

# Those Cunts In Their Cars

Those cunts in their cars,  
those cunts in their cars,  
they sit there for hours,  
those cunts in their cars.

Those obnoxious pricks,  
sit stuck in traffic,  
what gives them the right  
to fill my lungs with shite?

Those cunts in their cars,  
they think they're rock stars,  
sat on their fat arse  
going nowhere fast.  
Why can't they admit  
that their vehicle's shit?  
Stop clogging our streets,  
use your fucking feet.

The more that you buy the more you're oppressed  
They'll sell you freedom 'till there's no more left.

Those automobiles  
forever stood still.  
They look like such cocks  
trapped in their steel box.  
I cruise past on my bike,  
I can do what I like.  
Yes I'm feeling great  
whilst they put on weight.

You've seen through the scam  
You know that it's dark  
You want to stop driving  
But there's nowhere to park

Cunts in their cars  
How long will it last  
Till things of the past  
Are cunts in their cars

This is the most laid back track I believe I have ever made. And also the most intentionally offensive. And clearly, we're going for the good old juxtaposition trick again.

For this article I really have abandoned any pretence at toning down my tone. I gave myself more or less complete free reign to be as insulting and mean as I possibly could. I am the Anticlarkson.

## You Need To Keep Driving

When I was a kid, I loved cars. Fast ones. Sleek ones. Jagged 80's supercars like the Countach and the Esprit still tweak that excitement in me. I spent hours drawing them. I built hundreds of small plastic versions of them which would then clog up my shelves gathering dust.

I couldn't wait to be old enough to drive a car, it seemed like the ultimate reason why it was worth being an adult, whose lives otherwise seemed quite dull. Being in charge of one of those fast, huge powerful machines seemed like the height of sophisticated responsibility.

I remember watching those safety information broadcasts, of the "stop, look, listen" variety, where the adults would solemnly instruct children how not to get squished whilst crossing the road. Strangely, it never crossed my mind to question why the adults would drive these infant-crushing machines in the first place. Somehow, the onus was on *me*, an 8 year old boy to keep *my* shit together and not be a foolish idiot, whilst "responsible" grown-ups hurled 1-ton chunks of metal up and down past my childhood home.

From 1986 to 1994 or thereabouts, my brother and I would religiously watch every F1 Grand Prix. I spent several years with the fervent wish to become a racing driver when I grew up. In fact I possibly had even stronger self-aggrandising delusions about racing driving than ever I had about music later. I worked out exactly which world championships I would win, and exactly which year I would crash and perish in a tragic yet heroically gladiatorial demise. It would be interesting to dig out my old predictions as to who would win the F1 championships, firstly because I called myself Robert Hamilton, and secondly, my Kart racing number was 44, so I really could have cleaned up at the bookies there by

predicting there would have been about seven world championships won by a british driver called Hamilton using the number 44. Damn.

So don't get me wrong I can see the appeal of motorcars. I love the thrill of being pressed back in the seat as I press the accelerator. I love the noise. I love the power. The precision engineering. The sensation of speed. The convenience. The autonomy. The sleek chiseledness of bodywork. I too feel the pull of the automotive dream.

The trouble is, that dream isn't what driving a car is actually like. At all. 99% of the time it's pure frustration. Those deserted mountain roads you see on car adverts are great, probably, but how many people actually have a daily commute that goes down deserted mountain roads? If anyone, only those people who are heading out to make those car adverts. The car *you* can afford is not sleek or exciting. It looks exactly the same as all the other cars. It will not even be an interesting color, it will be black, grey, blue, or if you're really wild, red. You will not be able to experience the promised thrill of speed, because speed is illegal. You will be stuck in traffic most of the time. You will get fined. You will make a tiny scratch on the bumper and have to pay hundreds of pounds to correct it (because driving a scratched car is equivalent in social status to riding in a bus that smells of tramp urine). You will get fined again. You will have to pay through the nose just to keep the thing standing still. If you're feeling a bit sleepy and a small child runs in front of you, you will then be a child murderer and must live with that guilt for the rest of your existence. In fact I could write an entire book about how badly cars suck balls, luckily I don't need to because someone's already done it - "[Carjacked](#)" by Ali Sparkes tells the whole sorry tale. It is written from an American perspective, but then the car most eloquently demonstrates it's ultimate folly in America.

I now see this dream more as a mad delusion that has been implanted in our heads by car and oil companies. This lie makes public transportation *less* efficient, and they profit from precisely that lack of efficiency. In terms of actually moving people around in a sensible way, the car is an insane way to do it. They're insanely expensive, they're insanely dangerous, they're insanely disruptive to the human urban environment, they're insanely destructive to the actual environment.

So let's get down to facts. Pure hard, cold, cuntty facts.

Fact 1: Around three thousand people die a day in crashes on the roads worldwide. That's a whole 9/11's worth of violent gore spattered death EVERY DAY of every week of every month of every year. That's a Hiroshima for you every two months. That's also around a third of the *daily* death rate as the First World War, which in my mind has always been the

quintessential shining example of psychotic social lunacy. And bear in mind WW1 was over and done with in a mere four years, this car shit is seemingly with us in perpetuity. Car crash deaths aren't pretty and quick, you end up bleeding to death in a ditch with bits of metal stuck into you. Experience-wise not really so dissimilar to perishing on the Western Front. Cars are at least 400 times more mortally dangerous than terrorism. And yet people freak the fuck out about them and more or less ignore cars. Coronavirus in 2020 killed around 1.8 million. Car crashes killed 1.3 million. Apparently you "can't compare" virus deaths to car deaths... but I think I just did.

Fact 2: The average american family would have an extra million dollars saved for retirement if it weren't for the money they spent on their cars (and that's just directly, not including the cost of infrastructure, social cost of pollution, death, injury, healthcare, wars to secure oil etc.). Cars are one of the fastest depreciating assets you can buy.

Fact 3: American road maintenance costs about the same as the entire Apollo moon program *every* year.

Fact 4: The average american driver spends 42 hours a year sat stationary in traffic, costing the economy 300 billion dollars (another three Apollo programs down the drain). Even if it weren't for traffic, drivers would still be selfish, but add in the fact that half the time they're not even fucking *going* anywhere and they ascend to the hallowed ranks of diamond prize shit-for-brains cuntastic moron-cuntbags.

I wouldn't mind so much if the harm was confined to the people who have cars, in fact I might even take pleasure in that fact, but it's not, take for example, Fact 5:

Cars used within the EU-27 externalize about 250-350 billion euros per year on to other people, other regions and other generations. That means that myself, and everyone else who doesn't have a car are paying 750 euros per year so that lazier, cuntier people can continue to drive. In other words I have to pay nearly a grand a year so that other cunts can threaten my safety and respiratory health as I cycle to work.

Fact 6: Six million [\*pets\*](#) are killed every year by cars in the U.S. Maybe a murdered pet doesn't seem so important to you, but really, when a pet dies it is desperately sad. A child can be distraught, and I know adults who have become terribly upset when this happens. A pet is often the cuddliest, most innocent, most unconditionally loved member of the family. And the cunts are smooshing the guts out of them six million times a year in a single country.

Just take a few moments to enjoy that, drivers. Picture in your head a happy little girl skipping down the road to suddenly see a crushed mangled bloody lump of fur that is, wait... oh no, the same fur colour as her beloved little animal companion... is it Sammy? Is it? Has anyone seen Sammy? Sammy didn't come home. It *was* Sammy. That sad brutal thing, Sammy times six million times all the other countries in the world. It's kind of horrifying. It's like some bizarre sadistic hell machine designed to inaugurate children into the savage nature of our existence as fragile biological entities amusing ourselves with powers we are not entitled to weild. And we're not even starting to think about the wildlife that's being slaughtered.

Fact7: As cars get bigger (and safer for the ever obese cunts inside them), pedestrian and cyclist deaths i.e. innocent non-cunt deaths are *rising*, to about [6200 last year in the U.S.](#)

Fact 8: 6.5 million people die a year from air pollution. That's from vehicles and factories, but vehicles tend to be the main polluters in the areas where people actually *live*. That's a three times the death rate of the holocaust, which at least gassed people reasonably quickly. It's looking like coronavirus will only claim about a fifth of that figure this year. This pollution also causes cognitive defects and reduces IQ. Some even posit that lead pollution was responsible for the [crime wave in the mid 20th century](#).

And on and on and on.

Especially in cities, where I have lived most of my life, driving a car is especially aggravating. It infuriates me that whilst riding my bike I have to breathe these cunt's pollution, I have to risk my life whilst the cunts barely risk theirs, and I have to spend my taxes on maintaining their cuntng infrastructure. And that's even before we have started discussing the forthcoming destruction of the entire cuntng ecosystem I live in.

Fact 9:

You thought the facts had finished didn't you? Well no, they just keep coming.

In central London, the average car speed is 7.4 miles per hour. Have you ever tried to go that fast on a bike? It is laughable, you can barely stay upright. It takes deliberate effort *not* to speed up. This is the speed at which you would go whilst waiting for a three year old girl on a tricycle to catch up with you, and not because she couldn't pedal at that speed, but because she turned back to collect a lost mitten<sup>1</sup>. This is not "transport" by any stretch of the imagination, it's just filling the road with large obstacles that *real* transport, like busses and bikes, can't get past.

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<sup>1</sup> Or to investigate a flattened fluffy pancake that bears a striking resemblance to... oh, we did that already.

If you want to do dangerous shit, fine. Fly in wingsuits, [set yourself on fire and jump off tall buildings into small piles of snow](#), drink crack, put fireworks up your urethra, that's all great, go knock yourself out (literally). If you want that thrilling power trip of mastering a vehicle and driving at speed, you can do that: go get a track day. You can drive around at ludicrous speeds with other consenting adults. I've been to a few and it is indeed *awesome* fun. But don't expect me to pay for your daily pathetic watered down imitation of that with *my* money or *my* health or *my* life.

## They'll sell you freedom till there's no more left.

They say that consumerism is just giving people what they want. But do we "want" to spend 20% of our income on sustaining world-war levels of violent slaughter and multi-Chernobyl disaster levels of poisonous pollution<sup>2</sup>? Or have we simply been hoodwinked into it? Or is it another conspiracy?

If car drivers are cunts, then SUV drivers are mothercunting über-cunts. At some point in the early 90s car manufacturers realised that the number of cars was reaching saturation point. There simply weren't enough consumers to buy more cars to keep profits going up at the rates they were accustomed to. They also noticed that the profit margins on SUVs were way higher than on any other category of car. Huh, interesting, they said. So instead of trying to sell more normal cars to an already saturated market they decided they would sell bigger cars with higher profit margins. To rephrase that, they couldn't find any more cunts, so they set their sights on turning everyone into even bigger cunts. And of course, the stupid cunts lapped it up. The market share of the SUV has exploded since then, and is now becoming the biggest selling car category worldwide. Resulting in millions of tons of extra carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and yet more road deaths due to the greater impact of heavier cars.

And this perfectly demonstrates the exalted "efficiency" of modern consumer capitalism. Stiff competition between internal combustion engineers over hundred years has resulted in ever more ingenuity being employed to squeeze out every last watt of power from every millilitre of gasoline. This is marvelous. But all this hard won fuel efficiency is then completely pissed up the wall via frankly dystopian mind control techniques that brainwash people into thinking they need a wanking great cuntmobile that consumes 30% more fuel than a normal car. Despite the best efforts of engineers, marketing still wastes

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<sup>2</sup> As we will find out in Atom Smashers, Chernobyl produced a comparatively infinitesimal amount of poisonous pollution compared to fossil fuels.

our energy and our lives. One fine day, we'll just make sure we leave all of this shit to the fucking engineers.

The way I see it, cars embody everything that's cunt-ed up about consumerism. They're a perfect storm of infantile ideology ("Freedom", yeah?), misleading marketing mind-control, environmental carnage, degenerate uninnovative engineering, ugly formulaic and tasteless industrial design, the political corruption of corporate lobbying, regulatory failure, the sterile emptiness and meaninglessness of most people's inner lives, the rampant triumph of humanity's basest, most impulsive cognitive biases, the curse of "lock in", the prioritisation of the struggle for social status over quality of life, and a host of [large and small scale shady-business practices](#) designed to funnel money from the poor to the rich, from the dumb cunts to the smart cunts.

Electric, autonomous cars might help a bit, *assuming* we can crack the problem of generating electricity cleanly, but not much. I also imagine they'll just bring a bunch more unforeseen problems. For instance, if your car can drive itself, then in a dense city, the cost of keeping it running around will probably be cheaper than parking it. This means even more congestion and energy usage due to having loads of empty cars cruising around waiting to pick up their owners. The best thing that autonomous cars would do is eventually make it illegal to drive yourself, and hence relegate the bromance of driving a car to the racing track, where it belongs.

So in this song, I wanted to juxtapose the dream of transportation freedom, which is expressed by the dreamy 60's lounge-crooner style of the music, with the reality of cars, which is that they're cunts.

## I cruise past on my bike

Despite the cars, I enjoy(ed) my commute on my bike. The first two kilometers of my commute was down a tree lined bike path that leads down the river Panke, passes a few lovely lakes, and then goes through a park. This is how my day started. Sometimes I stop to look at a Cormorant, a Heron or even a Kingfisher. The sun is glittering off the lake, the birds are singing and I'm silently zipping along on the greatest, most efficient and convenient form of transport known to mankind. It's priceless. And yes, I do wear that extremely smug cyclist expression as I go. I have the bizarre luxury of paying less for my house precisely so I can be further from work and have more time to enjoy cycling. I don't really understand the logic of doing this any other way.

Particularly last summer, my morning ride was quite a creative time for me. I would sing things as I went, which is great breath and vocal practice, and no one listens or cares because your voice is drowned out by the noise of all the cunts in their cars. And even if people do hear, it's a tiny snatch of something, and then you're gone.

So, yes, as pretentious as it sounds, this song was actually written on my bike. I would sing it to cars as I went past them (or less often, as they went past me). As I continued to sing it the melody and the chords gradually took shape in my head. Again, having my phone to record the ideas as they came was very useful. You can hear the wind rushing by on the sketches.

I would recommend to musicians that you become adept at composing stuff in your head. After all your head is where most of the ideas come from, so if you can store them there too then you have a highly efficient workflow. If you can completely free yourself from a computer or a guitar or anything else, then you have a far more direct, and highly portable, way to compose. It took me a long, long time to be able to do this, I'm no Mozart (as you can hear), I can't tell exactly what chords are going on in there until I get a guitar in my hands, but I have enough experience to be able to have a bit of mental polyphony, and more importantly I can remember the things I have come up with. And actually if I can't remember, that's good too, because it means it wasn't memorable enough anyway, and I kind of think that music should be memorable - I use my imperfect memory as a kind of idea filter to weed out anything forgettable.

As soon as you set an idea down, it becomes somehow inflexible. Especially on a computer you really get trapped by the stuff that's already on there, and so sometimes the longer you can keep a song fluid and flexible and purely in the mercurial world of ideas, the better. I find that having a recording that you are working with bogs me down, the question becomes not "what would be awesome for this song?" But "what bit of data should I stick here on track 14?", and the latter question inevitably has far more boring answers than the former.

A good idea is not simply just itself, just some idea waiting for other ideas. No. I get the extremely strong feeling that when an interesting idea comes, it's not simply like a thing that requires other things to be created and bolted onto it. It is more like a hint of something bigger. It is more like unearthing a fossilized dinosaur skeleton from rock. You first discover a small toe or something poking out from an escarpment. But it's not like you can just take the toe and construct anything you want from it... Actually, the whole rest of the song might be there, somewhere buried in the rock. If you are a clever archeologist, you can tell from the single scrap of toe that you initially found exactly what kind of animal lies

hidden. The skill that then becomes crucial is that of not destroying the fossils in the process of uncovering them... this is all too easily done, and once destroyed the idea is very much un-put-back-togetherable. I have destroyed countless great songs because of clumsy archeology, and I curse myself whenever I hear the original sketches because I probably irredeemably destroyed a priceless archeological find. Miners are somewhat clumsier than archeologists I suppose.

So this raises an interesting question - are the songs in some sense "real" before you make them? In other words, was Plato right?

## I can do what I like

Ooh, I do like a good chord sequence. The trick to coming up with chord sequences that *feel* new for me (they probably aren't really new, right?), is forgetting all the chords I already know, and building the notes up in each new chord one by one, such that I build the right chord on the basis of how the individual notes within the chord are moving, not on the basis on "what chord usually comes next". Because the chord that usually comes next is inevitably a boring one.

So most of the songs I write on guitar feature chord fingerings I've never come across before. It's an astonishing thing that you can be playing the same chord, but change the fingerings or simply remove or add one the exact same notes and yet you will have a new sound. Endless, endless discovery even on a simple wooden box with six strings. It's like sorcery really exists.

My favorite chord changes are always where single notes move by slightly discordant or peculiar semitones, but nonetheless the whole sequence feels logical and inevitable.

I particularly like the first chord change in this song, I guess it's the real hook that the whole track hangs on. The first chord is a C major 7th, which is *the* classic smooth jazzy lounge chord. This chord is a handsome but slightly craggy rich gentleman cruising through the alps in his Maserati, bathed in the springtime sunshine, circa 1968. The following chord however, is a G minor, which is more plaintive and despairing. If, for instance, several years later our craggy ex-Maserati man (he lost his job and had to trade down to a Fiat 500) hears the news that an old flame of his, that lovely mysterious woman that by some twist of fate was called away to Argentina and left him wondering what might have been, has died of a diesel particulate related lung disorder, this chord might be appropriate. And most crucially, the vocal line takes advantage of the fact that there's a semitone to fall from the B

- precisely the 7th note that makes the first chord "loungey", to the B-flat - precisely the minor third which makes G minor sound "sad". So within the first few seconds of the melody you have a microcosmic embodiment of the shattering of that dream of freedom through personal transportation. Bam!

Now this is such a neat trick I'm prepared to put money on it being completely unoriginal. I imagine there's a bunch of other tracks with precisely the same thing in it, I also bet that they have similar "broken dream" type themes. It wouldn't be the first song that hangs around one change in the sequence, a track that springs to mind is I Can't Help Myself, where the exquisite G to D minor change, again under a falling single semitone in the melody, occurs on the "help" of help myself, highlighting both the pleasure and pain of falling uncontrollably into a situation where your happiness utterly depends on someone else. Y'know, bittersweet blah blah. Same old box 'o tricks.

Luckily, however, there's a few more chords to go, so likelihood is I haven't completely duplicated another song. I'd love to be able to tell you that all the changes are as brilliant and meaningful as the first one, but rulez is rulez and from that moment on it's more about following basic musical logic and the fact that the melody needs to keep going down in semitones...

Having said that another thing I've been working on in my music is more variation over repetition. It would have been easy to keep this as a four chord sequence, but the second time round, whilst the melody and the first two chords stay the same, I noticed that there are another two chords that fit under the second half just as well. I think this is called 'reharmonization'. So things change underneath it to a more jocular, bluesy major seventh feel, it adds a slightly different flavour to things. Also the second time round it should maybe sound as though it's working up to the middle section rather than just going round again.

The middle section itself isn't particularly interesting melodically, it's more of a "foil", like it's playing the straight man to the verse in order that the hook sounds better when we get back to it. The lyrics are also playing the straight man, in that they bluntly state the thesis of the song, but bringing it onto a slightly generalised higher level: "the more that you spend the more you're oppressed. They'll sell you freedom till there's no more left". Which is more anti-capitalism to annoy Mike with. Bear in mind Mike *does* own a car. In fact he has a Tesla that he has had retrofitted with an internal combustion engine just to irritate people. What a cunt.

## Vibraphones Are Just Cool Aren't They?

This section just says that vibraphones are cool. Because they are. This track obviously could not do without one. Not a real one of course, but real enough to be cool. Cool. Like Stereolab. Whose singer was killed on her bike by some cunt in a truck. Just thought I'd mention that.

Speaking of "clever" references to other bands, there's a "clever" reference to one of my favourite tracks ever here. It sounds like a sarcastic parody, but of course you all know I fucking love the original. I wonder how obvious it is. To me it's obvious, but then I thought it up. Maybe it would slip past me, oblivious, if I didn't know it was there. Maybe it's too subtle and no one will get it? Or maybe it's too blindingly obvious and everyone will just groan? I never know if I'm being too obscure or too obvious. Which raises questions of whether such clever muso tricks are worth doing at all, if half the audience are oblivious and the other half scoff at your crassness, maybe it would all be best avoided. Does it actually add something to the track? Well, yes it does actually, even if it wasn't a clever reference it would still be kind of nice musically, it definitely adds some spice and variety to the arrangement's progression, and it was the clever reference that provided the impetus and challenge that brought forth the creativity required to make that interesting bit... so whilst the smarmy cleverness is *not* useful, the end product of it is. This paradoxical phenomenon is closely related to the concept of the "Kumpo", which I will get to in a later chapter.

## Freedom

If you want freedom, don't buy a car. That's not freedom, that's enslaving yourself to the automotive, oil and debt industries.

What I suggest you do is buy a bike and a synth. Actually you could buy fifteen great bikes and fifteen awesome synths for the same amount of money. Parameter-space-wise, if you buy a synth with 100 knobs, the amount of sonic and cultural territory you can explore is astronomically vaster than the territory that you could ever drive through.

Freedom of movement is vastly overrated. Freedom of *thought* is where it's at.

*Without going outside, you may know the whole world.*

*Without looking through the window, you may see the ways of heaven.*

*The farther you go, the less you know.*

(Lao Tsu)

*I saw the ways of heaven and all I got was this Lao Tsu T-shirt.*

(Mike Trollfield)

And slowly but surely people will begin to realise this.

## The Desolation Of Roads

The most desolate places on Earth aren't deserts or the frozen wastes of Antarctica, they are places that have been destroyed by roads. Ballardian concrete wastelands, littered with twisted scraps of metal, plastic and rubber where no human or animal exists. Every surface within a few meters of a road is covered in toxic grime. The closer you live to a road, the worse your mental and physical health will be.

I wanted to end this piece with a sonic description of such a landscape, but there are other songs waiting impatiently to be allowed onto this album, and in the end felt it would not be appropriate. Actually, despite the cussing, it *is* quite a pleasant chilled song to listen to and I didn't actually want to ruin that nice cheesy lounge ending with some roaring automotive hellscape, even though that would certainly have expressed the political point of the song. Maybe at some other juncture that soundscape will get made, for instance if I were to do this song live and then mix out into some industrial techno, then precisely that conceptual segue would be useful. For now the only remnant of that idea is me briefly telling you about it here. Sorry about that, probably not worth a top level heading, but then neither was the vibraphone bit so we're clearly operating under a deflationary scenario with regards to heading levels.

## "Where's My Flying Car?" Syndrome

We just rewatched the Back To The Future trilogy. I thought they might be shit in hindsight, but no they are actually pretty good, obviously the first one is the classic, but the quality is more or less sustained for all three films. Phew. It's weird watching films from the 80s and early 90's<sup>3</sup>. In a way they are exactly the same, but in other ways you are watching them with so much more cultural knowledge they appear transformed. What really strikes me is how funny some of the lines are, and how well they are delivered. I don't actually remember these being so funny at the time. What also strikes me is that I have an

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<sup>3</sup> Films post 1994 are different, they are more "now". There was *before* Reservoir Dogs and Trainspotting, and there was *after*.

absolutely infuriating political correctness enforcement officer in my head just waiting to pounce on revered cultural touchstones from my past and ruin them. The last victim of my inner equity inspector was Bill Murray's character in Ghostbusters who, once a wacky but lovable rogue, is now simply another toxic male who gets a girl he doesn't deserve. Though it does have to be said that Sigourney does get the most meme-worthy line of the film. "There is no Dana, there is only a stereotypically beautiful woman with extremely flimsy character development". Hmm, but if sardonic oddball legend Bill Murray is a cancel risk then civilization is on thin ice indeed. Speaking of political correctness, is Mike going to chip in here? Yes, he is, he very much is. He's in the foyer hanging up his black leather coat and trilby.

Anyway, back to back to back to the future. The most striking thing about that 1980's vision of 2015 is of course the contrast between the stuff that did actually happen and the stuff that didn't happen and moreover isn't looking like it's going to fucking happen for another million years. Isn't it weird how we were perfectly capable of getting our guesses wrong by a factor of several million in 1985, and yet today the road ahead all seems pretty certain<sup>4</sup>?

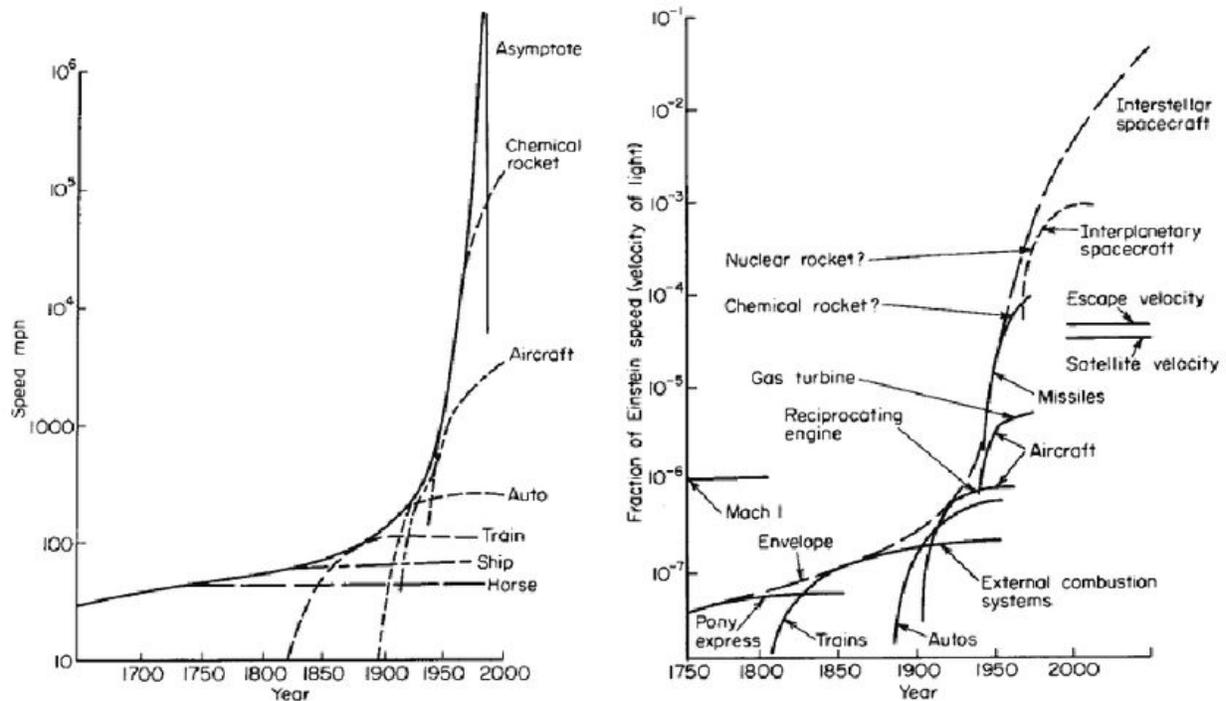
There is a scene where Marty's girlfriend turns the lights in the house on with a voice command. Done. We got that. There's the giant flat screen TV. Done. Overachieved, actually. Screens now look way more magnificent than the futuristic screens we used to see on our screens. There's the self-lacing shoes. Done. OK, nice, but then there's the outrageous fashions. Er, *Nul points*, fashion has massively under-developed and under-outraged. I believe I whinge about this elsewhere. Then there's the tiny expanding pizza. Uhhm... not missing that really. Pizzas being too big prior to being cooked isn't really on the list of pressing human needs in need of a stunningly radical atomic physics breakthrough. But then we come to *transport*. The flying cars, sky-roads and hoverboards. Not even fucking *close*. It's hard to say that progress in transportation has been anything other than pitiful. Transport has been stuck in a kind of weird stasis. People from 1985 could time travel here and they would be like - what the fuck man, cars are the same, planes are the same, trains are the same, bikes are the same, trams are the same, boats are the same, what in gods name have you people been *doing* for thirty five years? And what the hell happened to hovercrafts? Hovercrafts were way cool, and you just *gave up* on them? Jesus, *you guys!* And how come I have a time machine and I'm from 1985 and you don't still have time machines... etc.

Take a look at these charts<sup>5</sup>. You will see that in the early 60s people could quite easily have claimed there to be some kind of Moore's law exponential increase in transportation speed.

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<sup>4</sup> Spoiler alert, it's *not* certain. Not even that apocalypse you are so convinced about. See next chapter.

<sup>5</sup> I love saying that. I'm sure to wear Jeff Goldblum-esue glasses and jacket when I say it.



A 1961 chart showing Moore's law for transport speed.

But, this law turned out to be not a law, just an observation, and Moore's law also turned out to be not a law but also an observation.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and we can laugh at the 60's space geeks who were getting excited about travelling at 1% of the speed of light in 2020, but the question is *why* has transport advanced so pitifully slowly in my lifetime? The answer is that exponential growth is a fantasy. There is only really ever S shaped growth, with the first part of that S *looking* like an exponential. [Here's a paper about such things](#) if you're interested. So whilst I totally believe in progress, as I made clear in the last chapter, I don't believe in unlimited progress in every field of endeavour. At some point the law of diminishing returns overpowers the law of self-leveraging knowledge. Therefore, endless progress relies on finding new fields to progress *in*. Which is why it fundamentally relies on transformative creativity, and not simply just optimising shit, which is what we've mostly been doing for the past two decades.

So, what can be done to radically transform transport? What can we do to put ourselves back on the exciting upward swing of the S curve instead of the dull ever-flattening part?

I see a future of localised activities. I see a future of more *diverse* transportation. Rather than bikes, cars, lorries, I see many new categories of different sized vehicles for different environments and different needs. Electric scooter sharing may be kinda silly, but at least it's *new*, at least it's *different*, at least people are *trying* something else, at least it's not just more and more cunts in cars. At least people are waking up to the fact that you don't need a car for any and every situation. Some city centers have got rid of cars, and they are vastly improved as a result.

So I can imagine the whinges about getting rid of cars. Actually, I don't have to imagine very hard. What about delivering heavy things? OK, how often do you need to move stuff that's too heavy to carry? For me, it's exactly once a year when we try to get a Christmas tree from the garden center to our house. That's it. I will only be carrying out this activity about forty more times for the entire rest of my life, and that doesn't justify spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on something to do it with. Besides, we solved that issue with a bike trailer. Brushes needles off hands in smug satisfaction.

But I understand your burdened mileage may vary. Maybe I'm being uncharitable by assuming that the only things you ever pick up or take away in your pickup are takeaways. You may have a pressing need to transport large blocks of solid tungsten around every weekend. Maybe, I don't know. I don't know what you're into. But let's say large blocks of solid tungsten is your thang, and you need to get yourself and your big-ass blocks to the village tungsten owners club meet every Saturday morning. Fine.

Well, maybe we should actually think about the problem of moving *things* around, right? Once you have got rid of the need for the driver controlling the vehicle, you have got rid of the need for the vehicle to be a certain size. The vehicle could be small enough for small packages, or large blocks of tungsten. It wouldn't need windows and it wouldn't need to be above ground all the time, because tungsten doesn't need to see. It wouldn't need to contain entertainment devices, it wouldn't need to constantly keep moving, or get to it's destination so fast so as to threaten the lives of pedestrians and cyclists, because tungsten doesn't get bored, and doesn't have anything else to get on with. It wouldn't need vast safety infrastructure, because tungsten doesn't get horribly injured or experience terrible pain, or have loved ones that will grieve it's demise. It wouldn't need to be autonomous, because tungsten doesn't have crass juvenile fantasies about being a big tough boss man driving a big tough car wherever it wants whenever it wants all on its own.

The method of moving non-sentient heavy shit could be completely decoupled from the method of moving sentient human shit. All it would need is some security system to stop the little vehicles getting stolen.

Once cheap autonomous goods transportation is everywhere, you don't need a car to transport you *and* your tungsten, simply transport yourself via transport designed for humans (bikes, electric or otherwise, public transport), and transport your tungsten via transport designed for objects (insert snazzy name for that here). I imagine this infrastructure will be coming along in the next decade, hopefully subsidised by all that tax that Amazon never paid.

But what about the less able people? Well, actually, I notice that less able people already have specific transport that helps them get around. They get (for some reason) extremely slow small red electric cars. So rather than complaining that less able people need massive cars why not just make mobility scooters better?

But what about families? What about them? The poor hard working British families? What about *them*? *The faaaamiiiiiees*? Well, firstly *why do you always try to use families to win every fucking argument*? Secondly, I know loads of families without cars. They don't seem to be terminally bored or starving to death so what's your point?

Wait a minute, I seem to be turning into Mike. Oh shit, I am *literally* turning into Mike. I look in the mirror and *I'm changing*, it's a bit like the incredible hulk, except instead of turning green I'm sprouting a goatee and bifocals... Noooo!! Aaaaaaagghghhhhh!!!

## Offensive Words

*Mike Trollfield*

Hi Folks. It's me, Mike. I'm here to talk about offensive words. In the process I may offend someone.

Can I just say that *I* wrote this song, not Cursor Miner? I'm not completely sure why this song is on this album and not on my new album "Hits from the wrong" by Mike Trollfield, but here we are.

As you may have gathered by now, this track contains the c-word. I don't like using that word, but "automobile" didn't scan, so "cars" it was. Ha, no seriously... some people do find

“cunt” beyond the pale even now. But I think they’re mostly Americans so I choose to ignore them.

Words are awful aren’t they? The word “cunt” smacks you over the head with a massive thwacking sound “cunt!”. Ow! That really hurt! I think I may have mild cuntcussion. Once upon a time uttering these kinds of words was thought to be the most terrible thing that a person could possibly do in public. Thank god, we woke up and realised that they were fine, and we could all chill the fuck out. The End. Well. For a few calm decades at least. Now, inevitably, the stupidity has all started again. When at long last, the Christian Conservative right finally stopped demanding everything be censored, it is of course the job of the regressive left to resurrect the practise even more fervently. It seems that we, as a species are incapable of living without some kind of perpetual moral panic concerning the noises we make with our mouths.

The new scariest words are of course to do with race. I say “to do with race”, but the newer taboo words are extremely tenuously connected with race, and yet even this tenuous connection is enough to make them scary. Because surely making race more scary will help everyone afflicted with unfortunate amounts of race, right? The latest example is the use of the word “master” as the name for the main branch in Github. Turns out this needs changing, because it used to be a reference to “master-slave” relationship for the controlling and controlled parts of software systems, which was in turn a metaphor based on the master-slave<sup>6</sup> carriages on railways and so on and so on all the way back to real masters and real slaves and the real problem that we are now trying to rectify by changing the fourth-hand terminology. That sentence will either be greeted with incredulous incomprehension or an indignant “why the hell are you relating this heroic story sarcastically?” depending on which side of the fence you are on. I, Mike Trollfield, will now risk both my gonads and my good standing at my place of employment in an attempt to straddle this high, razorwire festooned fence. The following is an essay I penned with the intention of posting publicly at my workplace, but did not, due perhaps to the aforementioned testicular risk<sup>7</sup>.

## Sanity Check

Suggestions repeatedly come up to engage in renaming of offensive terms in our codebase and in our products. Very little opposition is voiced to these suggestions, for reasons I

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<sup>6</sup> Quaintly, these rail cabs were also referred to as the cow and calf. I therefore propose renaming the master branch the “cow” branch.

<sup>7</sup> And Mike, let’s not forget that posting such a huge essay on a very sensitive topic under a facetious pen name as part of some weird art-music-book project would be downright bloody *weird*.

would like to go into later, but I would like to question the practise<sup>8</sup>, and I would immediately ask you seriously to put aside any immediate visceral reactions to that, and consider my objections without rushing to judge me. Please trust that I am concerned about this for the same reason you are concerned about this.

The arguments *for* doing this, I think, consist of the following. Please let me know if this is a misrepresentation of the reasoning, if I am setting up any straw man argument, or if I have missed anything fundamental. So, in ascending order of questionableness:

- The effort to change these words is so minimal, and the improvement is good enough and visible enough that it is simply polite to change terminology, basically as a courtesy, or to send a message that we care.
- That the history of race and slavery are so intimately intertwined that any reference to slavery in language is by extension racist.
- The terminology itself was created by people with bad intentions, either overt or subliminal.
- By flagging these words up, we raise awareness of the issues in question.
- Encountering words that remind people of the roots of present injustices is actually *harmful* to some people.
- Using words that have roots in gross injustice *perpetuates* that injustice somehow, therefore changing the terminology can bring about genuine, large scale societal change.

I completely agree with the first point, but I think it is outweighed by other negative effects which I shall go into later. The second point is persuasive, perhaps historically skewed, but of course, given the persistence of inequality through history and the urgency sensitivity of the topic it is genuinely insensitive to object. The third claim is impossible to ascertain without being able to mind read the dead. But the last three arguments I find quite seriously wrong, and I believe that getting them wrong is seriously hampering everything we are hoping to achieve with liberal, progressive politics.

I am no expert in sociology, but I *have* studied philosophy, the philosophy of science, psychology, cognitive science and topics related to mindfulness and stress reduction. And as far as I can see these kinds of claims directly contradict valuable wisdom in *every one* of these fields.

Changing the terminology for a *new* product can introduce new and better language for what's going on. We now have "leaders" and "followers", and that's good. It is better. This was a great idea with regard to new syncing technologies. It is simply good sense to do this.

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<sup>8</sup> and the theory... *especially* the theory.

Objections were of course voiced from outside the company, and those objections may indeed indeed have been inspired by suspect motivations, and rightly dismissed<sup>9</sup>.

So I should be *absolutely clear* that I am not arguing for using outdated terms in our new, public products for which we decide on our terminology afresh.

And let me also be clear about this: This isn't *about me* being annoyed about people changing the words I've used for years, I can cope with this. I, after all am a privileged, cognitively able coder and can quite easily adapt to using new terminology. It will probably be mildly irritating, but no biggie. I'm not even arguing for *keeping* the word master, I don't care, I think it's irrelevant. It's a stupid term. But that's precisely my point. The stakes are *so much* higher than this. The word is irrelevant, but the thinking *behind* efforts such as this is deeply worrisome to me. I write such a huge and vitriolic screed, not because I wish to defend to the death the Imperial Majesty of the Queen's English as Clumsily Employed by White Nerds, but because I believe deeply in the same cause that you believe deeply in: making the world better, reducing needless and unfair suffering, and enabling flourishing for all people. I care for exactly the same reasons you care. If your proposed means of achieving this are moving us further away from the ends then that makes me just as angry as you, if not more.

What it's really about, and what really worries me and makes me incredibly anxious about the whole topic is that these kinds of attempts to help people are not just ineffective, they are precisely *counterproductive*. There are four reasons I consider this so.

Firstly, flagging words as offensive, and encouraging people to read the worst into many parts of language and culture is a perfect recipe for exacerbating anxiety, paranoia and trauma, not least in those you are trying to protect. People who study anxiety and trauma are generally agreed that further stigmatising and erecting barriers around the object of people's fears actually makes that fear [worse not better](#). It makes that person less resilient, and less able to deal with their issues. Not stronger, not happier. It inflates those fears and makes barriers to overcoming them ever higher. So the fifth argument, that of preventing harm to others, is shaky. And that doesn't make the research wrong, it makes your claim that you are protecting people highly questionable.

Regarding "raising awareness", here is a document from Racial Equity Tools detailing many group [exercises to raise awareness of structural racism](#). For now, let's leave aside what structural racism is (I haven't heard a good definition yet). At no point in the document do they instruct people to scour their working terminology and try to find anything offensive...

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<sup>9</sup> However, I found it highly alarming the way that the objection was paraded on a public email thread and dismissed ad-hominem. The worse you consider a crime to be, the more robust and measured must your responses to it must be. The trials of the worst offenders must absolutely be the fairest of all, because the moral high ground is essential territory to protect. Public shaming and mob-judgement does our cause no favours.

why not? Because that wouldn't actually raise awareness of anything fundamental at all. I find it hard to believe that any of us in our company, or even in the wider world, are truly oblivious of the historical injustices in question. Even the most regressive bigot is at least *aware* of the issues, even if they reject their urgency or even their reality. Absolutely, we may be unaware of many unrepresented and less acknowledged or shameful aspects of history, absolutely we may be oblivious to how certain structures in our society hold people back, our privilege may make us blissfully ignorant of what true oppression feels like subjectively speaking, but how *exactly* will changing a word for something irrelevant suddenly impart that complex and difficult knowledge? Can you explain how it is supposed to work precisely, without hand waving and without baseless accusations, and without reference to circular arguments?

Also be aware that "raising awareness" is the exact opposite goal from claim four, which is saying that by changing the name will help the offended avoid encountering any triggering concepts, and avoid the psychological discomfort caused. Is it really the plan to somehow raise awareness in the groups who need it whilst diminishing it in others who don't? How exactly are you targeting your awareness modifier beam with such devastating psychological accuracy?

And this would apply even to genuinely offensive and insulting words. On top of this, we are erecting these barriers of fear around words that 99.9% of the time were used in perfectly innocent ways, in other words we are *expanding* the repertoire of hurtful words in our language. Please, how will this cause less hurt? The word "master" is used for all kinds of things. I mean, isn't it? I have my records "mastered", and a vinyl can have a "master" copy, do we need to rename the entire mastering industry? I have a masters degree, does this need to be renamed? Should Grandmaster Flash now be categorised as offensive or can he still be considered one of the most masterful DJs of all time, having produced some of the earliest masterpieces in the Hip Hop canon? Can we still attend masterclasses? Can I still watch mastermind? What about people whose surname just happens to be Masters? You can say that these versions of the word are not the offensive ones, but they do, actually, have linguistic roots in the offensive term, in the same way the master branch does, because in the days when these words were coined, society was extremely hierarchical and unjust.

When, in all honesty, was the last time you heard someone use the word master in its original sense? And no, Lord of the Rings doesn't count. I'm sorry if this is sounding flippant or facetious, but it's almost impossible not to fall into that.

The other terms up for discussion have absolutely *no* background of racism, the expression "blacklist" for instance. Just because it contains a reference to the color black and has a negative connotation must mean it is offensive? Please, no. It mustn't. It really shouldn't do if we want society to stay sane. And it really didn't until well meaning people started saying

it should do. If it does now, how far should we go with that? The vast majority of cultures on earth associate darkness with the unknown and fear, and lightness with the known, the safe and good. Including the cultures of people with dark skin. When it's light, we can see, when it's dark we can't. When we can't see, that is dangerous. Light good, dark bad. It has a very simple explanation in Evolutionary Psychology. You might think that it is desperately unfortunate that we evolved to associate darkness with bad things, and therefore we should cancel the entire field of evolutionary psychology in order to protect marginalized communities... but of course, it's not unfortunate at all, because anyone with the tiniest scrap of sense knows that to extrapolate that metaphor to judging entire groups of people by their skin colour would be ludicrous. If anyone is as simple minded and ignorant enough to actually do this, then I'm afraid they're also more than ignorant enough to not really get on board with your convoluted deconstructionist argument for changing it.

Not even the most stringent totalitarian reeducation program in history would be able to eradicate this metaphor. No matter how hard you try, you can't burn all the literature and poetry and music and art that references black and white or light and dark! If you claim the metaphor itself to be a problem you give a huge amount of momentum to the very stupidity that you are trying to eradicate - namely the stupidity of judging the worth of people on irrelevant characteristics such as colour. By saying every reference to the colour black *is always* a coded reference to an (arbitrary) bloc of African descended people, and furthermore that reference is *always* racist, you absolutely further cement those associations in people's minds, when in fact those tenuous associations were almost entirely generated by your misguided project to "raise awareness". It lends credence to the very thing we are trying to get rid of. It makes the divisions between people worse, not better. It is almost as if your aim is to cause more fear, more distrust, more anxiety, perhaps in order to whip people up into some nihilistic destructive frenzy. If that's your aim I'd urge you to change it.

By encouraging us to problematize, detest, stigmatize and fear the very nuts and bolts of our cultural inheritance, a self-perpetuating dynamic is set in motion that constantly nudges us further and further in the direction of thinking that everything is somehow tainted, that nothing is to be trusted, the very soil of our culture is soaked in blood, and that most of the entire human world is fundamentally rooted in evil, and anyone who thinks otherwise is also evil. Please stop to ask yourself these questions: How therapeutic do you think this is? How well does this map on to good practises in, say, the treatment for trauma recovery? How well does this align with our most effective counselling techniques such as CBT? How good is this attitude for encouraging calm dialog and constructive discourse between a diverse populace in a civil public sphere? How good is that for recognising and feeling gratitude for the immense struggle for progress and hard-won victories that past generations have *already made on our* behalf? If you want to raise children into adults who

are free from crippling anxiety, able to have in depth discussions about important complex issues with people different from them without fear or unwarranted suspicion, and be able to weigh up multiple viewpoints in arguments about how we want society to function, scare-ifying and then banning words is precisely the opposite of what you should be doing.

The sixth and final argument is the most extravagant claim, but I think the one most often cited (e.g. the one referred to in [this article](#) about the github terminology), runs that using words with roots in oppression somehow perpetrates *further* oppression. For some reason the left assumes this to be a universally verified fact, but it's really not. This is a highly tenuous and relatively obscure claim. I have heard people putting it forth for thirty years and have yet to see an explanation of the mechanism by which it happens. Even if it turns out to be true, without an understanding of *how* it happens there is precious little hope that by haphazardly tinkering with terminology you can rectify the issue.

There is certainly plenty of research that shows that [language is an important tool that shapes and gives form to thought](#). The human subconscious is a complex, interwoven massively parallel system and it is possible that the web of associations of a word is somehow activated each time it is used. Whenever a word or concept is activated in the mind, a huge web of related concepts are also activated to some degree. Some words and phrases may indeed reinforce certain patterns in our minds. I completely sympathise with how one might think it could be a good idea to tweak something there. It *seems* far easier and more effective than tweaking taxation, law enforcement, the legal system, financial regulations, the electoral system or anything out there in the real world that perpetuates real inequality. But what makes people so confident that they can immediately proceed forth from that psychological observation and manipulate words so as to engineer significant macro-economic change - and it has to be said mostly on a completely amateur, vigilante basis? How are you so confident that you understand exactly how the majority of human subconscious minds will respond to your edits, and that they will not backfire horribly? And how exactly would pointing out a connection to historical oppression *previously unknown to someone* (e.g. the word "master") would suddenly reconfigure this vast web of hitherto nonexistent subconscious activations and suddenly inspire the "correct" political opinion? This would not be possible unless the harmful constructs were being communicated telepathically, but then how do you know that changing a few words will stop the telepathic prejudice from leaking in via some other route? Again, I apologise for lapsing back into ridicule but the gulf between the complexity of the mechanisms by which we absorb our cultural worldview and these feeble attempts to hack it really is that ridiculous.

My charitable reading of this philosophy is that the power structures in society are absorbed by the subconscious mind, and then the language we use reflects these power structures, even without us consciously being aware of it. This could well be the case. Using

this language then reinforces the power structures, and frames the way we think. This is not unlikely, and is a conjecture well worth taking seriously, worth studying, and worth making ourselves more mindful of. But accepting this premise for a moment, how do you then *know* that your attempts to change language are not reinforcing exactly the same power structures? Maybe it only seems that way on the surface? What makes you so certain that *your* ideas are the “pure” ones? Maybe what seems to your conscious mind to be an excellent way of fighting racism is in fact more subconscious racism? And actually there is a decent argument that it *is*, in that it reinforces the categorisation of people on the basis of labels and trivial characteristics, these categories of people then need to be treated differently, further some categories being more in need of “protection” than others. This absolutely then reinforces in our minds the divisions between people according to race, gender, sexuality and all the rest. And of course, the more we try to avoid any hierarchical structures, the more inverted hierarchies are erected in their place. So then we might be in a bit of a bind in that many of our attempts to combat these power structures may in fact be tainted with them<sup>10</sup>.

The progressive left are constantly making reference to socialization and subconscious bias, while refusing to admit that their activism is precisely socialization, with a fantastical amount of bias. Concepts from genuine psychology research are borrowed, but only when it suits. How do we get out of this bind? Am I saying progress is impossible? No, but it does require making what we are attempting to achieve objectively definable and measurable, and doing extremely careful studies to find out what the measurable effects of various interventions will be, and making recommendations based on those studies. And from what I have read, the studies say that most of this stuff is not working.

If you are genuinely trying to eliminate what you claim is ubiquitous unconscious bias, then only the most rigorous of approaches have any chance of succeeding. The good news is that there is a method that is known to be the best way to eliminate bias. This is the scientific method. I.e. something a bit more rigorous than just piling in and renaming and shaming anything that’s shock-trending on social media. I am perfectly aware that certain “academic” fields consider science and even rationality itself to be perpetuating white powerknowledge and hence racism, but to go down that route is to welcome the death of free society and the death of all hopes regarding social progress.

Attempting to solve oppression by tinkering with terminology seems to be like fixing malfunctioning software by renaming the variables. Of course, renaming variables can be an excellent way to make code more understandable. There *is* a point there: naming things

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<sup>10</sup> You can reply that I’m just playing philosophical games now, but I’m simply accepting what I think might be a reasonable claim and running with it.

is important to express what they do. But ultimately you could rename all the variables to anything you like and it wouldn't change how the software *works* one single bit.

And we are not worrying here about creating a new name for something, we are not worrying about how to best express what something does, we are *renaming* something in order not to cause offense, which is different. Renaming does always come with a cost in time and effort and cognitive load, and has an effect on the world that is subtle and hard to predict. Improving variable names can be valuable, yes, the names might be better, some things may definitely become clearer in the process, but the bugs will all still be there unless you find the real cause of the problem. The actual problem. And language is *clearly not* the real cause of the problem. Words alone do not create reality. The human mind does not consist entirely of words. Many perfectly progressive, left wing thinkers consider that idea to be a fringe intellectual fad that has simply got out of control. Cognitive science has moved on by immense strides since this idea was last fashionable. You may object that I have not *read* the entire works of Foucault and all 200,000 of his citations so I am in no position to make that call, but this is a little like saying I have to read the entire Bible in order to claim that supernatural miracles do not happen.

Given the theoretically ascribed power of terminology, surprisingly little thought goes into the actual practical cultural implications of changing it. Changing terminology does also introduce a cascade of other implications, psychological and practical. For one: now there is a precedent, and a dynamic has been put in motion. Even on our small scale, we may have to go back and edit all the stuff that already exists, whether public or not, to make it comply with the new norm. What this puts into motion is that *any* company who keeps this terminology by negligence, ignorance or basically being too busy with something else, or any devices that are older than a few years old are now perceived as being mildly racist. Now everyone has been told that the terminology is offensive, all the old synths out in the world are offensive. When previously they were not. Again, how does this make people feel safer? How does it make them feel more secure in society? How does this calm people's anxiety? How would this change a genuinely racist person into a non-racist? Even if these companies weren't racist before (which is always up for debate), they are now. This is unfair on them, as being accused of racism is no joke. If the crime is terrible, then a false accusation of that crime is, whilst certainly far less terrible than being a victim of that crime, at least to be approached with extreme trepidation. I see no evidence that anyone has seriously thought through all of the long term implications, or set out at what point this project could ever be considered successfully completed.

Clearly white upsetness about false accusations of racism pale into insignificance against the feelings of those experiencing genuine abuse, fear and systemic disadvantage. I get that

<sup>11</sup>. The question is what *is* the genuine oppression here? Is it the fact that some words in the English language (actually *all* languages) contain words with historical roots that are connected to situations in the past that we almost universally find abhorrent now? Or is it that Britons with names that mark them out as foreign or BAME are twenty percent less likely to be invited for a job interview given the exact same CV, *today*? Or that despite our marvellous new found sensitivity and tolerance around mental health issues, they are spiralling out of control in young people, particularly girls? How has the history of linguistic metaphors anything to do with this? The idea that preventing someone being upset by the history of an everyday word will help solve the actual injustices in society makes absolutely no sense to me. It seems insulting. It seems like empty posturing.

I shouldn't *need* to play up my own vulnerability in order to bolster my argument, in fact I find what I am about to do slightly distasteful, but to help make my point I will. Regarding "sanity checks"... Speaking as a person who has dealt with some mental health issues in the past, including a full blown psychotic episode (or [spiritual emergency](#) if you prefer), I can safely confirm that coming across the phrase "sanity check" in code in no way makes me feel excluded, offended, threatened or diminished. It certainly doesn't plunge me back into the hellish parallel reality that I once genuinely experienced, which was y'know, the *actual* problem. Sanity checking the location of a new line character does not trigger me into questioning the rational integrity of my *own* character. I do understand the idea that insanity might be bad. It is often bad. It can be way worse than I had it. Doesn't make casual use of a word bad. Speaking as a liberal rationalist, an artist, a lover of dark humour, and a lover of the rich playfulness of the English language, the idea of eliminating the phrase really *does* trigger me. On top of that, fearing that what I consider perfectly normal and reasonable beliefs about how social communication works might be considered abhorrent and unacceptable by the majority of people I work with really *does* destabilise my emotional state and make me question my own mental integrity. It is not pleasant to spend entire weekends seriously considering if I am, as I'm sure some would claim, actually a morally hideous and self-deluded person for disagreeing with them.

The bigger you make my issues, the bigger the issue feels to me. Rebranding words as scary just makes people more scared. Yes, I have had one or two terrifying episodes, they were traumatic, and it took me time (years in fact) to recover my self confidence, but I don't find

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<sup>11</sup> Again I'm aware that I'm not allowed to say I get that, because by definition I can't "get that". I get that. The most polite response to people like me complaining about this kind of stuff is that I need to educate myself about the reality of the situation. Absolutely I do, we all do, educating ourselves is one of our primary duties as citizens. So then I duly follow the helpful links provided... links that point me to people espousing theories that bear no relation to the reality of the situation. The more I research, the more contradictory it seems, and *less* it makes sense to me. The more I read about it the more I'm told that I will never be able to get it. Terrible ideas such as "white fragility" seem designed to be impossible to "get" and just leave everybody helpless and sow yet more division.

any mere *words* for madness scary or personally offensive. Nutjob, loony, demented, doolally, dotty, screwloose, bonkers, cuckoo, fruit-loop, round the bend, mental case, two sandwiches short of a picnic. Please feel free to use them all, have a laugh with them. Have an insane, cackling, shrieking, swivel-eyed, maniacal laugh with them. Don't make them taboo. Planting taboos like tripwires and landmines across the ways in which popular culture refers to mental health issues will not actually help people who suffer from them. Treading on linguistic eggshells in paranoid terror every time the subject is raised will *not* improve the actual state of people's minds. The best thing is to have honest, relaxed conversations about these things, and branding swathes of casual conversational terms "incorrect" and insisting that everyone refers to the condition in the absolute latest fashionable jargon with the twitter mob's stamp of approval makes that process *harder* not easier.

So you want to avoid people being triggered, but how on earth will encountering a word that has been *blatantly* renamed from another word fail to trigger you? Surely forcing everyone to dredge up the problematic nature of our culture every time we want to say something normal will just make them even more apparent and even more present in the minds of the people encountering these terms, terms that a few years ago simply passed unnoticed by everyone. It's like shouting "don't think about elephants!" when you really don't want people thinking about elephants and nobody was thinking about elephants. It's very similar to introducing yet more euphemisms for "special needs" and gifting playground bullies with yet another piece of linguistic ammunition with which to tease more victims, a phenomenon known as the "[Euphemistic treadmill](#)". If it were just a case of getting rid of the phrase "sanity check", it wouldn't be worth arguing about, you might think let's just concede that and then all this nonsense will stop. But it won't. How could it? Because this has nothing to do with prejudice, these actions won't help prejudice, therefore there will still be prejudice in the world, therefore we'll have to cancel yet more stuff, stuff which takes us further and further away from dealing with the real issues. More and more concessions to problematization will have to be made until who knows what end point. How do we know that we can stop at master on github? Will the line between useful and futile stay securely forever drawn precisely at this current point? I guarantee you that it won't, because every time something like this happens the blurry line of acceptability shifts slightly, and the edges of it encompass yet more of our culture, and activists must demand yet more ineffectual effort.

We *want* things to be sane, we want code to be sane, and sometimes it's useful to check that, and sometimes it's useful to have a phrase to refer to that check. Just because mental health has a stigma attached to it, and that stigma is decidedly unhelpful doesn't mean that the everyday notion of sanity is problematic. The idea of sanity may indeed be problematic when critically examined from a philosophical standpoint, sure, this is well known. Maybe

the crazy fool is really the wise man, yes, yes, a Jungian archetype that has fueled my own creativity for thirty years. Fine. But then similarly philosophically ambiguous are the notions of “knowledge”, the notion of “existence”, and the notion of “time”. A code review is not the time or the place to call time, place, knowledge or existence into question, and in the same spirit I would ask you to please sanity check this incessant compulsion to blacklist perfectly innocuous usages of language.

So the next reason it is counterproductive is that it deeply harms the perception of progressive, compassionate politics, and puts wind into the sails of genuinely illiberal political movements because... well, it's just bloody silly. Sorry. There's no other way to put it. It makes the liberal far-left look chumps to the entire rest of the world. To the global mainstream, we look about as persuasive as flat earthers<sup>12</sup>. Outside of our filter bubble, we come across as numpties. It's humiliating. This is why we repeatedly don't win elections. This is why the right wing populists *do*. Trump and Brexit happened because the left was becoming nonsensical. Whilst I don't agree we should “pander” to the center and dilute our aims, and it could well be that prejudice is indeed entrenched in the views of the average person, we should at least acknowledge that not looking like a bunch of hopelessly deluded wallies that should be kept out of power at all costs might be a good idea.

Ridiculousness itself is not a reason to reject someone's argument. There are plenty of counterintuitive and ridiculous things that are very much real. Scientific knowledge is littered with things that are unintuitive, unbelievable and crazy. But extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. And in this case it is never provided.

It is clear that the right can weaponise “political correctness” and characterize genuinely good causes as being ridiculous, when they plainly are not. But the question is *how* have they been able to do that so easily? And the reason is because *so many* blatantly ridiculous examples of it actually exist that the left provide them with an open goal.

It is like an *anti*-recruitment drive for the cause of creating a better society. There is just a basic level of haplessness to the whole thing that is at risk of turning one of the most noble and uplifting social projects in history into a bad joke. For people of my age and background it's like watching the Jehovah sketch from Life of Brian playing out for real on eternal repeat... It's a bit like watching a terribly inexperienced substitute teacher try to discipline an unruly classroom and in the process just bring more and more ridicule down upon themselves. It feels to me that alt-right trolls don't actually have to generate their own content now, because we are doing it for them. We are *saving them the effort* of promoting their cause. Every time some beautifully well intentioned person on the left does something inane it provides further ammunition for the right to gleefully use against us. Worse than

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<sup>12</sup> The idea that the world is constructed by language is actually *more* foolhardy than believing that it is flat, at least the flat earthers acknowledge that the thing is actually there even if they don't get the shape right.

that, it drives moderate people further to the right, in their droves. When unexceptional, moderate, politically neutral people who maybe have an ounce of common sense left see the liberals behaving like bad parodies of themselves then they are intensely put off, they find such assaults on common sense *offensive*, in that it *offends* their sense of logic, and this jeopardises any hope of making progressive politics mainstream.

For those moderates and conservatives who do take it seriously, it is threatening. Maybe it's OK for you if some of *those* bad people feel threatened. Maybe that is part of your intention, to get one back at the man and make him squirm for a bit. But I don't think this is constructive at all. In fact I think this is playing with fire. It's simply a further escalation in a culture war that's already disintegrating our political institutions. Many people see the woke left's attack on logic as a petty power grab. Others see it as an attack on liberal culture itself by an extremist cult. Some see it as a threat to civilization itself. I think they are wrong, but I don't think it's such a surprise that people would react that way, and I think great care has to be taken that such an impression is dispelled.

The third reason it is counterproductive is that the social dynamic behind the entire effort is deeply suspect. Advocates for these kinds of policies are regularly using the worst kind of debating techniques to advance their cause, and in the process they impoverish the intellectual environment and stifle debate.

I know this argument too is considered a "trope". I know it is considered a trojan horse. I am perfectly aware that this free speech argument is abused by the right in order to air genuinely horrific hate-speech, but the solution to the abuse of a good concept is not to *further* abuse it by giving it yet another obfuscating layer of political spin and chucking it back. Saying the opposite of bad people does not make you a good person<sup>13</sup>.

It *is* true that the far left are suppressing free speech. Not overtly in most cases, but it is happening, and it is happening to me. If the more ideologically driven amongst us make a suggestion of how to "change the world for the better" and some of us don't believe that the change will do anything of the sort, then many of us, probably the most reasonable and sensitive of us, feel we must remain silent for fear of being thought of as a member of the opposing tribe. By expressing concern about the *means* I am instantly tainted with the odour of not agreeing with the *ends*. By saying "I don't actually think changing the 'master-slave' terminology will help anyone at all" I might be mistaken for somehow saying I *want* to make the world a worse place and that I *want* to deeply upset the descendents of slaves. Nothing could be further from the truth. And insinuating such things back at me will not help us arrive at a position of strength.

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<sup>13</sup> And, another crucial idea that is now seemingly quite difficult for people to understand: being a bad person does not necessarily make you wrong about all matters of fact, and conversely being wrong about vital issues does not make you a fundamentally or irredeemably bad person.

Critiquing ideas about *how* to change society for the better does not make you an enemy of progress, quite the opposite, because if bad ideas are allowed to go unquestioned, then progress is impossible. If these bad ideas are eating away the very foundations of open society the risk is even greater. So please, please dial back these incessant ad-hominem attacks. They're jeopardising our future.

And equally, please stop taking reasonable objections *as* personal attacks. They're not. If you happen to hold the viewpoints I am critiquing, please do not take it as an attack on you, it isn't. I sympathise absolutely with your motivations and your ideals, many of which I either still hold now or have held in the past, and may hold again in the future if I encounter further good arguments.

I don't want to offend you. And for this reason I also don't want to be constantly *at risk* of offending you. This risk of offence, this omnipresent cost of engagement, makes a proper dialog about how best to react against the injustices of the world extremely fraught, because it makes discussion of suggestions of how to improve things far too risky to one's reputation. I really don't feel I can honestly express any of these opinions publicly. I acknowledge that I don't have the rhetorical skills or social sensitivity to feel confident that I won't genuinely offend someone. I don't *want* to offend people and yet for some reason I am forced to *choose* between destroying a personal relationship with someone and discussing important things honestly. Now, when such topics come up I spend hours debating with myself whether I should say anything, even to the extent of posting something into a text box and deleting it again, typing something else, deleting it again. Now when I see a politically incorrect term, or even it's correct substitute, I too join the hallowed ranks of the triggered, because it raises all these fears about not agreeing with my peers in my mind, I feel the fear of becoming an outcast looming. Even as I type this my mouth is dry and my heart is pounding. I've spent countless sleepless nights worrying about this. The knowledge that this text is sitting on my hard drive heightens my daily sense of anxiety. What if this gets me sacked? This is wrong. It shouldn't be like this. And I have seen this happen to others too, what people agree with me about privately they don't say publicly. When more than about six people get together, everyone falls back into line. Interesting conversations evaporate and the party-line platitudes are wheeled out. Seeing this kind of robotic behaviour has disturbed me all my life, but it is becoming more and more visible.

Again, I can feel the shocked responses from the jury in my head: Am I really going to have the presumptiveness to elevate my paranoid fears of ostracization such that it outweighs the genuine fear that, say, people of colour feel regarding police brutality? No, of course not! But this isn't what we're talking about, is it? These really aren't the two sides of the equation, as much as some people might like to think they are, as much as some people like to pretend they are and misdirect our attention to the hardship of others in order to make

their weird schemes look more impressive. We're talking about the fear of being socially ostracised from one's place of employment on the basis of one's politics, philosophy or even belief in scientific fact, which is a significantly bad thing to happen to a person, versus experiencing some mild discomfort over a perfectly normal word, which is not.

People constantly substitute the idea of political correct *behaviour* for political correct *language*. The left do it when they claim that to criticise their word games is to criticise their noble aims, and the right do it when they insinuate that the aims are as ridiculous as the means. Both arguments are deeply flawed and let me be absolutely clear once more: I am in no way critiquing politically progressive conduct, laws, policies or anything *real*. I'm not denying the existence of subconscious bias, I'm not denying the existence of structural racism, I'm not denying humanity's horrific history of colonialism, genocide and enslavement and I'm not denying it's persistent legacy. I'm not denying how much work we have to do to make our world decent. Right now I'm very specifically critiquing this irrelevant, meaningless, counterproductive, incessant, nitpicking obsession with *language policing*.

There is a certain move in a debate where someone who is on the ropes defending some terrible idea will quickly swap in an example of genuine injustice *as a proxy* for their poor reasoning and claim that their opponent is causing harm to *that* party (or their own feelings) by criticising their idea. This really amounts to using some hypothetical suffering person as a kind of human shield to deflect the blows of rational good sense (see the [motte and bailey doctrine](#)). It is not a good habit, and one that the far-left seem congenitally unable to even perceive, because they are immediately distracted and overwhelmed by the shiny bauble of injustice that has been whipped out of said debaters sleeve. I would really urge you to be able to be mindful of when it occurs.

So these well intentioned efforts, over the long term, are extremely counterproductive because they engender an extremely impoverished intellectual environment. If we want to solve complex problems, we need to be able to think clearly, and in order to think clearly collectively we need to be able to have decent, difficult, challenging conversations, and to do that we must absolutely be tolerant of, and even encourage, contrarian viewpoints. Whilst the vast majority of the conversations amongst my peers and colleagues have been conducted respectfully and courteously, the outside world is starting to look far uglier, and I am deeply concerned that many of us on the left are losing this ability.

Which brings me to the final reason why these efforts might be counterproductive. Doesn't anyone find the idea that you can, almost by sleight of hand, sell your academic terminological tweaks as a proxy for genuine political change quite weird? Even offensive? Isn't it tremendously condescending that millions of people even in the world's richest societies cannot get equality, cannot get jobs, cannot get justice, cannot get decent education, cannot experience personal safety, but hey, at least they get a few words

changed in some codebase in some place, a codebase that that they still have an unjustly smaller chance of being able to work on? Aren't we wasting precious brain power and precious good intentions on something that is acting as a *proxy* for real justice or real rebalance of economic and political power? Maybe we're only doing it precisely because it *doesn't* matter? Isn't this just a massive, meaningless distraction? To paraphrase Kennedy, "We do these things because they are easy, not because they are hard". In twenty years time, when we have finally completed the project of renaming everything, will we be looking out on a perfected liberal paradise? Or an Orwellian micro-fascist hellscape that was erected in our absence? Will we genuinely look back on our lives and think renaming stuff was time well spent?

Much like social media platforms have parasitised our desire to socialize, this obsession with language sanitation is also a parasite, that is riding on the back of our good intentions and misdirecting their energy. It is a collection of bad philosophical concepts that has insinuated itself into the guts of liberal progressive politics, and taken advantage of both our desire to do good in the world, and our fear of social shame. It is a tremendous waste of time. It is consistently sold as simple courtesy that "costs nothing", but that is simply untrue. It is costing us *huge* amounts of time, debate, anxiety, fear and frustration. It is wasting the time of politicians, wasting the time of journalists, wasting the efforts of activists, wasting the careers of academics, wasting the research of scientists, wasting the emotional energy of people arguing on social media, wasting the critical thinking skills of university students, even wasting the time of our conservative opponents who would be far better off getting back to the task of preserving our vital social institutions, and wasting and misdirecting the absolutely justified anger of the people it purports to be advancing the cause of.

Not only is it a waste of time, but the emotional burden of it is also making us sick. It is crippling our ability to work, converse, think and engage with the world. Is it any wonder why the younger generation is experiencing so many issues with their mental health when they spend their days wracked with anxiety over irrelevant things, twisting their minds into contorted logical impossibilities in order to carry out ineffective actions in order to solve vast intractable social problems that they are made to feel somehow responsible for? They think globally, which is great, but they also *feel* globally which is psychologically and emotionally disastrous and they *act* ineffectively, which is pointless.

The words themselves are not the problem, the *intent behind them* is what is important. I can tell the difference between an insult and casual banter, despite being bat-shit radio rental, and I assume you can too, why must we assume that no one else can? Why must we even set about *training them out of* that ability? Why is our higher education system setting about disabling young minds' ability to detect nuance and subtlety in human conversation?

It's crazy... and no I'm not *literally* saying that you are mentally ill, but I am saying that we may become so the more we go down this path.

This is a deeper problem that is really undermining anyone's ability to have a calm life where we behave like responsible adults and deal with our differences with equanimity. It seems we are actively and stridently teaching people that intent doesn't matter, and simultaneously that progress isn't real. This implies that there is no such thing as an honest mistake that we can let slide. There is no such thing as a word that used to refer to something bad but now doesn't. Anything that was at any time bad, is now bad for ever. As much as proponents of political correctness like to talk about "nuance", they are actually completely steamrolling nuance. They are taking the complex weave of language and unravelling it into a one-dimensional thread, which always leads back to something terrible and indelible. There is increasingly less understanding of context, no such thing as a well intentioned faux-pas. There is less and less possibility of reading anything but the worst possible meaning into any use of our language. There is no such thing as basic innocence or hope for forgiveness, or the ability to recover from the past, even. Because things are a bit fucked, we have to live staring directly in the face of the fuckedness of everything, forever, and yet nothing we actually do changes it because we are socially conditioned to think that not thinking that everything is fucked makes us the absolute worst kind of person. It is an exceptionally dark view of human life, a narrow view of what a decent person is, a twisted view of what culture is, and I feel deeply sorry for all the people who think they have to buy into it to be decent. I think it will impede the wellbeing of many vulnerable people for decades to come.

So, my suggestion for what to do about renaming "master" is to estimate the work involved (*including* the amount of time spent arguing with contrarians such as I, Mike Trollfield), calculate how much developer wages we would save by *not* doing it, and donate that money to a cause that might actually help the issues we are worried about. Why not? Why not send *that* message? I estimate I have spent about ten hours over the weekend writing this piece, a piece which should be unnecessary to write. I hereby promise to donate that amount in my hourly wages to a good cause<sup>14</sup>.

No, I don't really care what the master branch is called. I'm not arguing for *keeping* the word, it's a stupid use of that word, trunk would be better, it doesn't matter - that's my point. It doesn't matter. I'm arguing for not wasting our time thinking about it. I'm arguing

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<sup>14</sup> So, alleviate your white guilt by donating to Black Lives Matter, right? I'm not terribly convinced of the effectiveness of giving money to advance a very specific political ideology in one of the wealthiest countries on earth. I did consider it, but then I read more. A knee-jerk impulse to donate to whatever cause is most visible on social media is understandable, but not optimal. I will instead be giving to [effective altruism](#), who help those most in need by actually making every effort to consider who *is* most in need. I fully acknowledge that the statistical likelihood is that these people may well be black, but consider also that the statistical likelihood is that they are not Americans [Mike].

for drawing a line at a point where things are ceasing to make any sense, and sparing all the thought and angst and energy that will go into purging our language over the next few decades and spending that on something more constructive.

## Next Time

Thanks Mike. So let me get this clear, this will get *you* sacked not me, right? Good.

But hey, we're both being offensive now aren't we? Look at what I'm saying, if you own or drive a car, you're a cunt, pure and simple. I probably wouldn't call a struggling mother of two children living in a remote rural area driving them to school a cunt *to her face*, at least not without downing ten cans of Stella beforehand, but the long list of facts I bored you with above still stands. Having said that, I'm an open minded easy going kinda guy, and I'm willing to accept the possibility that you might just be able to uncunt<sup>15</sup> yourself by getting rid of your car, getting on a bike and offsetting all the carbon you emitted with all that money you save. Off you go.

Yes, now it's time to clean things up. Both the environment and my bad language. Now, we move away from these carbon emitting cunts and we get onto the next track: Clean Energy, and by extension, we discuss the big one, Global Warming. "Yippee!" the crowd whoops, anticipating a hands in the air, feel good ride. Yeah. Why not? I can do that. I can. What, don't you trust me anymore?

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<sup>15</sup> Decunt? There must be a word for disencuntenating oneself into a state of acuntitude...?