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# The Idioms of Non-Argument

What happens when reviewers spend more time focusing on the motives of authors than the merits of their claims?

By Conor Friedersdorf



Brian Snyder / Reuters

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In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff argue that well-intentioned adults are unwittingly harming young people by raising them in ways that implicitly convey three untruths:

1. The Untruth of Fragility: *What doesn't kill you makes you weaker.*
2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: *Always trust your feelings.*
3. The Untruth of Us vs. Them: *Life is a battle between good people and evil people.*

In their telling, the spread of these untruths, especially in the middle and upper classes, helps to explain a spike in mental-health problems among young people and recent tumult on the campuses of highly selective colleges. But if parents and educators change course, they argue, they can raise happier, healthier kids who'll turn into better citizens.

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I liked the book, which has its origins in a 2015 [cover story](#) in this magazine. The updated thesis, when fleshed out across detailed chapters, struck me as clearly stated, logically argued, and plausibly true—and the proposed remedies struck me as highly unlikely to do harm.

“Whatever your identity, background, or political ideology,” the authors advise young people, “you will be happier, healthier, stronger, and more likely to succeed in pursuing your own goals” if you do three things:

1. Seek out challenges “rather than eliminating or avoiding everything that ‘feels unsafe.’”
2. Free yourself from cognitive distortions “rather than always trusting your initial feelings.”
3. Take a generous view of other people, and look for nuance, “rather than assuming the worst about people within a simplistic us-versus-them morality.”

They even include practical advice for conveying those lessons in child-rearing. How significant are the ills that they identify relative to all the others that confront higher education or young people generally? I don't know. But their prescriptions seem sensible, low-cost, likely to help some, and unlikely to prevent other reformers from addressing other problems.

Some critics have praised their work. Thomas Chatterton Williams [reviewed](#) the book favorably in *The New York Times*. Wesleyan University President Michael Roth's *Washington Post* [review](#) seemed to endorse the book's advice in its last paragraph.

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Lots of folks who responded to the book more critically argued that it gave short shrift to the thing they regarded as the most pressing problem in society or on campus. Few challenged its core arguments, whatever they were worth.

But I wanted to hear from critics of their central thesis. That's how I found myself reading Moira Weigel's review in *The Guardian*, having seen folks on social media flagging it as a devastating takedown. "Moira Weigel eviscerates with ease "The Coddling of the American Mind," the biologist [Stephen Curry](#) wrote. The sociologist Kate Cairns [asserted](#) that the review "systematically demolishes" the book, while another observer [characterized](#) the review as "an excellent shredding."

Imagine my surprise when even [that review](#) contained a passage that appeared to grant the potential value of the advice at the book's very core. Weigel wrote:

Despite the title, which suggests cultural or civilisational diagnosis, the checklists and worksheets distributed throughout this book make clear that its genre is self-help. The tips it contains may benefit upper middle class parents. They may benefit students from minority or working class backgrounds who arrive on elite campuses to find that, despite good intentions, those campuses have not fully prepared for them.

It's the sort of passage that would usually appear in a positive review. It is no small thing to identify a problem that harms families from different economic classes and to offer tips that may help folks in each to help themselves.

But as it turns out, that passage is a brief aside, anomalous for its substantive assessment of the book's thesis. The review's first paragraph complains that the book doesn't discuss financial hardship among college students (though the authors trace the mental-health trends that worry them back to high school and to the wealthiest families, not the ones struggling to pay tuition). An entire section complains that the

book's style "wants above all to be reasonable. Lukianoff and Haidt include adverb after adverb to telegraph how well they have thought things through." Is it bad to want to be reasonable? Have they thought things through? The merits of such substantive questions are rarely Weigel's focus, though. Many critiques are implied rather than stated, rendering them unfalsifiable.

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The balance of the review is scathingly negative not in its arguments—a few pop up along the way, some concerning peripheral matters—but in its *ad hominem* attacks and other rhetoric disguised as argument as though its mere trappings confer heft. An argument can be strong or weak, civil or ill-mannered, calm or heated, edifying or misleading. Even the most frustrating arguments, though, offer readers more than the tropes pervading this frustrating review, and other journalistic work of the same genre: Let us call them Idioms of Non-Argument.

The *Guardian* review is a useful illustrative example in part because its entire mode is foreshadowed in the headline that announces the article:

**The Coddling of the American Mind review – how elite US liberals have turned rightwards**

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's book sets out to rescue students from 'microaggressions' and identity politics. But perhaps they merely resist change that might undermine them

That display copy says: *Never mind the merits of the book's thesis—what's important here, fellow leftists, is where the authors fall on a left-right ideological spectrum and what psychological factors may be motivating them.* What's a truth proposition when there's an ongoing culture war to fight?

What unfolds over the body of the review isn't quite a character assassination of the authors so much as a series of premeditated assaults.

The book is utterly in keeping with the longtime professional interests of both authors, and closely tied to Greg Lukianoff's personal experience using cognitive behavioral therapy to fight serious depression. But Weigel dismissively speculates that they wrote the book "perhaps, because an article that they published in *The Atlantic* went viral." Is she implying that the subject doesn't justify book-length treatment? Some other dig? Is the line merely included to convey contempt?

Both authors have long records of producing work that is intellectually honest; neither happens to be an ideological conservative. Yet over the course of the review, Weigel compares them not only to Allan Bloom, but also to Dinesh D’Souza, and then, using guilt-by-association tactics, to the alt-right:

Hints of elective affinities between elite liberalism and the “alt-right” have been evident for a while now. The famous essay that Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos wrote in 2016, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” cites Haidt approvingly. At one point Lukianoff and Haidt rehearse a narrative about Herbert Marcuse that has been a staple of white nationalist conspiracy theories about “cultural Marxism” for decades.

Nassim Taleb, whose book *Antifragile* Haidt and Lukianoff credit with one of their core beliefs and cite repeatedly as inspiration, is a fixture of the far right “manosphere” that gathers on Reddit/pol and returnofkings.com.

The commonality raises questions about the proximity of their enthusiasm for CBT to the vogue for “Stoic” self-help in the Red Pill community, founded on the principle that it is men, rather than women, who are oppressed by society. So, too, does it raise questions about the discipline of psychology – how cognitive and data-driven turns in that field formed Haidt and his colleagues Pinker and Jordan Peterson.

Are Haidt and Lukianoff correct or incorrect about Herbert Marcuse? Is *Antifragile* a good book? Is cognitive behavioral therapy a worthwhile approach? Is there wisdom to glean from the Stoics or the discipline of psychology? Weigel offers the reader no arguments of substance—just the Idioms of Non-Arguments that all of those things *raise questions* because ostensibly bad people are tenuously associated with each of them. God help [Kevin Bacon](#) if he’s ever the subject of a similarly crafted profile.

The apotheosis of Weigel’s vilification tactics comes a bit later. In the book, the authors recount what they regard as examples of “catastrophizing” on college campuses. But the authors also go out of their way to point out that today’s college students are sometimes behaving totally rationally when they perceive a threat to their physical safety. Among other examples, they flag an apparent rise in hate crimes, a college student’s online threat to “shoot every black person” at the University of Missouri soon after Dylann Storm Roof’s neo-Nazi murder spree, and the murder of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, Virginia.

They write:

Students of color facing ongoing threats to their safety, and seeing frequent reports of threats elsewhere, are not new phenomena; the history of race in

America is a history of discrimination and intimidation, intertwined with a history of progress. And yet, this new wave of racial intimidation may be particularly upsetting because of recent progress ... The shock of Trump's victory must have been particularly disillusioning for many black students and left-leaning women. Between the president's repeated racial provocations and the increased visibility of neo-Nazis and their ilk, it became much more plausible than it had been in a long time that "white supremacy," even using a narrow definition, was not just a relic of the distant past.

Judge for yourselves whether passages like that are fairly or unfairly characterized in the part of Weigel's review where she likens the authors to a character in a recent Hollywood film, who kidnaps black people and steals their bodies:

Like Mark Lilla, Steven Pinker and Francis Fukuyama, who have all condemned identity politics in recent books, [Haidt and Lukianoff] are careful to distinguish themselves from the unwashed masses— those who also hate identity politics and supposedly brought us Donald Trump.

In fact, the data shows that it was precisely the better-off people in poor places, perhaps not so unlike these famous professors in the struggling academy, who elected Trump; but never mind. I believe that these pundits, like the white suburban Dad in the horror film *Get Out*, would have voted for Barack Obama a third time.

Cheap shots like that serve no purpose other than to prejudice readers, and bear not at all on the quality of the book's ideas. (And not that it matters, but famous professors in the struggling academy are, contra the inapt analogy to better-off people in poor places, a demographic that surely voted overwhelmingly *against* Trump.)

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Vilification and guilt by association are not the only Idioms of Non-Argument. Misrepresentation is another.

Consider the treatment of intersectionality in the book. The authors sketch the framework as it was articulated by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, now the director of the Center on Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia University, and they favorably quote an explanatory passage from *Intersectionality* by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge.

The authors write:

Intersectionality is a theory based on several insights that we believe are valid and useful: power matters, members of groups sometimes act cruelly or unjustly to preserve their power, and people who are members of multiple identity groups can face various forms of disadvantage in ways that are often invisible to others. The point of using the terminology of “intersectionalism,” as Crenshaw said in her 2016 TED Talk, is that “where there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem, and when you can’t see a problem, you pretty much can’t solve it.”

Only then do they add:

Our purpose here is not to critique the theory itself. It is, rather, to explore the effects that certain interpretations of intersectionality may now be having on college campuses. The human mind is prepared for tribalism, and these interpretations of intersectionality have the potential to turn tribalism way up. These interpretations of intersectionality teach people to see bipolar dimensions of privilege and oppression as ubiquitous in social interactions. It’s not just about employment or other opportunities, and it’s not just about race and gender.

Their argument is that while the originators of intersectionality and careful adherents of the theory offer important insights, some less nuanced interpretations are misleading students about reality by training them to see the world “in terms of intersecting bipolar axes where one end of each axis is marked *privilege* and the other is *oppression*.”

By way of illustration they cite teaching tools like this one:

They reason:

Since “privilege” is defined as the “power to dominate” and to cause “oppression,” these axes are inherently moral dimensions. The people on top are bad, and the people below the line are good. This sort of teaching seems likely to encode the Untruth of Us Versus Them directly into students’ cognitive schemas: Life is a battle between good people and evil people.

Perhaps their reasoning is flawed or their concerns are not borne out by the facts. But how does Weigel distill that very carefully qualified argument?

For all their self-conscious reasonableness, and their promises that CBT can master negative emotion, Lukianoff and Haidt often seem slightly hurt. They argue that intersectionality theory divides people into good and bad. But the scholars they quote do not use this moral language; those scholars talk about privilege and power. Bad is how these men feel when someone suggests they have had it relatively easy – and that others have had to lose the game that was made for men like them to win.

Once again, there is a truth proposition, like *Can CBT help master negative emotion?* But rather than use the best available evidence to adjudicate something so plainly relevant to the book, Weigel casts doubt on the proposition in the reader’s mind by claiming that the authors “seem slightly hurt,” citing no particular passage, as if *that* should bear on our faith in cognitive behavioral therapy.

She then offers a misleading account of their beliefs about intersectionality—they are explicit that neither intersectional theory nor the scholars they quote commit the Us vs. Them fallacy—and concludes by asserting *how they feel* (which is to say, how her ideology tells her that they must surely feel) in a hypothetical situation that she made up.

Later, Weigel writes:

Predictably, Lukianoff and Haidt cite Martin Luther King as a spokesperson for “good” identity politics—the kind that focuses on common humanity rather than differences. But there was a reason the speech they quote was called “I Have a Dream” and addressed to people marching for jobs.

Keeping faith with the ideal that all humans are created equal means working to create conditions under which we might, in fact, thrive equally. In the absence of this commitment to making the dream come true, insisting that



everyone must act as if we are already in the promised land can feel a lot like trolling.

“Can feel a lot like trolling” is dense with weasel words, but what’s more notable here is the clear implication that Haidt and Lukianoff insist “that everyone must act as if we are already in the promised land.”

Later, Weigel writes, “Enjoying the luxury of living free from discrimination and domination, they therefore insist that the crises moving young people to action are all in their heads.” No, they do not so insist! Lukianoff leads an organization—the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education—that constantly advocates on behalf of students facing unjust discrimination, and battles administrators who violate their civil rights. And their book explicitly states this about social-justice activism:

College students today are living in an extraordinary time, and many have developed an extraordinary passion for social justice. They are identifying and challenging injustices that have been well documented and unsuccessfully addressed for too long. In the 1960s, students fought for many causes that, from the vantage point of today, were clearly noble causes . . . Students today are fighting for many causes that we believe are noble, too, including ending racial injustices in the legal system and in encounters with the police; providing equal education and other opportunities for everyone, regardless of circumstances at birth; and extinguishing cultural habits that encourage or enable sexual harassment and gender inequalities. On these and many other issues, we think student protesters are on the “right side of history,” and we support their goals.

Despite that passage, Weigel goes on to write, “The authors cite the ‘folk wisdom’ ‘Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.’ They call this attitude ‘pragmatic.’ The prospect that a group of children might get together to build a new road themselves is not one they can countenance.”

The authors themselves, though, believe they are offering advice to young people that will make them *more likely to succeed in building a new road*.

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That brings us to yet another Idiom of Non-Argument: reduction to privilege anxiety. Forget about counterarguments that address the merits of a proposition. Simply assert that its advocates fear losing their privileged status, and obviously acted in order to thwart the rise of marginalized people, and you will discredit their project without having to grapple with it at all.

Thus:

... the consensus that has ruled liberal institutions for the past two decades is cracking up. The media has made much of the leftward surge lifting Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. But as this new left-liberalism gains strength, a growing number of white men who hold power in historically liberal institutions seem to be breaking right.

As more and more Americans, especially young Americans, express enthusiasm for democratic socialism, a new right-liberalism answers. Its emerging canon first defined itself in reaction to new social movements highlighting the structural or systemic elements of identity-based oppression. By deriding those movements as “clicktivism” or mere “hashtags,” right-liberal pundits also, implicitly, expressed frustration at how web platforms were breaking up their monopoly on discourse.

One wonders: What makes the book’s thesis right-leaning? How has Haidt or Lukianoff broken rightward? Does democratic socialism bear on their subject matter in any way? If Lukianoff is motivated by frustration at web platforms for breaking up an elite monopoly on discourse, why does the organization he leads fight to expand the ability of leftist college students and faculty members to post their views without punishment on blogs and social media? And what, precisely, is it about their claim that students are prone to catastrophizing that preserves privilege? A review operating in the mode of argument and ideas would grapple with such questions rather than begging or eliding them.

The Idioms of Non-Argument reward those adept at using book reviews as a chance to denigrate ideological adversaries, ascribing to them motives that fit their in-group’s preferred narrative. But they do little for readers.



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*The Guardian’s* review is terribly unfair to *The Coddling of the American Mind’s* two authors, but that is of comparatively little consequence. If the book’s thesis is correct and its insights are actually adopted, it could help a lot of people; if it is incorrect in a way most people fail to appreciate, it could do harm or impede a search for better solutions. That’s why it would be valuable to have a rigorous critique from a skeptical reader. Put another way, testing the truth of its claims really matters.

But Weigel’s look at the book—perhaps the most prominent skeptical review it received—spent little time arguing about its actual claims. Instead, it focused on the attributes of its authors and how they might be invoked to reify the progressive left’s notions of what ostensibly motivated them to write, or who has the better overarching ideological narrative to advance. This is the problem with the Idioms of Non-Argument. They don’t leave us any closer to understanding.

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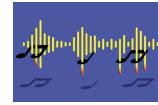
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