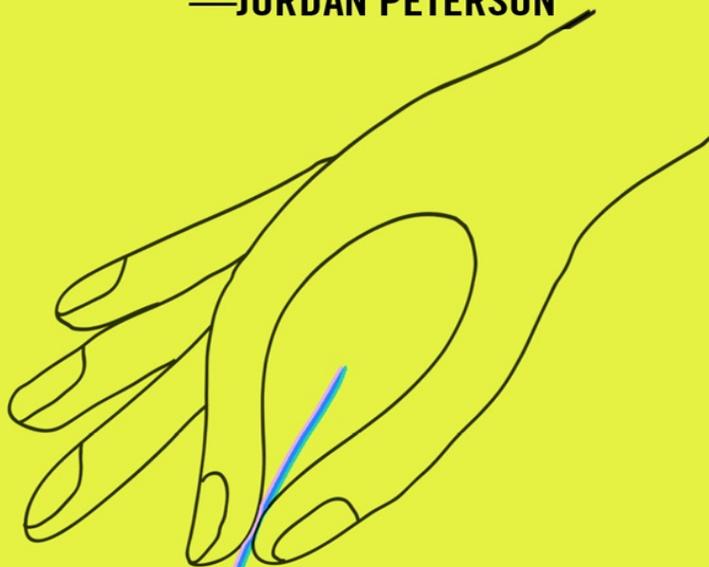


“Read this book, strengthen your resolve, and help us all return to reason.”

—JORDAN PETERSON



THE PARASITIC MIND

*How Infectious Ideas Are Killing
Common Sense*



GAD SAAD

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“Lacking fear, charismatic in his speech, and armed with solid, straightforward, biologically grounded ideas, Dr. Gad Saad has become somewhat of an internet phenomenon over the last few years. His new book continues in the same vein, warning its readers of the dangers of an unthinking progressive agenda and helping reestablish the general consensus that allows peace to prevail. Has your common sense been thoroughly assaulted? Read this book, strengthen your resolve, and help us all return to reason.”

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“Gad Saad argues that ‘nefarious forces have slowly eroded the West’s commitment to reason, science, and the values of the Enlightenment’ and that these forces act like the weird brain parasites that alter the behavior of mice to make them less afraid of cats, driving human society towards a dark age of irrational prejudice and superstition. His courage, his rationality, and his enthusiasm for that much-neglected thing, the truth, shine through this powerful book.”

–**MATT RIDLEY, PH.D.**, author of *The Rational Optimist* and *How Innovation Works*

“A wonderfully intelligent, witty, and riveting account of the politically correct madness engulfing our society. *The Parasitic Mind* is a must-read for anyone

concerned about victim politics, cancel culture, and the assault on reason. Saad not only expertly diagnoses the malady, he also points the way to a cure.”

–**CHRISTINA HOFF SOMMERS, PH.D.**, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and co-author of *One Nation Under Therapy*

“A virus is sweeping through our civilization—a mind virus corrupting the brains of students, professors, and the public at large—and *The Parasitic Mind* is the vaccine that will counter this pernicious pandemic. Professor Gad Saad has emerged as a heroic public warrior fighting for reason and science in the search for truth. That he has developed such a fearless following clamoring for a work like this is a testimony to its necessity and why I think its broad readership will help stem the tide of unreason and anti-science.”

–**MICHAEL SHERMER, PH.D.**, publisher at *Skeptic* magazine and author of *Giving the Devil His Due*



THE PARASITIC MIND

HOW INFECTIOUS IDEAS ARE KILLING COMMON SENSE



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To Lior, Bahebak

Preface

When we think of a pandemic, we often conjure images of deadly infectious diseases that spread rapidly across countries causing unimaginable human suffering (like the Black Death, the Spanish influenza, AIDS, or the ongoing COVID-19 crisis). The West is currently suffering from such a devastating pandemic, a collective malady that destroys people's capacity to think rationally. Unlike other pandemics where biological pathogens are to blame, the current culprit is composed of a collection of bad ideas, spawned on university campuses, that chip away at our edifices of reason, freedom, and individual dignity. This book identifies these idea pathogens, discusses their spread from the universities to all walks of life including politics, business, and popular culture, and offers ways to inoculate ourselves from their devastating effects.

In Chapter One, I offer a brief synopsis of the factors that led to my becoming an ardent warrior against these destructive ideas including my experience of two great wars, the Lebanese Civil War (as a child) and the war against reason (as a professor over the past twenty-five years), as well as my life ideals of seeking freedom and truth. In Chapter Two, I explore the tension between thinking and feeling, and the tension between the pursuit of truth and the minimization of hurt feelings. I argue that it is wrongheaded to create a false tension between our reasoning faculty and our emotions. We are both a thinking and a feeling animal. A problem arises when we apply the wrong system to a given situation (such as letting our emotions guide us in a situation that requires reason, or vice versa). I provide several contemporary examples to highlight this point including the hysterical emotional responses to Donald Trump's election as president of the United States and Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the United States Supreme Court. In Chapter Three, I posit that freedom of speech, the scientific method, intellectual diversity, and a meritocratic ethos rooted in individual dignity rather than adherence to the ideology of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity (DIE) are

nonnegotiable elements of a truly enlightened society. A fair society ensures that its members have equality of opportunities and not equality of outcomes as mandated by DIE edicts. Chapter Four addresses several anti-science, anti-reason, and illiberal idea pathogens including postmodernism, radical feminism, and transgender activism, the latter two of which are rooted in a deeply hysterical form of biophobia (fear of biology). These idea pathogens destroy our understanding of reality and common sense by espousing such positions as: invisible art is a form of art, all sex differences are due to social construction, and some women have nine-inch penises. Chapter Five examines how the mindset of social justice warriors gave rise to universities that prioritize minimizing hurt feelings over pursuing truth (a continuation of the theme first addressed in Chapter Two), the Oppression Olympics (intersectionality), Collective Munchausen and the homeostasis of victimology (I'm a victim therefore I am), and pious self-flagellating at the altar of progressivism. In this view, warped by outrage and resentment, the world is binary: you are either a noble victim (even if you have to make it up) or a disgusting bigot (even if you've never been one). Choose a side. Chapter Six explores Ostrich Parasitic Syndrome (OPS), a malady of disordered thinking that robs people of their ability to recognize truths that are as obvious as the existence of the sun. Science denialism is one manifestation of OPS but there are many others. Those afflicted with OPS utilize a broad range of strategies to shelter themselves from reality including the use of six degrees of faux-causality wherein countless ills are pinned wrongly on one's favorite culprit (such as "climate change causes terrorism"). I examine how OPS sufferers take imbecilic and at times suicidal positions regarding issues of civilizational import including the root causes of global terrorism, the virtues of open borders, the apparent congruence between sharia law and the United States Constitution, and the supposed racism of profiling. To document the pandemic of disordered thinking without offering a way for people to inoculate themselves against these idea pathogens would be insufficient. So in Chapter Seven while warning readers of various forms of faux-profundity masquerading as truth, I examine how to seek truth via the assiduous and careful erecting of nomological networks of cumulative evidence. Finally, in the last chapter, I propose reasons that cause people to remain passive bystanders in the battle of ideas, and I suggest a course of action to turn the tide. Do not underestimate the power of your voice. Seismic changes start off as small rumbles. Get engaged in the battle for reason and freedom of thought and speech. Your voice matters. Use it.

I am periodically challenged in my dogged efforts to combat the idea pathogens spread by social justice warriors. The criticisms usually take one of two related forms: 1) “Professor Saad, are you not exaggerating the problem? After all, social justice warriors constitute a minority on most campuses.” 2) “Dr. Saad, why don’t you tackle more important problems? Stop obsessing about some quack outliers. Your time would be better spent elsewhere. Discuss science. Teach us about your areas of scientific expertise.” Let me tackle each position in turn with the hope that my responses might compel some people who are quietly watching from the sidelines to join the battle of ideas. On September 11, 2001, nineteen men armed with nothing more than religious fervor and ideological zealotry, killed nearly 3,000 people and permanently altered the New York skyline if not our collective sense of security. The devastation inflicted by motivated terrorists can greatly exceed their number. Similarly, social justice warriors and their ilk are intellectual terrorists, and they can wreak havoc on reason and our public life, limiting people’s willingness to speak and think freely, without ever constituting a majority.

On April 6, 2019, I posted the following message on my social media platforms:

Some people are truly irredeemably clueless. They post comments attacking me for criticizing the SJW [social justice warrior] mindset instead of supposedly tackling “important” matters. Yes, because having a set of idea pathogens take complete control over the minds and souls of millions of people in academia, government, companies, the media, and the general society in a manner that is akin to religious superstitious dogma is “unimportant.” Having anti-science, anti-reason nonsense taught to children in elementary schools is “unimportant.” Having governments and universities push policies that are antithetical to individual dignity & a meritocratic ethos is “unimportant.” There is NOTHING more important than fighting for freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and a commitment toward science, reason, & logic over quasi-religious dogma. Those who are incapable of seeing the larger picture are complicit in perpetuating the current zeitgeist of lunacy. That at times I use satire, sarcasm, and humour to battle against the enemies of reason should not detract you from understanding how serious this battle is.¹

This book is all about that battle.

An associated criticism that I often receive is a form of whataboutism on steroids. People expect that I should dispense my ire and cast my critical eye on the right in equal measure as I do the left. I inhabit the world of academia. This is an ecosystem that has been dominated by leftist thinking for many decades and certainly for the entirety of my professional career. The idea pathogens that I discuss in this book stem largely if not totally from leftist academics. Postmodernism, radical feminism, cultural relativism, identity politics, and the rest of the academic nonsense were not developed and promulgated by right-wing zealots. Runaway selection is an evolutionary mechanism that explains how animals evolve greatly exaggerated traits (like the peacock's tail).² I posit that many of the idea pathogens covered in this book are manifestations of a form of runaway selection of insanity spawned by leftist professors. There is an ever-increasing ideological pressure to come up with more egregious departures from reason, as a signal of one's progressive purity. As an evolutionary behavioral scientist, I am as keen to criticize Republican politicians who choose to "reject" evolution as I am Democrats who reject some of its implications. My focus on the left is a mere reflection of the fact that its intelligentsia shape academic culture and the subsequent downstream effects that trickle to the rest of society. I don't need to critique both sides of the political aisle with equal alacrity under the misguided desire to appear impartial. That would be akin to asking a gynecologic oncologist who specializes in cervical cancer why he maintains a strict focus on women. *Come on, Doc, don't be sexist. Please be impartial and also treat men with cervical cancer.* (Actually, this is now a possibility since trans men have cervixes.) My goal is to defend the truth, and today it is the left's pathogenic ideas that are leading us to an abyss of infinite, irrational darkness.

Another manifestation of whataboutism occurs when people accuse me of not focusing on *their* preferred issues. "But what about Israel, Professor Saad? Why don't you criticize their policies? What about Trump's position on climate change, Professor Saad? Are you a climate change denier? If you care so much about the state of our educational system, why don't you attack Trump's secretary of education Betsy DeVos?" This is as logical as questioning why a dermatologist is spending her time curing melanoma. *What about childhood leukemia, Doc? Why are you being hypocritical in your clinical practice? You never perform surgeries on ruptured Achilles tendons, Doc. Why the obsessive focus on skin-related medical conditions?* To reiterate, I fight against a particular class of mind viruses. This does not imply that I should address all issues under the sun

with equal zeal. This reminds me of creationists who proclaim that in the spirit of fairness, high school students need to be taught evolution and intelligent design as competing theories. Intellectual consistency does not require that I critique the full universe of idiotic ideas. I am a parasitologist of the human mind, seeking to inoculate people against a class of destructive ideas that destroy our capacity to reason.

Upon reading this book, I hope that readers will walk away with a renewed sense of optimism. We may have fallen into an abyss of infinite lunacy, but it is not too late to grab hold of the rope of reason and hoist ourselves back into the warm light of logic, science, and common sense. Thank you for coming on this journey. Truth shall prevail.

CHAPTER ONE

From Civil War to the Battle of Ideas

I am often asked why I am an outspoken academic, willing to tackle thorny and difficult issues well beyond my areas of scientific interest. Given the stifling political correctness that governs academia, it would be advisable from a careerist perspective to be the proverbial “stay in your lane” professor. So why do I stick my neck out repeatedly? As is true of most human phenomena, the answer lies in the unique combination of my personhood (genes) coupled with my personal history (environment). On a personal level, I am a free thinker who is allergic to go-along, get-along group think. The ideals that drive my life are freedom and truth, and any attack on these ideals represents an existential threat to all that I hold dear. I am also the product of my unique life trajectory shaped by two wars. While few people will ever experience the horrors of war, I have faced two great wars in my life: the Lebanese Civil War and the war against reason, science, and logic that has been unleashed in the West, especially on North American university campuses. The Lebanese war taught me early about the ugliness of tribalism and religious dogma. It likely informed my subsequent disdain for identity politics, as I grew up in an ecosystem where the group to which you belonged mattered more than your individuality. With that in mind, let us return to my homeland in the Middle East.

Growing Up in Lebanon

I was born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1964 and spent the first eleven years of my life in the “Paris of the Middle East.” My family was part of the dwindling Jewish community that had steadfastly remained in Lebanon despite the growing signs that Lebanese Jews had a bleak future. My father had nine sisters and a brother, while my mother had six sisters, all of whom, with the exception of one paternal aunt, had emigrated from Lebanon long prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. My maternal grandparents died prior to my birth; my paternal

grandparents left for Israel around 1970. A similar immigration pattern occurred within my immediate family. I have two brothers and one sister, all much older than I (the closest to me in age is ten years older). My eldest brother married a Christian woman of Palestinian origin, and they immigrated to Montreal, Canada, in 1974. My sister also moved to Montreal prior to the outbreak of the civil war, both to pursue her studies and to escape the looming dangers. Finally, my other brother who had been crowned Lebanese champion of judo on multiple occasions was forced to flee our homeland due to ominous threats that he should retire (for it was not good optics for a Jew to repeatedly win a combat sport). He heeded that “advice” and moved to Paris, France, around 1973 to continue his studies and judo career. The breathtaking irony is that he eventually represented Lebanon at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Hence, the Jewish judoka who was no longer welcomed in Lebanon only a few years earlier was “embraced” when it suited the relevant authorities.

Growing up as a Jewish boy in Lebanon had its existential challenges. I vividly recall when the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser died in 1970, a few weeks shy of my sixth birthday. Nasser’s Pan-Arabism (unification of the Arab world) had made him a hero in the region, and as often happens in the Middle East, thousands of people took to the streets to publicly lament his passing. Why would this event constitute an episodic memory for a five-year-old boy? As the angry procession made its way down our street (aptly named *Rue de l’Armée* or The Military’s Street), the terrifying chant “Death to Jews” left an indelible mark on me as I cowered in hiding next to our balcony. You see, even in “progressive, modern, and pluralistic” Lebanon, endemic Jew-hatred was always ready to rear its ugly head. All calamities in the Middle East are ultimately due to the diabolical Jew. It rained today. Blame the Jews. The economy is weak. Blame the Jews. Tourism is down. Blame the Jews. You contracted a stomach bug. Blame the Jews. The Christians and Muslims in Lebanon are not getting along. You guessed it, blame the Jews. And contrary to current attempts at revisionist history, this existential disdain for the Jew precedes the founding of modern Israel by 1,400 years. I can still remember sitting around the table on Yom Kippur (the holiest day in Judaism) in 1973 watching the worried look on my parents’ faces as word broke that a combined Arab army had attacked Israel on that holy day. Existential genocidal hatred is not something that one magically and suddenly contracts as an adult; rather, it is instilled insidiously and repeatedly in the minds of otherwise pure and innocent children. I was the only one of my four siblings not to attend a Jewish elementary school. I must have

been nine or ten years old, in class at the *Lycée des Jeunes Filles*, when the teacher asked pupils to state what they wanted to be when they grew up. Typical responses were uttered uneventfully (policeman or soccer player) until one student said, “When I grow up, I want to be a Jew killer,” after which the class erupted in raucous laughter and gleeful claps. I still have the class photos from that era, and that boy’s face is forever etched in my memory.

In sharing these stories, I don’t wish to imply that our daily lives in Lebanon prior to the civil war were hellish. My parents were well entrenched within Lebanese society. The fact that we were part of the last wave of Jews to leave Lebanon was a testament to my parents’ overall attachment to our homeland. Most of my childhood friends were Christian and Muslim (one of whom recently reached out to me, as his daughter was about to start college in Montreal). Any hope of long-lasting peaceful coexistence was shattered once the civil war broke out in 1975. This conflict remains the standard by which the butchery of all other civil wars is gauged. Neighbors who had lived next door to one another for decades became instant prospective enemies. Death awaited us at every corner. If the endless shelling did not kill you (we learned to take cover or not depending on the whistle signature of the bombs), the snipers might if you appeared within their field of vision. Civilians were kidnapped and killed. They were also mowed down while waiting in long bread queues (two of my family members evaded such a death by going out late to buy bread during a ceasefire). Various militia set up roadblocks at which point they’d check to see your internal ID (which had one’s religion written on it). If you were of the “wrong” religion, you could be executed. Our religious heritage was written as “Israelite” rather than “Jewish,” which meant we had few Muslim friends at roadblocks. Of the innumerable terrifying moments that I experienced during the civil war, one sticks out in my mind as uniquely eerie and ominous.

Prior to the start of the war, my parents had contracted a hand dryer service that provided a roll of washable textile which was installed on the wall of our kitchen. This was a precursor of the subsequent models of disposable hand drying tissues found in public bathrooms. Periodically, the same individual would come to our house to remove the dirty roll and replace it with a clean one (I believe his name was Ahmad or perhaps Mohammad). I thought that this was a rather strange service then, and even more so now as I recount the story. One evening, in the middle of the otherwise endless street-to-street fighting and continuous bomb shelling, I heard a knock at our front door. I walked to the door and asked who was there. The reply came: “It’s me Ahmad [Mohammad],

the guy who changes your kitchen roll. Open the door, kid.” I delayed, and his insistence grew more sinister and forceful: “Open the door now!” I ran to my mother. If memory serves me right, there were four occupants at our house that evening: my mother, my sister (who had returned to Beirut to visit us and was now stuck there), a male friend of my parents (who was also stuck at our house even though he lived a short drive away), and myself. My father was not at home; I believe he was outside the country, but I can’t remember why he was away. He eventually returned to Beirut and narrowly escaped death on the drive back to our home. My mother approached the door and talked through it with Ahmad who was accompanied by one or more men. The exchange grew tense, and my mother fetched the male friend who was cowering in another room. She hoped he might frighten them away, and I recall the disgust and anger that my mother expressed for this male friend’s breathtaking cowardice in refusing to help.

Within the brutality and chaos of the civil war, there remained some semblance of law and order. As a last-ditch effort and against all odds, my mother phoned the police (the Arabic word for the outfit was “sixteen”), and they took the call—remember that this is during a full-blown war. Once they arrived at our house, we opened the door and let everyone into the kitchen. The lead policeman asked the men why they were there and who they were. Ahmad replied: “Oh, my friends and I were in the mountains, and we brought back a basket of pomegranate with us, and so we stopped by to give it to this family.” After the policeman (I recall his impressive rifle by his side) checked to confirm the contents of the basket, he stared coldly at Ahmad and said: “Your connection to this family is that you change their hand drying roll, and you decided to brave the street fighting and come in the middle of the night to offer them pomegranate. If I ever find you here again, you’ll have serious problems.” What happened next still gives me shivers down my spine. Ahmad looked at us and said very coldly and menacingly: “I’ll be back for you.” We did not stay much longer in Lebanon after that incident, and so Ahmad never had the chance to “visit” us again.

It was clear that we needed to leave Lebanon as soon as possible. The day of our escape from Lebanon was straight out of a shoot ’em up movie. On that fateful day, some armed Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) militia picked us up at our home. They had been contracted to get us safely to Beirut International Airport; the risk was that they might drive us to a ditch and execute us. The PLO controlled the area around the airport, so there was little chance of clearing the checkpoints if the appropriate militia did not accompany you. One

of the armed men asked me if I wanted to hold his machine gun, which I did with excited trepidation. On the way to the airport, I recall my father proclaiming that he had forgotten his money belt at our house and that we needed to return to get it. The militiamen rejected my father's plea, and we proceeded on our precarious journey. The next memory that I have is perhaps one of the most poignant ones of my life: the flight captain declared that we were out of Lebanese airspace, at which point my mother took out a chain with a Star of David (or it might have been a Chai, a Hebrew symbol for *life* or *living*), placed it around my neck, and said: "Now you can wear this, not hide your identity, and be proud of who you are." Several years later, I asked my parents to fill in my memory lapse: Why could I not remember any other details from our drive to the Beirut International Airport? Apparently, as we drove through the various neighborhoods, our militiamen exchanged fire with unsympathetic local militias. We were crouched in the car with luggage over our heads. I have no memory of that incident.

My first impression of Montreal was how cold it was. I had never experienced such a climate. That said, I recall thinking that it was better to face falling snow than falling bombs. I vividly remember being driven by my parents to Iona Elementary School. It was a dark and dreary day. The teacher graciously asked me to stand in front of the class and introduce myself. This was an English school, and I knew very few English words (other than whatever I might have learned while watching spaghetti westerns growing up in Beirut). I began: "Mon nom est Gad Saad. Je viens du Liban." [My name is Gad Saad. I come from Lebanon.] I faced the dreaded collective blank stare. Using my hands, I gestured a machine gun mowing down people while stating "Liban, Liban." I recently ran into a classmate who was present on my infamous first day at school, and he confirmed that this episode was also etched in his mind. It is perhaps poetic that we ran into one another at my daughter's elementary school year-end BBQ.

Even though we had safely arrived at Montreal in 1975, our Lebanese nightmare continued well beyond that point. My parents found it difficult to adapt to their new lives in Canada, and so they did not fully sever their ties with their homeland until 1980. This was the year that my parents made one of their imprudent return trips to Beirut and were kidnapped by Fatah. They were held captive for several days during which time they faced a very unsavory reality. During their disappearance, I was kept in the dark about their circumstances (in a bid to protect me), and only found out what had really happened once my parents were freed (via high-level political figures who intervened on their

behalf). One of my high school classmates, who was also Lebanese-Jewish, was fully aware of my parents' kidnapping (his parents and mine were lifelong friends). He later recounted to me that he had found it very odd that I appeared so carefree and joyful during my parents' disappearance. He did not know that I was unaware of their lot as the tragic events were unfolding. As my parents were about to embark on their final flight out of Lebanon, their friends reminded them that while they were very sad to see them go, they should never return. Their sage advice was heeded. The gravity of the situation hit me hard upon being reunited with them in Montreal. I will never forget the trauma in their eyes as well as my father's temporary asymmetric facial paralysis. I also recall being haunted by the possibility that my mother might have been gang raped by her captors.

That I miraculously escaped from Lebanon offered me some temporary respite for the next fifteen years or so. The ugliness of ideological tribalism, however, returned to haunt me on university campuses. But before I get to that, I want to discuss the two life ideals that best explain why I fight against the enemies of reason.

My Life Ideals: Freedom and Truth

I was only ever interested in two possible occupations, professional soccer player and professor. The plan was to pursue my athletic career full throttle and once I retired, I would complete my studies and become a professor. While it is quite rare for professional athletes to complete advanced degrees, Socrates, the captain of the Brazilian national soccer team at the 1982 World Cup, was also a physician. While not an athlete, Brian May, the guitarist of the legendary British rock band Queen obtained a Ph.D. in astrophysics from Imperial College London in 2007 (three decades after abandoning his studies to focus on his musical career). It was certainly not a pipe dream to aspire to both careers. Regrettably, a devastating injury coupled with other life obstacles ended my soccer career, and so, I dove into my studies. I completed an undergraduate degree in mathematics (I recently found out though that mathematics is “racist”¹) and computer science, which catered nicely to my bent for perfectionism and analytical purity. After all, a mathematical proof is either correct or not. Programming code is either free of bugs or not. Immediately after completing my B.Sc. degree at McGill University, I enrolled in the two-year M.B.A. program at the same institution. During my second year as an M.B.A.

student, I was one of a handful of fortunate students picked by Professor Jay Conger for his Group Dynamics course. In each class we delved into psychological principles that illuminated our personal lives. In one of our assignments, we had to identify the scripts that defined our life trajectories (a framework originally developed by psychiatrist Eric Berne, who established the theory and practice of transactional analysis). Berne argued that parents give their children scripts for their lives somewhat in the way that actors receive scripts in order to play their roles. While I concede that parents do wield sizeable influence in shaping their offspring, psychoanalytic theories overestimate such forces while ignoring the unique combination of genes that defines an individual. Some people might indeed be commandeered by life scripts. (“Be a good boy and do us proud. Don’t dishonor the family.”) Others might be driven by a desire to meet certain guiding ideals and/or objectives. (“Make the world a better place.”)

It requires deep (and difficult) self-reflection to consider whether and how one’s life has been governed by a recurring life script or by a recurrent assertion of certain ideals. Many realities that you’ve faced might seem disconnected but upon further scrutiny, you might discover that they are linked via a common script or ideal that you value. One of the benefits of psychotherapy is to precisely identify such patterns for patients. In my case, my life has been shaped by a commitment to two foundational ideals: freedom and truth. The pursuit of these two ideals was not imposed on me by my parents; rather, it is a manifestation of my personhood as inscribed in my genes. I’ll address each of these ideals in turn.

The Freedom Ideal

My love of freedom became apparent as a young child being dragged to synagogue in Beirut, Lebanon. I found the rote prayers and herd-like rituals very alienating. My inquisitive nature felt stifled by religious dogma. I found no freedom in religious practice. You simply belonged to the group and mimicked their behaviors. I suspect that many children find religious services unappealing, but I had a more visceral repulsion. My strong individuality, even at such a young age, rebelled at the pressure to conform, and I was delighted to have been the only one of four children in my family never to attend Jewish school. In my forties, my father shared with me his deep regret that I did not receive a Jewish education. I told him that I was thankful that he had not forced such an education on me. My friendships and romantic interests have spanned races, ethnicities, and religions, and I am richer for it. Fast forward to my teenage years

when I developed into a very competitive soccer player with the potential to head to Europe to pursue a professional career. I played the number ten position, which is typically reserved for a skillful playmaker who is given free rein to roam the field. Whenever I had a coach who placed constraints on my movements, I was devastated. My playing style required complete freedom of movement, and anything short of that had a deleterious effect on my performance.

The pursuit of freedom is also at the root of my professorial career. This holds true on two very different levels. Academia grants me the freedom to spend my time throughout a given day as I see fit. I often work very long hours, albeit at my discretion as to when and where I do so. Having to attend two or three scheduled meetings in a given week suffocates me, but I'm perfectly relaxed at the prospect of spending twelve hours at a café working on my next book. Having occupational freedom is good for me. People who possess less occupational freedom have higher cortisol levels (a higher stress response). The social epidemiologist Michael Marmot has documented the relationship between individuals' health and the extent to which they possess control over their job responsibilities.² More freedom equals better health.

There is a second element of freedom that has defined my scientific career, and that is the freedom to navigate radically different intellectual landscapes. For most academics, the road to glory requires a commitment to hyper-specialization. Develop expertise in a small niche and stay in your lane. Most academics build their entire professional reputations on research of very narrow areas of interest. I do not have the intellectual temperament for such careerist shackles. As a truly interdisciplinary scientist, I traverse disparate intellectual landscapes as long as they tickle my curiosity. This is why I have published in varied disciplines including consumer behavior, marketing, psychology, evolutionary theory, medicine, economics, and bibliometrics. The anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko famously authored a book titled *I Write What I Like*. In my case, I research what I like (and I am thankful to my university for having implicitly supported my broad academic interests). You might imagine that I do not take too well to those who argue that there are some research questions that should never be tackled—*forbidden knowledge*.³

My desire for intellectual freedom is also the reason that I am a professor who is deeply engaged in social media. Unlike the great majority of my highfalutin colleagues who take great pride in being ivory tower-dwellers, I am a professor of the people. I consider it part of my job description to engage with the public. During a recent visit to give a lecture at the Stanford Graduate School of

Business, I had a telling conversation with a Stanford colleague who epitomizes the “ivory tower” bias. He was aware that I had appeared on the Joe Rogan podcast (an extraordinarily popular platform) but was clearly disdainful of such public engagement. He seemed to think that one could either publish in leading scientific journals or appear on Rogan’s show. I disabused him of this false either-or proposition by pointing out that a complete academic should strive to do both. Many professors forget that their professional responsibility is not only to generate new knowledge but also to seek to maximally disseminate it. Social media offers endless such opportunities by allowing ideas to spread quickly and to a very large number of people. No rational intellectual should oppose such a possibility, and yet many succumb to what I refer to as the *garage band effect*. If you are a struggling band that plays in your parents’ garage only to be heard by them and a few annoyed neighbors, you are legit. If your band becomes a smashing success with a number one hit on *Billboard* and now plays in front of large stadium crowds, you’re a “sellout.” This is precisely the mindset of many academics. They prefer to publish only in peer reviewed journals (play in the garage) and look with derision at appearing on Joe Rogan (number one *Billboard* hits and filled-out stadiums). I reject this intellectual elitism for reasons similar to why Donald Trump leapfrogs the mainstream media and engages the electorate directly via social media. Take the message directly to the people. We have the tools to do so.

The Truth Ideal

Without the necessary freedoms, it would be impossible to instantiate my second life ideal, namely the pursuit of and defense of truth. There is a bidirectional relationship between truth and freedom such that the truth will set you free (John 8:32), and only in being free can one aspire to uncover the truth. Clearly though, few people stay up at night worrying about injuries to the truth. But I do and always have. Growing up, my mother repeatedly warned me that the world did not abide by my punishingly strict standards of intellectual, ethical, and moral purity, let alone follow my pathological commitment to honesty and probity. She was imploring me to recognize that the world was made of multiple shades of grey rather than black-or-white dichromatic coloring (though she did not use these terms). When I am exposed to intellectual dishonesty and ideological dogma, I respond in a manner that is akin to someone being punched in the face. I experience an adverse emotional and psychological reaction that

compels me to fight back. While I am a jovial and warm person, I can become a combative brawler when I witness departures from reason that stem either from willful ignorance or from diabolical, ideologically driven duplicity.

The quest for truth should always supersede one's ego-defensive desire to be proven right. This is not an easy task because for most people it is difficult to admit to being wrong. This is precisely why science is so liberating. It offers a framework for auto-correction because scientific knowledge is always provisional. An accepted scientific fact today might be refuted tomorrow. As such, the scientific method engenders epistemic humility. I grew up in a household where this quality was sorely lacking. Several members of my family are classic know-it-alls who seldom exhibit any deference to someone who might possess greater knowledge or wisdom on a given topic. They know more about the heart than the cardiologist, more about teeth than the dentist, more about mathematics than the mathematician, and more about academia than the academic. Also, they were seldom, if ever, willing to admit to being wrong. When it came to epistemic humility, they were not reincarnations of Socrates. I was always deeply troubled by this family dynamic for I viewed their epistemic grandiosity as a deep affront to the truth. A personal anecdote that took place more than two decades ago perfectly captures this reality.

A family member remarked to me that the Ancient Greeks were anti-Semitic Christians to which I gently retorted that they were not Christians. The individual in question insisted that of course they were Christians. At that point, I explained that the time period in question was labelled "BC" in reference to its being "before Christ" (prior to Christianity). Once it was clear to this person that my position was unassailable, what do you think he did? Did he grant me the courtesy of admitting that he was wrong? I have recounted this tale on a few occasions and asked people to guess what his reaction was. No one has successfully cracked that mystery yet. When all hope that he might be proven correct was extinguished, he looked me in the eyes and stated with a straight face, "Yes, I said that they were not Christians, and you said that they were. So I am right." Of course, we both knew that this was a grotesque lie but in his narcissistic and delusional bubble, his perfect record of superior knowledge remained intact.

My mother's admonition about the incongruity between my notions of intellectual and moral purity and the real-world was ironically on full display in my interactions with family members who possess zero epistemic humility. My intellectual probity was repeatedly violated by these individuals who cared only