge, no generalizations about people would be possible, not even such as, say, that the Dutch are the tallest people in the world. To him, it is irrelevant whether such generalizations are true. That Jews are clever, for whatever reason, seems to be borne out by the disproportionate number of Nobel Prizes they win. That Germans are good at engineering seems to be borne out by their cars, machine tools, and other products requiring engineering skill. But mere facts, however obvious, must not interfere with the expression of the right sentiments and the suppression of the wrong ones.

The woman who informed on Lamonby; the vice chancellor of the university; the employment tribunal that said that the university had a duty to its multicultural student body to “protect it from potential acts of racism”; and the judge who rejected Lamonby’s appeal—all had substituted cant or humbug for thought. It is natural to speculate on why. I think, ironically, that the answer can be found in a word: racism. They were furious with Lamonby because, if what he said were true (for whatever reason)—that Jews were clever and that

Germans were good at engineering—it must be true also that other people were less clever and less good at engineering, an impermissible thought. Why impermissible? Because, in their heart of hearts, they fear the possible explanations of inequality of outcome. That is why they do not want a society with no legal impediments to anyone, where everyone is left to find his own level.

Cant is, among other things, a defense against unwelcome thoughts. “Clear your mind of cant,” said Doctor Johnson. “It is a mode of talking in Society: but don’t think foolishly.” Easier said than done, especially nowadays, when the instillation of cant, as well as the prevention of anything else, is the main business of education.

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