

# Anti-Intellectualism in New Atheism and the Skeptical Movement

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## 1 Abstract

Anti-intellectualism involves general mistrust of scholars, academics, and experts, often as pretentious or power-motivated. While scholars have described currents of anti-intellectualism in American public life [41], evangelical Christianity [61], in responses to COVID [57], and rural identity [55], to my knowledge none have looked at how anti-intellectualism specifically manifests in the New Atheism movement. In this work, we explore the way anti-intellectualism is commonly found and expressed in New Atheism.

## 2 Introduction

Anti-intellectualism is often defined as a view that “intellectuals . . . are pretentious, conceited and snobbish; and very likely immoral, dangerous, and subversive . . . The plain sense of the common man is an altogether adequate substitute for, if not actually much superior to, formal knowledge and expertise [41].” The kind of anti-intellectualism found in New Atheism differs from that often found in public life or evangelical Christianity in that it is not distrustful of scientific consensus or experts, but has an aversion to other fields of study outside of a logical positivist view, including philosophy, theology, the humanities, and the social sciences. The irony is that despite claiming trust in academic research and scholarly consensus, there are many cases where New Atheists are hostile to results supported by such consensus, such as empirical support to the benefits of religion. Doubly ironic is that the source of (at least part) their anti-intellectualism owes itself to Protestant influence and anti-clericalism more generally. In what follows, I will explore the historical context and specifics of anti-intellectualism in New Atheism.

My argument is that New Atheist anti-intellectualism borrows heavily from the tradition of Protestant anti-clericalism. Protestant anti-clericalism led to a skepticism of Catholic doctrines and institutions. Common to New Atheists and Protestants (especially American Protestants) is a faith in the common man’s

“common sense,” leading to a distrust of the necessity of institutions or religious authority.

## 3 New Atheism

### 3.1 What is New Atheism?

New Atheism, a term first used in 2006 by Gary Wolf [81], is a social movement consisting of atheists who believe religion should not only be tolerated, but challenged and criticized, and ridiculed [28]. The “four horsemen” as they were called in a roundtable video and subsequent book [40] include Richard Dawkins [18], Christopher Hitchens [39], Daniel Dennett [20], and Sam Harris [34]. Other popular figures associated with the “New Atheism” movement are Ayaan Hirsi Ali [48] (at least until her 2023 conversion to Christianity [1]), Jerry Conye [14], Victor Stenger [73], Lawrence Krauss, and Richard Carrier. Many of the popular writers for New Atheism are either American (Dennett and Harris) or British (Hitchens and Dawkins).

The “New” part of New Atheism is not any new specific argument, but rather a general contemptuous tone and aggressive stance against religion, in part motivated by the political influence of the Christian right and terror attacks committed by Islamic fundamentalists [28, 47]. Indeed many argue New Atheism is in part a reaction to the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, explaining its emergence and popular support in the mid 2000s [22, 38]<sup>1</sup>. Regardless, many of the philosophical ideas in the movement can be traced back to skepticism and humanism from earlier times, in particular the work of David Hume [43] and Voltaire [78]. For example, Dawkins’ “Main Argument” against the existence of God in [18] was made by Bertrand Russell in 1929 [69]. As we will see in Section 5, their goal and tactics are political in nature, not academic, in part explaining their distinctive (and often militant) tone.

### 3.2 New Atheism, Scientific Skepticism, and the CSICOP

New Atheism owes much of its history to the scientific skepticism movement, in particular its call for the application of reason and scientific methodology to all claims [51]. The scientific skepticism movement is often associated with a desire to “debunk” or “expose” false claims, including claims of ghosts, UFOs, angels, etc [8]. As we will see later, a common belief among skeptics is that pseudoscientific beliefs can be dangerous, involving fraud, personal harm, and even death. Part of the rhetoric of the scientific skepticism movement is framed as helping people overcome harmful “delusions” and adjust their thinking more in line with scientific methodology.

According to philosopher Jules Evans (and Kurtz himself [77]), the modern scientific skepticism movement “arguably first appeared in 1976, when the

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<sup>1</sup>Harris claims he began writing *The End of Faith* the day after 9/11 [7]

philosopher Paul Kurtz proposed the establishment of a Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) at the American Humanist Association annual convention [23, 52].” Now known as the Center for Inquiry (CFI), the CSICOP was founded by Marcello Truzzi, Paul Kurtz, magicians James Randi and Martin Gardner, and astrophysicist and science communicator Carl Sagan. It was chaired by Truzzi and Kurtz. The link between scientific skepticism, atheism, and humanism is not coincidental - the CFI has a division called “Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science,” and Dawkins was presented with their highest award, “The In Praise of Reason Award,” in 1992 [15]. Furthermore, Paul Kurtz is considered largely responsible for the secularization of humanism [9].

### 3.3 Pseudoskepticism

One concern voiced by some within the scientific skepticism movement is the presence of “pseudoskepticism.” Pseudoskepticism is a term Marcello Truzzi coined to refer to dogmatism masquerading as skeptical inquiry [75]. Drawing upon Quine and Ullian [66], Truzzi’s idea of true skepticism is closer to unbelief and ignorance than disbelief, whereas pseudoskepticism often involves a strong belief in a negative claim. Truzzi explains “if a critic asserts that there is evidence for disproof...he is making a claim and therefore also has to bear a burden of proof [75].” CSICOP fellow and former parapsychologist Susan Blackmore wrote:

There are some members of the skeptics’ groups who clearly believe they know the right answer prior to inquiry. They appear not to be interested in weighing alternatives, investigating strange claims, or trying out psychic experiences or altered states for themselves (heaven forbid!), but only in *promoting their own particular belief structure and cohesion* [12].

“Former” skeptic Stephen Bond claims pseudoskeptics often adopt the label of skeptic to feel smarter than others:

Look past the crocodile tears on any online debunking forum, and you’ll quickly find that the majority of visitors are not drawn there by concern for the victims of irrationality, but by contempt. They’re there to laugh at idiots [5].

Note the use of contempt in place of reasoned argumentation, which New Atheism adopts (see Section 4.5). Truzzi eventually resigned from the CSICOP, citing the presence of pseudoskepticism as his reason for leaving [79]. In a later published correspondence between CSICOP cofounders Truzzi and Gardner, Truzzi criticized the CSICOP for acting like “more like lawyers,” dismissing claims without giving them a fair hearing [80]. Consider the “creative differences” between Truzzi and Gardner’s vision for the CSICOP’s associated journal *Zetetic*: Truzzi explains his view as follows,

I contend that if a hearing is granted, it should be a fair and open-minded hearing based on consideration of the arguments and evidence. And if the arguments and evidence have some merits, even if they are inadequate to bear the burden of proof, we should be willing to admit such merits while still failing to accept (rather than necessarily denying) the claim [75].

Gardner, on the other hand:

I see the The Zetetic as designed to combat the current wave of crap, not to analyze it...designed as a nonscholarly, nonacademic, bad tempered magazine – calling the fool a fool and the quack a quack. I would like to see it perpetually skirting libel laws . . . gloves off, no holds barred, and gobs of purple rhetoric [67].

After Truzzi left the CSICOP, he established his own journal called The Zetetic Scholar, while Gardner remained; CSICOP’s magazine Zetetic was renamed to The Skeptical Inquirer.

### 3.4 Criticism by Fellow Atheists

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the most vocal critics of New Atheism are atheists themselves, many of whom scholars and public intellectuals. These scholars often prefer to distance themselves from the “New Atheism” label. These include noted philosopher of science Michael Ruse, who said Dawkins’ work made him “Ashamed to be an atheist” [68]. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt claims “The new atheists conduct biased reviews of the literature and conclude that there is no good evidence on any benefits except the health benefits of religion [32].”

Paul Kurtz believed militant atheists were “mistaken” in their approach [53, 63], especially around religion. Kurtz criticized CFI for sponsoring Blasphemy Day, claiming “they ridiculed religion and did not appeal to rational arguments...I never intended for the organization to mock religion [77],” eventually leading to *his* resignation from the CFI (in his words, “voluntarily, but under great duress”). In a case of supreme irony, Kurtz claimed four of his articles, including his letter of resignation from the CFI, were censored from the Council for Secular Humanism’s and CFI’s magazine “Free Inquiry.” Kurtz accused them of being “similar to thought police,” and given their name, commented, “what a contradiction [77].” Kurtz was editor-in-chief of Free Inquiry (and founder of The Council for Secular Humanism) since its inception in 1980 until his resignation in 2010 [77].

## 4 Anti-Intellectualism

### 4.1 American Anti-Intellectualism

Richard Hofstadter helped popularize the discussion around American Anti-Intellectualism in his 1963 book “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life” [41]. According to Hofstadter, America’s distrust of intellect comes from three different areas: religion, commerce, and democracy. When it comes to religion, Hofstadter claims American Protestantism valued emotion over theology, with theology often seen as too Catholic or Anglican<sup>2</sup>. For commerce, Hofstadter claims Americans often favored practical experience to theoretical analysis. For democracy, Hofstadter claims the democratization of knowledge led to an education focused on teaching the less able instead of developing the most brilliant. The common denominator is a focus on common sense and practical experience over theoretical and intellectual analysis.

Of course, as Noll [61] points out, many America’s elite institutions, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, were founded by Protestant educators and ministers. According to Noll, the formation of these schools, along with the intellectual life of early America, follows what May [56] called the didactic enlightenment, a tradition drawing mostly from Scotland emphasizing common sense [29]. According to Fiering [24], the Scottish enlightenment “was uniquely suited to the needs of an era still strongly committed to traditional religious values and yet searching for alternative modes of justification for those values.”

This was done by arguing “that all humans possessed, by nature, a common set of capacities — both epistemological and ethical — through which they could grasp the basic realities of nature and morality [61].” It should be no surprise that Americans resonated with this movement, as (at the time) they had recently shed themselves from the authority of Great Britain. The principles of the diadic enlightenment allowed Americans to justify their break with Great Britain and maintain Christianity in a culture seeking to deny absolute sovereignty to any worldly power [56, 61]. Indeed Thomas Paine’s influential pamphlet “Common Sense” made a parallel between American independence and Protestant belief, illustrating the possibility of a new American identity [64, 21]. The main point is America’s skepticism of authority and institutions, placing its trust in instead in common sense: indeed the Declaration of Independence includes references to “self-evident truths.”

### 4.2 British Anti-Intellectualism

Discussion of British anti-intellectualism goes back even further than discussion of American anti-intellectualism. A 1952 article by Houghton [42] explains

The practical nature of the English mind, its deep respect for facts  
pragmatic skill in the adaptation of means to ends, its ready apt to

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<sup>2</sup>Recall the American settlers and their Puritan background, often seeing the English Reformation as still “too Catholic”

common sense-and therefore, negatively, its suspicion of abstraction and imaginative speculation-have always been characteristic of the nation.

Similarly, Collini [11] makes a case that British culture contains a mix of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, and that some of the greatest thinkers from the country include people like George Orwell, who are attracted ideas and argumentation while remaining suspicious of abstract thought divorced from the empirical. Furthermore, Nind [60] remarks “there has long existed in Britain a streak of anti- intellectualism which has affected every aspect of our national life,” making a similar link as Hofstadter [41], Noll [61] between the industrial revolution and a more pragmatic philosophy. Finally, Johnson [46] argues disastrous policies and philosophies were the result of intellectuals, warning laymen to not trust them

Beware intellectuals. Not merely should they be kept well away from the levers of power, they should also be objects of suspicion when they seek to offer collective advice.

### **4.3 The Commonalities between British and American Anti-Intellectualism**

Both Great Britain and subsequently America were heavily influenced by the Protestant reformation and its skepticism towards Catholic authority, thought, and institutions. New Atheism takes a similar skepticism applies it to Protestant institutions, beliefs and scripture. Consider the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura: if all humans posses a moral and epistemic capacity to interpret scripture, then there is no need for Catholic authority or theology for salvation. For New Atheists, if all humans posses a moral and epistemic capacity, then there is no need for organized religion to teach people what is true or good - it is similarly “self-evident.”

### **4.4 Common Sense and New Atheism**

Faith in the common sense of the common man and a distrust in political and religious authority often leads to a view of intellectuals as “eggheads.” After all, if common sense is enough, then what need is there for complicated theory or fancy institutions? What is worth noting here is the ways New Atheism often draws from this tradition of common sense to make their arguments. This is particularly the case for arguments involving morality, as a common argument against Atheism claims it leads to immorality [26], a view even shared by some Atheists themselves [27]. To make their case for a form of morality outside of traditional religious communities, New Atheism rests their argument on an assumed correctness of moral intuitions.

In the Moral Landscape, Harris writes, “While moral realism and consequentialism have both come under pressure in philosophical circles, they have the virtue of corresponding to many of our intuitions about how the world

works [36].” He continues, “I am convinced that every appearance of terms like “metaethics,” “deontology,” “noncognitivism,” “anti-realism,” “emotivism,” and the like, directly increases the amount of boredom in the universe [35].” Here, Harris dismisses the literature which contains challenges and alternatives to the view he proposes in *The Moral Landscape* not by a reasoned critique or response, but by claiming the concepts in question are “boring.” In both cases, we see the “virtue” of intuitions or common sense over a deep engagement with experts or written literature.

Finally Harris remarks, “Consequentialism has undergone many refinements from the original utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. My discussion will ignore most of these developments, *as they are generally of interest only to academic philosophers* [36],” emphasis mine. While a restricted scope is understandable given his stated goal of bringing these discussions to a wider audience, there is an implicit assumption in his comment that such developments would not significantly challenge his position to be worth mentioning or addressing. My point here is not to make any normative judgements on Harris’s lack of engagement, rather it is to point out the reliance on intuition over scholarship that forms part of Hofstadter’s identification of Anti-Intellectualism.

#### 4.5 The Rhetoric of Dismissal

The exaltation of common sense found in New Atheism manifests in a hostility to fields of study outside the empirical sciences. However distinctive to New Atheism is its rhetoric of contempt, which [28] describes as “sarcasm...devaluing and ridiculing”. Implicit in such arguments is an appeal to common sense to reveal how “ridiculous” such intellectual activity is. Likely mocking theology, Richard Dawkins wrote, “Oh dear, I lack a basic understanding of fairies, leprechauns, hobgoblins, elves, little people, pixies and invisible unicorns. Educate me[16]!” and “You can’t deny leprechauns until you’ve immersed yourself in the PRACTICE of leprechology[17].” Dawkins’ tweets display a confidence of the superiority of common sense over careful study. Finally, consider Daniel Dennett when he writes “suppose I return service rudely as follows: ‘What you say implies that God is a ham sandwich wrapped in tin foil. That’s not much of a God to worship!’ [19].” The implication in each case is that any claims about God and religion do not need to be taken seriously, and are clearly ridiculous to anyone who possesses common sense.

Some of this rhetoric is likely influenced by rhetoric from the scientific skepticism movement described in Section 3.2. Consider the parallels between Martin Gardner’s writing:

The creationist and the astrologer, from my perspective, should be laughed at, and hit over the head with bladders and abusive rhetoric—not treated the way one school of linguistics treats a rival school. Believers are never unconverted by rational argument. They are affected by ridicule, especially if they are young [67].

And Richard Dawkins:

I lately started to think that we need to go further: go beyond humorous ridicule, sharpen our barbs to a point where they really hurt. Michael Shermer, Michael Ruse, Eugenie Scott and others are probably right that contemptuous ridicule is not an expedient way to change the minds of those who are deeply religious. But I think we should probably abandon the irremediably religious precisely because that is what they are – irremediable. I am more interested in the fence-sitters who haven’t really considered the question very long or very carefully. And I think that they are likely to be swayed by a display of naked contempt. Nobody likes to be laughed at. Nobody wants to be the butt of contempt [10].

In either case, their goal is more *political* than anything else: rather than engage with the literature fairly, they wish to influence politics. And this goal is often explicit: for instance the “About Us” page for CFI’s Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science states their two “missions [are] 1) Teaching the value of science, and 2) Advancing secularism [49].” And they are likely correct on at least one point: such sophistry is probably more effective at mobilizing political and social action than a nuanced or fair hearing (see Section 5).

## 4.6 An Aversion to Philosophy

One popular target among New Atheists is philosophy, in particular philosophy of religion. Peter Boghossian, author of the 2014 book *A Manual for Creating Atheists* [3], tweeted “Being published in the philosophy of religion should disqualify one from sitting at the adult table [4].” Biologist Jerry Coyne wrote “that the bulk of work in [Philosophy of Religion] (indeed, nearly all of it) is worthless...It’s like a field called the philosophy of fairies [13].” One atheist, John Loftus, wrote an entire book calling for an “end” to philosophy of religion [54].

In many cases these critiques extend to philosophy as a whole. As “former” skeptic Stephen Bond wrote, “skeptics have no time for philosophy; many skeptics hate and fear it. It’s the skeptic Kryptonite [5].” Common complaints New Atheists levy against philosophy is that it is useless and does not progress. In his book “*The Grand Design*,” Stephen Hawking wrote “[P]hilosophy is dead....Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge [37]”. Popular science communicator Neil DeGrasse Tyson<sup>3</sup> once said (to the chagrin of philosopher Massimo Pigliucci), “You can’t even cross the street because you are distracted by what you are sure are deep questions you’ve asked yourself. I don’t have the time for that. [65]” Theoretical physicist and cosmologist Lawrence Krauss wrote, “philosophy used to be a field that had content” and

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<sup>3</sup>While DeGrasse Tyson identifies as an agnostic and is not technically a New Atheist, he is popular among skeptics as he hosted the reboot of the TV Show *Cosmos*, the original of which was hosted by Carl Sagan.



[It] reminds me of that old Woody Allen joke, “those that can’t do, teach, and those that can’t teach, teach gym.” ..[I]t’s really hard to understand what justifies it. And so I’d say that this tension occurs because people in philosophy feel threatened—and they have every right to feel threatened, because science progresses and philosophy doesn’t [2].

In the context of common-sense pragmatism and capitalism, philosophy is a purely mental activity that does always not produce “things,” that have quantifiable value the way scientific experiments can. To many within New Atheism, this implies it has little to no value and cannot (or does not) “progress” in the same way <sup>4</sup>. Note the emphasis on time and efficiency – philosophy is designated as “worthless” or a “waste of time,” as if each field of study needs to demonstrate its utility by some external quantifiable metric to be worthwhile or true. Here we see an anti-intellectual devaluing of the life of the mind; regardless of whether philosophy has any value in sharpening the mind or exploring deep questions, it is dismissed on the grounds of utility as “wasteful” and “useless”<sup>5</sup>.

#### 4.7 Science, The Exception?

Of course, if New Atheists were so hostile to scholarship, what explains their appreciation and advocacy for Darwinian evolution, or science more generally? Unfortunately for the New Atheists discussed Section 4.6, the answer has more to do philosophy than it does science.<sup>6</sup> And many New Atheists and those who identify as scientific skeptics adopt the *philosophical* position of metaphysical naturalism.

Much more to say here about the link between logical positivism and naturalism

### 5 Political Myth and Ressentiment

Henry Tudor defines a political myth as an ideological narrative shared within a social group, often involving heroes and villains [76]. Here the word “myth” is not meant to be pejorative, nor is the myth in question necessarily untrue; rather it is believed by the group in question, mobilizing their action [25, 45]. Geroges Sorel explains that political myths “are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act...identical with the conviction of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement [70].”

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<sup>4</sup>Though I am not a philosopher, I do believe philosophy does progress

<sup>5</sup>It is worth noting that any such metaphilosophical discussion is itself philosophy. As a result, any disparagement of philosophy means the person in question is doing philosophy, often poorly.

<sup>6</sup>Note that any claims about the ontological significance of scientific results are philosophical claims. Arguably philosophy may be the only field which can make such study or evaluate meta-methodological or demarcation arguments, including its own [58].

## 5.1 The Role of Ressentiment

Political myths often involve what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*. Related to the English word *ressentiment*, *ressentiment* is a French word describing a narrative grounded in a sense of injury [59]. A group mobilized by *ressentiment* believes they have been (or are currently being) wronged, and it is this sense of injustice that gives moral energy to the group's cause and action. Sociologist James Davison Hunter explains, "Over time, the perceived injustice becomes central to the person's and the group's identity...Accounts of atrocity become a crucial subplot of the narrative, evidence that reinforces the sense that they have been or will be wronged or victimized [45]." Of course, these narratives need not be true (or completely true) - they serve a different purpose than being a direct, honest reporting of the facts. Often an untrue (but passionate) narrative will be more effective at mobilizing action than an accurate (and nuanced) account [44]. Similarly, as Jonathan Haidt remarks, research into moral psychology suggests "morality binds and *blinds* [33]."

## 5.2 Political Mythos and Ressentiment in New Atheism

The political mythos characterizing New Atheism involves a sense of injustice caused by religious belief and organized religion in particular. As philosopher Charles Taylor argued in [74], perhaps much of this criticism originated from the Protestant reformation, extending into 18th century Deistic critiques of Catholicism. The anticlericalism found among many reformers at the time, such as Luther, led to a skepticism and distrust of church institutions and authority. However, just as Luther and protestant reformers rejected Catholic authority in favor of an individual's personal reading of scripture, 18th century Deists and freethinkers took this criticism further and rejected the divine inspiration of scripture altogether. What we see here is a winnowing rejection of authority, starting with the Protestant reformation (which rejected the authority of the Catholic church), to 18th century providential Deism (which rejected the divine inspiration of the Bible and God's action in the world), to modern atheism (which rejects the existence of God altogether) [74].

These rejections are often within a political myth, framed within a narrative offering a hero to root for and a villain to boo. For instance, a narrative sometimes shared by Protestants, Deists, and modern-day atheists is a narrative that Galileo was a hero, imprisoned (According to Voltaire) to "groan . . . away his days in the prisons of the Inquisition [62]" for bravely challenging the oppressive "dead hand of the Catholic church [30]." Here, *ressentiment* against the Catholic church fuels this narrative more than an attempt to be fair and accurate [72]. This *ressentiment* against organized religion in general can be found among the work of the aforementioned "Four Horsemen:" consider Hitchens' book (or just the title) "God is not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything [39]."

### 5.3 The Irony of New Atheist Anti-Intellectualism

The theory of Ressentiment helps explain why, despite their talk about the importance of trusting scholarly consensus, New Atheists are often resistant to embrace it when it provides disconfirming evidence to their political myths. For example, despite research suggesting religious belief is actually helpful for individuals and society, and religious believers are give more to charities (including secular charities)<sup>7</sup> [71, 6], Dennett claims “Perhaps a survey would show that as a group atheists and agnostics are more respectful of the law, more sensitive to the needs of others, or more ethical than religious people. *Certainly no reliable survey has yet been done that shows otherwise* [20].”

Dennett’s ignorance or dismissal of the relevant literature is surprising only if we assume he is just trying to accurately portray scholarly consensus on the matter; as transmitting a political myth, it is not surprising at all. As Hunter remarks “The injury or threat thereof is so central to the identity and dynamics of the group that to give it up is to give up a critical part of whom they understand themselves to be. Thus, instead of letting go, the sense of injury continues to get deeper [45].” Similarly, as Sorel mentioned in 1908, political myths “cannot be refuted . . . since [they are] identical with the conviction of a group [70].”

Of course, it is worth mentioning that anti-intellectualism of this kind, namely motivated resistance to disconfirming evidence [50] along with a “selective...[re]telling of history [45]” is not exclusive to New Atheism. Indeed, it can be found among virtually all social groups, religion certainly included<sup>8</sup>. However what this does suggest is that New Atheists are not motivated solely by a desire to align themselves (or the world) with scholarly consensus on all matters. The cherry picking of specific results or fields of academic study to agree with while dismissing others suggests the aforementioned social pressures are at play.

### 5.4 Overlapping Myths

1. Myth of the practicality of the common man from protestantism
2. The myth of the evils of organized religion from the enlightenment, the french Enlightenment in particular?

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<sup>7</sup>A point made by Jonathan Haidt in [31, 33]

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