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Year of the Virus: Understanding the contagion effects of wokism

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Abstract

Wokism has become a major force in Western political culture with manifestations in Black Lives Matter, transgenderism, cancel culture, political correctness and various social justice movements. Examinations of this phenomenon have focused on its expression in Critical Race Theory and its postmodernist, social activist and Marxist precedents, all of which assumes rational agency on the part of the actors involved. Using criteria previously developed and applied to suicide cults and terrorist organizations (Robertson, 2017b), this paper examines wokism for the characteristics of a mind virus. In preparation for that examination, the self is described as the body that could be infected by such a virus. The mechanisms by which such an infection could occur are described using clinical case studies and an evolutionary account of the development of the modern self. The author concludes that the four conditions used for diagnosing a mind virus have been met in this instance. The discussion section includes suggestions for inoculation. Further research is recommended.

Key words: woke, wokism, self, mind-virus, postmodernism, social justice

Running Head: Woke Virus

Year of the Virus: Understanding the contagion effects of wokism

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The novel coronavirus had not yet been recognized when Yasmin Mohammed (2019) published her memoir blaming “Western Liberalism” for failing to protect her from forcible confinement and beatings she suffered as a child. Following an intervention by child welfare authorities, a Canadian judge acknowledged her suffering but refused to intervene in her parent’s “cultural (Muslim) ways.” Early the following year journalist Margaret Wentz was removed from an honorary position with a Canadian university following a social media mobbing in which she was accused of being a racist and anti-feminist (Wentz, 2020). “Due process” which would have allowed her to defend herself from the allegations was not given. In March, 2020, demonstrations spread throughout North America and into other continents following the death of George Floyd while he was in police custody in Minneapolis, USA. Systemic racism was assumed to be the cause. During the same year many schools and colleges in the United States ended achievement testing as a requirement for admittance, and employers paid for employee re-education sessions.

Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020b) named the movement behind these interconnected events “Critical Social Justice,” but this paper develops an argument that these events were influenced by an underlying social contagion that can be better understood as a mind virus. In developing

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this argument, it is first necessary to describe the “body” that may be infected by such a virus. The self is proposed as that body in the next section along with an evolutionary account of its development. In the second section of this paper I apply a model that allows us to recognize a mind virus to the modern cultural phenomenon of “wokeness.”

The self as a mental analogue to the body

The self is core to such psychological concepts as self-esteem, self-concept and self-empowerment. In this section, I describe how this evolved cultural construct became the paradigm of practice within the profession and how cultural units may attach themselves to this self. I discuss the historic tension between collectivism that gives definition to ourselves as a social species and the individualism inherent in a self capable of volitional planning and consciousness. I conclude this section by reviewing how we might determine this self has become infected by other units of culture that serve to appropriate the self’s resources.

Most current schools of psychotherapy emphasize individual choice with respect to personal development with the implication that selfed individuals are making these choices. Classical behaviourists (Skinner, 1974) presented an alternative view that consciousness and the self that has it are unnecessary distractions preventing a scientific examination of behaviour. In keeping with this deterministic view, behaviourism focused on helping patients using classical and operant conditioning as opposed to cognitive processing. Behaviourism delivered impressive results in treating such conditions as depression, anxiety, alcoholism, trauma and conduct disorder, and in so doing, providing concrete evidence that we are a species whose behaviours are determined by genetic and environmental factors. Despite these successes, behaviourism failed to become dominant in the profession. As we shall see, this failure was grounded in a

species-wide consensus on the mental attributes of humanness. Its successes, however, suggest a way that mind viruses could operate to undermine those attributes.

Thomas Kuhn (1970) described psychology as a “proto-science” for failing to develop a unifying paradigm that would take it out of the domain of philosophy and into the domain of science. Hutcheon (1996) identified three “formations” that potentially could have become such a paradigm: Psychoanalysis, genetic developmentalism, and behaviourism. She identified behaviourism as the most fruitful of the three; however, she concluded it failed "because it attacks the very roots of our cultural assumptions” (p. 261). These cultural assumptions include: 1) human beings have minds, 2) minds presuppose the presence of beliefs, and 3) beliefs are only possible if there is the notion of objective evidence by which we can determine truth.

Many academics have endorsed the determinist alternative to these cultural assumptions, that consciousness, free will and the self are illusions (Blackmore, 1999; Coyne, 2012; Cronin, 2003; DiCarlo, 2010), but the practice of psychotherapy has proceeded in the opposite direction. By the twenty-first century, even those who still called themselves behaviourists were talking about personal choices and cognitive distortions, thus sounding very much like the therapists who now called themselves cognitive-behaviourists. Classical behaviourism had encountered an already-established paradigm that humans are thinking animals with minds capable of logical consistency and rational evidence-based assessment. While a profession that is united by these notions could assimilate deterministic methods, it could not capitulate to a determinist ontology because to do so would undermine the foundational assumption of that we are thinking, rational beings.

A mind capable of having beliefs necessarily posits evidence for those beliefs--evidence that, in turn, presupposes a reality that the mind can understand. Moreover, a mind with the

ability to assess evidence, independently and temporally, could not exist without self-awareness. But the self, defined by these capabilities, represents a relatively recent cultural adaptation (Robertson, 2020) that embodies a tension between individualism (with its sense of volition, uniqueness, constancy and reflectivity) and collectivism (with its sense of community, social interest, attachment and productivity). The two case studies that follow illustrate the self in map form, and how that self may change.

Therapeutic change to the self of two clients

“Suzie” (Robertson, 2011) had attempted suicide five times before I saw her. When established methods of treating suicide ideation failed to bring necessary results (cognitive behavioural therapy, Adlerian psychotherapy, narrative therapy, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), I suggested that we map her self to find out what was blocking treatment. We began by identifying units of culture that represented who she was. Each referent word, or meme, included connotative meaning, affect and associated behaviours. Using the idea that connotative, affective or behavioural similarities between memes could be represented as links, we produced the map in figure 1.

Few memes in figure 1 suggest individual volition or social interest. A meme labeled “depressed person” is central and attempts to remove it prematurely had destabilized the entire structure. We began to move or remove memes supporting the placement of “depressed person” as central while building a new core with a focus on social interest and volition. Suzie could now visualize a better self and accept evidence that it was true. Her suicide risk receded. She found achievement and recognition when she relocated to a new community.

When I presented this case study to a doctoral class, one participant declared that I was simply doing cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). From that point of view, the map suggested

cognitive re-framing, supplemented by behavioural “homework assignments.” These challenged negative memes such as “ugly” and supported a new “human rights” core. A narrative therapist in class disagreed, suggesting that memes provided the outline of a story, and I had helped my client write a better one. Actually, I began my career as an Adlerian psychotherapist. This anecdote illustrates that the self, as pictured here, is fundamental across psychotherapeutic schools of practice.

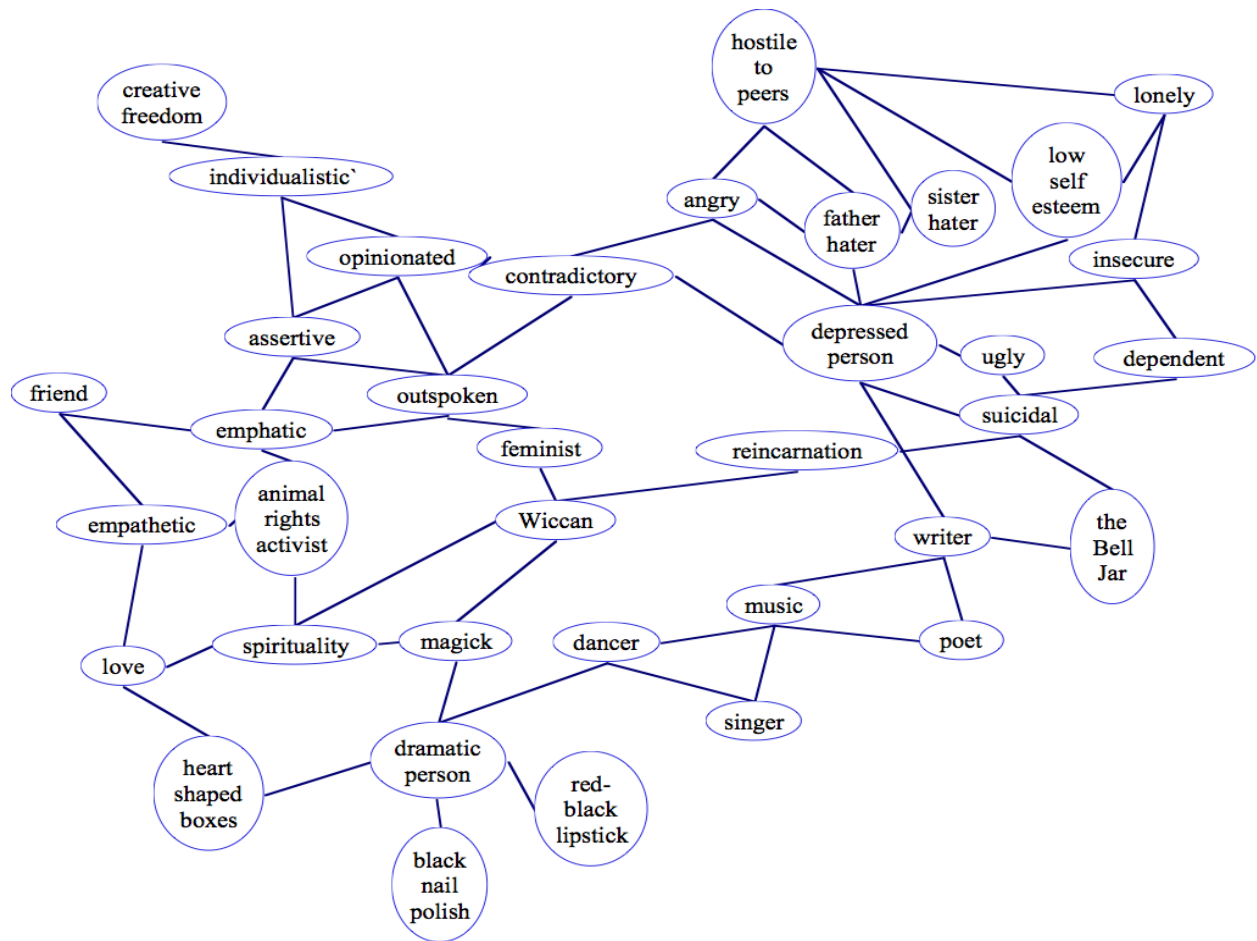


Figure 1: Initial self-map of a youth with suicide ideation, showing memes in relation to each other

About a decade after I worked with Suzie, another client, “Olivia” came to me with symptoms of PTSD after being raped by a friend during a night of heavy drinking (Robertson, 2016). After a month of CBT-informed treatment, she was able to return to work. Nonetheless,

she acknowledged a personal history that included failed relationships, alcohol abuse and the loss of child custody. She asked for further psychotherapy, focused to become a better decision-maker. We began by developing the self-map represented in figure 2.

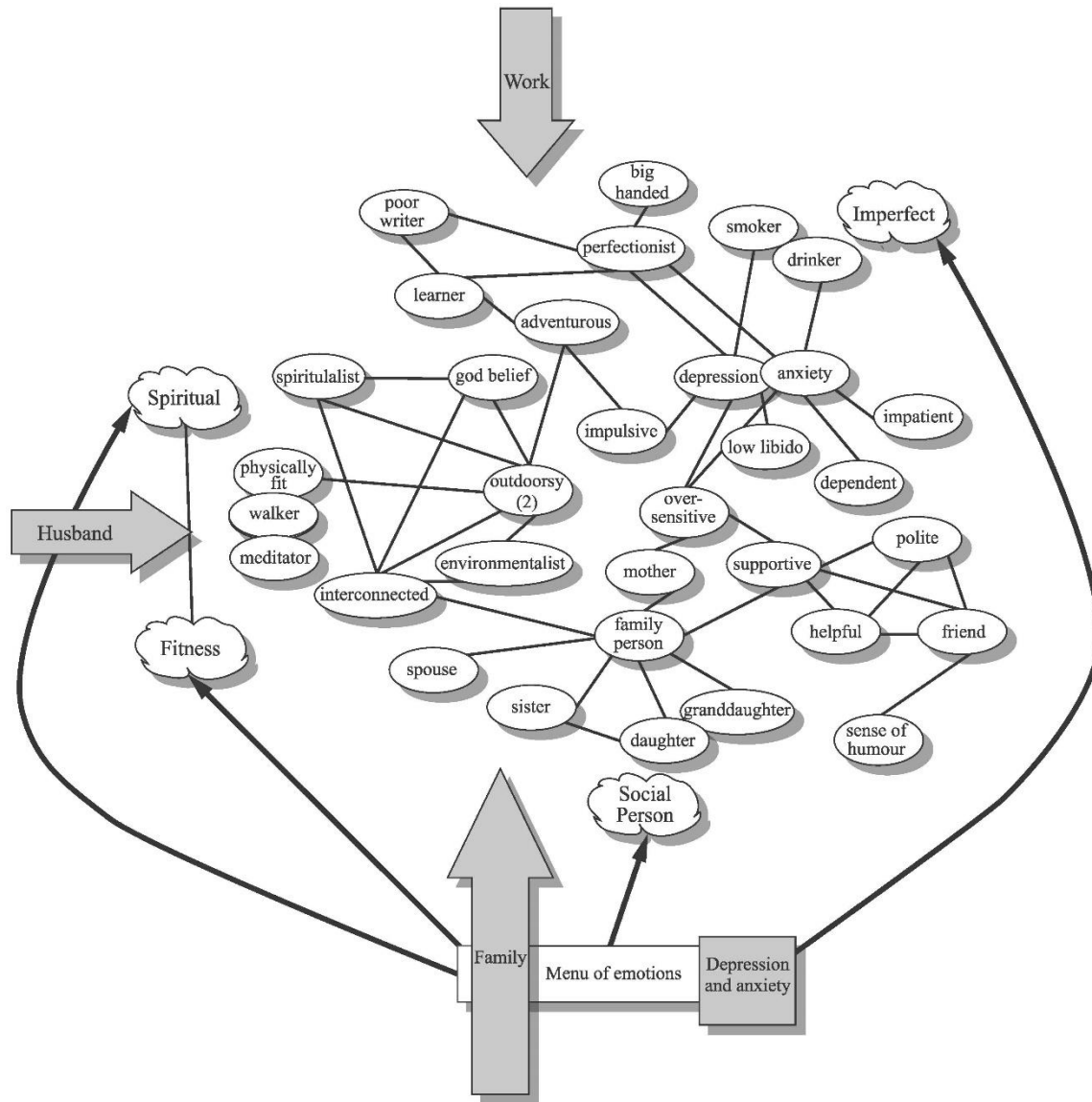


Figure 2: A self map of a woman suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder

The bottom bar represents the biological forces that sometimes triggered various clusters of memes labeled “imperfect,” “spiritual / fitness” and “social self.” Thick arrows represent the influence of her family, spouse and work on her self-definition. To the extent that biological and environmental forces control the structure of the self, we can say that it is “determined.” During

the course of treatment, we were able to add or modify several memes in Olivia's "imperfect self" giving her a more balanced identity. She developed a sense of empowerment and volitional control, both of which she used to maintain her commitment to behavioural change. She no longer defined herself as a depressed person, although she acknowledged that everyone experiences sadness and depression on occasion. She developed new associations between clusters that gave her the ability to choose to not ruminate on her deficiencies. We added a second bar, below the menu of emotions, to recognize her "psychological characteristics" such as intelligence, introversion and self-assurance.

Significantly, Olivia now found restrictive the very relationships that she had found to be supportive during her bout with PTSD. Her spouse now accused her of wanting to be better than him, possibly when she refused to join him on his drinking binges. Her employer refused to allow her enough latitude to make decisions on the job. Her mother would unexpectedly enter her house searching for the drugs that she assumed were stashed there. Olivia came to the insight that her spouse, employer and parents had not changed—but that she had changed. If she wanted to keep her newly minted self, therefore, she would have to move to another community. With the help of distance-counselling and some new friends, she re-established herself elsewhere and even negotiated new boundaries with her family.

A determined species unchained and re-chained

As can see from the examples of these two clients, the social environment is a powerful determinant of who we are. Determinists would say that psychotherapists, directed by their programming, overpower the other determinants that keep their clients' old selves in place. Determinists would have more difficulty, however, in explaining why both clients chose to move to other communities *without* the advice of their therapist. To argue that therapists unconsciously

push their clients in such directions requires the assumption of unseen forces. A simpler explanation would be that *most* of our decisions are determined but that, with hard work and mental resources, we can make decisions at variance from our memetic and genetic programming (Robertson, 2017a).

In *The Evolved Self* (Robertson, 2020), I argue that volition and temporal constancy combined with a more primal self as recently as the beginning of the first century BCE. Our sense of constancy, that we are in some important sense the same person over time, allows us to think about our selves in remembered events while considering how we might have influenced alternative outcomes. Using a similar mechanism, we can imagine our selves in the future and predict outcomes on the basis of available evidence. What constitutes evidence will necessarily, at least in the first instance, be learned. If having a better grasp of reality ultimately favours better outcomes then cultures will evolve in that direction. For example, the scientific method, which originated in post-Enlightenment Europe, has brought about a revolution in new knowledge. The method itself has been appropriated by most non-European cultures where “culture” is defined as current practices, values and artifacts.

Beliefs are possible only in the mind of someone who accepts that there is some way to differentiate truth from falsehood; and that implies an objective reality. To change a belief about oneself, one must first take oneself as an object that can be examined. Unfortunately clients cannot change who they are at will. Like Suzie, they often resist changing even dysfunctional selves. They need evidence to support desired changes; otherwise it feels as though they are merely play-acting.

The rejection of classical behaviourism by psychotherapists, despite its demonstrated efficacy, flowed from deeply held cultural assumptions about what it means to be human. The

combination of behaviourism with cognitivism suggests a form of compatibilism, that the concepts of free will and determinism are not mutually exclusive. The ideal of free will became part of our self-definition flowing from culturally evolved changes to the self (Robertson, 2020). While assumptions of personal volition, continuity, and reason became the benchmark of what it means to be human, we do not always attain this ideal. Psychologists are in the business of teaching clients the skills that they need to approximate this self. To Sagan (1996) that ideal involved doing science: "Every time we exercise self-criticism, every time we test our idea against the outside world, we are doing science. When we are self-indulgent and uncritical, when we confuse hopes with facts, we slide into pseudoscience and superstition" (p. 27).

Taking the objective view, as is necessary in science, does not come naturally to the human species. Jaynes (1976) said pre-Homeric Greeks relied on pre-programmed cultural responses to triggering events and when an event occurred that had not been prepared for in their cultural programming they reacted in a random, sometimes schizophrenic way. After a study of early Egyptian hieroglyphics, Johnson (2003) concluded that the early Egyptians did not have minds, as we would now define the term. A simpler explanation is that they did not have the kind of self that we take for granted today.

The individualism that forms a part of what I call "the modern self" (Robertson, 2020) was a potential threat to the stability of pre-modern societies made up primarily of people with a different kind of self. Since the self is a culturally mediated construct, by controlling available memes, collectivist societies can limit the possibilities available for self-construction. Acceptance of such constraints can be supported by appeals to authority, particularly religious authority. The Axial Age of the first century BCE (Jaspers, 1951; Mahoney, 1991) produced major world religions that were concerned with regulating the self in some ways. Early

Confucian thought dealt with the moral development of the self in relation to the collectivity infusing it with a sense of duty to ancestors (Wu, 2017). Hindu thought divided society into a series of castes with a full education available only to the Brahmin caste. The Buddhist doctrine of “no-self” required initiates to place themselves under the direction of masters who represent the Buddha himself. Like Judaism, Christianity, has held that people must renounce the self, because human reasoning is faulty and true knowledge is divinely inspired. These teachings are consistent with a hypothesis that while the presence of people who could engage in individual volition and planning were valued, their abilities needed to be regulated.

Although the medieval Roman Catholic Church encouraged the practice of science that was consistent with its theology, the Protestant Reformation coupled with the re-learning of classical Greek philosophy in the scientific Renaissance of the sixteenth century led to the Enlightenment that began with Descartes, Bacon and Newton in the seventeenth. This Enlightenment did not invent individualism; it proclaimed that the individualism already inherent in the self that allowed for the determination of objective reality was good. Since a healthy self also requires relationships with others in the form of social interest, collective identity and intimacy, this development did not spell the end of collectivism, and each “individualist” society has retained or created ways of expressing communal or group identification.

In *The Evolved Self*, I argue that the struggle between collectivism and individualism occurs, in the first instance, within each person’s self. I argue also that, for the most part, we remain the determined beings that we have been throughout most of our history as a species; but also beings with the capacity to reflectively reprogram ourselves by acting on reasons that matter to us as individuals. If we view this conscious self that is capable of such reflective thought² as

² As used here, reflective thought is a kind of thinking involving situating one’s self in past events.

analogous to the body, then we need to consider that memes and meme complexes (which are not part of the self but nonetheless exist in culture) can be deleterious to it. These meme complexes would be analogous to viruses that can enter the body.

The emancipation of the self was not welcomed by everyone. People with functional selves face responsibility, after all, for their own well-being. They must realistically assess their circumstances, selecting those that would provide meaning and purpose, but also implement plans to assure their own happiness. My private practice is beset with clients who would rather place the responsibility for their own well-being on others. In his examination of totalitarian movements following World War II, Eric Hoffer (1966/1951) noted, "The frustrated follow a leader less because of their faith that he is leading them to a promised land than because of their immediate feeling that he is leading them away from their unwanted selves" (p. 110).

Building on the religious trope that our selves are inadequate, Martin Heidegger (1962) deconstructed science and reason by claiming that only one who is "Dasein" could know ultimate truth. "Dasein," in Heidegger's idiosyncratic usage, includes being present simultaneously in the past, present and future which only a few can achieve. He named himself and the fuehrer as Dasein. German psychologist Eric Fromm (1969) described the relationship between the totalitarian dynamic and the self:

There is the wish to submit to an overwhelmingly strong power, to annihilate the self, besides the wish to have power over helpless beings. This masochistic side of the Nazi ideology and practices is most obvious with the respect to the masses. They are told again and again: the individual is nothing and does not count. The individual should accept this personal insignificance, dissolve himself to a higher power, and then feel proud in participating in the strength and glory of this higher power. (pp. 257, 256)

It is frightening to consider that if Suzie had lived in pre-war Germany, a Nazi sympathizer could have suggested not only that she needed to accept her sense of personal insignificance but also that she could do so most effectively by identifying her self with glory of the Aryan race. Incorporating a new ideological or religious meme into one's self, moreover, includes incorporating whatever attaches to that meme. In this example, Suzie would have felt Nazi militarism, anti-Semitism, and Fuehrer worship as essential to her self. If both the Nazi and Suzie were caught in the same contagion, then we could say that one passed a mind virus to the other. In an earlier article (Robertson, 2017b), I listed four conditions necessary for diagnosing such a virus:

- 1) A mind virus will result in an observable change or transition in self-definition, one that is neither planned nor related to self-betterment;
- 2) The change must involve a diminution or negation of the modern self or its component parts;
- 3) The change must involve an appropriation of personal resources for the purpose of spreading the meme cluster in question; and,
- 4) The change is likely marked by considerable and uncharacteristic emotional valence.

Is wokism a mind-virus contagion?

The first section of this paper examined the structure of the self. I then proposed an evolutionary understanding of that structure and concluded with four conditions that are needed to satisfy a diagnosis of a mind virus that could be said to infect this self. Before applying those conditions to wokism in this second section, I define the term and explain why it is preferred to other labels sometimes used. Each of these labels are examined in turn: (1) postmodernism; (2) identity politics; (3) neo-Marxism; and (4) social justice (as a movement).

Postmodernism, the view that all knowledge is “socially constructed” and a product of power relationships, provides a method for the woke to attack and discredit competing beliefs. Objective evidence cannot be used to counter these woke beliefs since it is assumed that even science and reason amount to nothing other than a “white, male way of knowing” (Strong, 2002) and is, therefore, a conspiracy to oppress others. Tellingly, however, since they never deconstruct wokism itself, it cannot be said that it is completely postmodern. It is more like a religious faith, something postmodernists considered to be a grand meta-narrative.

Identity politics incorporates the tenet that that people are defined by the oppression that they have endured as members of their own races or other identity groups. Advocates do not apply this analysis to all groups. They describe Jews as white oppressors despite 2,000 years of anti-Semitic oppression. They describe East Asians as “honorary whites,” moreover, because in the United States these U.S. Americans are statistically ahead of actual whites on measures of academic achievement and income. Since identity politics is selectively applied, wokism cannot contribute to a general understanding of racism or oppression.

Most woke people identify with “the Left” and are sometimes referred to as “Neo-Marxists,” but postmodernism classified Marxism as a modernist “grand narrative” (Lyotard,

1984). Wokism appropriated Marx's theory of class conflict where the "white race" is assigned the place of the capitalist or ruling class. By replacing Marx's idea of class conflict with cultural warfare they ascribe class solidarity to one's racial, gender or other assigned oppressed group. Thus, a black person who identifies with non-black workers might be accused of "false consciousness" which is, of course, a reversal of actual Marxism. Instead of striving to eradicate the capitalist class the logic of woke-Marxism would be to eradicate "whiteness" or "maleness."³

The social-justice movements that began in the 1960s aimed at eliminating barriers faced by members of disadvantaged groups. The goal of equal opportunity would permit people, irrespective of sex or racial background to advance on the basis of their motivation and ability. Wokism appropriated the rhetoric of social justice. But by insisting on equal *outcomes*, instead of equal opportunities, they have devalued merit and work thus reversing the original goals of the social justice movements.

Wokism represents an inconsistent application of various historical, and sometimes conflicting, conceptual paradigms. I now examine this movement for the four conditions outlined in the previous section for determining the presence of a mind-virus.

Condition One: Change in Individual Self-Definition

The form of identity politics, on which wokism relies heavily, gives high status to recognized victim groups—which is to say non-whites, non-heterosexuals and non-males. Moreover, it gives even higher status to people who are simultaneously members of several victim groups under the rubric "intersectionality." Competition between victim groups for greater recognition rewards people for identifying and fixating on perceived grievances (Noor,

³ In 2017, a founder of Black Lives Matter, Toronto was reported as posting on her Facebook page "Whiteness is not humxness, in fact, white skin is sub-humxn. All phenotypes exist within the black family and white ppl are a genetic defect of blackness" (Curl, 2017).

Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012). One study of university students (Gabay, Hameiri, Rubel-Lifschitz, & Nadler, 2020) identified an emergent interpersonal-victimhood personality type characterized by a pathological need for recognition, difficulty empathizing with others, feelings of moral superiority, and a thirst for vengeance. The study noted that those who have this personality type “lash out” when others question their victimhood or challenge their self-image of moral superiority. Increasing numbers of these self-identified victims create a culture of victimhood in which “the aggrieved actively seek the support of third parties as well as those that focus on oppression” (Campbell & Manning, 2014 p. 692). This culture of group victimhood is gradually supplanting a culture based on individual dignity.

Woke identity politics holds that members of the “white race” are *collectively and innately* oppressors, which makes them analogous to the capitalist or bourgeois class in Marxism (Campbell & Manning, 2014; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020b). Because it is assumed, in wokism, that white males have benefitted from “privilege” both racially and sexually, they are not allowed to claim victim status even though they may be victims in many ways. Yet, white males are visibly active in the woke movement. I would expect their personalities and self-definitions to vary from those of other woke people. Here is a case study of woke white male personality based on my personal “lived experience” as a moderator of two humanist discussion groups in 2020.

The first discussion group was “open” in that any member of the group was allowed to post any article or topic providing they had not been previously banned from doing so. Although membership in the group varied between 1,500 and 1,600, active participants on any given post rarely numbered more than 20 except for the most controversial ones. Wokists were active on

most controversial posts, and most of these activists were, judging from their profile pictures, white males.

When I actively began to moderate this group, I found woke members swearing at people who disagreed with them, calling them racists, “alt-righters,” and “white supremacists.” The woke members frequently suggested that the moderators should ban such people for not being true humanists. I scrolled through the relevant conversations and found that no one had posted anything that advocated racism or white supremacy. I developed a set of rules to encourage civil discourse and announced that I would delete posts that expressed hatred toward any person or any group. I announced that name-calling would be considered a form of expressed hatred.

“Bill” was probably already angry with me for deleting a post in which he called someone “a racist piece of shit” for suggesting that the authorities should not remove statues of Canada’s first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald. Macdonald, who gave Amerindian people in Ontario the vote and provided food to ward off starvation, also contracted with four Christian denominations to provide education. Malnutrition, physical and sexual abuses were subsequently found in many of these Indian Residential Schools. I suggested to Bill that Macdonald should not be judged for events that occurred without his knowledge well after his death. His reply was that I was “completely without conscience” and that I favoured “raping and torturing children.”

In a second humanist discussion group,⁴ a Humanist Canada board member posted an article about a woke mobbing of a retired professor who had suggested there should be limits to abortion. The woke demanded that this professor lose his emeritus status at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, but the board member suggested that humanists need to fight for the freedom of speech of those even with whom we may disagree. “Jason” replied:

⁴ This second group is Humanist Canada’s official Facebook page. Only Humanist Canada board members and designated employees could post to this page although all members can respond.

I don't want anti-choice misogynists to have a platform. Voltaire's quote you used is nice when you have the privilege to utter it, but it doesn't mean much to oppressed and marginalized voices to know that their oppressors will continue to get a seat at the table because of some bizarre equivocation around free speech.

Within wokism, Bill and Jason are powerful white males who are assumed to have "voice" and a duty to speak for recognized victim groups whose "voices" are "oppressed and marginalized." Disagreement with some aspect of a woke narrative identifies oppressors who are to be confronted by the special-status white males. At any point, however, a member of a victim group could find their voice and accuse those who have adopted a saviour role of patronizing them. I observed this in the open humanist discussion group. A board member had created a post with the theme "trans rights are human rights." A transperson accused the board member of using trans issues to further a political agenda. The member both apologized deferentially and explained, without evidence, that humanists had been posting many transphobic statements which is why his post was needed.

Members of the woke movement who are also members of victim groups and who adopt a personality type consistent with woke narratives will assume a posture of moral superiority. Woke advocates who are white males can forestall negative intervention by these morally superior people by vigorously pursuing attacks on the non-woke coupled uncomplicated by nuance or compromise. We also need to consider the psychological benefits whites may obtain from a process Rene Girard described as "scapegoating" (Girard, 1989). Wokism has labeled whites to be an "oppressor race" with all members presumably guilty of benefiting from this oppressor status. White woke can temporarily transfer this guilt to a named scapegoat who then takes on the sins ascribed to this race. We have seen this process in the example of John A.

Macdonald in Canada, attacks on Winston Churchill in Britain and on the founding fathers in the United States. As we will see in the subsequent discussion of woke mobbing, the process of scapegoating can be applied to anyone but in all cases it can only provide temporary psychological relief. While white males are more likely to be selected as a sacrificial scapegoat, as the sacrificial crisis becomes more severe categories start to break down and the actual victim selected by mimetic violence could be anyone. During the height of the sacrifice, it will seem that the victim is to blame for everything.

As can be seen from the foregoing, wokism has the effect of assigning specific personality characteristics to identity groups. While it may be that some people enter the woke movement with such personalities already expressed, the internal logic of wokism pressures individuals to conform to the personality assigned to their particular status.

Condition Two: Diminution of the Modern Self

The first section of this paper outlined how a healthy modern self includes the capacity for relationships with others in the form of social interest, collective identity and intimacy as well as more individualist aspects such as volition, uniqueness, continuity and reason. Combined, this self allows for the objective investigation of external reality. A negation of either our collectivist or individualist qualities would diminish this capacity.

In the humanist discussion groups that I monitored, woke members dismissed as racism or “transphobia” scientific research into the heritability of intelligence and rapid onset gender dysphoria. In doing so, they rely on the critical-social-justice trope that all knowledge is a function of power and is perpetrated by oppressive “discourses.” There is, of course, a contradiction in this argument in that if there is no objective reality, as has to be the case where what is taken as knowledge is a function of power, then there can be no basis to believe that

critical social justice is true. In this, the woke are similar to Heidegger who also put limits on science and reason but advocated a “higher authority” to inform the masses as to ultimate truth. The woke present themselves as that higher authority.

A functioning society is impossible if everyone were to uniquely determine their own subjectively held individual realities. If objective knowledge is impossible, then an alternative reality acting in the place of a *Dasein* must be imposed on non-believers. Free speech is irrelevant in arriving at truth if truth is determined by that higher authority. Indeed, free speech, in such circumstances, is potentially dangerous for allowing other understandings of reality to compete for the minds of those who are to be led. Therefore, the woke have journalists fired, have books and articles withdrawn from publication, “de-platform” speakers, and have professors fired for replacing ideological orthodoxy with heresy. The woke accuse those who fail to conform to their “reality,” of racism, sexism or a host of new “phobias” that no psychologist would ever diagnose. All this is done in the name of those who allegedly lack “voices.”

The voice of former Sacramento Kings broadcaster Grant Napeer was also silenced. Asked his opinion of Black Lives Matter, he said that “All lives matter, every single one.” In an apology, he stated that he had never imagined how the phrase could be offensive to anyone. He was fired on June 2, 2020. Anyone who believes that all lives matter, of course, cannot be racist, but people to whom the woke had given this label had chanted the phrase at counter-demonstrations. As a sports broadcaster, Napeer could be forgiven for not knowing this history. Entertainers, writers and politicians have also been forced to apologize for uttering this *anti-racist* sentiment. On October 8, 2020 an aboriginal Inuit cabinet minister, Patterk Netser, was removed as housing minister in the territory of Nunavut after posting “all lives matter” on his Facebook page.

The woke list of proscribed phrases includes “sexual preference,” “colour blind” (when referencing racism), “not racist,” and “sex change.” New words such as “intersectionality,” “heteronormativity,” “cisgender,” “microaggression” and “LGBTQ+” are de rigueur. Old words and phrases, moreover, take on new meanings. During the 1970s, for example, “systemic racism” was used in connection with organizational policies and practices that resulted in discrimination. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) during that era had a policy that police officers had to wear a standard issue hat. The effect of that policy was that devout Sikhs, who wear a turban, could not become police officers. That policy was changed. A policy of racially profiling people to be stopped to be searched would also be an example of systemic racism.

In June 2020 RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki said she had looked at her organization’s policies and procedures and could not find any examples of systemic racism. The prime minister’s office, using a different definition, forced her to recant her views. This more recent woke definition of systemic racism is that if there are differential outcomes, for example in arrest rates, then systemic racism must be the cause. Such a simplistic analysis ignores the need to research complex socio-economic factors that could lead to a higher crime rate over which the police have no control.

The picture that emerges is wokism as a kind of filter, an overlay on actual events. Because we think primarily in words when interpreting events, the woke emphasis on language and language policing is an attempt to force the general public to accept the interpretations this filter produces. Thus, wokism is not merely about restricting freedom of speech, it is about restricting freedom of thought. In trying to control, restrict or inhibit our ability to reason, wokism diminishes these very capacities of the self returning us to a form of pre-Enlightenment collectivism. From this perspective, wokism is not revolutionary but reactionary.

Condition Three: Appropriation of Individual Resources

When a woke participant in one of my humanist discussion groups amended his comments after others had already responded, I viewed it as a personal idiosyncrasy. After three participants did the same thing, however, I took notice. These actions pointed to a psychological means by which wokism appropriates time and resources.

The term “woke” originated as a self-referent by adherents of this odd mixture of postmodernism, Hegelianism, Marxism, “social justice” and religion. Appropriated from African American slang, it represented a slur against those who were not sufficiently “awake” to accept their belief system. Like early Calvinists, who believed that they are predestined to join the “elect” and end up in heaven but still needed to continually demonstrate their piety as a way of proving their claim, the woke need to continually demonstrate their superior insight. In this example, they did not need to change the record to help the unwoke, with whom the conversation had already ended, but to demonstrate to other woke who might come across that record that they are indeed one of the elect. In “cancel culture” individual posts and records are examined dating back decades so that enemies of wokism can be eviscerated and publically shamed. This results in an impulse for woke advocates to not leave any record that might imply they are not sufficiently woke.

One can display one’s woke virtue by participating in internet and media mobbing. In November 2019, Don Cherry, a sports broadcaster who had been baiting liberals for decades on his *Hockey Night in Canada* program, decided to promote Canada’s Remembrance Day tradition of buying poppies to support programs for veterans. He lamented that no one from Toronto was buying poppies anymore and opined, “You people, you love our way of life, you love our milk and honey, at least you can pay a couple bucks for a poppy or something like that.” Within two

days, the Canada Broadcast Standards Council received so many complaints about Cherry's "racist" comment that their website went down. But this was not a popular public reaction. Only those using the woke mental filter can see racism in a request to buy poppies. Because the woke were not politically predisposed to watching Cherry in the first place, it is unlikely that many of those who complained actually listened to the program. But Cherry lost his job.

Another venue for virtue signalling involves participation in anti-racist demonstrations. Not all members of Black Lives Matter (BLM) are woke, but those who are, given their allegedly superior understanding, try to occupy its leadership positions. Within three days of the killing of George Floyd by police on May 25, 2020, BLM demonstrations occurred in at least 30 U.S. American cities and others around the world. Eight thousand protesters demonstrated in Portland, Oregon, on May 28. Rioting that included breaking store windows, looting, starting fires, and hurling projectiles at the police began the day after. A pattern of peaceful demonstrations by day and riots by night soon solidified. "Riots," in this instance, were planned in advance. On Facebook and Twitter, the rioters found locations, times and instructions. They were provided food, medical attention, gas masks and shields to protect them from rubber bullets and tear gas. They were armed with modified lasers, fireworks, clubs, hockey sticks, hammers, and in one case, a chain saw.

Portland city council responded to demands to defund the police by cutting \$15 million from its police budget in June. On July 2, several federal policing agencies arrived in Portland to protect federal buildings and monuments. On July 15, Mayor Ted Wheeler said that the federal "troops" were responsible for provoking the violence and demanded their withdrawal. On July 18, rioters broke into the Municipal Police Association building, setting it on fire. On July 30, the

federal police were withdrawn. Except for serious offences, rioters went free without bail.

According to reporter Andy Ngo, some rioters were charged and released as many as five times.

In August, Wheeler stated that President Trump had caused the riots through his policies. On September 10, in keeping with the demands of protestors, Wheeler banned the use of tear gas by police. Trump was defeated in November, but the riots continued. Following a riot on New Year's Day, 2021, Wheeler stated that his "good faith efforts at de-escalation have been met with ongoing violence and even scorn from radical Antifa and anarchists."

Real revolutions are led by real revolutionaries who believe there is an objective reality outside of themselves, and they use that reality to plan. Violence in their world is connected to goals. It may be difficult but not impossible to negotiate with these realists. But Wheeler could not deal with people who have rejected the realist approach. A virus does not recognize compromise, only an opportunity to grow. From a viral perspective, that is what Wheeler provided with his various appeasements. Not that they would thank him. A woke group assaulted him in a Portland restaurant on January 6, 2021.

In this section I outlined a psychological mechanism explaining the extreme attention to detail exhibited by woke in making their presentations. I also reviewed part of a massive social upheaval that is only made possible through a substantial time and financial commitment by woke. Those woke who participate in riots are also risking their physical well-being. It is clear from this account that wokism involves the appropriation of considerable personal resources.

Condition Four: Emotional Valence

Wokism is a morality play involving an epic and enduring struggle between the forces of good and evil. In this respect, it resembles a fundamentalist form of religion. As Eric Hoffer (1966/1951) noted following World War II, "A mass movement can get along without a god but

not without a devil. An abstract devil won't do, it must be tangible. This is why Christians must demonize and dehumanize opponents.”

In *True Believers*, Hoffer (1966/1951) described a subset of people in each religion or ideology who cannot accept the idea that others, with very different beliefs, could have an equal claim to goodness. Minions of the devil in wokism are given names such as “alt-righters,” “racists” and “gender traitors.” But few people actually advocate white supremacy, support racism, or see themselves as traitors to their own genders. Wokists try to resolve the resultant cognitive dissonance by declaring statistical evidence itself to be a product of racism and by resorting to what Nathanson and Young (2006) called “linguistic inflation.” We have already discussed how calling on people to buy Remembrance Day poppies was seen as the hate crime of “racism.” The linguistically inflated hate crime of being a gender traitor was illustrated with an article by a transwoman posted on the “open” humanist discussion group previously mentioned. The article describes J.K. Rowling’s view that sharing safe spaces between women and transwomen is threatening for women as “overblown.” The author conceded, however, that some predatory men could potentially use their access (as transwomen) to gain access. She recommended that trans and feminist communities should negotiate a solution. A fellow moderator deleted the article on the grounds of “hate speech.” If suggesting even negotiation makes one a “gender traitor,” then any deviation at all from woke dogma is tantamount to complicity in evil. This cynical mentality creates a problem for woke people, because conventional wisdom necessarily changes over time. With no central organization to define or authorize such change, woke people protect themselves from internal criticism by being hyper-alert and over reactive.

Compassion and social interest are likely the initial factors by which the woke memplex attaches itself to the selves of most woke people. But the driving force behind their activism flows from a *moral panic*—which relies on the assertion that evil people, who must be stopped, are bent on oppressing others. A similar moral panic emerged in 1966 as the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

China's policies had produced economic failure and widespread famine. A cadre around Chairman Mao Zedong concluded this was the fault of "bourgeois elements" in industry, in government circles and even in the Communist Party. Believers conceded that many of these people were unconscious of their revisionism. Mao organized idealistic students, his "Red Guards," to save the revolution. They began by revolting against their respective schools and cancelling classes. When huge demonstrations failed to produce the desired change, they began rooting out the evil, identifying members of the "bourgeoisie" by their lifestyle, use of language, family backgrounds, and how well they applied Chairman Mao's "little red book" of quotations. The Red Guards publically humiliated offenders, who typically lost their jobs. Mob violence was common and killed many people. Academics and intellectuals ended up in remote "re-education camps." Vandals destroyed books, statues, monasteries, museums and anything associated with "old culture."

Moral panics in the United States and Canada show some affinity with wokism. Even though almost everyone agreed in the 1920s that drunkenness was a problem, the Prohibition movement claimed that even a little alcohol was evil. Despite good intentions, Prohibition was a windfall for criminal gangs. And with the authorities confiscating alcohol, it became logical to quickly drink all one had resulting in an upsurge in binge drinking.

Fear of communism drove the McCarthyism of the 1950s. Associates, friends and relatives reported on each other to the House Un-American Activities Committee, which made sure that suspected communists were publicly humiliated and lost their jobs and that those who refused to cooperate spent time in jail. The Satanic abuse and sexual abuse scares of the 1990s, aided by the dubious science of Repressed Memory Syndrome, resulted in lost jobs, broken families and many innocents in prison. These North American moral panics intended to change culture in some ways, but they did not require a *diminution of selves* and thus would not satisfy the definition of a mind-virus used here.

Discussion

Wokism meets the four criteria used for identifying a mind virus. Because those criteria include the diminution of the self, it should not be surprising that wokism is heavily deterministic. By controlling the outer world of the cultural environment, it seeks to control the inner world of thought. As classical behaviourists in psychotherapy discovered, behaviourism works. Psychologist Susan Blackmore (1999) described humans as “meme machines” with illusions of free will. But she is only partially correct. Ordinarily, we modern humans follow patterns that our parents, teachers, religious leaders or other significant others mandated. Or we perform some behaviours habitually. Nonetheless, we have the capacity to *re-program* ourselves by focusing our attention, examining evidence, selecting alternatives, predicting results, and changing our behaviours (Robertson, 2017a). This is hard work and time consuming. Wokism seeks to become our significant other, replacing the role of such people as parents, teachers and religious leaders in generating our behavioural programming, while limiting our capacity for self-programming. That a mishmash involving the partial application of often competing

philosophies could accomplish this in a largely educated population invites discussion as to its origin.

We can speculate about how a group of old Stalinist academics, sufficiently traumatized by the collapse of the Soviet Union to ignore the postmodernist attack on Marxism as a grand meta-narrative, began experimenting with pieces of various philosophies. Shaped by the reactions of their students, these professors hit on a combination that, though not philosophically consistent, was highly emotive: implanting a feeling of superior knowledge and urgency in their charges along with built-in “attack memes” that prevented them from easily assimilating non-sanctioned points of view. From the perspective of a mind-virus, people become vectors for the purpose of infecting new hosts (Bjarneskans, Gronnevik, & Sandberg, 1997). I doubt that many of the woke have actually read Jacques Derrida let alone Marx, Heidegger, Hegel or the other white males that grandfathered their worldview. Irrespective of its actual origins, this mind-virus has demonstrated a capacity to mutate that defies placement on the political spectrum.

A virus has no ideological loyalty. New mutations can rapidly overtake older ones. While initial varieties of wokism were anti-capitalist, the corporate media and transnational high tech companies (including some of the world’s richest people) have adopted a new strain. Whereas the Left has traditionally challenged the concentration of corporate power, particularly with respect to corporations controlling news, the woke have embraced the rights of private companies to censor viewpoints. We have to consider, therefore, how wokism serves monopoly capitalism. Globalization has lowered the real wages of working class people and reduced the job prospects of anyone with a high school education or less in the United States and Canada. The jobs that these people once held have been largely outsourced to low-wage economies. If the working class is racially divided, which is guaranteed by identity politics, then it cannot be

effectively organized by unions or political parties as a class. Wokism provides the capitalists who benefit most from globalization with opportunities to signal their own virtue while cementing in place the very system that created their huge profits in the first place.

Inoculation against a mind-virus is possible through self-education. We need to recognize the code words that woke people use and the contradictions that are inherent in their assertions. This virus normally begins by appealing to our social conscience. If we happen to be members of an identified minority, it appeals to our group loyalty. If that does not work, then the woke typically lash out, as I have shown. We need to recognize the pattern. I recommend a sense of humour to maintain perspective. I do not recommend apologies, because wokists see these as admissions of moral deficiency, and these “admissions” can be used to manipulate others. Instead, we should focus on the deficiencies in wokism and on objectively verifiable facts. Remember that the world has become a much better place in the last 50 years. Poverty, disease, infant mortality, racism, sexism and the murder rate have all declined worldwide. We need to celebrate these advances and protect science and reason that have made them possible. Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020a) said:

We do not believe that bad ideas can be defeated by being repressed, especially when they are as socially powerful as postmodern ideas are right now. Instead, they need to be engaged and defeated within the marketplace of ideas, so that they may die a natural death and be rightly recognized as defunct. (p. 264)

To defeat a mind-virus we must first re-assert the Enlightenment ideal that human beings, through the use of evidence-based processes, can indeed begin to discern objective reality and truth. I hope that I have contributed to this process with this paper.

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