Waking Up Podcast with Sam Harris

"Facing the Crowd: A Conversation with Nicholas Christakis"

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https://www.samharris.org/podcast/item/facing-the-crowd

Sam Harris: Welcome to the Waking Up Podcast. This is Sam Harris. I am back from London where I did an event with Richard Dawkins and Matt Dillahunty, and have a few more events with those guys coming up. One with Richard and Matt in Vancouver, and three next year with Matt and Lawrence Krauss. Most of you seemed to love the event in London, and it was a great turnout. There were over 3,000 of you.

Given the few comments I heard afterwards, I wanted to clarify a few things. I want to differentiate those events from my live podcast tour that's coming up in Live Nation because I think some people are showing up expecting to see a live podcast produced by me where I had complete control over the nature of the conversation. That's not what's happening at those events.

In anticipation of Vancouver and the three events I'm doing with Lawrence next year in New York, Chicago, and Phoenix, I will go out to all of you in social media, and do my best to seed the conversations with questions that most interest you. You should know, for my other events coming up in December and beyond – and those events are in Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, DC, and Philadelphia in December and January – those will be live podcasts. There will be abundant Q&A with the audience there.

Many of you on social media have pointed out to me that I have not commented on the shooting in Vegas, and you have questions about that. I will save that for my next AMA, and not create a long housekeeping here. It seems looking at my website here that this is my 100th episode. I don't put any special significance on that number, but it's great that we've made it this far. I want to thank all of you who have helped me make it this far. The show continues to grow. It couldn't grow without your help.

I just had a great interview with Cass Sunstein, which will probably be the next podcast. Today, I'm bringing you Nicholas Christakis. Nicholas is a sociologist and a physician. He directs the Human Nature Lab at Yale University where he's appointed as the Sol Goldman Family Professor of Social and Natural Science. He's the co-director of the Yale Institute for Network Science.

His lab focuses on the relationship between social networks and wellbeing. His research engages two types of phenomenon, the social, mathematical, and biological rules governing how social networks form (this is referred to as "connection" in his work) and the biological and social implications of how they operate to influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (this is often referred to as "contagion").

His lab also does experiments in how to change population-level behavior related to health, cooperation, and economic development. It's very interesting work. I would have wanted to speak with Nicholas anyway about his work, but another thing that reminded me of the need to speak with him was his experience at Yale, which you may have seen on YouTube. You should watch it now if you haven't.

He was the professor awhile back who was standing before a howling mob of students, and stood there with the imperturbability of a saint, really, as he was castigated by young men and women who were properly unhinged by their identity politics and some of the crazy ideas about speech that are rattling around in their heads.

I'll embed a relevant clip on my blog. There are many, but I'll have one there where this podcast is embedded. You will enjoy the first hour of this conversation much more if you've seen five minutes, at least, of that encounter because you will see Nicholas' patience. You will see the untenability of the situation he was in. You will see a hostility of the dialogue among Yale students that one could scarcely imagine possible.

This was, I believe, the first incident like this to come to national attention. This preceded the riots at Berkeley preventing Milo's speech. It preceded Bret Weinstein's ordeal at Evergreen. It preceded the attack upon Charles Murray in Middlebury. This was, if not the first moment like this, the first that became very prominent in recent memory. It makes for very interesting viewing.

Nicholas and I talked about all that. Then, we get into the dynamics of mob behavior, and moral panic, and related issues. I think you'll find it an interesting, useful, and certainly timely conversation. Now, without further delay, I give you Nicholas Christakis.

I am here with Nicholas Christakis. Nicholas, thanks for coming on the podcast.

Nicholas Christakis: Thank you so much for having me, Sam.

Sam Harris: We met at the TED Conference, if I'm not mistaken. I don't think we've met since. I think that was in 2010. If I recall, you gave the talk right after mine, or maybe it was just we were rehearsing together or something. That's the moment I have in my memory where we shook hands, and said hi. It was at TED just before or after one of us got offstage. Does that jibe with your memory?

Nicholas Christakis: We were in the same session. My memory is that you were sitting next to me as we were watching the speakers. Sarah Silverman spoke (I don't know if you remember) and the woman from 10,000 maniacs whose singing I adore, but whose name I'm spacing on [Natalie Merchant]. You spoke, and what I remember of your talk was that remarkable slide – maybe that was the first time you used it? – where you showed side-by-side photographs of a bunch of women wearing the chador and then a bunch of-

Sam Harris: The full burka, yeah.

Nicholas Christakis: The full burka. Then, a bunch of women on-

Sam Harris: Scantily clad, yeah.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah, or pornography or whatever. You said these are very different moral landscapes, and they even looked like landscapes visually. I remember thinking there were these undulating heads – in the way it was rendered to your image. It really got me to thinking. The topic of moral relativism and moral universalism is an old one, of course, but I don't think the sophistication of thought that we've been bringing to the topic lately has been very strong. You made a big impression on me, too.

Sam Harris: We're going to talk about your science and some of the science you presented there at TED, and some of the stuff you've done in the intervening years. First, just tell people, what is your background generally, academically, and scientifically?

Nicholas Christakis: Well, I am trained in the natural and social sciences. I'm a physician trained as a hospice doctor. I spent 15 years taking care of people who were dying. My first appointment was at the University of Chicago. I worked on the South Side of Chicago taking care of primarily indigent patients, although I had a few faculty and more well-to-do people. I worked there as a hospice doctor. Then, when I moved to Harvard from Chicago in 2001, clinically I served a palliative medicine doctor.

So, I was trained as a physician. Then, also, I was trained as a sociologist. I have a PhD in sociology as well. Most of my career has been devoted to research. I'm primarily a research scientist and doing work in public health. I stopped seeing patients about 10 years ago now. I'm a natural and a social scientist, but, increasingly, we do a lot of computational science, as well, in my lab.

Sam Harris: We'll talk about the science because, obviously, what can be known about social networks, and group psychology, and many of the other topics you touch, is important. You're now touching AI or human interaction with AI, too. All of those are very interesting. But I want to start with your immediate background here because this is one reason why many people know of you and were eager for you to come on the podcast.

You and your wife, Erika, were really the canaries in the coal mine for some recent moral panic, which is the appropriate name, that we've witnessed on college campuses. You are the man that many of us have seen standing in the quad at Yale, or I assume that was a quad, surrounded by a fairly large crowd of increasingly unhinged students.

This was really mesmerizing to watch. I can't imagine it felt the same to be in the middle of it. I must say you handled yourself as well as I could possibly imagine. You have been much praised for the way you conducted yourself in that situation. Many professors have since found themselves in similar situations. There's Brett Weinstein at Evergreen recently.

I just want to talk a little bit about your experience at Yale, and then move on generically to the problem on college campuses in general, as described by people like Jonathan Haidt and others who are focusing on the way in which there's an authoritarianism emerging on the Left, really exclusively, that is preventing free speech. I want to get your sense of what's happening there and how big the problem is. Then, we'll move on to what we can understand scientifically about crowds and social trends. As far as you are comfortable talking about it, can you tell me about what happened at Yale.

Nicholas Christakis: Well, In some ways, I'm a little naïve in the sense that I believe in institutions. But I'm also skeptical of institutions. I am worried about institutions. But I also believe in social institutions. And I've devoted my life to academia and to what I take to be the core commitments of modern American universities, which are envy the world over. These commitments center around, if you look at the motto of Yale, it's *Lux et Veritas.* I mean, that's an extraordinary commitment: light and truth.

These institutions are committed to the preservation, production, and dissemination of knowledge. They are guided ostensibly by principles of open expression, reason, and debate, and by liberal commitments to the equality of human beings, their capacity to perfect the world, the knowability of the world. They are, in my view, committed to a belief in the objective nature of reality. I would strongly defend those principles, and I've devoted my life to them.

In fact, even with respect to the narrower issue of free expression, I have been defending free expression – often for disenfranchised populations – for a very long time. Before I came to Yale four years ago, I was at Harvard. My wife and I had taken some unpopular stances back then defending the free expression of individuals who were on the side of issues of concern to Black Lives Matter, for instance, and who were protesting. There was a high school student who had worn a T-shirt that said "Jesus was not a homophobe." And we came to his defense.

For instance, there were some minority students at Harvard who had some concerns about the final clubs at that institution (those are sort of elite fraternities). They had posted a satirical flyer. Some people were unhappy about that flyer, and wanted to squelch the free expression of those students, and we came to their defense.

I am committed to this, maybe naively, but I am committed hook, line, and sinker to this belief that these institutions of higher learning in our society are important, that they are worthy of protection and respect. This is why, when they fail us, I get very sad. I get sad for our society. I get sad for the institutions. I get sad for the students.

I don't want to just keep talking endlessly, and I'll come back to your question. But there's a parallel set of ideas about universities in our society. If you think about these universities, they are supported by tax dollars and the bequest of (primarily) wealthy people. The reason this money is given to these institutions is to further the mission of the preservation, production, and dissemination of knowledge – not to provide faculty with easy lifestyles.

I mean, it's a wonderful thing to be a professor. I see it as a calling. But that's not the purpose of universities. The point is that we are supposed to be that place which preserves Sanskrit, which preserves Shakespeare, which preserves antiquities, which preserves mathematical knowledge and scientific knowledge. And which produces discoveries. We're supposed to be the place that transmits all this to new young people. That's the role we're supposed to play in society. We are to have a deep commitment to light and truth.

So I get very upset when fields of inquiry or ideas are proscribed. I think that, if our ideas are strong, they should win the battle of ideas. If you're so confident in what you have to say, you should be able to defend it. Your approach should not be to silence your opponents. Your approach should be to win the battle of ideas.

Sam Harris: I'm just going to interrupt you by reminding you of something you wrote, which appeared in the *New York Times*, which I think is the only thing you wrote in the aftermath of what happened at Yale addressing the events. You wrote, quoting you: "The faculty must cut at the root of a set of ideas that are wholly illiberal. Disagreement is not oppression. Argument is not assault. Words – even provocative or repugnant ones – are not violence. The answer to speech we do not like is more speech." [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/education/teaching-inclusion-in-a-divided-world.html?_r=0]

I couldn't agree more with that sentiment. It's amazing to me that this even needs to be said, and said as frequently as we now have to say it. Again, I do want to come back to specifically what happened at Yale because many people just might not be aware of it or might have forgotten the details, but how do you think it is that the Left, primarily, has lost sight of this principle that the antidote to bad ideas is good ideas, and the criticism of bad ideas?

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. I think the Right and the Left take turns in this regard. I mean, let's not forget the history of McCarthyism on campus.

Sam Harris: Yeah, but we expect the Right to get this wrong, at the extreme.

Nicholas Christakis: I was talking to some students here recently. They happened to be conservative students. Again, I should say that, politically, I'm left of center. I mean, I'm very progressive. I have some libertarian ideas. I have some conservative ideas. But, mostly, if I've done these surveys, I am significantly left of center politically, overall.

Anyway, I was talking to some of these conservative students, and, I was about to say, "it's the Left wing that marches in the streets." But that's actually not true. The Right wing also marches in the streets, at different points in history, and at different locations. I think lately, it has been the Left which has abandoned these principles.

For me, I should say that there are things like free speech, or a non-corrupt judiciary, or a strong defense, which really should be apolitical. I also think it's tactically idiotic of the Left to surrender this free speech. I mean, after all, let's not forget that the modern free speech movement was born at Berkeley.

Sam Harris: Yeah. That's where you cannot give a talk, now, without police protection every moment.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. I mean, I don't agree with many of the things that Ben Shapiro espouses. But the idea that $600,000 of police protection would be required for Ben Shapiro to speak at a university campus is preposterous. It's a waste of money. This is another thing that is astonishing to me. I wish we could preserve, and cultivate, and recommit, as a society, to principles of open discourse and protest.

I totally support protest. I support the right of students of protest. I believe that many of the most important movements – the Civil Rights Movement, the Gay Marriage Movement – many of these movements, which I wholly endorse, have had the lead taken by young people, and by people protesting in the streets. This is also part of the American tradition. It deserves respect and cherishing. But you cannot resort to violence or prevent others from speaking. And it's cost ineffective. Like look at the money. That $600,000 could have been spent on dozens of students going to school for free.

When we lose sight of these core, liberal commitments, I think we wind up spending money, and, eventually, spilling blood, which is just heartbreaking.

Yeah, I think it's nuts that many of these speakers need protection.

Sam Harris: We're going to go back to Yale, but I'll just give a little more color to how crazy this has gotten. You sent me an article from *The Economist* prior to this interview, which I hadn't seen, describing recent events at Reed College. It reads like an Onion article. I mean, it's just an unbelievable document. I'm going to read a couple of paragraphs here to give people a sense of it because, as much as I've paid attention to this, I was still surprised by these details.

[https://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21728688-reed-college-oregon-shows-left-v-left-clashes-can-be-equally-vitriolic-arguments]

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. I'll interrupt you, if I may. There's been a number of examples of almost stereotypical kind of Cultural Revolution behavior, almost Maoism, where the far Left resorts to eating its own. Consider Bret Weinstein: I mean Bret is a completely progressive individual for his whole life. Rebecca Tuval, who wrote that piece, she was stunned. This professor at Reed you are about to read about, who I might or might not agree with regarding a variety of topic. There are so many of these cases, which are so hard to understand. I hope we can talk a little bit about where they might be coming from as well. But go on.

Sam Harris: Definitely, definitely. There's this Western Civilization course that apparently has been receiving protests, it seems in every single class, at Reed. That's the set up. Now, quoting from the article, "Assistant Professor Lucia Martinez Valdivia, who describes herself as mixed-race and queer, asked protesters not to demonstrate during her lecture on Sappho last November." That's already an Onion article.

Nicholas Christakis: Sappho is a great poet. Also, a favorite of queer theory, as well. I mean, it's already interesting.

Sam Harris: It gets better. "Ms. Valdivia said she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and doubted her ability to deliver the lecture in the face of their opposition. At first, demonstrators announced they would change tactics, and sit quietly in the audience, wearing black. After her speech, a number of them berated her, bringing her to tears. Demonstrators said Ms. Valdivia was guilty of a variety of offenses: she was a 'race traitor' who upheld white supremacist principles by failing to oppose the Humanities syllabus. She was 'anti-black' because she appropriated black slang by wearing a T-shirt that said, 'Poetry is Lit'. She was an 'ableist' because she believes trigger warnings sometimes diminish sexual trauma. She was also a 'gaslighter' for making disadvantaged students doubt their own feelings of oppression."

And I quote from her now, "'I am intimidated by these students. I am scared to teach courses on race, gender, or sexuality, or even texts that bring these issues up in any way. I'm at a loss as to how to begin to address it, especially since many of these students don't believe in historicity or objective facts. They denounce the latter as being a tool of the white cisheteropatriarchy.'" That's the end of the quote.

I mean, this is just so insane on every level. This use of the term "gaslighting," with which I'm familiar, which has been used ever since the film came out 60 years ago, but I hadn't heard this being appropriated by the intersectional mob. I recently re-watched part of the video of you talking to students at Yale, and I heard one of the students admonish you for gaslighting, which I hadn't caught the first time around.

I have to say – because that video is just astounding to watch, and I can only imagine what it was like to be there – not having yet been schooled in this trend, that this is the thing that has been happening to people. Am I right about that? Were you aware of this happening to anyone else before it happened to you, or are you the first?

Nicholas Christakis: I honestly don't know the answer. I don't remember if, at the time, I thought so, because, since then, there have been so many similar episodes, that I don't remember if, two years ago, I was then aware of other episodes.

Now, part of the problem, here, is that there is some merit to some of these ideas, these grand philosophical ideas, and, in my view, a lot of merit to some of the complaints of the students. The problem becomes that these things have been so generalized – and what Jonathan Haidt calls "concept creep" also affects these phenomena.

What do I mean by this? Earlier, you and I talked about a commitment to the idea that there is an objective nature to reality (at universities). Now, there is a long philosophical debate about this topic. It's a deep and interesting set of ideas about subjectivity. Can we even see the world objectively? Does objective reality even exist? I myself think it does, but you can make an interesting philosophical argument about this.

What about the notion of so-called "social construction, " namely, the idea that the gender of the scientist, say, or the racist beliefs of the scientist, color their objectivity? Of course, they do. We have countless examples of this. We know this from research done by historians and others. We know that it's difficult to be an impersonal observer, and that every observer is situated somewhere. I think there is validity to those ideas.

However, I also do think that there is an out there, out there, and that it is knowable, and that we can do our best to understand it. When you carry the rejection of objective reality to the extreme that you call it a tool of cisheteropatriarchy, you really have jumped the shark. You've taken a core idea, which says, "Look, we need to not always believe what we are told," or "We need to understand how a person's position in society might affect what they see," and carried it to an absurd extreme.

We know this affects even ostensibly objective phenomena. Historian Emily Martin, for instance, has done some fantastic work (which I teach) on how scientists looking at cell division, or menstruation, interpret the biology by virtue of who they are. But then this idea is taken to such a ridiculous extreme that it becomes absurd.

Similarly, consider the notion of "cultural appropriation." The kernel of the idea there is that some communities of people are so denigrated that not only are they, let's say, killed and wiped out, but all of their ideas and culture are stolen from them. They are effaced. All that's left is a caricature of who they are. There is some truth to that, too. It's like adding insult to injury. Not only do I engage in genocide, but I take all your ideas, your culture, as well, and don't even credit you. Who am I to do that?

The problem is that, again, this idea is carried to a preposterous extreme. Because, of course, the whole history of ideas, and of culture, and of art and music, is one of endless theft. I mean, it's endless modification, and transformation, and exchange of ideas, and of thoughts and of musical and artistic forms, and so forth. To then start claiming that, like in the Reed College example, that she couldn't teach these things, she couldn't wear "Poetry is Lit," because she's appropriating African American slang, it's just a crazy caricature of what is otherwise potentially an interesting philosophical idea to discuss.

I think this is the thing that has made it especially hard for me: that I believe that I have a more than passing understanding of the epistemology here, and I have a more than passing sympathy for some of the concerns that the students have, say, about police brutality, about economic inequality, about racial justice. But I am also deeply concerned with the Maoist abandonment of reason and of discourse, and the kind of dehumanizing and atomizing of people.

I mean, one of the things that has really just depressed me, in the courtyard that day – and I wrote a little bit about this in that one other prior piece you mentioned in the *New York Times* (I think you're only the second public remarks I'm making about this)—was that there was a young African American woman who said to me, very plaintively (and it pulled at my heartstrings), she said: "You cannot understand our predicament because you are middle-aged, and white, and male."

And, I said to her that I understood what she was saying, but that I nevertheless believe in our common humanity. I believe that all of us – and I still believe this – that all of us, as human beings, can speak to, and understand, each other, united by our common humanity. So, even though I was a different gender, age, and skin color than she was, that I nevertheless could understand her, and that I was interested in making the effort to understand her, and I would hope that she could understand me.

But the students jeered at this! There was another student, a minority student, who later wrote a post in the *Yale Daily News*, where he wrote that he had never been more disappointed in his colleagues than when – the titles at the time were that we were the "Masters" of the colleges, but now, we're called "Head of College, " and the title has changed – he wrote: "I've never been more disappointed when the Master made the argument about our common humanity and my peers jeered."

My point is that, when you abandon the commitment to our common humanity, when you atomize people, when you believe that only certain types of people have authority to use certain types of cultural ideas or tropes, you efface, for me, a fundamental reality of our common humanity, and a fundamental tool we can have to interact with each other.

That professor at Reed, the claim that she can't wear a T-shirt that says "Poetry is Lit" is, to me, preposterous, and it violates every basic principle, in my view, that should animate a civilized society.

Sam Harris: To use the example of what the young woman said to you in the quad, that amounts to a naked declaration that meaningful communication is impossible.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes, which I think is really self-defeating, in the end.

Sam Harris: What is your game plan, if you're saying that you can't communicate your grievances?

Nicholas Christakis: To anyone who's not exactly like you?

Sam Harris: Yeah, to anyone who doesn't suffer them along with you. Then, what help are you asking for?

Nicholas Christakis: Plus, there are other experiences that we all have had – with pain, and suffering, and death, and grief. Maybe I've not had exactly same kind of suffering as you, Sam, but I'm pretty sure you've had some knocks in life. I'm pretty sure that, if we had a drink together, and were talking about some topic, that we could find common ground or shared understanding, even with dissimilar trajectories through life.

Sam Harris: Of course.

Nicholas Christakis: One person struggled with poverty as a child. Another person struggled with divorced parents. Another person escaped Vietnam on a boat. Another person witnessed violence. There are gradations and differences, but I believe people can empathize with each other. I hope.

Sam Harris: What's so disturbing about that encounter you had was the insistence that none of that is possible, and none of that is ethically or politically relevant. What was in its place was a desire to essentially shame you into silence. Again, coming from Yale students – objectively some of the most privileged people who have ever lived, whatever the color of their skin, this is just undeniable. Again, taking on board everything you just said about who knows what suffering even privileged people have had in their lives, but the idea that these were some of the most aggrieved people on earth, this was the wailing of the widows of Srebrenica. I mean, it was madness.

Again, I'm speaking as someone who just watched this from outside, who doesn't know these students, and hasn't lived with them, and dealt with them subsequently. Just to see the breakdown of discourse through the lens of what you experience there, again, from the outside, was pretty startling.

Before we get more into this – and, again, we're going to talk about the more general insights we can glean here about crowd dynamics, and social contagion, and all the rest – but before we do anything else, I want to back up and just remind people how this kicked off at Yale. What happened? You can be as abbreviated as you want, but just describe what sequence of events.

Nicholas Christakis: Well, I would rather have you describe the sequence of events.

Sam Harris: Sure. In my recollection, what happened is that your wife, Erika, who was also an instructor at Yale, responded to an email that came out from the school admonishing people to dress in the most tasteful possible and most politically correct Halloween costumes. Your wife, Erika, if memory serves, wrote a response to these some hundred students who were under her charge in, what was it, their dormitory or their house [Silliman College]?

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. I think the original email was sent by a dean, a person in the dean's office, a man by the name of Burgwell Howard, that had previously been a dean at Northwestern University. He had sent the same Halloween costume email there, at Northwestern. Then, he decided to re-send it five years later at a different university, namely Yale. There had been, to my knowledge, no episodes of students wearing blackface at Yale, or pushing the boundaries in such an extreme way. Nevertheless, this email was sent out, and it was subsequently very strongly endorsed by the Dean of Yale College, Jonathan Holloway, who has since left Yale to be Provost at Northwestern.

Actually, in the *New York Times* the previous month, there had been a whole exchange about this Halloween costume guidance issue. In the zeitgeist, people were talking about how this was getting a little out of hand and seemed a bit silly, that universities were providing official guidance on Halloween costumes. I think there were six people who wrote in that article, and five were against Halloween costume guidance, and one was for it. There had also been a number of emails that had come out at Yale at this time in the run up to Halloween.

I think the one that Dean Howard sent was maybe the third, and broadest, and most detailed. It had links to acceptable and unacceptable costumes, or recommended and non-recommended costumes. This email was coming from a positive intention, that is to say that it's not necessary to set out to cause needless offense. I think that, in a free society, we have to tolerate offense, but it's not like I'm interested in deliberately offending people.

Anyway, what had happened is that we had been hearing from the students, and Erika in particular had been hearing from her students, that the students felt infantilized by this email. Many of the students were objecting to this. They couldn't believe this. Erika, that day, had taught a session of her class, in late October, a class was about child development. It was an animated and intellectually rigorous conversation about what stage of development college students were at, and were they capable of choosing their own costumes, or negotiating among themselves if they had taken offense, talking to each other, and so forth.

This is more detail than you want, probably. But, earlier in the year, in August 2015, I had sent an email to the students, the 400 students in Silliman College, our college, about the murders in Charleston – where this man, whose name I'm blocking, thank God, had gone into the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the mother church, in Charleston, and slaughtered 9 or 10 people at close range who had welcomed him into their midst. He was white and the victims were all black. It was a vile and despicable carnage, motivated by racial hatred.

There had been a lot of discourse in the public space that summer. That was the summer where all the confederate flags began to finally come down. I was very concerned about these events, like many people were. I had organized a series of speakers at Silliman. We had a famous African American historian from MIT [Craig Steven Wilder] who came and spoke about the history of slavery and American institution. We had some people talking about other aspects of this. Also, I had booked, months earlier, Greg Lukianoff, who would come to speak about free speech. I had arranged a series of public speakers.

Anyway, I sent an email in late August or the beginning of September, to the students in the college, about the aftermath of Charleston. I talked about how, as a public health person, one of the things that I found most distressing was that Walmart had stopped selling confederate flags, but it had not stopped selling guns. That, in my view, this had it backwards. There was all this focus on symbolism, but not on practical concerns that, really, we needed to address, such as issues of inequality and issues of violence in our society. And these symbolic things, while important, were potentially distracting us.

I had an essay which touched on this (discussing the changes in the title of "Master"), which I think is still somewhere online. It's a couple of pages. [http://nicholaschristakis.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Three-Emails-from-2015-2016-to-the-Students-of-Silliman-College.pdf] The student feedback was tremendous. Dozens of students wrote to me, and they said, "Wow, this got me to think. It was so interesting." They said that, with Masters at Yale previously, "We hadn't been spoken to in this way." Yet, for me, this was normal. It was like writing an essay, like a thoughtful essay where you're trying to defend a point of view.

We had done this previously. When I had been at Harvard, Erika and I had a similar role there. We would regularly communicate with our students in this fashion, and some would agree, and some wouldn't agree. We had debates there about religious symbols, and public places, and vegetarianism. Could we roast a lamb at Greek Easter in the college courtyard using university money to purchase the lamb. It raised interesting questions for the students to debate.

Anyway, we got all this positive feedback for this, and there had been a lot of students complaining about the Halloween costume guidance email from the Dean. That was the history and the background. The *New York Times* article was in the public sphere. Yale students thought it was infantilizing. Previously, we had gotten some praise for engaging the students with ideas. That's what motivated my lovely wife, who has spent her career taking care of battered women, and inner-city children, and homeless substance users, and this has been her life – we're very progressive people – that's what got her to send this email, which said, "Do you, students really want or need this level of oversight?"

Just to clarify: my wife's argument was not actually taking a stand one way or the other on whether the guidance was necessary, and one way or the other on the costumes. She was saying, "You students should probably consider whether you wish to surrender this authority to superordinates." Fundamentally, this was a left-wing position saying, "You should be deeply skeptical of surrendering power to the administration, and you should talk about that." That was the intellectual essence of my wife's very gentle email – the aftermath of which you summarized earlier. [The email is archived here: https://www.thefire.org/email-from-erika-christakis-dressing-yourselves-email-to-silliman-college-yale-students-on-halloween-costumes/]

Sam Harris: Yeah. I should say that the email was utterly balanced, as was Bret Weinstein's email to his administration. There's no trace of racism. There's no trace of bigotry. There's no trace of failure of empathy.

Nicholas Christakis: Or lack of sympathy for the students! It's showing respect. I believe we show respect for the student when we say, "We're interested in engaging you in ideas."

Sam Harris: Again, we're talking about people who are old enough to be shipped off to fight a war. We're talking about people who, in a few short years, will be on the job market as some of the most highly educated and in-demand young adults in the country. These are people who should be able to talk about a Halloween costume that offends them.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes. But, you see, the problem is, again, this is where I have some empathy and sympathy for the students, too. This is what was so challenging because, again, you see there's a kernel of truth here. Like we discussed earlier with the notion of cultural appropriation and the claims that scientific objectivity is a tool of oppression – these ridiculously, extreme claims – there's an element of truth, as well, to the students' sense of alienation.

Part of it, again, is developmental. Students who are 18 to 22 years old feel a sense of alienation. We all did, in different ways. Now, if you're a minority student in these institutions, there may be an extra amount of alienation that you feel. I think there are ways that we can discuss that with students. I think there are ways we can reform our institutions. I don't lack sympathy for that, but, as Jonathan Haidt has said, I think the fundamental commitment of these institutions is to *lux et veritas*. This has to be done in a way in which we retain a deep and abiding commitment to speaking the truth and having open expression.

Sam Harris: Then, what happened? She sent the email, and some fury erupted. Then, you stepped out of the building to talk to an assembled a group of students. How did the YouTube video we've seen come to pass?

Nicholas Christakis: I'm not sure I want to go into all the details because it's… it’s almost prurient. At around 4:00 PM that day, the students had assembled in the Silliman courtyard, and were chalking remarks. Some were very positive, such as "We are one Yale," which I totally endorse. Some were very specific, and targeted at us, and, I would say, were harassing. I felt that it was appropriate to model my commitments, and that I had to walk the walk, and not just talk the talk, and that it would have been cowardly to not talk to the students about their strongly held views.

So, I went out into the courtyard around 4:00 PM to witness what the students were writing, and just to talk with them. I walked quietly around the courtyard, and made a show of reading what they had written, to dignify what they were communicating, and to model open expression. I just was reading all the prose and these slogans that were written everywhere in colorful chalk.

Unbeknownst to me, the students had just left the larger, Cross-Campus courtyard, elsewhere at Yale, where they had previously surrounded the Dean of the College (Jonathan Holloway), and some fraction of them – I would say 100 to 150 students, or something like that, maybe 150 – came to the Silliman courtyard, and they assembled. Eventually, some of the videos that were taken were released. I mean, there were a dozen or two dozen people filming that event, as became clear later. At least six people released videos online, I think, within a few days. I think you can assemble, from different clips that people released, the full hour between 5:00 PM and 6:00 PM.

Unbeknownst to me, Greg Lukianoff, who had been invited months earlier, arrived during the events. He had been invited by several entities at Yale over the summer. Because I knew him, I asked him if he could add us for a talk on free expression and the First Amendment, as part of our speaker series that evening before he had his other commitments on campus. [Lukianoff later described his experience in an interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-caLF8icOVQ]

He arrived at 5:00 PM. I was already in the courtyard, and, by sheer coincidence, he was walking across the courtyard to his accommodations in the College. I didn't know he was there. I mean, I had no idea. I didn't see him. I was engaged with the students. Unbeknownst to me, he also took some video footage. Then, eventually, things died down some time after 6:00 PM. I think Greg was speaking around 7:00 PM in the Master's House that evening.

I think it was a challenging time, certainly, in my life. It was a challenging time, I think, in some of the students' lives. I was very upset that there was a lot of hostility expressed towards one of the students, in particular. I came to her defense the next day, on November 7, 2015. We sent a tweet out saying that no one should be judged just for a short clip on video [https://twitter.com/NAChristakis/status/662944926494294016] . She was wrongly doxed by another organization – not by Greg, of course. And she got many, many vile threats. I completely repudiate those threats.

This was a young woman who I didn't know well, but who, by report, was otherwise a very sensible person. I think she got swept away, as happens with mobs. I think she was not her best that afternoon. Many people were not at their best. I mean, it's very important also to note, as you have suggested by having seen much more of the video footage, that a number of students were very strongly challenged by their emotions that day.

Sam Harris: I want to talk about mob behavior, but let's talk about your experience as the energy of antipathy was gathering around you here, and you were finding it increasingly difficult to have a conversation with a mob. Again, people have to watch some of this video to see what you were dealing with, and how well you were dealing with it, but it was also a problem of spoken-word geometry. It's very difficult to talk to a large group of people all of whom want to be heard, and anyone of whom can interrupt you at any moment, or demand that you not interrupt anyone else. Just the dynamics of you trying to reason with people who didn't want to be reasoned with were just obviously unworkable for much of that time.

Nicholas Christakis: There are a few things that I did wrong, I think. I was silent for the first hour from 4:00 PM to 5:00 PM, and I just listened to the students. There's no video footage that has been released of that hour, to my knowledge, because it's probably not very interesting.

Sam Harris: Although you're impressively silent for stretches in the video that has been released.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes. I was interested in listening to the students and hearing what they had to say, including in the second hour. Eventually, the students wanted me to answer their queries. Some people have since said to me, why didn't I sit down? That's not a very wise suggestion in that type of a situation in my view.

Sam Harris: No, no.

Nicholas Christakis: Others have since said, "Well, why didn't you leave? The students were clearly very heated." But that was not a possible thing for me to do in that situation. I was encircled by the students. At one point, I suggested that I might need to go and fulfill some other duties, and the students didn't want that.

Sam Harris: Wait a minute. I have to stop you there. You actually felt that there was a period there where you couldn't have physically left?

Nicholas Christakis: Well, I didn't test the boundaries by barreling through the students, but there was no obvious way to do that. I was surrounded. The students were five deep. I mean, there was no obvious way for me to go anywhere.

Sam Harris: The obvious question here, was there any moment where you actually worried that it would become physically violent?

Nicholas Christakis: Well, I'd rather not go there. I think that what I was trying to do in that situation was to try to get the students ... I was trying to avoid the circumstance in which the students deindividuated. There is an inflection point during social movements of all kinds, in group dynamics, where you can reach an inflection point where people suddenly feel anonymous and are disinhibited, and when social inhibitions fall away, and people start acting in ways they would not otherwise act. This is well understood.

Sam Harris: Yeah. I mean, you can see that even in what is said, apart from any possibility of violence; you can see that people's emotions are being amplified by the group dynamics, or, at least, that is the way it seems because much of what was being said to you in that circumstance, it's very hard to imagine any one of those students saying what they said, precisely how they said it, if they were just standing alone with you off in a corner.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes. I mean, I think that's one of the things that's important to understand about mass movements. I mean, one of the reasons that they're effective is that they are demonstrations of social power. When you have the Mothers Against Drunk Driving, when people bond together. Individual mothers losing their children to drunk drivers aren't as effective a political force until they bond together. You have the March at Pettus Bridge, the Civil Rights marches. Or you have the ... I'm blocking on the name right now of the famous, the gay bar that was at Stonewall, I think it was called. Is that right?

Sam Harris: Yes, Stonewall.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. When you have events like that which galvanize interest, and when groups of people band together, it's a demonstration of social power, and it calls for change in a way that an equal number of people atomized are not able to do. What you also get with those phenomena, in addition to the good that can come of it, is the other phenomena, such as this point we're talking about now where people lose their identities, as a flip side of when they join the crowd.

What's very important in those circumstances is to get people to see themselves as individuals. For example, one of the reasons that people wear masks during orgies is to deindividuate. It's disinhibiting during masked balls, for example. Or torturers wear masks; this is to facilitate their doing these vile things.

Sam Harris: I just want to say, for the record, that I always wear a mask at an orgy.

Nicholas Christakis: There are these well-understood social-psychological phenomena, which come into play at different moments. We're social animals. We can understand human behavior through scientific inquiry. My lab spends a lot of time on this, obviously, in various ways.

Anyway, on the point of deindividuation, it's very important for the people to feel themselves to be as individuals, and not as part of the crowd, and to feel themselves capable of moral agency. You want the people to be identified by name. "I am so-and-so. I'm not just part of this crowd." You want them to see the person to whom they're speaking as a human being.

I have gotten death threats periodically in my life for – not many, two, or three, or four times; and I've gotten hate mail the last 10 or 20 years about different things. I always respond to it, unless I can't cope with the volume of mail I'm getting. A person will send you these very vile things, and then, when you respond to them, they say, "Oh my god. I didn't think you would answer me." Then, they'll say: "I'm actually not a bad person. I'm so sorry I said those mean things to you."

You can literally defang many people who send vile things because they don't recognize that you're a human being on the other end of the line, and that you're actually capable of talking to them. Not everybody can be dealt with this way; but some people can be dealt with this way.

There was a wonderful experiment done by a graduate student at NYU, published about six months ago in which he developed a system for identifying racist speech online, people who were tweeting a lot of very racist things. He developed these little bots; they were actually more like sock puppets. He developed these fake accounts: with either a white person or a black person shown in the little photograph, the avatar, of the Twitter account. The person also either had few followers or many followers, and had low status or high status. [The paper is here, by Kevin Munger: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-016-9373-5]

He had a corpus of people who were sending out racist tweets. When they did that, this racist person, let's say, was sending out a very vile, racist tweet, with bad language, to another person. The racist person A sends out a tweet to person B. Then, this bot, person C, would respond to person A, and say very sweetly, "Hey, man. You probably shouldn't do that. There's a real person on the other end of that."

He found that this simple intervention, especially if you had a white person that did that with high followers – his experiment was to test whether the status of the intervener mattered, but nevertheless, it was always helpful as I remember the experiment – he was able to show that the simple cultivation in the person expressing hatred of a recognition of the common humanity of the target person attenuated the behavior for months afterwards. The racist account reduced or eliminated the racist tweets they were sending.

My point in this example, and in the other stuff we're saying, is that you can actually use these basic liberal principles of our common humanity to redress, and address, wrongs, hatred, and violence in our society. In some ways, you can attempt to tamp down a little bit on certain aspects of mob behavior. I don't know if I have answered your question, but there are elements there of an understanding of social psychology that, I think, help us understand some of the phenomena that we've been seeing.

Sam Harris: Yeah. Do you think the dynamics of mob behavior in person and up close and personal are, in any way, isomorphic with mob behavior online, or do very different dynamics come to play?

Nicholas Christakis: I think there are very similar behaviors. We have a lot of anonymity. There's no doubt in my mind that if people remove anonymity from Twitter, the bad behavior would decline.

Sam Harris: Yeah, I couldn't agree more on that. Anonymity in almost every case now, I think, is corrosive to the social fabric. It's not that you don't want to be able to be an anonymous whistleblower in some circumstances, but it never brings out the best in people in normal interactions.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes, but I hesitate to oppose anonymity because I also think anonymous speech should be allowed. I struggle with the issue of anonymity. I think, on balance, online, it's a corrosive force, but I'm not prepared to say that nobody who's anonymous should be allowed. I've taken this stand publicly, namely, that I think you should have the courage of your convictions. We should, all of us, work together to cultivate a society where we do not demonize people for their beliefs, and where we engage them or we ignore them.

If we can create that kind of a culture, then, I think we could, in parallel to that, facilitate open expression. I f we don't fire people for their opinions… for instance, like the ESPN reporter who recently called Donald Trump a white supremacist, I don't think she should lose her job. I think people should be allowed to have and express their opinions. I don't think we want a society where people are losing their jobs for expressing their beliefs.

If we do that, this also means that, if we have such a society, then I think we would make it easier for people to have the courage of their convictions and to publicly express their beliefs. These issues all are locked together. This call-out culture and this culture of outrage interconnects with these problems of anonymity and troll-like behavior, and fear of open expression and concealment of beliefs.

Sam Harris: Clearly, there is a belief too far that can't be embraced by an employer. Certain if beliefs are antithetical to the job requirement. If you discover that somebody who's working for the NAACP is actually the most committed racist in his private life, that's a problem for his function in the job.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. There's no doubt that there are such cases as well. For example, with respect to the police, and there was a case recently of a firefighter who made some very racist remarks that would call his fitness for duty into question. I'm certainly not saying that employers should be, in all circumstances, prohibited from exercising their judgment or relieving employees whose beliefs or commitments are inconsistent with the performance of their duties. Not at all am I suggesting that.

But I am suggesting that there is a worrisome aspect to our culture right now. It's like McCarthyism. If you're a communist, McCarthy believed that you couldn't work in Hollywood, that you couldn't work in the State Department. I don't think there's anything incompatible between being a communist and working in the State Department or in Hollywood. I mean, that doesn't seem to me to be relevant in the slightest, and not consistent with our American values. We're a plural democracy where we have heterogeneous beliefs, and we're committed to free and open expression, in my view.

Sam Harris: Yeah. Although, even there, again, my understanding of the history of the Red Scare is not what it should be. I have to bracket that topic with my agnosticism here, but I can imagine ... I mean, there was a certainly a moment where it became obvious just how dysfunctional, to put it blandly – the real word probably is how evil – communism was in its application on the ground in the Soviet Union.

Nicholas Christakis: I'm not a communist at all. I think more people have died at the hands of the far-left than the far-right in the last 100 or 200 years. But that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying, obviously, that if you're a Russian spy, you have no place in government, period.

Sam Harris: Right, but there's no bright line between being ideological in a way that the system around you can tolerate and being ideological to a degree that, whether or not you are, in fact, employed by the KGB, you may as well be.

Nicholas Christakis: Well, I don't know. *You may as well be* is different than you *are* employed. I think that is indeed a bright line.

Sam Harris: No, because you're sufficiently committed that you will leak secrets if you can.

Nicholas Christakis: Leaking is different than being committed. I mean, there is a bright line between thought, and speech, and behavior. Being a spy is different than being sympathetic.

Plus, the symmetry is very important because they weren't going after the far-right during McCarthyism. If they're so concerned with the far-left, if they were really concerned, well, what about the monarchists in the State Department? Maybe there were some monarchists in the State Department, and they should be ferreted out?

Sam Harris: I'm certainly not defending Joe McCarthy. I'm just ...

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. It's the world we're in right now. Isn't it crazy?

Sam Harris: Some people wouldn't put it past me, though. I just think that the boundaries here are inconveniently fluid.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes. This is the thing with campus speech, again. A lot of the cases that are brought up these days as speech that's out of bounds are amazing to me. First of all, there are well understood exceptions. Like one of the distinctions that's often forgotten is the distinction between free expression and harassment. Also, even under the harassment, there's an exception for public figures.

Harassment is when you have repeated and, typically, targeted speech against a particular individual. For example, famously, the Nazis party can march through Skokie, Illinois, the Supreme Court ruled, but it cannot stop in front of my house. The former is free expression; and the latter is harassment. This is well understood. There are boundary cases and difficult cased, of course. But you can't threaten an individual. But, it turns out, you can actually say vile things about public figures like the president or politicians. There's a whole other jurisprudence there, as well, because they don't have the same expectation of not being "harassed" or criticized as other people.

There are all these understood differences. There are boundary conditions about inciting violence and imminent danger, versus non-imminent danger. For example, there are these left-wing professors that have been calling for white genocide. You can make abstract commitments to white genocide, but it's different than saying, "Let's get guns today and go kill so and so."

There are all of these cases. And there's a long history of people thinking deeply about free expression and where the limits are. One of the things that's amazed me is that, in my view and in the view of most people who had experience with First Amendment issues, none of the cases we've been discussing about expression on campus are anywhere near those boundaries.

Ben Shapiro is nowhere near a boundary. He's nowhere near where we would think about, "Oh my god. This is a hard case. Do we or do we not?" Then, what I think what happens is that there is a loss of subtlety of thought. If you call Bret Weinstein a "white supremacist, " then what do you call the actual white supremacists? I mean, this is just a ridiculous statement. Again, it's a kind of concept creep, a kind of extension, which makes us lose the capacity to use powerful words when they are actually needed.

Sam Harris: As we've just discovered in the excerpt I read from *The Economist* article, even someone who is mixed race and queer gets all of these epithets thrown at her. Words have no meaning. She's anti-black. She's a race traitor. I mean, it's ...

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. Well, that expression, too, breaks my heart. The expression "race traitor" was an expression that previously had currency in the '60s. I really thought that, in the last half century, and with the election of President Obama (who I greatly admire), that we had put some of that behind us. The fact that students in 2017 would resurrect such language is very depressing to me.

Sam Harris: Who is to blame for this trend? I guess, the first question I ask is, is this as big a problem as it seems, or is this just being magnified by a dozen or two dozen very salient cases, like Yale, and Evergreen, and Reed, and Berkeley?

Nicholas Christakis: And Middlebury and Oberlin and Mizzou, and it just goes on and on.

Sam Harris: I mean, there are many cases. There are probably dozens now, but is this actually emblematic of a creeping moral panic on our college campuses or are 95% of colleges oblivious to this trend. If you could live a thousand separate lives simultaneously, and enroll in all these schools, you wouldn't notice any of this on most campuses?

Nicholas Christakis: I honestly don't know the answer to that. I see conflicting quantitative evidence about this point. On the one hand, I certainly see many more anecdotes in my own observations, and many more cases in the news. And the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which is an extraordinary organization in my view, a civil rights organization, has maintained a database, and it reports increasing disinvitations, increasing episodes, more campuses with speech codes that really don't pass muster. They would report their quantitative data as showing significant increases. And, also, Jonathan Haidt has some other evidence, using Google searches and other techniques, to quantify some of these phenomena. He traces an inflection about four or five years ago, with respect to these events.

But there is also other evidence that's against that. For instance, online, just in the last couple of days, I've been tweeting with some people about new evidence from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago; it has, for 40 years, been collecting data on people's willingness to tolerate proscribed opinions. They have surveyed about many proscribed opinions. Atheism. Can you be an atheist? Would it be okay for an atheist to speak in public, or teach my children? I forgot the third category. For 40 years, they've asked that question. Or, for 40 years, they've been asking those questions about homosexuality. I forgot all the categories. And one of the categories was to be a racist. And we've made huge progress in our society in most of the categories. But my point is that, according to these 40 years of data, there is not much change in the public's tolerance, including young people's tolerance, for proscribed speech.

Their data would thus suggest that things are not worse now than before. But then, there was this survey that was just released by UCLA which showed that very surprisingly large fractions of students, in a sample of 1,500 students from around the country, had what I would consider to be illiberal views. They would clamp down on speech in various ways. They equated speech with violence. And so on.

Yet, simultaneous to this study was another report that was done with the Gallup organization. I think that the Knight Foundation commissioned it, and it showed that, yes, that might be true, that students were illiberal, but the students were no different than the adults. There were roughly similar percentages holding these views in a parallel population of general adults.

My point is that I believe very strongly that something is different on campuses, but I think that the social science is a bit mixed right now, and it's hard to know for sure.

Sam Harris: Insofar as it is a problem, who do you think is primarily to blame for it? The students, the administration, the professors, the parents of the students? There are many different roles here. Who do you put the onus on?

Nicholas Christakis: There are many theories about what's happening. What I would say is that the actors that I think have a duty to address this are the faculty. Earlier, you quoted from my *New York Times* piece from a year so ago, and in that piece, I said that I think it's our obligation to preserve the commitment of these institutions to free and open expression. I think it's our duty, as a faculty, to push back against the false claim that speech is violence. I'm not necessarily going to blame the faculty, but I'm going to say that I think the faculty have a duty to oppose these illiberal moves. And I would hope that more and more professors would see this.

I have noted that a number of professional organizations have recently begun to speak up. We had a couple of sociologists in the State of Connecticut get into hot water recently. I think one was African American professor of Sociology [Professor Johnny Eric Williams at Trinity College] who made some rather racist remarks. There were calls to fire him. I don't think he should have been fired. Myself, I don't so. I don't agree with his remarks, but I don't think he should be fired. Then, some professional organizations came to his defense. But a lot of people pointed out that this was very hypocritical. I mean, where were these professional organizations defending right-wing expression? These organizations lose credibility if they only come out and protect left-wing speach.

I think this is the crucial thing. All these people on the Right that are against disinvitations: well, you should then also be opposed to the disinvitation of Chelsea Manning from Harvard recently. All these people on the Right that are for protecting free speech, then, you should support the football player that wants to kneel during the national anthem.

Each case is different. Yes. And we could construct arguments, and so forth, about how they are different. And all these people on the Left who think it's outrageous that professors who are talking about white supremacy are being criticized by the Right, then you need to defend people on the Right.

I think, all of us together need to work to create a culture of open discourse – certainly within our universities, and hopefully in the broader society. At least, that's my view of the kind of society I think we should have and that I would like to live in.

Sam Harris: The difference in context matters. You don't have to give a platform to everybody.

Nicholas Christakis: No. That's exactly right. You're not obliged to give anyone a platform. Let's be very clear about this. This is misunderstood as well. The disinvitation thing: nobody is automatically entitled to a platform at any institution. We have public squares for that in our society. You can go to a public square, and stand on a soapbox, and give a lecture. You're not entitled to speak at a university. But, I think that, once you're invited, there should be a strong presumption against disinvitation, unless, perhaps, there were new information that came out that was not previously known about you.

In the Chelsea Manning situation, everyone knew everything about Chelsea Manning. It's not like she was invited, and then suddenly they discovered something about her. I think universities should not yield to a mob crying for disinvitation. I think that's bad precedent. It would have been fine not to invite her – like if the community said, "We don't want her here. She's a traitor. This is our belief," whatever. That's their opinion. That's fine. But I think we should push back strongly against the heckler's veto or the silencing.

Here's the other thing, which I know you know, but it's often misunderstood, which is that when you heckle a speaker, when you prevent Charles Murray from speaking – and, by the way, he's just not a white supremacist, and this slander of him is just appalling to me – when you heckle a speaker, or use bull horns, or pull fire alarms, or create a situation in which he cannot speak, you're not just injuring his or her rights. You're injuring the rights of all the people who wish to listen to that speaker.

This is why assassinations are considered a worse crime than murder. It's because you're not only killing the person, but because you're depriving the electorate of their lawful will. I think we lost sight of that. Once you invite a speaker, the speaker should speak. If you are on campus, you don't have to go or you can protest them.

I need to say something else. I *strongly* support the right of students to protest, strongly. I think, most of the time, the students are right. Not always, but most of the time. I'm uplifted by student movements and passion. But I do not think that students have the right to prevent other students from hearing whoever they've invited to speak on a campus. That is not how universities are supposed to work.

Sam Harris: What form do you think that protest should take?

Nicholas Christakis: I think there's lots of means of civil protest. I think there's lots of peaceful protest. This is the other thing that's extraordinary. One of the most extraordinary rights we have is: the right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition the government for redress of their grievances shall not be infringed. That's a basic idea that's really a part of our society, enshrined in our constitution.

Sam Harris: Take me to a Charles Murray or Ben Shapiro event at Berkeley.

Nicholas Christakis: Well, the protesters should hold posters outside. They can hold posters. They can assemble outside and object. They can scream outside. They can come in to the venue and stand at the rear. They can ask challenging questions at the proper time. In most universities, at Harvard and at Yale, for instance, which are places I know, there are very well-defined and reasonable rules. You can lift posters in the back, but not in the front. Why? In the front, you obstruct other people's views. In the back, you don't obstruct people's views. That's not a hard distinction to make.

Sam Harris: You should have to be quiet, and let the event proceed, right?

Nicholas Christakis: Yes, you can't have a heckler's veto. That's right. But there is also a bit of tolerance here too. A brief interruption is tolerated. I mean, we're trying to educate students. We don't want a punitive police state. For example, most of these institutions even have rules of thumb for this on the part of the university police. If someone seizes the podium for 30 seconds, and then leaves, then we don't do anything. If they do it for more than 30 seconds, then we send the cops up to get rid of them, and so on.

Now, I'm not endorsing that. I don't think that's a good course of action. My point is there are procedures in place to tolerate reasonable interruptions and protest and opposition. When you cross the line is when you prevent the ability of others to hear their chosen speaker on a campus.

Sam Harris: Again, these lines are very hard to draw because it does depend on the speaker. I mean, say, you have a speaker who gets death threats, plausible death threats, as when you have someone like Ayaan Hirsi Ali on a college campus.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah, but these death threats again are not free expression, right?

Sam Harris: No, no, but I'm just saying if a student jumps up on stage there to seize the mic for 30 seconds in that type of situation.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes, which, to be clear, I'm not defending; but I'm just saying there are rules of thumb about what we do.

Sam Harris: Yeah, but in that context, the rule of thumb just can't be applied. Anyone who jumps on the stage when Ayaan is speaking, that has to be perceived as a security problem.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. I mean, I won't speak for Ayaan because what she's had to endure is just appalling and absurd. What I will say is that, in a university community, we can tell students that we prohibit you from jumping on the stage, and seizing the microphone, or intimidating speakers because we'll then have to do XYZ. But, as an educator, I would not be in favor of a rule that said, "If a student does that, then they're suspended for a year." I think that's too draconian. Typically, we have rules of thumb about how we cope with all this.

For example, the no-placards rule, where you can't obstruct the vision of the persons in the room. If a student unfurled a protest banner off to the side in the front of the room, we would not immediately have the police tackle them. We would say, "You need to move on." We want the police to exercise judgment and restraint. We want to sustain the commitment that the speaker is to be allowed to speak in a civilized way. We also recognize competing demands for protest. Sometimes, it pushes the boundaries a little bit.

Again, again, you and I are discussing what I would call really boundary conditions. I mean, I would not endorse what happened at Middlebury. I mean, I think that was preposterous.

Sam Harris: In the most egregious instance, it was totally illegal. It was an assault.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes. That's another whole thing.

Sam Harris: It should have been-

Nicholas Christakis: Yes, of course, assault is yet another whole thing. Yeah, I think that's exactly right. Yes.

Sam Harris: This may be a question you don't want to answer, but, in your case at Yale, how did the other professors and the administration respond? What was the aftermath? Has that resolved itself adequately?

Nicholas Christakis: I think administrations around the country are facing a lot of challenges in coping with these events. I think that, as time has gone by, there's more received wisdom about what's happening, and how to navigate this terrain. I think that these events are hard, in the moment, to cope with.

This is why I think principles are so important, as well. Why do we have principles? The reason we promulgate principles to live by, whatever those principles are, is so that, in the heat of the moment, we have a go-to set of ideas that can help us address challenges that we otherwise might find difficult.

This is why we have this commitment to free expression in our society – because it's hard. Free speech is hard. We have to commit to it when we are in the cool light of day because when it comes up in an impassioned moment, it's very, very tempting to fold. But that's not the right course, in my view.

Sam Harris: Let's just talk about the phenomenon of moral panic. We'll remain somewhat agnostic as to how big a problem this is on college campuses nationwide, but where it's a problem, it does strike me that it has the character of what I'm calling a moral panic. There have been other moral panics in our history. Relatively recent ones, too. You and I are both old enough to remember the childhood sexual abuse panic in preschools.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah, the daycare centers, particularly in the '80s.

Sam Harris: Like the McMartin Preschool. It's not to say that no child ever gets abused in a preschool.

Nicholas Christakis: I'm pretty sure that none of those cases, where those people were sent to life in prison, were guilty.

Sam Harris: Yeah, I was amazed.

Nicholas Christakis: It was like a witch trial.

Sam Harris: Yeah, I was amazed because I forget what year that happened. In the '80s, I was probably in college myself. My memory of the McMartin Preschool, and I wouldn't ask our listeners who are old enough to know something about it to just take this test right now in real time, my memory was that, though there were some aspects of the case that were not as they first seemed, basically something horrible did happen there and...

Nicholas Christakis: No, I don't think so…

Sam Harris: No, no. I mean, I have since looked. There had not been anything. It seems that what you have is a story of, as you said, something like a witch trial, where you had perfectly innocent people accused of impossible crimes, and, in this case, sent to prison.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes. Yes, it was unbelievable. There were many, many such cases of preschool allegations. It was a moral panic in our society. It's one of those things where it's like a Stasi or like a witch trial. It's like a circular denunciation. You have to denounce others, lest you fall under suspicion. What politician is going to come out and say, "These prison sentences are inhumane." It's very difficult for a politician to do that because their opponent will accuse them of being soft on crime.

Sam Harris: Yeah, or in this case, soft on child sexual abuse.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah, exactly. "Wait a minute. You're defending child molesters?" someone might say. But of course, that answer would be "Of course I'm not defending child molesters. What are you talking about?" But that's the problem in those types of situations where you have preference falsification, where people are afraid to reveal their true beliefs. It's an emperor-has-no-clothes phenomenon. Everyone agrees that the emperor is wearing beautiful clothes. In fact, he's not. Everyone agrees that the horrible sexual abuse is taking place in these preschools because they're afraid they'll be accused of being unsympathetic. Of course, it's not what's happening.

Sam Harris: These are situations where just the numbers that are being claimed can give the lie to the phenomenon. I remember that the journalist and writer, Lawrence Wright, was on my podcast. He wrote a book that was somewhat related to this phenomenon, regarding the satanic ritual abuse moral panic. He remembered when this was just becoming prominent in the news, he, as a journalist, got interested in it. He went to a seminar – I believe it was being taught by law enforcement in Texas – on this issue of satanic cult abuse. The claim was, I believe, given by a police officer in this context that there were 50,000 child murders every year due to satanic cults in the United States.

Lawrence remembers that, at that moment, he realized he was in the presence of this social phenomenon that he had never witnessed, because there has never been a year in the United States when there was anything like 50,000 murders of any kind, right?

Nicholas Christakis: Of course.

Sam Harris: Here, you have law enforcement talking about 50,000 babies essentially being sacrificed to Satan. There are examples of this. Again, I don't know if we have the reliable data on all these questions, but it's claimed, for instance, that something like one in three, or one in five, girls who goes to college get raped at college.

Apologies because I haven't actually done my homework on this topic, but I have got to think that ... I know that there are people like Christina Hoff Summers and others who have come out and said these statistics are totally wrong, and here is why. I just haven't followed the plot here.

But I have got to think if one in three or one in five women who go to college is getting raped, I would be astonished if we are actually in that situation. If college were that dangerous for women, either what is being considered a rape has been defined down so preposterously as to get to that number, or the numbers are fiction. It seems like we should be faster than we are to diffuse some of this just by getting a hold of the relevant facts.

Nicholas Christakis: I wouldn't disagree with you on the importance of facts, and basing our policy on them.

I have friends from the reasonably far left to the reasonably far right. And when I have arguments with them, I think it's one thing that we can agree on is a set of facts. Then, we can have a disagreement about our ideology. For instance, this is what the income inequality is in our society today. This is a knowable piece of information. This is what social science tells us about what some of the causes of this inequality are. We can now discuss what, if anything, we wish to do with this situation. And the Right and the Left will have different ideas about what to do.

It's like climate change. I mean, what I hate about this is that we may or may not decide that it's worth us responding to climate change. I mean, I think we should. That's my opinion. I really don't like the idea of trying to put our head in the sand, and say, "Because I don't want to engage a difficult policy decision, instead I'm going to deny the factual basis of it."

Now, I supposed my political science friends or my historian friends would probably say that American political discourse has always had this strand in it. In my lifetime, it seems that we've gotten less technocratic about the way we approach policy problems and much more ideological. I have seen evidence to support that that the ideological separation in the Congress, for instance, is at an all-time high.

I guess, what I'm saying is like that famous saying: "you're entitled to your own opinion, but not to your own facts." I just wish we could get to a point where we could agree on whatever the facts are, when we're facing a problem of whatever type. Let's agree on the facts. Then, we can decide what to do about it. Fear of where we might get shouldn't lead me to denying the necessity of acquiring facts or denying the accuracy of whatever facts we are looking at.

Sam Harris: Let's connect this conversation to some of the scientific work you've done over the years, and your study of social contagion, and social networks. Now, you're doing new work with AI, rather a low-level AI. And strangely enough, deliberately inaccurate AI, or random AI, can enhance human behavior, you've found. What does science know about human beings individually, and most importantly collectively, and their behavior, that can help us move toward something more rational and ideal here?

Nicholas Christakis: Yes. In my lab, we do a lot of work on different aspects of these types of ideas. We have a program of research on the evolutionary biology and the behavior genetics of human friendship. We try to understand why do people befriend each other at all? Other animals don't do this. Other animals have sex with each other, as we do, but we also befriend each other. We form long-term, non-reproductive unions with other members of our species. Elephants do this, which is amazing. Certain other primates, and certain whales, form friendships, but it's very rare in the animal kingdom. We try to understand the origins of this practice, and its meaning for us as a species.

Second, we also have a program of research that tries to understand phenomena of social contagion. How is it that ideas, and norms, and also biological contagions (germs) can spread in human populations, and how might we exploit an understanding of this to intervene in social systems to make the world better? For example, can we create artificial tipping points in the developing world? Can we thoughtfully and shrewdly target structurally influential individuals in developing world settings with respect to public health interventions? In some chosen villages, for example, if we were to get these five people to change their mind about a public health practice, can we get the whole village to copy them?

We have support from the Gates Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. We do a lot of work that's trying to invent techniques to foster behavior change at scale, at population-level scale.

Incidentally, some of this research is dangerous because it has a dual use. I was giving a talk about our work in a country that I won't name a few years ago. I was talking about some of the work that one of my colleagues, James Fowler at UCSD, has done on voting, on using ideas related to social contagion to increase voter turnout.

And these people came up after my talk and were asking all these questions. I realized, at some point, that this was a country that, let's just say, was not a democracy. They were asking me these questions to reverse engineer what we were doing. They were not interested in increasing voter turnout or facilitating the spread of true information. They wanted to suppress the spread of true information and reduce turnout, let's say. So, these are dual-use technologies. There are interesting ethical questions here about some of the stuff that many labs, including ours, around the country are engaged in with respect to social engineering.

Then, the third thing we do in my lab, which you're alluding to, relates to our online experiments, which also may include AI. I'll give you an example of why I think that work is interesting, and it's a little bit related to everything else we've been discussing today. We do work where we use some software that we have developed and that we put in a public domain [at breadboard.yale.edu] that allows us to create temporary artificial societies of real people. We recruit thousands of people online. We put them in an online environment for an hour or two for them to play in our online laboratory, to play social games. We're able to model social challenges like the social traps that groups fall into.

Many of the things that we've been discussing, whether it's racism, or mob action, or violence, are social traps. They are ways in which individuals, when they act together, do things that are against their own interest and against the group interest. We've created a set of ways of exploring things like how do people share better, and how do we get people to coordinate their activity better, and how do we get people to cooperate better, or how do we get people to evacuate efficiently in a disaster situation. So, we've built all these models of real people acting in these situations.

Now, what we're beginning to do is to add artificial intelligence (AI) agents to these social systems. What we're doing is we're creating hybrid systems, heterogeneous systems of humans and machines. As an example, think about autonomous vehicles on the road where there are people who are driving their cars, and there are also driverless cars. How do we program the driverless cars to behave in a fashion that gets the people to act properly, so that not only are the driverless cars driving the safe way, but they're modeling and encouraging safe driving by all the other people as well?

What we've done in my lab is that we've invented a bunch of techniques to do this. The way I summarize these ideas that we're not a laboratory that is trying to invent AlphaGo, or IBM Watson, or some super smart machine-learning entrained algorithms that try to reproduce human cognition. That is to say: we are not trying to invent smart AI that replaces human cognition. Instead, what we've been focused on is what we called dumb AI that supplements human interaction.

Can a very simple, dumb, trivial agent, when mixed in to a population of humans, help the humans to help themselves, help us overcome some of these social dilemmas, get us to be less racist online, get us to be able to share with each other better, get us to be able to coordinate efforts better together? In the most recent paper of ours, in *Nature*, we were able to show just that. [http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v545/n7654/full/nature22332.html]

We took 4,000 people and put them into groups of 20. Then, sometimes, we sneakily replaced some of the people with bots. Then, the group was given a collective challenge. They all had to coordinate on a solution to a problem. If they worked together, they were all paid. If they didn't, they weren't paid.

We showed that, by adding some bots, we are able to get the groups of people to work more effectively together. Specifically, as you alluded to, one of the sneaky or tricky things that we did is that we found that the bots with the dumb AI programming had to be a little bit imperfect. Adding a little noise to the system, adding a few people who were deliberately making wrong choices, unlocked the potential of the group to converge on the proper solution. If you want, I can give you a metaphor about why that is the case.

Sam Harris: Yeah. Why do you think that was the case?

Nicholas Christakis: Imagine we have a landscape of hills and a mountain. There are a bunch of hills of different heights and one big mountain. Then, I take four people, and I drop them at a random spot on this landscape. I handcuff them together, so they're each facing north, south, east, west, and I blindfold them. That's the scenario. We have a landscape with hills and a mountain. I randomly pick a spot on this landscape. I drop four people in. They're blindfolded and handcuffed together. And I say, "Okay, guys. Climb to the highest mountain."

The people talk amongst themselves. They say, "Well, why don't we each take a step in our direction, and report back which way is uphill." They each take a step. North says, "It's uphill from here." East and West say, "It's lateral from here." South says, "It's downhill from here." They all collectively move a step north. Then, they repeat the experiment. Now, West says, "It's uphill from here." They take a step west. They keep doing this. Eventually, they get to the point where they all say, "It's downhill from here."

Well, have they arrived at the highest mountain in this landscape? No. They've arrived at the nearest hill. They're on the top of the nearest hill. But now, they are trapped there. They cannot escape it. So, how do they find the highest mountain? In order to find the highest mountain, we have to let them make some mistakes. We have to let them take some steps downhill occasionally, even though it would seem to make no sense. But, if we let them make some mistakes, if we tolerate some noise in the system, a little error, then, they can succeed. Let's say that, 10% of the time, we let them go downhill. We let them go downhill even though they shouldn't, let's say.

Now, there's some probability they'll take a sequence of downhill steps, get down to another valley, and then climb a different hill. Eventually, they'll explore the whole landscape. Ultimately, they will come to the highest mountain. They'll find the global optimum, not just the local optimum. But they'll get trapped there because that global optimum is so high. That mountain is so high that, even if they take 10, or 20, or a hundred steps down, they turn around and come back up because it's the highest mountain, as they are wandering about.

That's why adding a little noise to, tolerating a little error in, these groups helps them to find the global optimum, and not just the local optimum. We proved that this could work. And, as well, there are a bunch of other results in this paper, but the gist of it goes beyond even the specifics that noise is helpful for search.

You and I remember when we were in college, that, if we wanted to find a biography of Winston Churchill or Che Guevara, we went to the library, and there was the book we were looking for. But then, near it, there were perhaps better books. A little noise, a little error, got us to find a superior outcome. But we don't want too much error. We don't want to be on a different floor of the library and encountering biochemistry textbooks when we're looking for historical biographies, but we want a little bit of error. That leads to optimality. This is well understood.

But the broader point of our work is that we've been able to show that there are many social dilemmas where we can add a little artificial intelligence into these hybrid systems, and help populations of humans. In fact, we're beginning to think about ways to do this with the problem of fake news as well. How can we improve the quality of discourse in our society perhaps by using some of our ideas?

Sam Harris: Do you have ideas beyond adding noise in this case? Actually, before you go there, how generalizable is this principle to human decision maybe?

Nicholas Christakis: Well, with respect to the noise principle, I mean, we're not the first to think of that or explore that. I gave the analogy of search. These are well understood other examples. For instance, mutation in biology is an example. If you think about a reproducing organism, if it reproduced with perfect fidelity at each generation, that actually might be problematic because the environment changed.

Sam Harris: Evolution, yeah.

Nicholas Christakis: And the species would die out. You need a little lack of fidelity in transmission. A little mutation in each generation is a good thing. Actually, it permits the organism to explore a larger part of the evolutionary landscape. The idea of noise, and it's also known as simulated annealing, well, there are a number of ideas about the importance of error, small amounts of error, in diverse sciences. There's some similar principles in chemistry with catalysis. It's a generic scientific idea. But we explored it in these social systems.

The higher-order claim here is it should be possible to create a family of simply programmed agents that could be useful. Not necessarily just with noise as the simple programming, but also other kinds of ideas. And these agents could be introduced into social dilemmas related to cooperation, coordination, navigation, evacuation, sharing, and so on, and help people to overcome traps where the people are not able to work effectively together. We have a number of ideas. Tackling online racism: we have some ideas about this as well. I cited a paper earlier in our conversation done by a different laboratory.

Sam Harris: When you were talking, I was reminded an experience I had. This relates back just the dynamics of crowds. It was at one point, I don't know, 25 years ago, where I briefly had to function as one of the bodyguards for the Dalai Lama when he was traveling in France.

Nicholas Christakis: Wow.

Sam Harris: This is the Dalai Lama at the height of his fame in France where he really is received as a head of state. He had proper bodyguards. He had four guys, analogous to our Secret Service guys, with guns around him. They wanted us, the people who were either studying with him, Buddhists, meditators, to be the buffer between them and the crowds. Just by the sheer fact of proximity, we were the ones who had all of the conflict with the people in the crowds.

One thing I noticed very early on, was that, in crowd after crowd, there was a difference between a crowd where there was some demarcation – like a physical barrier, but it could be as tenuous as something like just a velvet rope – where there was some demarcation as to where to stand if you're part of the crowd, and where there wasn't. When there wasn't a demarcation, that was the difference between absolutely peaceful civil order and just utter chaos. That is the simplest possible bot. We're just talking about a rope. So, are there general principles that you have found, beyond adding a little noise in conditions analogous to search?

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah. There are some ideas, but we haven't published them all yet. I'm not sure I want to talk about them just yet until we nail down more of the details. I have a book that's forthcoming in about a year or so from Little Brown. The title of the book is *Blueprint*, and it's on the evolutionary origins of a good society.

Sam Harris: Nice.

Nicholas Christakis: I'll be discussing some of these ideas in that book, and how it is that natural selection has shaped not just the structure and function of our bodies, not just the structure and function of our minds, but also the structure and function of our societies. Some of the principles we've been discussing are very relevant to that.

On this specific example of the bots, however, there is a way in which we are actually experimenting with a sort of “separation bot” right now. It's like the Dalai Lama example you gave. It enforces the perimeter of fewer social connections between groups. It manipulates the structure of the network, this bot does, in ways that we believe will improve human welfare.

Sam Harris: It's an interesting way because, when you get in this space, you discover things that are right on the surface of human experience, and have been there your whole life, but you may have never noticed them. One thing that I've noticed of late is that its civility, and even just good manners, is a barrier, a very clear barrier against violence, when things are genteel, and civil, and predictable, and people hold the door for one another.

Nicholas Christakis: Only if it's real, Sam. You see, this is the problem. This is an extreme example, and I know this is not what you're saying, but the use of the word "genteel," of course, conjures up genteel plantations, where meanwhile, there is slavery.

Sam Harris: There can be situations where you're exporting your horror to some other conditions.

Nicholas Christakis: Yeah, exactly. I think like the Romans or the Greeks that had a very civilized culture of debate in their ruling bodies, but only for a fraction of population. Yes, I think you're absolutely right. I think there are norms, as you said, of politeness and discourse – which is the theme for today – *discourse and groups*, I would say, is the theme for today – which have served the function of reducing violence.

I mean, this is also Greg Lukianoff's point. We use our words so as not to kill each other. This is progress! This is the whole point. We talk to each other. We even say vile things to each other. We have a culture that allows that, so that we don't draw swords. This, in fact, is one of the gifts of the Enlightenment, I believe.

Sam Harris: I believe that's the origin of the handshake.

Nicholas Christakis: Yes, yes. I think I've heard that same story – that there's no gun and there's no weapon in my hand. Although, chimpanzees will touch each other's hands, Jane Goodall has shown, in a very similar handshake-y way. Your point is, I think, that there is a sense in which certain norms do prevent violence. There is some old wisdom there that is valuable, I agree.

Sam Harris: Listen, Nicholas, it's been really a feast to see the world through your eyes for nearly an hour and a half here. I will have to have you back when you publish your *Blueprint*, so you can divulge of your secrets.

Nicholas Christakis: I would welcome the chance to come back. Thank you so much, Sam, for having me.

Sam Harris: Yeah, really been great. Where would you like people to find out more about your work in the meantime before your new book comes out?

Nicholas Christakis: Well, I can be followed on Twitter. My handle is @NAChristakis. My lab website is www.HumanNatureLab.net, and all our research is there, and videos of the work we're doing around the world, and our software is downloadable there. There are lots of resources there.

Sam Harris: Great, great. Well, write that book.

Nicholas Christakis: I have to finish it now, yes.

Sam Harris: Fix complex social systems for us, and fix Twitter while you're at it because there's a lot of fixing that needs to be done.

Nicholas Christakis: Thanks, Sam.

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[This transcript – as of October 16, 2017 – has been lightly edited for clarity, and some links have been added to some relevant materials.]