

When Leaders Go Mad with Christopher Ferguson (S2 Ep1)

SPEAKERS

Christopher Ferguson, Coleman Hughes (CH)

CH 00:30

Welcome to another episode of conversations with Coleman and welcome to the first episode of The New Year. First things first, I want to thank all of you for the enormous support you gave me in 2020. Because of your support, I'll be able to ramp up both the quality and quantity of my output in 2021. Two notes before I introduce today's guest. Many of you have been asking me about the status of my attempted conversation with Ibram X. Kendi, especially those of you who donated to charity to make that happen. There have been very interesting developments on that front. But I think I'll put them all in a solo episode, which I'll release very soon. And secondly, I should say something about the absolute dumpster fire that is American politics right now. The first thing to do is to blame the people directly responsible without caveat, and without immediately changing the subject. In this case, I'm talking about the President of the United States, claiming that he won an election he did not, in fact win., pressuring officials to find missing votes that don't exist, persuading millions of people who hang on his every word to behave as if an American election was just stolen. And saying, "we love you, you're very special", to people who perpetrated an act of domestic terrorism on his behalf. Irresponsible does not even begin to describe this behaviour. Impeachable gets much closer. During the presidential debates, I tweeted that Trump's failure to give a simple 'yes' to the question, "Will you concede if you lose", should have been disqualifying. This is why I said that. Now once you've blamed the people directly responsible, it makes sense to move on to the narrative surrounding the event. So let's start with race and policing. As the news of domestic terrorism storming the Capitol broke, I saw people on Twitter saying if these protesters were black, the police would have killed them. Alongside videos of cops being suspiciously lenient with these hooligans. There's no doubt some truth to this. If a group of black rioters stormed the Capitol, I can't imagine seeing videos of lenient cops. This point is not as profound as it might seem. First off, the knowledge that a white Trump supporting woman was killed should take some of the steam out of this point, in addition to the fact that the cops use tear gas and pepper spray on these people. But still, there are the videos of the lenient cops and we have to wonder why those exist? What accounts for their lenience? If it's only race, then how do you account for the cops' treatment of all white Antifa rioters? I think there are clearly two other variables that account for their lenience. One could be political sympathy. The knowledge that these rioters are generally pro-cop may have led the police to have more sympathy than they otherwise would. And then there's a freak show element. When you see a guy with horns and chest paint, it doesn't exactly inspire fear. It inspires laughter and cringe. None of this is to deny that racial bias is a real thing, or to justify the leniency into the cops. It's only to apply some common sense to the racism reflex that pervades social media. The final thing I want to touch on before I introduce my guest today is Twitter banning Trump. Let me start by saying that nothing here should be construed as a defence of Trump himself. Trump should be impeached and removed immediately. Even at this late stage, it's worth it to remove him, both so that he can't run again

and to set the precedent that a president can't try to steal an election with no consequences. But removing him from Twitter is a mistake. I have no problem with removing a sitting president from Twitter, if he actually violates the terms of service, but he didn't violate the relevant policy on glorifying violence. And the twisted logic that Twitter use to explain how his tweets violated the policy was laughable. And not to mention a scary exercise in censorship. And yes, they have every right to do it as a private company and you have every right as a consumer to choose a different company like Parler. So long as you can stomach its reputation for being a hotbed of conspiracy theory, white supremacy and QAnon. Except, of course, that you can't download parler either because they've been removed from the App Store. You don't need to be a Trump supporter to see that this is not the free market, operating as it should. This is monopoly 101. Personally, I'm happy to see Trump off Twitter. And I'll be even happier when he leaves office. But we should be very wary of the precedent we set by applauding Twitter for banning someone who didn't actually violate a policy. You either trust the discretion of the people who run Twitter, which you shouldn't, or you want to have a policy that's enforced even handedly. So that's my two cents.

On to today's guest. Christopher J. Ferguson is an American psychologist who serves as a professor and co-chair of psychology at Stetson University in Florida. He previously served as an associate professor of psychology and criminal justice at Texas A&M National University. In 2014, he was named a fellow of the APA. Christopher and I talked about the definition of mental illness, prescribing Adderall to children, link between creativity and mental illness, how mental illness affected historical figures like Alexander the Great, Hitler, and Stalin. And finally, I asked Christopher to assess the mental state of both Donald Trump and Joe Biden. So without further ado, Christopher Ferguson.

Okay, Christopher Ferguson, thank you so much for coming on the show.

Christopher Ferguson 06:43

Well, thanks for having me on today. It's a real honour.

CH 06:45

So you've just written a book about madness and insanity as it pertains to political leaders. And that's going to be the focus of most of our conversation today. You've also written and intervened in the public debate about video games and their alleged link to violence, and I want to touch on that, as well. But we're speaking the day after a mob of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol, egged on by Trump's claims that the election was stolen over the past two months. So the question of madness and insanity as it pertains to political leaders, I think is especially pressing right now. And we'll get to the impolite questions about Trump's mental state at some point in this podcast, I don't want to lead with that. I'd like to sort of set the groundwork of your book first. But before we do that, can you talk a little bit about your own background, where you're from and how you came to be interested in the question of madness as it pertains to political leaders?

Christopher Ferguson 07:58

Yeah, absolutely. So I'm a clinical psychologist and psychology professor at Stetson University. And I think, you know, like a lot of people to get involved in psychology, I really was interested in kind of the salacious stories of like, serial murder and mass homicide, and, you know, all of that kind of stuff. And my dissertation work was initially working with inmates in a jail, for instance, and looking at mental health issues related to violence, and that sort of stuff. And the whole thing about the video games that I got involved with was really kind of a diversion off of that. And it kind of stemmed from this whole debate about video games and mass shootings, and sort of the things that can lead people into doing horrible, you know, horrible things, but, but it's always been this kind of like, weird, parallel path, you know, if I was one of these, if I could live my life over again, what would I do? You know, instead of being an academic, I would be another academic, you know, which would be like a historian. So I've always been kind of interested in this idea of how psychology and history interact with each other. And, you know, there's kind of been this idea that's been around in a lot of books recently that it kind of were trade history is being mostly at the mercy of things like, plagues in geography and yeah, sort of circumstance, if you will, and took people out of it, to a large degree. It is kind of this idea that the great person arguments is wrong somehow. And certainly, there's obviously we're living through a plague right now, you know, a pandemic, certainly we would understand these things are important. But I think there's a lot of historical and psychological evidence to suggest that people do matter, that you know, an individual can step into a crisis point. You know, societies do have crisis points and individual leaders can matter. And if we're lucky, we have someone who is the right person, you know, has the cognitive and personality talents to lead us through a crisis point. But it's also interesting to consider what happens if we get somebody different. You know, if we get someone who is psychologically or cognitively impaired in such a way that they lead us into a more negative path to disaster, calamity, whatever we want to call it. And so the book is really a lot more about that side, you know, which kind of probably reflects my own interest, my own nature to some extent, you know, I really kind of wanted to write a book that would be fun to read, you know, particularly for a history book, a lot of history books are not really fun, I really wanted to write one that people would want to read. And I tend to be kind of drawn to the sort of salacious stories myself. So it's a lot about just how these individual stepped into history, and to a large degree made things worse, or the people that were in their nation, in the culture, and so on, and so forth. But there's a lot of talk about psychology itself, it's up so high, you know, how people make decisions, how we understand mental illness, and I tried to throw a few things in there to kind of talk about, you know, when we are these crises, points, what can we do to try to make things better and how can we learn from history so as to not repeat these kind of mistakes that we've seen in the past.

CH 11:03

Yeah, so I said, I wouldn't talk about Trump at the beginning. But it's too much on my mind, given what you just said. So he said a lot of interesting things. One was about the great man theory of history. And this is something I've heard talked about in the past as a way of accounting for causation in history, why events happen, that places a great deal of weight on the decisions of individuals, usually men. And that way of thinking about history, I think, has fallen out of fashion. But like most sort of academic paradigms, the truth is probably that it's important, but it's not everything. And it's hard to dismiss its importance. If you look at the past two months of America, where had one man, I think, you know, Donald Trump, in this case, chosen not to stoke conspiracy theories about the election being fraudulent, the past two months would have gone differently. And a major historic event that happened

yesterday in the storming of the capital likely would not have happened. You can bring systemic explanations into it. But that's really a case where it does seem like one man has a cult of personality and a particular weight, and the contingencies of his own psychology actually matter for society as a whole. So in any event, that's just to say, to tell readers, this is the sort of thing they can expect if they read your book is cases where the individual psychology of a person actually moves the needle in societies for good or for ill.

Christopher Ferguson 12:43

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think if we can think in this particular moment, if, you know, alternate history. Even if any other Republican nominee had been president, you know, right now, we kind of throw in, you know, you know, Marco Rubio or even Ted Cruz, you know, we might not like these individuals, necessarily, but it is hard to imagine that things today would be the same, you know, had almost anybody else been president through this. Even another republican president. Doesn't even have to think of like Hillary Clinton necessarily, but had been like, you know, Jeb Bush, or something of that sort, you know, how different things you know, would have been today. So, I mean, what we're experiencing right now, is really unprecedented, you know, the idea that the US Capitol would be attacked, or, you know, by a mob of rioters, and such as, I can't think of when something exactly like that has happened. I think, you know, perhaps the war of 1812 might have been the last time something similar happened to the US Capitol, and such. So, yeah, I mean, this year was one of these points where we needed some kind of strong leadership. And I think the way things have gone this year with the pandemic, you know, with the Black Lives Matter movement, the protests, the riots, whatever you want to call them over the summer, and now with the election and this interregnum between Trump and Biden, and we can see that the decisions of one person what this person says what this person does what they decide, really do matter, and can do a lot of harm, in this case, I think possibly could do good, but in this case, harm. And so we do have to be perhaps a bit more alert to the personal qualities of individuals that we choose as our leaders.

CH 14:37

So in your book, you make a distinction between madness, on the one hand, mental illness on the other, and then third concept of insanity. So what's the difference between these things and why do the differences matter?

Christopher Ferguson 14:51

Yeah, that's a great question. And you know, historically a lot of these terms had been used kind of interchangeably and even today, you know, when in casual conversation, people will use these terms fairly interchangeably. So, mental illness is a very broad category of situations and a large percentage of individuals who experienced some form of mental illness in their lives. Now, most mental illnesses are fairly minor. Yeah. So everything from feeling a little bit anxious to caffeine dependence is in, you know, our definitions of mental illness in such..... Yeah. So it's pretty easy to read yourself in there. Yeah, there's a there's a book that's called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. It's the DSM. It's on its fifth edition. So the DSM five, typically, you hear it referred to, yeah, so that kind of like is the if people would talk to us about like the Bible of mental illness be well, so it kind of describes all of these categories of mental illness, most of them again, are pretty minor, some pretty major like schizophrenia, where you just sort of lose reality testing, bipolar disorder is also quite serious. There are personality

disorders in there, which are kind of like long term problems with how the person perceives the world. So most people who have mental illness, of course, are not harmful. I mean, they, you know, they don't engage in violent behaviour that, you know, they're not hurting society, they're not hurting anyone, they may, if anything, be more at risk themselves, you know, being taken advantage of, or hurt or something of that sort. Yeah, with certain mental conditions, there are correlations between certain conditions and violent behaviour, like schizophrenia and such. So sometimes people hear that there's no correlation between mental illness and violence. That's actually not true. There's actually considerable evidence that suggests that there is, but it is important to point out that most people, even with schizophrenia, with serious mental illness are not violent criminals or not violent, I would be careful about that. So that's a very broad category of individuals. On the other side, there's insanity, which is a legal definition. It's a very, very tiny category. So with insanity, you have committed a crime and a jury, or perhaps a judge, decides that you are not responsible for that crime, because your mental condition removed from you the ability to understand that what you did was illegal. So if you have schizophrenia, and you kill someone, and you do that, because the voices in your head, were telling you that that other person was a diseased alien Nazi who was coming to kill you, then you're acting a self defence in your mind, you know, not in reality, but in your mind, you're acting self defence. And in that case, a jury or a judge may decide that you are legally insane, and thus not responsible for your actions. Typically, at that point, if you committed a major crime, you'd be most likely centre of psychiatric hospital, a forensic hospital. In between is this kind of concept of madness, and the way that I'm referring to madness here is a sense of a person has some kind of mental or cognitive impairment, and that is doing damage. So this takes it out of most mental illness, most mental illness doesn't do damage, you know, in a wide sense. So this person has some kind of mental condition is doing damage to themselves or to others, and the person is persisting in it, despite the obvious nature of the damage that it is doing. So it's certain categories of mental illness that are having a broader impact either for the individual, people around them, or on their society at large.

CH 18:15

Let's talk a little bit about the cultural biases or, or sort of the way in which culture can influence what's defined as a mental illness and what's not, you know, I think, recently of the explosion in awareness, and, therefore, medication of ADHD, and I suppose ADHD would be classified as a mental illness, right? Technically, yeah. So you know, it's interesting to me, that that's a cultural phenomenon, right to, to describe, you know, in another era, or in another culture, a person that we say has quote, unquote, ADHD would just be described as having a particular personality, like introversion or extroversion. And likewise, you could imagine the culture changing to a point where introversion is, you know, described as a as a mental illness or too much extraversion is described as as a mental illness. So how do you think about the the way in which culture shapes our definitions of mental illness?

Christopher Ferguson 19:26

Yeah, I mean, absolutely, it does. And this is, of course, is one of the controversies about psychiatry and about the DSM specifically for instances, you know, to what extent to these categories we talk about, reflect real illnesses, if you will, I tried to put like air quotes around the world we were real, as opposed to these kinds of cultural perceptions of people that are desirable or undesirable or whatever else. And the reality is, is that, you know, mental health conditions don't exactly exist in the same way that like the flu or COVID-19 or cancer does, you know that for a lot of medical conditions there's a

blood test, there's an MRI, there's some kind of test you can take, and you clearly have it. And if you have influenza, if you have the flu, you have the flu, whether you're in the United States, you have the flu, whether you're in Japan, doesn't matter where you are, it's the same flu. It doesn't matter what point in history you are, it's still the flu. Yeah, it just doesn't change, you know, in the sort of cultural context where, whereas mental illnesses, there's an element of that, that's not to say there isn't some kind of like biological reality behind many mental illnesses. Yeah, that psychosis is still psychosis, you know, whatever culture or time period you happen to be in. But there is this kind of like judgement call about where the boundaries of these mental illnesses are. And of course, probably the most famous example, is the situation of homosexuality, which was a diagnosable mental health condition for decades, until, you know, gradually, society decided that this was not, you know, something that was problematic. So in this sense, there, the perceptions of mental illness sometimes can relate to morality to some extent. You know, people that are behaving in ways that we find undesirable, that we judge them to be ill and thus can use that to, you know, stigmatise them, put them away and psychiatric facility, whatever you want to do with them, try to change them with some kind of therapy, a conversion therapy for homosexuality, for instance. And there are definitely these cultural kind of judgement calls about whether there's something really as a mental illness or not. And one of the there are a lot of controversies right now about the DSM five, but you know, one of them, of course, in my area is whether there is a such thing as a gaming disorder, you know, is it possible that people can overdo gaming, you know, set to the extent that it can be a mental illness? Well, of course, we're also at the point where a lot of people, particularly older people don't like video games. You know, so is it that this is a real mental disorder? Or is it just old people complaining about video games and finding some sort of way to institutionalise that? And that's where there's a lot of debate, you know, why do we care about video game addiction, and not all the other things that people overdo, which don't have a diagnosis, you know, for them?

CH 22:04

Yeah, I recently got into an argument with a friend over whether playing video games all day was the same as playing chess all day. My instinct was, I don't see how it's so different, in principle, in that they're both addictive in the sense that you want to do them all the time, you can do them all the time now with online chess. And this person really had a strong intuition that there's something fundamentally different about playing Call of Duty all day, because chess maybe has this allure of having to be a genius to be good at it or, but to me, it's just they're both games at the end of the day. And my sense was, it's not so different. And, and this stigma surrounding video games, from people who don't totally understand it. And I would, frankly, count myself as one of those people. I don't, I don't, I've never, it's been 10 or 15 years since I really cared or enjoyed video games. But I can see how being outside of the world, there's just so much you don't understand about it. And if you're not the proverbial 15 year old boy, and you're worried about your son playing too much. It just all seems pathological. Where other addictions seem totally healthy.

Christopher Ferguson 23:22

Yeah, well, you can look at the sort of addictions that we talk about, and they all tend to be kind of morally loaded, or at least many of them tend to be kind of morally loaded. And we talk a lot about like video game addiction, gambling addiction, of course, which is an official diagnosis. We have, you know, people talk about porn addiction, sex addiction, you know, we don't really talk too much about like, work

addiction, right? You know, another thing, I know people personally, who have damaged their lives, their marriages, their kids, you know, by overdoing it with work. But we really don't talk about work addiction as being a thing. You know, we don't talk about religion addiction, necessarily as being a thing, even though there are probably people out there that have overdone it in various ways with religiosity. So we tend to look at things that are naughty, if you will, yeah, sort of naughty behaviours that people sometimes do overdo. And we worry about those types of behaviours, where we don't worry about it if people were doing overdoing desirable thing, or socially desirable things. So if you work 100 hours a week, then you're just a hard worker, you know, even if your marriage falls apart, and your health is declining, and you're not a happy person, we just don't worry about that to the same extent, because it's kind of what you're supposed to do is work hard, right? You know, it's morally desirable sort of thing. So, yeah, so a lot of these things do end up being situations where we are using mental health diagnoses to kind of regulate people's moral behaviour and if people are stepping outside what we want them to do, what we expect them to do, we decide to label that a diagnosis if you will. Now, that doesn't mean that every mental condition is like that. I mean, this is not to say there aren't real mental health conditions. out there or people suffering from them. But it is to point out that diagnosing or coming up with these kinds of classification systems for diagnosis can be very tricky and there definitely is this sort of corruption or bias or inclusion of moral and social beliefs or customs into that process that can make things confusing, and sometimes could hurt people.

CH 25:22

So, ultimately, as we both, having agreed here, the definitions changed by culture, they change in the same culture over time. There's an element of arbitrary social taboo that infects these criterion. But at the end of the day, there still ought to be a difference between mental illness and, and its opposite. And there has to be some rational and useful principle by which to decide what things qualify as mental illness and what things don't. I think, despite everything I've been saying, I still believe that, and then the question is, what is that principle?

Christopher Ferguson 26:04

That's, that's a great question. If we really had that dividing line, we probably would have a lot less controversy in psychology and psychiatry. I mean, I think really the way people would talk about sort of the distinction between wellness and mental illness, typically kind of came down to three things. One was the sort of sense of personal distress, you know, so how much...how unhappy are you? Are you anxious? Are you sad? Are you depressed? Are you angry? And how persistent is that? You know, we all experienced these things occasionally. But if it's persisting and becoming interfering than that, that might move you over the line? Is the behaviour harmful? And are you persisting in it, despite its harmfulness? So, you know, obviously, alcoholism is a great example of that, you know, are you continue....drinking alcohol might be fun, so you might not be having distress. But are you having legal problems? Are you having health problems, you know, because of the drinking and are persisting, and that kind of behaviour. And the third one used to be kind of this sense of just being deviant? That would be the way of pointing and obviously, that's one that's now being de-emphasised to some extent. So in other words, was your behaviour, just so unusual that the average person would remark upon it and think of it as being unusual? Now, in more recent years, we've kind of been de-emphasising that criteria, again, because it can be very stigmatising people that are fine, they're happy, but they're just different. In some respects, but even with the other two criteria, you still get into these, you know,

obviously, yes, if you're suicidal, then you, you know, probably should have a diagnosis. If you're happy as a clam, you probably shouldn't. But where's the dividing line between the two? So one of the controversies now that was a change in the DSM five is, there used to be an exclusion that if you were going through a grief process, if a loved one died in your immediate social circle, and you felt persistently sad for more than two weeks that this was kind of normal? You know, if you're very, very close relative dies, and you feel sad for a while, that's just kind of humanity? Yeah. Now it's diagnosable. You can be diagnosed with a major depressive episode, even though the reason why you're depressed would probably look pretty reasonable to most individuals. So there's a lot of controversy built around things like that, is it to people's benefit that they should be diagnosed and thus might be able to get help? Or at least get insurance reimbursement for that help? Or should we be thinking of these things as being pretty normal reactions and not over pathologizing them? So there still are a lot of debates about exactly where the dividing line is, between a behaviour that may be unpleasant, but it's kind of normative, versus one that really should be thought of as being a mental illness.

CH 28:46

So before we get into which historical figures were mad, and what consequences their madness caused, a sort of last question in this category about Adderall and other things prescribed for ADHD, especially for children. I'm not sure if this is in your area of expertise at all, but I have taken Adderall like many people my age and college students as a study, helper drug, you know, and noticed the side effects can be extreme enough that it really makes me reflect on the fact that we're giving this to kids, often, kids that I would not say have a have a mental illness, but are somewhere on the personality spectrum of being able to sit still in this highly artificial environment of school that we create for them. And so I wonder what do you know about Adderall and its long term consequences? What's the state of the research on that? And do you have any sense of what's appropriate for say a parent whose child has been diagnosed for ADHD to think about Adderall

Christopher Ferguson 29:58

Yeah, that's a great question. So yeah, I would say, I wouldn't recommend taking it to binge study haven't necessarily, unless there was a diagnosis. You know, unless it was prescribed by a physician. I'm not myself a medical doctor, I am familiar with Adderall. You know, but I want to make sure that, to anybody listening, don't go off your medication because of anything I said. But yeah, so you know, Adderall is a stimulant, it's an amphetamine, if I remember correctly. And the idea is that with ADHD, you know, and I'll be blunt and I'll say that I, you know, by today's standards, I probably would be diagnoseable with ADD. So I sort of understand a lot of this, I have a lot of attention sort of issues. But the idea is that for people with ADHD, that they're particularly the frontal areas of the brain are under stimulated, they're bored, you know, essentially, and so they engage in a lot of behaviours to try to re-stimulate themselves and hence, the hyperactivity. The idea of why would you give someone who's hyperactive stimulants is, it seems kind of intuitive for a lot of people. But the idea is that you will stimulate those frontal areas of the brain, they won't need to fidget anymore in order to get themselves stimulated. And then they can focus on things like their schoolwork or homework or, you know, whatever else. So they've been prescribing these types of stimulants for decades at this point. Yeah, I mean, I think these are important conversations for parents to have with their paediatrician, the child's paediatrician. There are risks involved, and most medical doctors will be aware of them. They are

stimulants, so they have some of the same sort of issues with potential effects on the heart and other parts of you know, the circulatory system that could be negative, those rates are pretty low as I understand them, but they're things to think about. There seem to be some issues where it can stunt growth in children. So a lot of kids will take holidays off with the medications so their growth can catch up. For most kids, you know, they're okay, on these meds. You do hear of kids using them off label, I guess we might say, in the sense of potentially abusively, you know, where they're not prescribed the medication, or they're in some cases taking in a way...I used to work with a lot of juvenile delinquents., and for instance, one of the things I would hear about it at the very least is they were talking about crushing the capsules up and snorting them, you know, for instance, which is not something we would generally recommend. So there are some negative sides of some of these things. A lot of the other controversy built around ADHD, is I kind of made this joke about myself and saying, by today's standards, I would be diagnoseable with ADHD. It's also important to understand that with each iteration of the DSM, the diagnoses change a little bit. They keep tweaking diagnoses and ADHD is one of these that have been controversial for decades now, in the sense that over time, they've made it easier and easier to get diagnosed with ADHD. So there's a wider and wider group of people that could be diagnosed with this condition could end up on psychotropic medications, could in some rare situations experience some significant side effects. And again, there's kind of this debate of, you know, is the person so impaired, that they really would benefit from these medications? And I think there are some kids that would, or is this just a daydreamer, you know, that we might have thought of the kid as being sort of, you know, impatient, you know, otherwise normative otherwise doing fine, and just needs to be reminded to stay on task a little bit, you know? And again, where do we kind of draw that line? And do we get to a point where we're getting a little overeager giving these kinds of medications to anybody that is even slightly, having a difficulty with schoolwork, or attention or things like that, I get a lot of people who come in for testing as adults for ADHD. It's a very common concern that I will see in college students or adults in the workplace. And in most cases, yeah, they don't have it, you know, it's not a condition that pops up when you're 21 that is traceable back into, you know, childhood, but they they see these commercials on television, they get into conversations with their friends, you know, and they're bored at work and can't concentrate on these repetitive boring tasks. And they think that's unusual. And sometimes you have to tell them, no, your job is just dull. You're supposed to feel this way. And it's actually quite normal. And and Yes, you are right, that the thing about things like Adderall and stimulants is whether you have ADHD or not, they will have the same impact on you, they will hyperfocus you, you know, you don't have to have ADHD for these pills that have that kind of effect. But on the other hand, yeah, I don't know how much we want to get into the habit of relying, you know, probably shouldn't be cramming in the first place. I'm starting to sound like a professor now. But you know, even if you are, I don't know that, you know, taking Adderall if you don't have ADHD is a wise plan, but like I said, I mean, you know, these should be conversations between individuals and their physicians. And, you know, I'm not prescribing to anybody listening on the podcast.

CH 35:12

I'm reminded of a scene from the TV show, Louie, may it rest in peace, where Louie is at a PTA conference, and they're talking about why kids get sluggish and bored. Their kids are probably seven years old, after lunch, and they all have competing theories of the latest article they read. It's the food they're eating, it's the way they're being taught, and eventually, Louie intervenes in this debate where everyone is an expert and has an opinion, and reminds parents that school is boring for children, and

sort of implores them, don't you guys remember, like, we were kids once. It was largely boring. So yeah, I mean, it is something I worry about, but let's not dwell on it in the entire podcast, because there's a lot of other things to talk about. So in your book, you go through a lot of different famous political and military leaders from history. One of the first you deal with is Alexander the Great. So can you talk a little bit about him and what you find interesting about him relating to mental illness or madness?

36:26

Yeah, absolutely. So I mean, he's actually probably one of the people in the book that I cover who kind of comes out best in history, most of the people have pretty negative...he has a fairly negative end as well, but he's interesting, because of course, data at different stages, historians have looked at him more positively and more negatively. So for folks who don't remember, don't know who he is, he was a Macedonian leader, who basically took this Kingdom of Macedonia, which was really like a backwater of the Greek world, and sort of building on his father's successes, you know, unify...forcibly unified most of the Greek world, and then conquered Persia, most of the Middle East and North Africa, and all the way into India, and named city after city after himself all the way. So it gives you kind of a sense of what kind of individual he was. He was brilliant, an absolutely brilliant tactician, and defeated these huge Persian armies. These well financed Persian armies, you know, in a way that nobody...I think I made the allusion in the book, it was, it's kind of like Canada invading the US, and not only taking over the US, but taking over the entire Western Hemisphere, like nobody would have ever seen this coming and it really took this sort of brilliant military tactician to, to make this happen, you know, and I'm still waiting for his invasion from Canada to happen, by the way. So.... he was the narcissist is really what it comes down to him. He was...it was all about the Alexander the Great show to some extent, and he had this very inflated view of his own role and history. But he had the tactical brilliance to pull it off. You know, he came from a line of ambitious people, both his father and his mother were incredibly ambitious individuals. So there's probably some, you know, genetics that is playing a role in their. His early environment was chaotic, I guess we could say. It was not a loving environment that it came from. So we might hypothesize that there's some environmental factors. But he also was this incredibly hard drinking individual. He pushed himself, he pushed other people. He ends up murdering one of his best friends in a drunken fight. And, you know, he basically burns out in his early 30s, by I think it was a 32 or 33. He's dead, you know, nobody's exactly sure how he died. But he seems to have died from a combination of his alcoholism with an infection of some sort or another. And he really just was...you talk about burning the candle at both ends, he really was this powerful personality who just shaped the Greek world, the Hellenistic world, the Middle East, all the way through Persian to India just shaped it in his own image. We still have cities that are named after him, Alexandria, in Europe; Kandahar, in Afghanistan; still basically bear his name. So he just was a remarkable individual, but to be around him, I kind of make this comment in the book that you really wouldn't want to have him at like your Thanksgiving Day, you know, meal because he was an incredibly intense personality. He wanted praise, he wanted adoration from others. He was smart about it, and in a way that other people in history have not been, but he didn't want this kind of adulation, and he was willing to make other people pay a significant price for his success. He paid a pretty high price himself in the end, for his success, but he really is a sort of image of the sort of classic Narcissus, who in his case does have a lot of talent, whether we've judged him as being positive or negative, historically, like I said, his people's impressions of him are waxed and waned over the years. And he's to be thought of as kind of the hero

of, of history. Now, people kind of think like he killed a lot of people for not really a great reason. So people have been a little bit more negative about it, although that's kind of what people did back then. And in general, he was hardly the only one. So you know, he's a fascinating character. And there is this sort of sense....I think that we learn from him that sometimes you know, society...they call it roll big, you know, that if you're in a crisis point, you can take a big roll on a chancy individual. And you might get someone like Alexander the Great, who, you know, really blew up Macedonia, I mean, really kind of made Macedonia, this world Empire, when it was nothing beforehand, but more likely, you're going to end up with disaster is the reality of it. So Alexander the Great is one of these sort of rare examples of this extreme personality of a mad individual, if you will, who I guess arguably, if we kind of ignore hundreds of thousands of people who died as a cause of his conquest, we kind of ignore that tiny detail, he nonetheless propped up his culture, his nation and made them great, I guess, sort of a dangerous word today. But, you know, he really was very, very successful for the time that he lived in. But that is a big roll of the dice. And like I said, with these types of personalities, they don't always come with tactical brilliance. And you're more likely to end up with disaster than you are some kind of, you know, history setting precedent of strategic brilliance like you do with Alexander the Great.

CH 41:43

Alexander the Great, check. Next, Hitler.

Christopher Ferguson 41:48

Oh, wow. Yeah, you can't really end up talking about madness without getting into the Hitler. So Hitler is a fascinating individual. And it's interesting to read, there are a bunch of medical reports written about Hitler. So Hitler is this kind of classic example of an individual stepping into this, you know, again, kind of a crisis point of Germany, you know, during the Weimar Republic, which was already kind of collapsing, and turning into kind of an authoritarian regime before Hitler got involved in it. So it's really this kind of match between an individual and the circumstances of the culture in which he is living. Hitler kind of comes across as an individual whose background was harsh, but not necessarily unusually so, particularly with his father, he had a very distant and perhaps abusive relationship with his father. But nothing else really kind of strikes out it as him being super, super unusual in his background. But even in his early days, he sort of accounts from colleagues of his during World War One, sort of paint him as his very socially aloof individual, he kind of comes out of World War One, you know, a fair amount of positive accolades as a soldier, but his comrades kind of viewed him as being distant, unlikable, you know, hard to get to know and all that kind of stuff. And from there, he really develops into this...First off, he's a failed artist, which is interesting. So he tried to paint and you can still find his paintings online. ..They're not very good. You can see why he was a failed artist, but he kind of gives that a try. And so again, this is the sort of interesting alternative reality where there's like Hitler, the artist, and what would have happened if he had been successful and not become a politician. But he ends up sort of twisting off into this sort of paranoid worldview. So he's got these qualities of narcissism, but he's adding in a very paranoid view, the sort of sense of violence is an acceptable way for nations to address their problems. He gets deeply involved in anti-Semitism, which we all know of course, leads you to the Holocaust. And nobody's really exactly sure why Hitler became an anti-Semite, other than that was very common at that time in Europe, but there doesn't seem to be any real situations where he had like a bad interaction with someone who is Jewish or something of that sort. So it's not really quite clear where he came up with that worldview, but in a way that is kind of similar to Alexander, there is a sense

of everything really, in the end, revolving around Hitler himself. So Germany, the country, you know, the Wehrmacht, the the army, are all extensions of him and his very bizarre paranoid dreams about what he wants to see happen for Germany. He has this really strange idea about seizing land and the Ukraine and Russia, and moving Germans onto that territory was land that Germany did not need, so why he thought this was a goal that was worth fighting over is not really super clear. He develops a lot of psychosomatic problems. He has a lot of health issues particularly with his stomach, he ends up developing an addiction to amphetamines, and just famously spirals out of control by the end of World War Two. So there again, we have an individual...So kind of the question is would World War Two have happened if only Hitler hadn't been born? These are all these kind of like college students like time travel, baby Hitler, things that people kind of get into. "If I could only travel back in time and kill baby Hitler", you know, would that be worth doing.

CH 45:25

Or take him off Adderall.

Christopher Ferguson 45:27

Yeah. Yeah. Once again, we're back to Adderall and the stimulants...the stimulus did not help. We'll, say that in his situation. So World War Two probably still would have happened. Right? You know, there are a lot of structural issues built around the, you know, the Treaty of Versailles and World War One and how that ended up for Germany, that probably made World War, some kind of war with Germany and its neighbouring countries that were released, close to inevitable. But it probably would have taken a very different shape if Hitler had not seize control of the German Republic in the early 1930s. And definitely, he put his own personal stamp on how things, you know, move forward, you know, would there have been a Holocaust? You know, would the war have been as brutal as it had been? I suspect, probably not. But of course, that's all speculative history. And we can never really, really be, be sure. But yeah, Hitler is the classic example of a very disturbed individual, very mad individual. It'd be kind of common for a while for people to think of the Nazis as being very normal. And that may be true for some mid-level functionaries within the Nazi regime, of course, but in terms of the people that are in control, and specifically Hitler, it is certainly not the case that Hitler was psychologically normal. And so we have an individual who was mad, and unfortunately, he took his culture, his society down with it, and did a lot of damage to the world, to a lot of innocent individuals. And in the end, you know, largely destroyed his own culture. Fortunately, it's been built back up as a very different country today. But yeah, you know, so it's a real fascinating story about how much impact one individual can have. And yeah, it's kind of hard to write a book like this one without at least talking about Hitler a little bit.

CH 47:16

So how about Joseph Stalin?

Christopher Ferguson 47:21

Yeah, so...the greatest hits of mad people in history. Joseph Stalin also came from a difficult background, difficult family background, again, with a...you see a lot of these people that fathers are are not doing...fathers come across very poorly, in the background, of a lot of these individuals, so again, very difficult relationship with his father. In many ways, his life is this kind of mirror image to Hitlers.

And, you know, one of the best biographies I actually read about either man is one that was written about both of them, contemporaneously, Hitler and Stalin together, because their life course was so interwoven with each other. But again, very hard individual, very narcissistic individual, very paranoid individual. So with some of these leaders, you see this kind of combination of the narcissistic personality traits, the anti-social personality traits, with this kind of paranoid ideology, you know, that the world is divided very neatly into good and evil. And increasingly, the good is only me and a small number of individuals who around me and my social circle.

CH 48:25

Growing smaller by the minute often, because everyone is becoming a traitor.

Christopher Ferguson 48:30

Yeah, absolutely, and that's exactly what happened. The Soviet regime, if you look at, you know, kind of the history it started off with the Bolsheviks was kind of wide group of individuals. And one...I mean, the brilliance of Stalin, right, is that one by one, he kills off all of his colleagues, you know, basically, and it ends up being he's the last one standing, or at least the other people that are around him are so frightened of him that they're too afraid to, in any way question or disobey his order. So Stalin was a very smart man. I think in some ways he's not given enough credit for that, you know, that he's oftentimes overshadowed by Lenin as being more brilliant and Lenin certainly was more erudite, but Stalin was strategically brilliant in the way that he managed to cross out all of his rivals for erstwhile allies within the Bolshevik regime, and putting himself in charge totally, basically becoming a totalitarian leader. That was not the case. Early in the Bolshevik regime, really was never again the case with the Soviet Union after Stalin. And the consequences for that...if you look at, you know...we talked about Hitler and the damage Hitler did, arguably far more people were killed by Stalin than were Hitler. I don't know if this is the kind of contest we really want to have, you know, in terms of like, who can kill more people, it's actually that who becomes the baddest person. As a consequence, they're both horrible individuals, but Stalin was responsible for far more deaths. The difference being as most of them were within the Soviet Union itself. So he was responsible for many more deaths of his own people, as opposed to Hitler who tended to extend most of his homicidal urges outward to other groups of non-Germans, Russians, Poles, Jews, Gypsies, and Homosexuals, other individuals that were considered undesirable. So it's kinda like the big difference is, I think people sometimes don't have as much awareness of how much damage Stalin did, because a lot of that was internal to the Soviet Union as opposed to external as was the case with Nazi Germany.

CH 50:26

Hmm. Okay, next, was Jesus mad?

Christopher Ferguson 50:31

That's a loaded question. Oh, geez. Okay, I gotta think about...I wasn't ready for that one. I've got to think of a good answer for 'was Jesus mad?'. Okay. So here's what I will say that...I do kind of reference this. I think I make some comments about this without referencing Christ specifically. Well, who knows? Okay, we'll put it that way. You know, maybe he really is, you know, the Son of God come to lead us all out of sin. But what I'll say is that we do find a lot of these cases of individuals that have a particular psychotic disorder called delusional disorder, where they have some sort of psychosis about

the world, magical thinking, you know, the belief that they are touched by God, they can heal the sick, whatever, and are nonetheless coherent. So that's a little bit different for schizophrenia, with schizophrenia, people with schizophrenia, typically have difficulty communicating. They're not as coherent. With delusional disorder, people are able to maintain a kind of basic coherence. And as a consequence, you can communicate these delusions to other people, and you may find other people who are willing to accept them because of their own life circumstances. So certainly, we can look at contemporaneous examples of cult leaders like David Koresh, you know, for instance, who were coherent enough to convince, you know, some dozens or hundreds of other individuals to follow them into some to what most of us would seem like some sort of Bizarro, cult-like worldview, you know, but they have charisma. Yeah, they have coherence. They have, you know, authority, an authoritative personality, and they're able to lead people in that sense. So, certainly lots of religious leaders probably have delusional disorder. Some might have outright antisocial personality, and they're just lying. They just are, you know, they're full of crap about what they're saying. But you do get some of these individuals who really do seem to believe what they're talking about, and if they're coherent enough, you can end up creating a religion or at least a cult of some sort. Now, am I saying that's what happened with Christ? I won't say definitively. But it is something that happens, certainly, that many cults and perhaps religions do form from individuals who may be experiencing visions that are delusions, not real events. So that is certainly possible.

CH 52:48

Yeah. And in the case of someone like David Koresh, his motive seems so opaque and unintelligible to a normal person, for the most part, except when you're looking at, for instance, his taking the burden of sex away from the other male colleagues by doing them the favour of having sex with their wives for them. All of a sudden, that seems all too human and motivation.

Christopher Ferguson 53:17

Yeah, absolutely. I also have a difficult time deciding to what extent David Koresh really bought his garbage, you know, essentially. Yeah. So there was that aspect, you know, this is kind of this millennialist cult, the idea that he's going to lead people through Armageddon, if only they obey Him, unquestioningly, including, as you said, the turning over of lives, to him, and at some of the females involved was alleged, were under age...it's important to point out as well. You know, on the other hand, he died for this, you know, and even when he had the opportunity to back down during the siege of the Waco compound, he dies from getting shot in the head. We're not sure if he shot himself, or if one of his followers shot him or whatever else. But he persisted in it to the very end. Now, is that just an antisocial individual that got caught in their own scam and didn't have a way out? Or is it really someone who's delusional and really believes this stuff that they're trying to sell other individuals. And of course, these two things are not mutually exclusive. You can be delusional and antisocial at the same time, it's hard to say. But, it's also fascinating to consider the circumstances of individuals who by this, who sort of buy into this system, you know. One of his closest followers was someone who turned over his own wife to him and that individual followed him to death basically, and you know, trying to think of like, why would you do this?, you know, it doesn't make any kind of sense. And that's really an amazing thing as well. But yeah.

CH 54:51

So are there benefits to madness or insanity. I can think of a few potential examples. One is, you know, some people have made the point that in foreign policy, the leader viewed as the least sane, often ends up getting the most of what he wants, because the very fact that he's unpredictable, makes him a very effective negotiator. The leader whose mind you understand that, you know, is a rational actor, that you know, is likely to back down from the brink is less effective at getting what he wants than the leader, who you're actually afraid might hit the nuclear button on a whim because he's psycho. So another example that's talked about is the alleged link between creativity and madness. You know, Kanye famously said during one of his mental breakdowns, "that you guys want insane art, but you want it from sane people", alleging that, you know, often the very things that make him break through as a creative person are the same things that classify him as having bipolar, for instance. So are there benefits to madness? How do you think about that question?

Christopher Ferguson 56:15

Yeah, depends on how the social capital is kind of built around that. Actually while you were saying that I was also kind of thinking about sort of, like a public discourse right now and the extent to which more extreme views are given more capital and more modest views, to some extent. So that kind of a thing can play some role in, you know, how successful people are as well. But you know, to your example, yes, I think to the first one, yeah. Being as mad as possible as a negotiator; that can work to some extent. And the thing we find with like aggression in general, is that you generally want to... evolutionarily speaking, not morally speaking, but evolutionarily speaking, being somewhere in the moderate range of aggressiveness seems to be what works best there is this sense of you don't want to be a pushover, you don't want to be someone that they know you can take advantage of, or that they can take advantage of you. On the other hand, if you're just a complete lunatic, eventually, people start to think they need to take you out before you do some real harm, you know, so you want to be...there is some advantage to that sense of being unpredictable. To a certain extent, you can get away with that for a little bit. And again, we kind of going back to the example of Hitler, I mean, this is kind of where Hitler's early success was, was exactly doing this, you know, the degree to which he was successful diplomatically, with other European countries, a lot of that came from the sense of him leveraging the potential for another world war, over particularly Britain and France. And at the same time, being aware that the leaders of Britain and France had no stomach for this war. So they were willing to give him a lot of concessions, usually at some other countries expense like Czechoslovakia, in order to avoid this kind of conflict. And that worked to an extent, and then it stopped working, right, you know, and then we ended up with World War Two. So you can push it to a certain degree, but eventually people will figure out that you're just a wild cannon. And eventually, they'll react accordingly. So it's a dangerous negotiating strategy. I think that actually was one of the...if i remember correctly...that was actually early on in the Trump administration, and Trump himself, kind of raised that, that he was this kind of wild negotiator, and that was going to be an advantage. And maybe sometimes it was, but you know, I don't know that, on balance, that it is worked off terribly well for us necessarily. I think with art, it is important to point out that most people that have mental illness, most people who are mad, if we use that term, are not particularly creative, you know, you're not guaranteed. So if you're kind of thinking like, "Oh, I wish I could do art better. Maybe I ought to go off my antidepressants". No, no, there's no guarantee that that's going to bring you any kind of creative insights. What we tend to see sometimes is with, perhaps with Kanye West, perhaps with Vincent van Gogh and some other people historically, is that when you're going through significant mental illnesses, like psychosis and stuff, you end up being less

restrained. So that can help you sometimes break through social taboos, we're talking about social taboos earlier. And in some cases, you can end up with some artistic drawings, again, I think that the risk of this is we tend to engage in confirmation bias. So we tend to look for all the cases that are successful. So I think what a lot of cases of madness, you end up with about 99% of the time ending up with garbage, and 1% of the time ending up with something truly brilliant. And we only really remember the 1% of people who are really, really brilliant. And so that kind of leaves us with this idea...This is kind of this correlation between madness and creative brilliance. That can't happen sometimes, but it doesn't work out for most individuals who have significant mental health problems.

CH 59:52

Alright, so I'm going to finish up by asking two extremely rude, impolite, uncouth questions that are shameful questions that nobody should ever ask. But hundreds of millions of Americans have asked themselves over the past several months. The first one is, is Trump mentally ill? Or slash, does he have a personality disorder?

Christopher Ferguson 1:00:18

He, I would say, you know, I gotta throw my typical psychology caveat, I have not diagnosed him. I have not had an evaluation with him. Judging from his public behaviour, my professional opinion is that he probably qualifies for what we would call typically a vulnerable or fragile narcissist. So we would have something of a narcissistic personality disorder. Now that's not uncommon among politicians. Narcissism in the political realm is very, very common. And we might even say it's kind of necessary to some extent to have like a super, super high level of self esteem, to be able to function in that sort of environment. The thing what we call vulnerable narcissists, or fragile narcissist, is they tend to have a... their boastfulness hides a certain lack of esteem that is underneath the surface. So they tend to overreact to slights in ways that most narcissists don't, which tend to make them more of these kind of wild cannons and as such, so they become a lot more impulsive, a lot more predictable, unpredictable, and they tend to lash out against people they think are either insulted them or offended them humiliated them in ways that are very, very damaging both to themselves and to other individuals. And I think we've seen this all the way through the Trump administration that for the first three years of the Trump administration, I usually described as kind of a clown show, I mean, you know, there really weren't any major crises, there really weren't any major policy initiatives. To some extent, you could look back at George W. Bush and say that George W. Bush did more damage to the world than Donald Trump did. But then we had 2020, right. And we end up with a pandemic, we ended up with the death of George Floyd and all the ramifications of that. And then we ended up with this election process. And all of this needed a deft leader, someone who was able to swallow their own pride, particularly with the election and losing the election, and lead us together as a community through this and a vulnerable narcissist is not the person that we want in charge while we're going through this. So I will say, definitely, you know, that the way he behaves, at least in his public persona, as a politician is consistent with this sort of fragile or vulnerable narcissist. That's a very, very dangerous person to have in charge. Does he have a more significant mental illness? I don't see any evidence he has anything like schizophrenia or psychosis, necessarily. The other kind of argument people have been having is about sort of dementia. Now, people have been having that about both Trump and Joe Biden, of course

CH 1:02:45

That was actually my second rude question.

Christopher Ferguson 1:02:47

Oh ok, we can hold off on that one for a second, then maybe but...but I think most of what we're seeing is related to this really, really virulent form of narcissism that Trump is exhibiting. That made him a great reality TV star. It makes them a very, very poor president. And especially, and you can compare him I've seen other people compare him to Al Gore, for instance, who had to get in front of Congress and preside over the electoral college voting that confirmed that he lost and he did so, you know, with dignity. And you can contrast that with the behaviour of Trump, which has, you know, there's no way to say other than it has caused a lot of damage for our nation. Oh, yeah. I mean, I think that he's mad, you know, to use the language of the book, and that madness is destructive for him, it's going to be destructive for his legacy. I have a real difficult times how historically his presidency will be viewed positively. And it is very bad for us as a culture. Now, our problems, our crisis points predate him. He is not the source of all of our problems. But he certainly has made things worse over the last four years. And I can only hope in the next four years, we'll find a way to work together to make things more positive.

CH 1:04:05

All right, so final rude question with the opposite partisan valence. Is Joe Biden suffering from the early stages of dementia?

Christopher Ferguson 1:04:16

we don't know definitively. It's really kind of that there is a non trivial possibility that he is. So there's my mother, who's about the same age as he is, and who is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Jokes fairly regularly that she should have run for president. This is the level that she probably could have done it just as well as either of these two gentlemen were. One thing we can say definitively is that as people age, the odds of developing at least mild cognitive impairment as well as dementia go up, and they go up significantly. So I have calculated in an article that I'd written for Psychology Today, I calculated that whoever we voted in as president in this current election, whether it was Trump or Biden, just statistically speaking, there was a 50% chance that one of whoever we voted in was going to have at least mild cognitive impairment, we can put it that way. So just statistically speaking, there is at least a 50% chance that we're going to have a president who has at least mild cognitive impairment, we don't know that he is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. There are some intriguing programmes out there statistical programmes that can analyse voice. And I would be kind of curious to see if any scholars in the near future analyse Biden's voice patterns, because people that are in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease do begin to speak differently than other older adults who are not experiencing dementia. That's one of the ways we increasingly speculate that Reagan...may very likely have had early Alzheimer's during the last years of his presidency. It's due to some of these analyses. So I'll be kind of curious to see if anything comes out suggesting that Biden may have, you know, early dementia, but I really hope not. We're pretty dependent upon him getting us through the next four years, and we're in a pretty tough spot. So I'm hoping that he is the guy. I would hope whoever was

elected. So there's not a Democrat, Republican thing, whoever we got old, young, Democrat, Republican, I'm hoping the person we have an office is going to be able to lead us forward as a nation to a much better place in four years than we've been for the last certainly four and probably closer to ten.

CH 1:06:23

On that note, cannot agree more. And it was a pleasure to speak with you. Can you point listeners to where they can find more of your work? Do you have a website or at least a Twitter handle or something like that?

Christopher Ferguson 1:06:35

Yeah, absolutely. I have a website, which is not very imaginative. It's just my name, which is **christopherjferguson.com**. And you can also follow me on twitter **@CJFerguson1111**.

CH 1:06:48

All right. Thank you so much, Christopher. It was a pleasure.

Christopher Ferguson 1:06:50

It was great being on today. I appreciate it.