



Epsilon Theory

# *The Welding Shut of the American Mind*

September 20, 2020

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***Well, that's one way to handle a lockdown.***

Oh, haha. JK! That's not a Chinese soldier welding an apartment door shut in Wuhan in 2020 for coronavirus, that's an Israeli soldier welding an apartment door shut in Hebron in 2015 for ... well, I'm sure they had their reasons.

Maybe this is more what you had in mind.

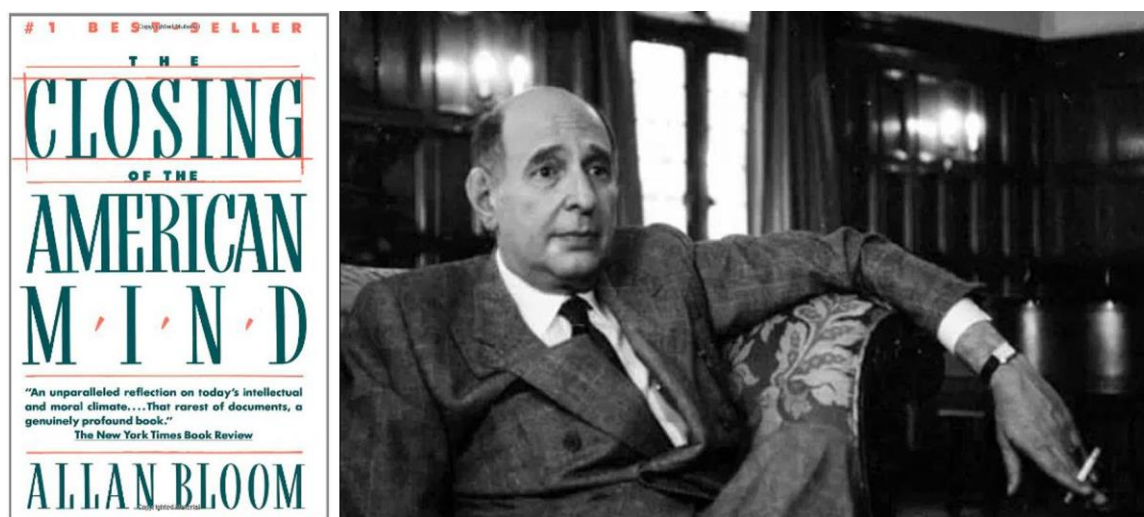


Those are apartment gates that have been welded shut, and yes, this is in China. But again, it's not the lockdown that you think it is.

These are the offices of the Unirule Institute of Economics in Beijing, winner of the Cato Institute's Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty in 2012. Yes, the Cato Institute. Yes, the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty. The Unirule Institute's claim to fame is the 2009 publication of a series of articles that criticized and stopped (or at least delayed) a Chinese government-proposed constitutional amendment that would have enshrined the Party's control over private property. Naturally, the Unirule Institute is characterized by Chinese state-owned media as a "liberal" and "subversive" organization. Those darn libs and their advocacy for private property rights!

This picture was taken in July, 2018. A year later, the Unirule Institute of Economics was shut down for good.

Turns out that governments and other organized interests of wealth and power weld doors shut all the time.



In 1987, Allan Bloom published *The Closing of the American Mind*. It is an important and beautiful work of art and thought. You should read it. Like all important and beautiful works of art and thought, there are aspects of this book that you will find to be highly problematic and you will disagree with vehemently. Certainly I did. More importantly, like all important and beautiful works of art and thought, there are aspects of this book where, if you allow it, you will find your notion of a life well lived changed forever. Certainly I did.

Here are two important and beautiful quotes from *The Closing of the American Mind* that are relevant to this note:

*“Freedom of the mind requires not only, or not even specially, the absence of legal constraints but the presence of alternative thoughts. The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities.”*

*“Indignation is the soul’s defense against the wound of doubt about its own; it reorders the cosmos to support the justice of its cause. It justifies putting Socrates to death.”*

Bloom takes a sociological, impressionistic approach to his argument that the faux “openness” of academia and popular culture results in a rigidity and closing-off of thought more generally. I’m not going to revisit that here. That’s Bloom’s argument, not mine.

**My argument is that the rules of the mental games we are playing today – the *algorithm* that goes through our hard-wired and socially trained heads as we process highly mediated and constructed narratives – creates a stable, incredibly damaging equilibrium of *indignation* and *ego*.**

**My argument is that the closing of the American mind is evolving into its next stage: *the welding shut of the American mind*.**

What’s the difference between closing and welding shut? A closed door can be opened. A welded shut door cannot.

In economic terms, a door – or mind – that’s been welded shut is a strong equilibrium. There is nothing within the rules of the game and the self-interest of the game’s players that will *ever* open that door. Opening the door through continued play of the same game or following the same rules or incremental change is not just difficult, it is impossible.

**The only way to open a door that’s been welded shut is to tear it down.**

Now I can imagine ways to tear down the welded shut doors of the institutions and social systems that blight our world. This is the entire impetus behind *our call to BITFD*, to burn down these institutions and social systems now locked in *the pernicious forever equilibrium of the Long Now*.

*But how do you tear down a welded shut mind? What does that even mean?*

Answer: it’s a meaningless phrase. You can’t “tear down” a mind. You can’t take a mind and BITFD.

**Once a mind is welded shut, it’s lost forever. *Once a rhinoceros, always a rhinoceros*.**



**Berenger:** And you consider all this natural?

**Dudard:** What could be more natural than a rhinoceros?

**Berenger:** Yes, but for a man to turn into a rhinoceros is abnormal beyond question.

**Dudard:** Well, of course, that's a matter of opinion.

- Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros* (1959)

*Rhinoceros* is about a small European town where everyone changes, one by one, into rhinoceroses. Once changed, they rampage through the town, destroying everything in their path. People are a little puzzled at first, but soon enough becoming a rhinoceros becomes *normalized*, to use a word you hear a lot these days.

*"Oh look, a rhinoceros."*

Soon enough, it's just the way things are. Soon enough, it becomes harder and harder to remember a time when rhinoceroses weren't rampaging through the town. Soon enough, only one man remains a man. Utterly alone. Utterly lost.

**See, it's not just the bad guys who became rhinoceroses.**

In Ionesco's play, sure, the local goons and authoritarian politicians are the first to become rhinoceroses. But quickly the scientists and the academics and the artists begin to turn, and they're the worst of the lot. Not because they're the biggest and baddest rhinos. *But because they know better.* Because they have the capacity for self-recognition and self-reflection to resist the rhinoceros call ... and they choose not to.

Exactly the same thing is happening in America today.

Every day, I see more and more good people lost to this Rhinoceros disease, a virus of the mind with an R-0 far higher than any coronavirus. Good people who have convinced themselves that they've found The Answer — either in the form of a charismatic person or, more dangerously still, a charismatic idea — and that The Answer *requires* their unquestioned indignation and unexamined ego in service to its mighty end. And once they go there — once they give themselves over to the indignation and the ego that is beyond self-recognition and self-reflection — they never come back. Their heart and their head are welded shut. They're a rhinoceros now.

### Once a rhinoceros, always a rhinoceros.

We can't open a mind that's been welded shut. We can only prevent *more* minds from being welded shut. We can only prevent our OWN minds from being welded shut.

And we can.

There IS a vaccine for the Rhinoceros disease. There IS a way to drive away the organized interests of wealth and power that are *always* searching for new ways to weld your mind shut.

**There IS a way to *fight* the organized interests of wealth and power who pose a clear and present danger to liberty and justice for all, without sacrificing our autonomy of mind to *other* organized interests of wealth and power who pose an equally clear but slightly less present danger to liberty and justice for all.**


Unlike a physical door, our minds can only be welded shut if we *allow* them to be. The narratives served up to us by organized interests of wealth and power – narratives which are the acetylene torches that can weld our minds shut – only find purchase if we *allow* them to find purchase. These intentional efforts by organized interests of wealth and power – what I like to call **the Nudging State and the Nudging Oligarchy** – are the necessary but not sufficient cause of a mind that is welded shut. The sufficient part is us.

*Our autonomy of mind cannot be taken from us.*

***But we can give it away.***


Here's an example of how that works ...



### Many People Say



The go-to move by sophists like Vox and Trump is to claim that “many people” are asserting their made-up premise that justifies an otherwise ludicrous position. Why do they do this? Because it works. Why does it work? Because common knowledge game. Because of the power of the crowd watching the crowd.

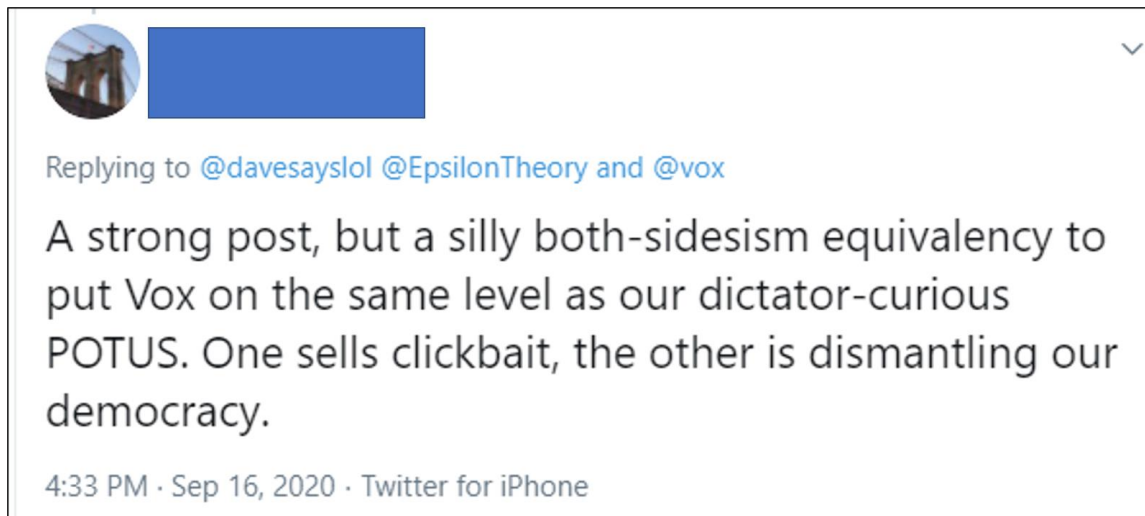
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A few days ago I wrote a brief note on the go-to move by sophist demagogues like Vox and Trump, which is to claim that “many people” are asserting some made-up premise that justifies an otherwise ludicrous position. Why? Because common knowledge game. Because of the power of the crowd watching the crowd.

There were a lot of comments on the note like this:



In reaction, I made some of my usual snide Twitter responses. Blah. It deserved better.

Let's start with a thought experiment. Let's say that I had written this exact same note, but I didn't mention Trump at all. Let's say that the entire note talked solely about Vox and their manipulative, pathetic habit of begging the question by writing made-up nonsense like "To many, Beethoven's most famous work is a symbol of exclusion and elitism in classical music" when, in truth, no one thinks this. No one. Maybe I found some other media outlets that use this same BS "many people say" construction, but I don't mention Donald Trump at all.

What do you think the reaction of people like our Name\_Redacted commenter above would be to that note?

Would it be "Huh, I see what you mean about Vox. That's a manipulative, pathetic linguistic trick they're using here!"

Or would it be "How dare you write this article about Vox and their use of this manipulative, pathetic linguistic trick, but leave out the biggest and most obvious user of this manipulative, pathetic linguistic trick – Donald Trump!"

Actually, forget about this being a thought experiment. I can give you a dozen examples of notes we've written where the common refrain from a particular set of readers is uniformly "but whatabout Trump!". To readers like Name\_Redacted, any set of appropriate objects of social criticism MUST include Donald Trump.

And in this case, I think that's fair. Yes, Vox is an appropriate object of ridicule and scorn on this "many people say" crap, but I am certain that Trump is an appropriate object of ridicule and scorn here, too.

So that brings us to the note I actually wrote, with a set theory notation of **Objects of Criticism = {Vox, Trump}**, which brings us to the next step of this mind-welding algorithm, a comparative operation on the only dimension of critical analysis that matters for many readers: *political power*.

Name\_Redacted's rejection of the note as "silly" is not because he's a Vox fan or thinks that the criticism of Vox is factually wrong. No, Name\_Redacted's rejection is based on his comparative assessment that a) Donald Trump's existential political power > Vox's mundane political power, and b) the potential damage from whatever bad things Trump may do with his existential political power > the potential damage from whatever bad things Vox may do with its mundane political power.

*Therefore, the words spent on a critical analysis of Vox are a distraction and a waste of time from the far more important words spent on a critical analysis of Trump.*

THAT'S what makes the note a silly exercise in "both-sidesism" to Name\_Redacted.

Of course, no one is existentially powerful like the President of the United States. No one can do more damage to America and the world than the President of the United States. Which leaves us with this syllogism:

- **Whatabout!** — Every set of appropriate objects of social criticism while Donald Trump is President must include Donald Trump.
- **Bothsidesism!** — In any set of appropriate objects of social criticism, the existential salience of Donald Trump to modern society requires that all non-Donald Trump objects must be discarded as extraneous or comparatively immaterial.
- **Ergo, the ONLY legitimate object of social criticism is Donald Trump. QED.**

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Here's another example. This time not within a mind-welding algorithm of social criticism, but a mind-welding algorithm of academic scholarship.

Earlier this summer, the English department at the University of Chicago – arguably the most prestigious English department in the world – **issued the following statement** [emphasis mine]:

***Faculty Statement (July 2020)***

*The English department at the University of Chicago believes that Black Lives Matter, and that the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Rayshard Brooks matter, as do thousands of others named and unnamed who have been subject to police violence. As literary scholars, we attend to the histories, atmospheres, and scenes of anti-Black racism and racial violence in the United States and across the world. We are committed to the struggle of Black*

*and Indigenous people, and all racialized and dispossessed people, against inequality and brutality. ...*

*English as a discipline has a long history of providing aesthetic rationalizations for colonization, exploitation, extraction, and anti-Blackness. ...*

*In light of this historical reality, we believe that undoing persistent, recalcitrant anti-Blackness in our discipline and in our institutions must be the collective responsibility of all faculty, here and elsewhere. ...*

***For the 2020-2021 graduate admissions cycle, the University of Chicago English Department is accepting only applicants interested in working in and with Black Studies.***

So I want to be very clear with what I'm saying.

I think Black Studies is an academic discipline worthy of study and emphasis by – not just individual members of this incoming cohort of University of Chicago English department graduate students – but any individual member of any cohort of graduate students in any university in any humanities or social science department.

*But I do not think Black Studies is the ONLY academic discipline worthy of study and emphasis by a cohort of University of Chicago English department graduate students.*

Also to be clear, I'm not asking anyone to DO anything about the University of Chicago English Department's decision. It's entirely within their purview. There's no great (or small) harm to anyone here, and there are plenty of other excellent English departments where graduate students who want a research career defined by something other than Black Studies can go.

*But I also think this decision by the University of Chicago English Department is misguided and sad.*

Why? Because the lifeblood of scholarship and research is this and only this: no one tells you what you work on. **No one tells you what questions are interesting to YOU.**

Take that freedom away – the freedom to define what questions are interesting to YOU – and you've got ... med school. You've got law school or business school or any other pre-professional program where you are *trained* to be a mechanic who can think in a certain prescribed way and master a certain prescribed body of knowledge so that you can fix a certain set of chronic issues in a certain field. A highly paid mechanic, for sure, but a mechanic nonetheless.

No one goes into academia to be a *mechanic*. No one goes into academia to be *trained*. No one goes into academia to be *told* what is acceptable inquiry and what is not.

The faculty of the University of Chicago English Department know this is true, because I promise you it was true for each and every one of them when *they* entered academia. But when you

believe that your world is faced with an issue of existential salience, when – to use Bloom’s words – the “alternative thought” is ANYTHING other than unwavering commitment to a struggle against racial injustice and brutality, then your syllogism becomes this:

- ***Whatabout!*** — Every set of appropriate objects of academic scholarship in the humanities must include Black Studies.
- ***Bothsidesism!*** — In any set of appropriate objects of academic scholarship in the humanities, the existential salience of Black Studies to modern society requires that all non-Black Studies objects must be discarded as extraneous or comparatively immaterial.
- **Ergo, the ONLY legitimate object of academic scholarship in the humanities is Black Studies. QED.**

And if this is your syllogism – if this is the algorithm that runs through your head while setting graduate admissions requirements – then all of these pretty words about intellectual freedom and all of those pretty memories about *your* journeys of intellectual discovery as a graduate student really don’t matter. Not even a little bit.

*By god, there’s a war to fight here and I’m a commanding officer on the front lines! Our graduate student admissions process must be placed in service to that war, and graduate students must be treated as a collective means to a noble end, not as individual ends in themselves!*

**As with all mental algorithms driven by ego and indignation and the stories we tell ourselves, this is a very stable equilibrium.**

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Here’s another example.



*Oscars Best Picture Contenders Required to Meet Diversity Standards (WSJ)*

*“After years of facing criticism for lacking diversity among its Oscar nominees, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has decided it will require films competing for best picture to meet criteria aimed at fostering a more inclusive Hollywood.*

*Films can qualify by meeting standards in at least two of four broad categories. Those include having at least one main actor from an underrepresented racial or ethnic group; casting at least 30% of minor actors from underrepresented groups; telling a story that focuses on such groups.”*

All of this has happened before.

Hollywood is no stranger to self-censorship, and in the eternal struggle between art and commerce, the former gets lip service and the latter prevails. Always and in all ways. The most famous example is the Hays Code, a self-administered set of “moral standards” imposed on the content and production of movies released to the general public, which had enormous power in Hollywood from the mid-1930s through the mid-1950s.

But I think what’s happening today with these self-imposed inclusivity requirements is very different from the self-imposed Hays Code. Hollywood adopted the Hays Code and established the institutional framework around it in large part to reduce the threat of outright government censorship and an even more stringent set of “moral standards”. I’m not saying that many of the studio heads responsible for establishing these self-enforcement mechanisms did not also agree with many of the prurient and regressive rules they established, but I think it’s fair to say that the perceived existential threat of outright government censorship was the major catalyst for change. I think that’s fair to say for other famous examples of self-censorship in related commercial art forms, too, like the imposition of the Comics Code in the 1950s.

Hollywood’s self-censorship today isn’t driven by the perception of an existential government threat. The Academy is not establishing these Best Picture qualification rules because it’s worried that the government is going to swoop in and impose even more stringent inclusivity requirements. I mean ... LOL.

Similarly, Hollywood’s self-censorship today isn’t driven by the perception of an existential commercial threat (or opportunity). The Academy is not establishing these Best Picture qualification rules because it believes that movies about historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups make for better box office numbers. Also ... LOL.

No, Hollywood’s self-censorship today is driven by the perception of an existential *narrative* threat. And by narrative threat I don’t mean the story that the rest of us might have about Hollywood. No, it’s a far more powerful narrative than that, which is what makes it existential. *It’s the story that Hollywood tells itself about itself.*

The existential story that Hollywood tells itself (particularly the Hollywood that is represented through vehicles like the Academy Awards) is that they are creating art. And not just any art, but good art. And not just good art, but Art That Makes A Difference™.

In exactly the same way that the faculty of the University of Chicago English Department has changed their internal mental models to reflect an ego-driven self-narrative that *requires* all incoming graduate students to serve in the struggle against racial injustice in a prescribed manner of academic scholarship, so have members of the Academy changed their internal mental models to reflect an ego-driven self-narrative that *requires* all movies to serve in the struggle against racial injustice in a prescribed manner of Art That Makes A Difference™.

And so:

- ***Whatabout!*** — Every set of appropriate objects of Art That Makes A Difference™ must include prominent depictions of historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups.
- ***Bothsidesism!*** — In any set of appropriate objects of Art That Makes A Difference™, the existential salience to modern society of prominent depictions of historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups requires that all non-prominent depictions of historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups must be discarded as extraneous or comparatively immaterial.
- **Ergo, the ONLY legitimate object of Art That Makes A Difference™ is a prominent depiction of a historically underrepresented racial or ethnic group. QED.**

Of course, with the ego-amplifying mechanism of an awards ceremony embedded in the mix here, this is also a very stable equilibrium.

So ...

I'm sure you've noticed that I'm not giving you any examples of a welded shut mind from the other side of the culture wars, any of the thousand and one examples I could provide of a mind-welding algorithm from MAGA-world.

**This is intentional.**

***This is a test.***

I don't write for rhinoceroses.

Did reading this note make you indignant? Good.

Earlier, I only gave you a snippet of that Allan Bloom quote on indignation. Here it is in full.

***"Yet if a student can – and this is most difficult and unusual – draw back, get a critical distance on what he clings to, come to doubt the ultimate value of what he loves, he has taken the first and most difficult step toward the philosophic conversion.***

*Indignation is the soul's defense against the wound of doubt about its own; it reorders the cosmos to support the justice of its cause. It justifies putting Socrates to death.*

***Recognizing indignation for what it is constitutes knowledge of the soul, and thus an experience more philosophic than the study of mathematics.”***

*How do you keep your mind from being welded shut?*

***With self-reflection of ego and self-recognition of indignation.***

You say you want a revolution? Well here’s where it happens. In your own damn mind.

THIS is the struggle of our day. This is the struggle of all days, of every human society that’s ever seen its day in the sun. It’s a struggle that NEVER stops, because those organized interests of power and wealth in every human society will ALWAYS be there with their narrative blowtorches, seeking to weld our minds shut in service to their power and wealth.

Their advantage is the strong equilibrium nature of the mental algorithms they burn into our brains. Once a rhinoceros, always a rhinoceros.

Our advantage is our nature: the innate autonomy of human minds.

Our advantage is our nurture: the learned bonds of human friendships.

A self-reflection of ego boils down to not taking ourselves too seriously. A self-recognition of indignation boils down to challenging our received truths.

*How do we manage that?*

**With our friends.**

With the people who respect our autonomy of mind, even as they challenge our cherished ideas for the ego and indignation often embedded within. And demand the same in return. With the people who refuse to apply the blowtorch syllogisms of political party to a personal bond of friendship, who refuse to deny your moral worth because you have “alternative thoughts”. And demand the same in return. With the people who treat you as an end in itself, never as a means to an end. And demand the same in return.



Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia weren't just friends. They were good friends. Two intellectual giants and enormous egos who came to *vastly* different conclusions on almost every political and legal flashpoint of the past 100 years. And yet political affiliation and legal philosophy and knock-down, drag-out intellectual fights did not define or preclude their personal relationship. Somehow they were able to challenge each other without triggering a nuclear war of personal indignation and wounded ego.

*I wonder what they found as their common bond?*

One last Allan Bloom quote. For the win.

***The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth.***

***This, according to Plato, is the only real friendship, the only real common good. It is here that the contact people so desperately seek is to be found.***

***Find your Pack.***

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