



Combating Cancel Culture: Why we need moral righteousness checked by humility

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Introduction

The discussion surrounding cancel culture has quietened since its peak in the early 2020s. A columnist in *the Telegraph* went so far as to proclaim it *dead*.¹ Much of the public could be forgiven for thinking along such lines as high-profile public cancellations appear to have become less common. With X (formerly Twitter) owned by a self-proclaimed free speech absolutist, and organisations such as the Free Speech Union (FSU) and Academics for Academic Freedom (AFAF) campaigning against cancel culture, it is understandable that the issue no longer dominates the public discourse.

But cancel culture is far from over, and one reason it persists is the widespread misunderstanding of what it actually is. While organisations such as the FSU seek to counter its effects, there has been far less effort to examine the philosophy that underpins the impulse to cancel. This essay intends to make clear that cancel culture, defined by the academic Piper Norris as ‘acts of mass public boycotting, isolating and shaming’ is not a creation of the 21st Century but is a behaviour consistent throughout the history of humanity.²

What warrants ‘cancel culture’ its own term in the 21st Century is that it has taken on a new interface, and new significance, thanks to online technology and additional cultural changes. Social media amplifies and perhaps more significantly simplifies participation in this kind of behaviour by providing unprecedented levels of exposure and global connectivity. It is now possible to call for the ‘cancellation’ of a public figure in another country, entirely unknown to the individual, with minimal effort and instant reach. By contrast, before the rise of social media, comparable forms of public condemnation were typically confined to smaller, more immediate communities or mediated through established news outlets, which imposed barriers to entry and limited who could publicly criticise others.

Because the urge to ‘cancel’ and assert moral superiority over our peers is so timeless, it should not surprise us to find that philosophers and theologians from as early as the 3rd Century had much to say on the phenomenon and what it reveals about human nature. The teachings of theologian St. Augustine of Hippo are particularly enlightening in this respect.

Augustine held that pride is the root of all sin, because pride is the moment in which a person first turns away from the good, believing they know better. Pertinent to the issue of cancel culture is how Augustine observed that it was pride in one’s own moral standing, the certainty of being unfailingly good and noble, that most directly correlated with a willingness to punish. ‘For the more anyone knows himself to be involved in sins, the more he is gentle toward others.’³

Augustine links moral certainty to the severity of judgement toward others: the more certain a person is of their own innocence, the more harshly they tend to judge those around them. In addition, he was aware that it is natural for humans to presume or even exaggerate their own innocence. As Augustine acutely summarised: ‘The human race is inquisitive about other people’s lives, but negligent to correct their own.’⁴

¹ Harvey C. *Cancel culture is dead*. The Telegraph. 2022. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/cancel-culture-is-dead-the-left-hasnt-noticed/#> (accessed: 25/08/26)

² Norris P. *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2021

³ Augustine. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 50.7. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

⁴ Augustine. *Confessions*. Book X, §180. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110110.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

This negligence stems both from our limited awareness of our inner motivations and from a culpable refusal to confront evidence that threatens our self-conception as a 'good person'. Augustine's teachings on human nature are particularly relevant to Western culture today, yet their insight is rarely recognised. His view has largely been displaced by a strain of the Enlightenment that, in conscious opposition to the Christian tradition, adopted an overly optimistic view of human nature, and in doing so, effectively championed moral pride.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is best representative of this strain of thought. He developed the narrative that the burden of sin could be blamed on societal structures, thus freeing the individual of moral responsibility. This is evidenced in his most famous saying, 'Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains.'⁵ And again when he wrote that, 'Nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state... it is society which depraves and corrupts him.'⁶

Under scrutiny, these statements reveal a conflated moral arrogance. Rousseau fatally separates the individual from the abstract entity that is society, encouraging his readers to see themselves as free of or in rebellion against it. His view is distinct from viewing society as the collective participation of individuals, and it would serve us better to view it that way. Recognising this broader view encourages a greater sense of responsibility for the state of our society, understanding it as something that reflects not just others, but ourselves.

The argument of this essay begins by tracing how Western thought gradually abandoned Augustine's sober account of human nature. He understood human beings as oriented toward the good yet vulnerable to corruption, a view later refined by Aquinas, who preserved this balance by insisting that original sin was a weakness, not a total moral collapse.⁷ But this moderation did not last. The Protestant Reformers, reacting against perceived moral decay in the Church, pushed the doctrine toward a bleak pessimism, culminating in the idea of total depravity.⁸ Humanity, in this view, was not merely tempted by sin but wholly incapable of resisting it.

The Enlightenment responded by swinging to the opposite extreme. Rejecting human weakness outright, it embraced an optimistic, and ultimately flattering, vision of human nature. Individuals were encouraged to see themselves as fundamentally innocent, locating corruption not within the self but within society. Rousseau popularised this reversal, likely intentionally, as many of his writings on human nature appear as an intentional inversion of Augustine, with Rousseau even naming one of his books '*Confessions*' as a foil for Augustine's famous work. Where Augustine taught that human beings corrupt society, Rousseau insisted that society corrupts the human being. This relocation of guilt away from the self, laid the foundations for a culture in which individuals increasingly view themselves as blameless.

This philosophical shift has consequences. Rousseau's optimism interacts with the dynamics of resentment and scapegoating described by philosopher René Girard. When people believe themselves innocent, and morally superior, rivalry intensifies. Resentment spreads memetically. Communities become prone to identifying and punishing scapegoats. In such an environment, moral judgement is

⁵ Rousseau J-J. *The Social Contract*. 1997 edition. Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/46333> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

⁶ Rousseau J-J. *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*. 1997 edition. Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11136> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

⁷ Aquinas T. *Summa Theologica*. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

⁸ Luther M. *The Bondage of the Will*. 1525. Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15342> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

no longer expressed through persuasion or debate but through public shaming, ostracism and the enforcement of unwritten norms. This is the soil in which modern cancellation grows.

Building on this foundation, cancel culture should be considered as a contemporary mechanism of moral pride. It shows how digital technology accelerates condemnation, how decentralised online communities erode traditional moral authority, and how social media incentives reward outrage. It also explains how cancel culture often creates 'implicit laws', unstated but widely understood rules, through punishment and majority self-censorship. Case studies reveal how individuals are sanctioned not only for their actions but for challenging the moral framework itself, exposing how fragile and coercive such frameworks become when grounded in pride rather than truth.

Cancel culture has evolved and its use on both sides of the political divide suggest that it should be understood as a human nature problem rather than a problem of a singular political ideology. It is a tool aimed to create a flawed notion of social cohesion and therefore challenges that the solution to this is found in a greater emphasis on unchecked free speech. Whereas proponents of cancel culture seek to restrict free speech in the name of preventing perceived harm and enforcing moral hegemony, this essay argues that free speech should be exercised responsibly: not as licence for recklessness, but as a means of reflecting the best qualities of the individual and cultivating a civil society in which the pursuit of truth is given priority.

The conclusion turns back to Augustine for a correction, drawing on the doctrine of original sin for its practical merits rather than appeal to scripture or revealed truth. It argues that the doctrine offers a more realistic and humbling account of human nature, one that encourages self-scrutiny rather than self-exaltation. Augustine's emphasis on shared human weakness undermines the moral distance that fuels cancellation, while his insistence on humility provides an alternative to the vengeful certainty of the crowd. Cultivating humility is not a call for moral laxity; it is a necessary antidote to the pride, resentment and scapegoating that make cancel culture so destructive. Only by recognising our own susceptibility to failure can one resist the temptation to punish others with moral absolutism and instead foster a culture grounded in mercy, justice and genuine moral responsibility.

Moral Pride in Modern Culture

Cancel culture may be seen as the consequence of a form of moral pride embedded in modern western thought. *Moral pride* can be defined as an excessive love of one's own perceived virtue, producing a complacency in one's moral judgement and a diminished capacity for self-criticism. The term *pride* in English usage derives from old French *prud*, meaning splendid and brave and commonly used by the Norman knights, but inverted by the Anglo Saxons to be, *pride*, or *pryde*, used to redesign Norman behaviour as arrogance or excessive self-regard, and therefore carries a negative connotation.⁹ It is this use of the word that was used to translate the deadly sin that Augustine focuses on.

In the modern world, pride has come to be viewed largely as a positive term and so it is necessary to draw a distinction between *pride the sin* and *good pride*. The Anglo-Saxon use of pride carried the important distinction of self-regard being *excessive*. Whilst there is perhaps a form of pride over one's moral convictions that is *not* excessive, the discussion here is particularly focused on pride that *is*. The form of pride that is not excessive, and therefore morally permissible, is rare, and the distinction is so

⁹ Online Etymology Dictionary. *Pride*. Available from: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/pride>. Accessed 1 Sep 2026.

subtle that perhaps it is better described with a different term, one that replaces the hint of self-satisfaction with a less sentimental notion of a person who derives their dignity from virtue.

Before the Renaissance, the word 'pride' in the context of human nature was strictly associated with sin. St Augustine went so far as to call it 'the beginning of all sin.'¹⁰ Importantly, the classical Christian understanding did not hold human beings to be entirely corrupt, but rather emphasised their potential to be corrupted. St Thomas Aquinas, drawing on ideas of Aristotle, argued that human nature is in fact oriented towards the good, understanding original sin as an inherent weakness or *propensity* towards evil.¹¹ In sum, humanity strives for good but is constantly tempted towards sin. Thus, Aquinas suggested that Augustine's view of original sin does not contradict our inclination towards the good but instead runs parallel to it.¹² This is the definition of original sin that is worth considering and offers a compelling alternative understanding of human nature to Rousseau's.

This understanding, however, was not to last. The understanding of original sin shifted once again from the reasonable middle way of Aquinas to a more draconian pessimism about human nature, spurred on by Martin Luther through the reformation responding to the perceived lapse of morals of the Catholic faith.

The Protestant Reformers of the early 16th Century sought to recast the doctrine of Original Sin in what they believed to be a more faithful expression of Augustine's teaching. They developed this into the *doctrine of total depravity*, which holds that the corruption of original sin extends throughout the whole of human nature. Theologian John Calvin incorporated this doctrine as the first of the five points of Calvinism, within a broader theological framework characterised by divine election and predestination.¹³ Total depravity complements this determinist framework by emphasising humanity's inability to save itself: just as Noah was preserved by God while the rest of humanity perished in the Flood, the Calvinist account distinguishes between those whom God elects for salvation and the remainder of humanity, who remain in their fallen condition.

It was partly in reaction to this pessimistic, Protestant understanding of human nature that another approach to was then articulated in the 18th Century – one that would arguably go onto the shape the attitudes we hold in the West today. If the Enlightenment is understood as 'the source of the modern secular world,' then it follows that contemporary notions of pride emerge from this period's reconfiguration of moral psychology and human nature. Criticism towards the doctrine of total depravity in this period emerged for good reason. It offered little comfort to humanity, whose nature is inherently one of optimism. It followed that Enlightenment thought swung the pendulum of pride towards positivity and optimism – arguably too far.

There is no better embodiment of this point, nor an Enlightenment thinker more significant to modern culture than Rousseau. He fundamentally restructured the prevailing understanding of human nature. Previously, Augustine had argued that the original sin which corrupts individual human beings was

¹⁰ Augustine. *The City of God*. Project Gutenberg; Book XIV, Chapter 13. Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45305>. Accessed 1 Sep 2026.

¹¹ Aquinas T. *Summa Theologiae*. Part II–II, Question 82. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2082.htm>. Accessed 1 Sep 2026.

¹² *ibid*.

¹³ Calvin J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Available from: <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/tulip-and-reformed-theology-total-depravity>. Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

subsequently reflected in social and political institutions. Augustine first makes that clear that original sin is a weakness of our human nature, stating;

*All good qualities, no doubt, which it still possesses in its make, life, senses, intellect, it has of the Highest God, its Creator and Maker. But the flaw, which darkens and weakens all those natural goods ... it has not contracted from its blameless Creator... but from that original sin.*¹⁴

He then emphasises that it is this weakness that human nature brings into societal structures: 'It is thus that pride in its perversity apes God. It abhors equality with other men under Him; but, instead of His rule, it seeks to impose a rule of its own upon its equals.'¹⁵ Augustine argues that original sin, expressed as the prideful desire to be like God, leads individuals to corrupt society by seeking dominion over one another.

Rousseau completely reversed this relationship. He argued that human beings are naturally gentle and innocent and that it is society's institutions which corrupt the individual. 'Nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state... it is society which depraves and corrupts him.'¹⁶ The consequence is that the individual is encouraged to distinguish himself from the abstract entity called 'society', locating evil not within the self but in external structures.

This bears a superficial resemblance to the asceticism of the early Christian monks who withdrew from civilisation to escape its perceived corruption. Yet Rousseau's separation was philosophical rather than physical. He did not retreat from society itself, but positioned the free citizen intellectually outside it, critiquing its institutions while remaining within them. Each criticism reinforced the distinction between the innocent individual and the corrupt social order. If society alone bears responsibility for moral failure, and one identifies oneself as standing apart from society, it follows that one also stands apart from blame. This relocation of guilt does more than absolve the individual; it gives said individual a sense of moral pride, a sense of superiority.

This superiority can become dangerous. René Girard in his magnum opus, *The Scapegoat*, explains how our sense of superiority makes us resentful and violent. He begins by suggesting that humans have an inherent 'desire for being'.¹⁷ He develops this by suggesting that human desire is memetic, people desire the same thing because they imitate each other's desire. 'Man is the creature who does not know what to desire. He turns to others in order to make up his mind.'¹⁸

This is why status in society is so malleable to what is currently fashionable. It also leads to resentment, through our constant rivalry with each other. Our sense of superiority fans the flames of this resentment as we feel entitled to have our superiority acknowledged and given status and yet feel so often unappreciated. Resentment itself becomes mimetic, the action of copying, just as people imitate each other's desires, so do they imitate anger. When mimetic resentment spreads throughout a community, the community faces a crisis: violence threatens to escalate. Girard argues that the community tries to escape this crisis by collectively directing its hostility toward one individual or

¹⁴ Augustine. *Nature and Grace (De Natura et Gratia)*, Chapter 3. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1502.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

¹⁵ Augustine. *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 12. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

¹⁶ Rousseau J-J. *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*. 1997 edition. Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11136> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

¹⁷ Girard R. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.1977.

¹⁸ Williams J. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of René Girard*. 1996. Available from: <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/2859498> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

minority group: the scapegoat. Through this sacrifice, the crisis is averted, and the community has maintained cohesion.

Rousseau's ideas which engender the blaming of society makes the danger of Girard's theory more potent. Firstly, Rousseau's thought encourages the individual to take pride in blamelessness, which causes the individual to be morally suspicious of society, whilst simultaneously locked in mimetic rivalry in competing for status within society. This creates either one of two problems:

- It creates intense resentment over society not rewarding their perceived moral superiority, or:
- The moral superiority that comes from signaling blamelessness becomes in itself a status rivalry.

The second is the outcome most evident today, moral superiority has become an object of mimetic desire, that Rousseau's philosophy of labelling society corrupt becomes a fashionable idea to be held as long as it gives one status.

Moral pride also has the effect of obscuring the true nature of scapegoating. It allows the individual to view their own resentment as righteous. Instead of the individual acknowledging the truth – *I am angry because I envy, resent or rival this person* – they come to believe that *I am angry because this person is evil and deserves to be punished*.

This transformation is concerning for a cohesive society, as resentment becomes moral indignation, revenge becomes justice, the rival becomes an aggressor and violence becomes righteousness.

A healthy degree of skepticism should be directed towards philosophies that alleviate us of responsibility, encourage us to see ourselves as superior and, most importantly, tempt us to view our own vindictiveness as a righteous crusade.

However, fully appreciating Augustine's warning requires more than simply condemning the pride of Rousseau or other Enlightenment philosophers that wittingly or otherwise encourage moral pride. To do so risks falling into the same pattern of moral superiority, whereby one distances oneself from those deemed morally inferior. Augustine cautions against this attitude, noting that people often take satisfaction in the failings of others while neglecting their own moral condition. His point is that there should be no assumed moral distance between oneself and others; rather, all share in the same flawed human nature, specifically the tendency toward pride.

Cancel Culture

It has now been established that a certain understanding of human nature, most clearly presented in the writings of the Enlightenment thinker Rousseau, has led to an individualistic moral pride which persists in our culture today. Ironically it is perhaps a consequence of pride that people are drawn to philosophies that elevate their sense of virtue by relieving them of their responsibility, instead allowing them to displace their blame onto external social institutions. This moral pride inevitably produces resentment and hostility towards those deemed blameworthy. And modern Western cancel culture can be understood as a reflection of this way of thinking.

Cancel culture has been defined here as ‘acts of mass public boycotting, isolating and shaming’.¹⁹ Yet this definition alone does not explain what distinguishes cancel culture from the traditional forms of social policing that have existed throughout history. Several characteristics make the contemporary phenomenon distinctive.

First, its scale and speed are unprecedented. In the past, someone who violated a social norm might have been shunned by their village, church, university, or workplace. Social media, however, allows millions of strangers to participate in condemnation within hours, transforming what was once a local act of social policing into a potentially global one.

Second, cancel culture often lacks a clear hierarchy of moral authority. Traditional communities typically possessed recognised figures and institutions, such as priests, teachers, or community leaders, who exercised some authority in determining and enforcing social norms. By contrast, online cancellation rarely has a single institution directing events. This decentralisation is significant in the context of moral pride: as trust in institutions declines, individuals may become increasingly willing to regard themselves, rather than established authorities, as the arbiters of moral judgement.

Third, the digital nature of cancellation makes its consequences unusually enduring. Writer Jon Ronson highlights this problem in *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*, where he observes how articles, screenshots, and videos can remain searchable long after the original controversy has passed.²⁰ Unlike traditional forms of social punishment, which could fade as memories diminished, digital records can preserve an individual’s transgression indefinitely, making reputational damage far more difficult to escape.

Finally, social media can incentivise the public condemnation of others. This need not be the result of deliberate design; rather, platforms combine social approval, instant entertainment, and controversy in ways that can reward some of humanity’s less admirable tendencies. Outrage attracts attention, condemnation generates approval, and public shaming can become a source of social status. The result is an environment in which the impulse to identify and punish the blameworthy is not merely permitted, but potentially rewarded.

These changes mark a significant cultural shift, driven in part by new technologies that amplify and preserve social behaviour, with social media providing both permanent evidence and incentives for cruelty. But they also reflect a deeper erosion of community cohesion: a weakening of shared moral codes and a decline in legitimate authority figures capable of modelling social norms. Together, these forces have reshaped how moral judgement is expressed and enforced.

In a perverse way, cancel culture aims to solve this erosion by creating a moral framework that is adhered to by a majority. The strength of the moral framework is established through a combination of punishment of dissenting minorities and majority co-operation. Moral legitimacy is no longer ascribed to community figures but often self-proclaimed by individuals who view themselves as blameless.

Essentially, cancel culture is the latest expression of a long line of social-policing mechanisms aimed at enforcing moral hegemony. This is not to be confused with moral unity. Moral unity arises when a group shares a broad moral framework and pursues common goals while still allowing for

¹⁹ Norris P. *Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2021

²⁰ Ronson J. *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*. New York: Riverhead Books; 2015.

disagreement about how those goals should be achieved. Moral hegemony, by contrast, depends on coercion: it seeks to impose uniform moral belief by punishing or excluding those who fall outside the accepted boundaries. Cancel culture is a problem precisely because it operates as an instrument of moral hegemony, replacing persuasion and debate with pressure, conformity, and social sanction.

Understanding this, the question then focuses on how an ideology like progressivism, or 'woke', often associated with arguing for relative truth, can be so intent on enforcing moral hegemony. The MP Danny Kruger in the House of Commons described this tendency as,

*A combination of ancient paganism, Christian heresies and the cult of modernism, all mashed up into a deeply mistaken and deeply dangerous ideology of power that is hostile to the essential objects of our affections and our loyalties: families, communities and nations.*²¹

His description aptly captures the forces that popularised cancel culture as a means of shutting down ideas that run contrary to the ideology. It is important to understand the grounds on which attempts to justify the cancellation of a person for their political views. Unlike some religious blasphemy laws that restricted certain freedom of ideas on the grounds of attempting to preserve some objective truth, progressivism takes a different approach.

This is because, for those who cancel, the avoidance of harm is considered more important than freedom of speech and, ultimately, the pursuit of truth. The sentiment that 'you can do whatever you want as long as you're not hurting anyone' of course goes back to the harm principle of John Stuart Mill,

*The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.*²²

However, understandings of what constitutes 'harm' today have expanded considerably since Mill's time. It is no longer restricted to objectively demonstrable harms such as physical injury – it can now be as mild as lightly mocking someone or hurting their feelings. Mill did not consider it necessary to explain what counts as harm to others, allowing for the abuse of his original principle.

When expanded in this way, the harm principle becomes authoritarian: freedom of speech is held hostage by someone's vulnerability to feel harmed. Consider the following example,

*20-year-old Royal Holloway student faced the prospect of expulsion after he compared a keffiyeh worn by a pro-Palestine activist student to a 'tea towel' during Freshers' Fair in September 2025. This is after the group of student activists 'perceived' this comment to be Islamophobic and reported him to the university.*²³

This case study demonstrates that, beyond the possibility that some individuals may perceive harm irrationally, there are certain incentives created by a system that relies on self-reported harm to determine what is permissible. In this case, an altercation between two university students becomes imbalanced where the pro-Palestine activist student is considered by the university to be in a 'protected group' due to the idea that certain ethnicities and religions have a unique ability to be

²¹ Kruger D. *Speech in the House of Commons ("Empty Chamber Speech")*. 2020. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JIYf_VGv64 Accessed 26 Aug 2026

²² Mill JS. *On Liberty*. 1859. Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/34901> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

²³ Royal Holloway incident (2025). *Student investigated for "tea towel" comment*. BBC News. 2025. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

harmed. The student was being punished not because his statement was merely rude but because it was rude about a culture considered to be vulnerable.

Regardless of the extent to which one agrees or disagrees over the level of vulnerability of certain groups, such a system is all too easily exploited. This system may encourage individuals to exaggerate or even actively seek out grounds on which they can claim to have been harmed. This is because, under Mill's principle, a successful claim of harm can be used to legitimise the silencing or cancelling of the person deemed responsible. Someone may be encouraged to cancel a perceived aggressor either out of a desire for revenge or, more dangerously, out of a misplaced sense of moral duty. This misplaced moral duty arises when an individual equates victimhood with virtue, convincing themselves that being harmed grants them a moral justification to wield the power of cancel action. Punishment toward the perceived aggressor ceases to be understood as revenge and instead becomes synonymous with justice.

The major differences between cancel culture and other forms of social policing have been outlined, along with the intentions that sustain it, particularly the drive to impose a uniform moral framework within a community and its entanglement with incentives of power, revenge, and moral pride. The remaining question is how cancel culture operates. It is necessary to understand how most forms of cancel culture uses punishment to create 'implicit laws' that regulate behaviour through the creation and enforcement of unwritten social norms that are widely understood within a community but rarely stated explicitly.

Implicit Lawmaking

There is no rule book or manifesto that details which statements warrant cancellation. There is usually a strong general gist about what areas are controversial that perhaps changes slightly depending on age group and gender. Race, sex, abortion, immigration and political affiliation are just some of the many topics in which cancellation usually occurs. However, the lack of clear guidance on what is specifically off limits makes cancellation unclear and unpredictable. This is exacerbated by the fact opinions considered to be unacceptable are constantly evolving and are not debated or agreed upon. Cancel culture is effective in taking advantage of this disunity by using punishment to set up a proposed moral framework and then relying on majority fear or obedience to affirm the validity of the perceived moral framework.

For example, person A states that they like the colour green, to which person B, who dislikes green, calls for a boycott of person A, supported by persons C, D and E, who share the same view. The boycott serves not only as punishment for liking green, but also to establish an implicit rule: that liking green is morally wrong and not a position worth defending. The remaining members of the community, whether through fear, indifference or unwillingness to become involved, reinforce the validity of this implicit law by refusing to challenge or criticise it.

The aim of this example is to emphasise how cancel culture is often used to set up moral positions that become accepted by a majority in a community. The effectiveness of the moral position, in this case, that liking green is morally wrong, depends not on the strength of the argument itself, but on the strength of the social disincentives that discourage others from challenging it.

This is important because it helps explain why some people fail to distinguish between crude insults directed at their ideology and genuine arguments that challenge their beliefs in good faith. Where a moral code has been established through cancel culture, any challenge to it can appear threatening because its authority depends, at least in part, on continued collective affirmation. A reasoned, good-faith challenge is particularly dangerous because it makes the implicit law explicit: it defines the moral position, exposes its underlying assumptions and gives others permission to question it. Once the consensus begins to weaken, so too does the authority of the position itself.

This is a potential weakness of any moral framework that relies excessively on social consensus, but it is particularly pronounced in moral codes formed through cancel culture, where there may be little underlying wisdom or reason to sustain them once collective affirmation is removed. Strong moral frameworks do not depend solely on majority approval; they are grounded, at least in part, in claims to objective truth that can withstand scrutiny and disagreement.

Perhaps the best example is J.K. Rowling and the trans debate. In 2020 Rowling wrote a tweet criticising an article titled 'Creating a more equal post-Covid-19 world for people who menstruate,' mocking the article's phrasing, saying 'I'm sure there used to be a word for those people... Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud.'²⁴ Whether Rowling had tweeted this out of frustration with the article or as a planned stand of defiance is unknown, but the resulting backlash provides a revealing insight into how cancel culture works and some of its strengths and weaknesses. The first wave of abuse and calls for boycott of Rowling represented the punishment by which cancel culture establishes its implicit laws. In the case of Rowling the implicit law was that criticism of trans-language is equal to a criticism of the trans narrative and such a criticism is morally wrong.

The courage of Rowling to stand defiant in the face of rape and death threats, boycotts and public shaming from friends and colleagues is laudable and exposes some of the vindictive punishment strategies of cancel culture.²⁵ The punishment strategies can be more effective against someone who lacks Rowling's status. Rowling occupies a position of exceptional financial and professional independence and has no employer who can dismiss her. The backlash may be a problem but not effective enough to silence Rowling or to force her into a public apology in the hope of 'saving' her career.

Majority Enforcement

The true cost of the punishment towards Rowling was the creation of an implicit law that the majority enforce with their silence. This majority is most effectively held in smaller communities that exist within our society. For example, schools, universities and workplaces. These are communities where creating an environment where the majority self-censor is relatively easy because they are tight knit environments that make ostracization particularly painful and simply not worth stating an opinion considered controversial.

As shown in the green example, it is not necessary to have a real majority that believes in the implicit law for cancel culture to be effective, all that is needed is a fanatic vocal minority and self-interested

²⁴ The Week Staff. *JK Rowling criticised for tweet about "people who menstruate"*. The Week. 2020. Available from: <https://theweek.com/feature/1020838/jk-rowlings-transphobia-controversy-a-complete-timeline> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

²⁵ France 24. *J.K. Rowling reveals death threats over transgender row*. 2021 Nov 22. Available from: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211122-j-k-rowling-reveals-death-threats-over-transgender-row>. Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

majority. Edmund Burke once issued a famous statement of the nobility of the silent majority of the British people.

*Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field.*²⁶

He was praising the quiet interests of the majority as a defense against the ‘importunate chink’ of the grasshoppers, in this case the devotees of the moral code enforcing censorship. However, patterns emerging through accumulating cases of cancel culture present a contradictory view of the silent majority. The pattern suggests that the silence of the majority is not one of dignity but one of self-censorship.

This becomes clear when considering the average person views the incentives and disincentives of raising an opinion considered unacceptable. In informal social contexts, raising an unwanted opinion can incite ridicule and disapproval – in institutions such as schools, universities and workplaces, it can mean the end of your career.

Examples from across Britain and its social institutions show this pattern clearly.

*School teacher Kevin Lister at New College Swindon was sacked for ‘refusing to refer to a biologically female student by their preferred male name and he / him pronouns’ BBC reported. Mr Lister has since been barred by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) from participating in regulated activities with children. Lister had worked as a maths teacher for 20 years and is now legally considered to be harmful to children.*²⁷

In universities, similar disincentives exist for students.

*Leeds student Connie Shaw was sacked by her student union for gender critical views. She reported that this incident spread throughout the university and was told by friends that they had been warned off associating with her.*²⁸

And again, in the workplace.

*Gillian Philip, a Scottish children's author and ghostwriter lost her book contracts after expressing support for JK Rowling on Twitter, which conflicted with her publisher's corporate values.*²⁹

In each of these cases, the courage of those cancelled caused them to be isolated. Individuals who may share their views or at least recognise the injustice of their cancellation feel they have too much to lose if they speak up and support them, encouraging a self-perpetuating cycle of self-censorship.

²⁶ Burke E. *Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink...* (quote). Available from: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1029850-because-half-a-dozen-grasshoppers-under-a-fern-make-the>. Accessed 1 Sep 2026.

²⁷ Lister K. *Case of dismissal for refusal to use preferred pronouns*. BBC News. 2023. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-wiltshire-68681038> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

²⁸ Shaw C. *Leeds student dismissed from student union for gender-critical views*. Telegraph. 2024. Available from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/12/09/student-suspended-gender-critical-views/> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

²⁹ Philip G. *Children's author loses contracts after expressing support for JK Rowling*. The Business Insider 2020. Available from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/gillian-philip-childrens-author-sacked-tweeting-support-jk-rowling-2020-7> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

The result is that ideas that might otherwise have been expressed are left unsaid, or eventually abandoned altogether.

The unfortunate consequence is that self-censorship encourages cowardice. This emboldens cancel culture by proving that it works, discouraging people from engaging with ideas deemed too controversial. The message that cancel culture stifles important conversation is now etched into the public consciousness, but what is less often discussed is the responsibility all share in enforcing it. It is not the grasshoppers but the silence of the crowd that creates mimetic fear. It is our obedience to the doctrines of cancel culture that gives its acolytes their teeth.

By exposing the implicit laws of cancel culture and debating them openly, on the other hand, its power is weakened. Censors reveal themselves to have created a ‘house built on sand’:³⁰ a moral code sustained by coercion, and one that can only operate if people are willing to be coerced. The punishments of cancel culture are real; people can lose friends, jobs, opportunities and dignity. But these punishments depend on the power that cancel culture is allowed to wield. If that power is weakened, so too are the punishments. Friends are less likely to abandon one another over a controversial comment in a culture where good-faith debate is encouraged. Likewise, companies often follow the direction of public opinion, so if enough people openly demanded greater tolerance for controversial ideas, businesses would have less incentive to punish those who express them.

There has been a noticeable change and pushback to cancel culture as it existed at its strongest form in 2020-24. Gender critical views, once one of the most cancellable offences, have received a wave of support with the Supreme Court ruling in 2025 that the word *woman* in the Equality Act specifically referred to biological sex.³¹ In the US, Trump’s successful trans-critical presidential campaign and several organisations, think tanks and public figures vocally challenged the implicit laws around transgender identity, which have solidified confidence in speaking about gender in terms of biological sex.

But while the explicitly left-wing form of cancel culture that dominated the early 2020s is slowly being dismantled, cancel culture itself persists. This is because it is too often understood through individual controversies and political strategy rather than as a broader cultural phenomenon rooted in moral pride. In this sense, cancel culture can be understood as a form of social engineering: a means of establishing moral hegemony when individuals seek the cohesion of a shared moral framework but lack the patience, willingness, or confidence to achieve it through persuasion, good-faith argument, and leading by example.

It is now worth considering how our own politics risk falling into the same trap of moral pride that makes cancel culture possible. It will also argue that championing free speech, while important, is not by itself a sufficient response to cancel culture, because it fails to address the deeper problem of human nature and the importance of character in matters of speech, debate and truth.

³⁰ The Holy Bible. *Matthew 7:24–27*. English Standard Version. Available from: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+7%3A24-27&version=ESV>. Accessed 1 Sep 2026.

³¹ UK Supreme Court. *Judgment on the definition of “woman” in the Equality Act. 2025*. Available from: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10259/>. Accessed 25 Aug 2026

The Evolution of Cancel Culture and Its Consequences

Donald Trump at various points in his two terms in office has claimed to be the President of free speech. At his second inauguration speech, he declared;

*After years and years of illegal and unconstitutional federal efforts to restrict free expression, I will also sign an executive order to immediately stop all government censorship and bring back free speech to America.*³²

This bold claim was cause for celebration for free speech advocates both in the US and Britain. Between late 2024 and early 2025, Elon Musk made several pro free speech changes to Twitter (now X), the largest social media platform in the world. These changes included dissolving the old trust and safety advisory teams; granting a general amnesty to previously suspended accounts; and introducing a feature to flag and expose state-ordered censorship requests by naming the specific government agency and requiring legal basis for content takedowns.³³ These changes have made it rarer to be deplatformed online over political comments.

It is also true to suggest there is a noticeable cultural shift in what is acceptable to say. This, however, does not necessarily spell the end of cancel culture – it may simply be becoming less visible. There is now also considerably less agreement over what counts as cancel culture. Trump's actions following the murder of Charlie Kirk, for example, are ambiguous. Trump called for restrictions on people celebrating the murder of the activist, in one case revoking the visas of six foreigners who engaged in such celebrations.³⁴

This itself may not have been cancellation given that it did not pertain so much to political differences as to the cruel cheering of an assassination. One could make the argument that this is fair use of punishment in order that a certain level of public decency can exist, and that Trump's campaign of ending federal restriction was always intended to protect freedom of ideas rather than protecting the freedom to say anything without consequences.

But what about Trump's actions in the case of sanctioning comedian Jimmy Kimmel? Can the same defence be made to allow Trump to keep his title as the president of free speech? Jimmy Kimmel Live TV was suspended from the 17th to the 22nd of January 2026, over controversial remarks surrounding Charlie Kirk's death.

*We hit some new lows over the weekend, with the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and everything they can to score political points from it.*³⁵

The comment itself is neither particularly sharp nor well-informed, but its target is clear: it criticises the Government's attempt to capitalise on the incident, rather than expressing any celebration of Kirk's death. Kimmel's remark is political satire and should be understood in the same category as criticisms of government pandemic policy or of government politicising of events such as Pride celebrations.

³² Trump D. *Second Inauguration Speech*. 2025. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7gE8y7RkVs> 25 Aug 2026

³³ Musk E. *Policy announcements and censorship-transparency updates on Twitter/X*. 2024–2025. Available from: <https://twitter.com/elonmusk> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

³⁴ The Guardian. *US foreign visas: Charlie Kirk faces scrutiny over social media activity*. 2025 Oct 14. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/14/us-foreign-visas-charlie-kirk-social-media>. Accessed 4 Sep 2026.

³⁵ BBC News. *Jimmy Kimmel suspended after controversial remarks about Charlie Kirk's death*. 2023. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c203n52x1y9o>. Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

These are all examples of speech that may cause offence yet remain political in nature and should be protected.

If this is not sufficient evidence that cancel culture is a universal problem across the political spectrum, consider one more case.

In 2025, New York University was withholding the diploma of graduating student Logan Rozos, after using the graduation platform to denounce the US government and its culpability in the alleged Gaza genocide. The university was seeking disciplinary action after Rozos 'misled' them over the contents of his speech.³⁶

Supporters of free speech have understandable grounds for concern. While it may be true that Rozos misused the platform to make deeply political remarks, the University's reaction shows that meaningful restrictions on speech are still in place. It is also reasonable to note that many free-speech advocates adopt an anti-establishment posture precisely because institutions have, at times, used cancellation dynamics to suppress speech that challenges prevailing cultural narratives. In this context, their skepticism is not incidental but a predictable response to patterns of institutional overreach.

The reality is that Trump was very unlikely to be able to deliver on his promise to 'end all government censorship' and the idea that a right-wing government could end cancel culture once and for all takes a naïve view of what cancel culture is. Government policy cannot end selfishness or jealousy or any other aspect of our human nature, it follows that it cannot end cancel culture. Because cancel culture is a consequence of moral pride, the only way to counter cancel culture is to rediscover a culture of humility. Where our desire to be morally superior gives us license to cancel, a counter-effort to be humble would give us pause to reflect and make wiser judgments.

If this is the case, then why has cancel culture appeared to lessen and what kind of moral pride is affecting the right? The answer to the first question has two parts, the first being that those on the right generally have demonstrated a stronger preference for the protection of fundamental liberties, including free speech. Second and perhaps more concerning, is that the growing polarisation is causing less frequent debate between opposing ideas. If people are spending more time in echo chambers it may follow that there will be fewer visible cases of cancel culture but at the cost of wider societal cohesion.

The question of what kind of moral pride is affecting the right is a more difficult question to answer but will end up being similar to the left. The more foundational point is that cancel culture comes from a philosophy of moral pride particularly evident in Rousseau's teaching of human nature, and this is by no means exclusive to the left. The idea that moral superiority can be found in blamelessness is universal and can be seen in right-wing proponents, particularly those who feel anger over a real or imagined victimisation at the hands of left-wing cancel culture. Without humility and the potential for forgiveness, the cycle continues, and the narrative becomes one of over-correction: *They did this to me so I have a right to do it to them.*

³⁶ The Guardian. *NYU withholds diploma after student's speech on Israel–Gaza*. 2025. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/15/nyu-withholds-diploma-israel-gaza-speech> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

Why has Cancel Culture Lessened?

In sum, cancel culture appears less visible today because several forces have reduced both its frequency and its prominence. The rise of widely promoted free-speech rhetoric has shifted cultural expectations, making public attempts at cancellation harder to sustain. Social-media platforms have also adopted more tolerant moderation practices, resulting in fewer high-profile celebrity removals and less public drama around deplatforming. At the same time, there has been a clear backlash against the informal norms that shaped cancel culture from 2020–23, weakening the social incentives that once fueled rapid pile-ons. Together, these shifts help explain why cancel culture now occupies a smaller share of public attention.

These factors, while illustrative, do not fully explain why cancel culture lessened.

One potential argument is that the *why* can be explained by a recency bias argument. That the rise of the right, through populist political figures, are still in early stages and have not been in power long enough to have demonstrated a similar willingness to engage in cancel action. The previously cited examples of cancel culture under the Trump administration potentially support this; if Trump was willing to cancel Kimmel, he will probably cancel again.

However, this is not a sufficient explanation. It is not honest to argue that time is the only differentiating factor, in terms of participating in cancel action between left and right. Those from right-wing libertarian traditions are generally more in favour of free-speech and less restriction.

A King's College London study in 2021, showed that,

*Half of the UK public (50%) disagree that 'no-platforming' is the right response to speakers with controversial views, compared with one in six (17%) who are in favour of such a response and one in four (24%) who don't take a position. Labour supporters (27%) are nearly three times as likely as their Conservative counterparts (10%) to agree that no-platforming can be appropriate.*³⁷

The divide in opinions over free speech has only grown since 2021, where the attempts to deplatform public figures were more frequent, highly visible and increasingly polarising. In practice, support for free speech in individual cases tends to be binary: either one upholds it, or one does not. And for those who do uphold it, the defence often demands a more uncompromising stance than they might naturally choose, pulling them away from a moderate, low-conflict position. As these defenders adopt increasingly combative arguments, the distance between them and advocates of deplatforming widens, intensifying the overall polarisation.

This suggests that the right prioritises free speech more, but what is the significance of this? However necessary and worthy a cause it may be, free speech is not, as many believe, a sufficient antidote to cancel culture. Cancel culture's aim is to establish social cohesion through punishment and that does not strictly require a restriction of speech. One could have free speech laws that protect against firing and de-platforming yet still suffer the punishments of cancel culture through social isolation and social reputation damage. Nonetheless, protecting free speech does indeed lessen the severity of the punishment. Free speech is also vital in weakening cancel culture by allowing individuals to expose and

³⁷ King's College London Policy Institute. *Culture Wars in the UK: Public Opinion Survey*. 2021. Available from: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/research-analysis/culture-wars-in-the-uk> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

debate the implicit laws. Above all, free speech creates the condition for free ideas, which makes good ideas possible.

Free Speech and Moral Pride

The championing of free speech has its limitations. Free speech does not solve the potency of moral pride. Solely championing free speech can potentially even exacerbate pride as the focus is on one's inherent right to say anything and far less interested in whether that speech is aimed at finding truth. The promotion of free speech should not accidentally end up giving equal value to all speech.

Without the humility of acknowledging one's own faults, it becomes challenging for one to see that they have a responsibility in using their speech discerningly. Our speech is a reflection of us, and just as we are free to strive to be the highest or lowest versions of ourselves, so is speech free to be used to accomplish this goal. In this vein, it is worth mentioning that the ability to be anonymous on social media helps veil the individual from the consequences of their speech. Anonymity online can incentivise a use of language that the individual would likely disassociate from in person. It is generally a good thing to encourage people to associate their use of speech with their character.

Greater reflection on speech should be encouraged, but the debate ought not to center solely on whether speech should be sensitive to others or whether all speech should be permissible. Instead, it should focus on the kind of culture that speech is meant to cultivate, with particular attention to how the formation of individual character shapes that culture.

Consider the speech in the House of Commons. The speech of every member is not entirely 'free', for every member is burdened to introduce one another as 'my honourable friend' or 'the honourable gentleman'.³⁸

This tradition is often considered archaic and could be considered by some to be contrary to the more direct, bold and aggressive language style that is popular particularly in the US and increasingly in the UK as well. However, the tradition speaks to a higher truth: the need for order that can only be sustained by civility. This tradition both gently encourages your opponent to rise to their title as *honourable gentlemen/lady* and reminds the parliamentarians that the House of Commons stands for something greater than whatever petty insult was going to be used instead. It is an important instance of where speech is guided in a manner that is not strictly free to serve a higher culture.

Much of the language that has infiltrated debate today, by contrast, is designed to tear down opponents and elevate the speaker. Such language is corrosive to a culture of good-faith debate.

Common expressions such as 'educate yourself,' 'check your privilege,' and 'be on the right side of history' have become familiar features of contemporary political discourse because they are rhetorically effective. Rather than engaging directly with an opponent's argument, these phrases encourage the recipient to question their own moral standing, level of education, or social position and are not exclusive to any particular side of the political debate. The instruction to '*be on the right side of history*' is particularly symptomatic of moral pride as it arrogantly suggests the user possesses oracle-like knowledge of the future. Too often this phrase is used to sidestep debate, it is a comfortable

³⁸ Debrett's. *The etiquette of the House of Commons chamber*. Available from: <https://debretts.com/the-etiquette-of-the-house-of-commons-chamber/>. Accessed 1 Sep 2026.

In addition, QCs would have been addressed as 'learned' and those who have served in the Armed Forces as 'gallant'.

slogan that massages one's sense of righteousness and certainty without requiring one to explain exactly what undeniable goodness their ethics code will bring to history. Consider, for example, the criminal acts committed by those in society who believed without introspection that they too were on the *right side of history*.

Additionally, the phrase 'check your privilege' is another commonly used phrase that fosters moral pride. Often it is used by those on the liberal left to refer to a perceived advantage in society due to a person's ethnicity, sexuality or socio-economic background. It is also used on the right, in a different fashion, often referring to 'academic elites in ivory towers'. In both cases blame is being placed on perceived high status in society. This is symptomatic of Girard's scapegoat theory in which individuals attribute blame to those viewed as benefiting from society, which builds resentment, tension and the desire to punish.

The point is that promoting free speech alone does not solve the underlying problem of moral pride. At its best it can create the environment for people to freely challenge poorly thought through moral frameworks, but it can also encourage an entitlement to use speech frivolously without regard to the truth of the ideas put across.

Divided Society

If cancel culture is understood as a coercive attempt to manufacture social cohesion, then the remedy cannot be to escalate division. Social cohesion matters, and a shared moral framework is essential for any stable society – but cohesion must be achieved and policed without resorting to the coercive methods of mob mentality. When cancel culture is instead understood as social policing gone wrong, our aim becomes one of addressing this misstep, rather than attempting to do away with social policing altogether. The important distinction is that punishment through social disincentives remain, but the underlying moral pride, that so often is complacent, is dropped.

It follows that any suggestion that seeks to remedy cancel culture through free speech should specifically seek to encourage speech oriented toward constructive debate; debate that seeks to build common ground rather than deepen fractures. In this sense, the goal should not be to abandon moral discourse but to channel it toward forms of engagement that unite rather than divide.

There is little doubt that societal division continues to intensify, and the prospect of a stable middle ground between the political left and right appears increasingly remote. Public opinion data reinforces this trend. The survey conducted by King's College London five years ago also reported that;

Three-quarters of the public (74%) say the UK feels divided to them these days, with more than one in four (28%) saying it feels very divided. By contrast, one in seven (16%) think the country is united, including just 1% who feel we're very united as a nation.³⁹

The ability to predict what the future will bring in terms of further division or how actors on both the left and right may continue to deploy cancel culture as a tool for enforcing moral conformity is for another time. What is more constructive is to introduce a message of hope. The troubling reality is that cancel culture reaches far deeper than restrictions on free expression; it reflects a distortion of

³⁹ King's College London Policy Institute. *Culture Wars in the UK: Public Opinion Survey*. 2021. Available from: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/research-analysis/culture-wars-in-the-uk> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

our social-policing instincts driven by moral pride. Yet this same depth offers an opportunity: it is a problem that could unite rather than divide. If cancel culture stems from an imbalance of moral pride in how human nature is understood, then addressing it requires placing greater emphasis on humility.

Humility is not a politicised virtue, nor does it perpetuate cycles of blame or scapegoating. Many of the dangers associated with cancel culture could be mitigated if enough individuals committed themselves to cultivating this virtue. And the most practical place to begin is with oneself.

Original Sin: An Antidote to Moral Pride

Strategies to counter cancel culture must first reckon with the problem of moral pride. This requires a pivot towards strategies that understand and engage with the reality of human nature, in this way going further than free speech and towards the implementing of better ideas about who we are and how we should live together.

St Augustine recognised the dangers of ascribing overly positive, even utopian interpretations to our human nature – thus it is in his teachings that the correction may be found.

To understand why utopian interpretations of human nature should be rejected, it helps to look closely at what they claim. The problem with utopian ideas is that they tend to identify a real problem, simplify it to a slogan and invent an imaginary solution that, crucially, is supposed to be possible to achieve by our own efforts on earth.

Rousseau's view is a good example: it offers an appealing picture of humanity in the state of nature as gentle, peaceful, and kind. Yet this vision is unsupported; there is little surviving evidence to suggest individuals lived freely in this way. The attraction of utopian thinking lies not in its rationality but in the ideal it encourages us to strive toward.

The other indicator that Rousseau's thinking is utopian is the way it simplifies the obstacles that prevent us from actualising the vision. When one paints a utopian picture of how things should be, it follows that an explanation is needed for why reality falls short. This, as discussed, is where the danger in Rousseau's philosophy lies: it externalises blame onto society and, by extension, onto those perceived to benefit from it, a pattern common to most utopian philosophies. Utopian thought often turns ugly when it comes time to identify who is responsible for thwarting the ideal vision.

The point here is that, through Augustine, the remedy sought is not a response directed solely at Rousseau but at all forms of utopian philosophy that foster moral pride. Augustine identified pride as the sin that made utopian philosophy dangerous. It follows that humility would be the virtue he aimed to cultivate. Augustine was an admirer of Plato and was therefore receptive to the idea that virtue had to be cultivated in society through education and discipline to embed virtuous behaviour as a habit:

*For no man under heaven who has cultivated such practices [vices] from his youth could possibly grow up to be wise, so miraculous a temper is against nature, or become temperate, or indeed acquire any other part of virtue.*⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Plato. *Seventh Letter*, 326c. Available from: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.%207th%20Letter> ([perseus.tufts.edu in Bing](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.%207th%20Letter)) Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

For Plato, this meant educating children about virtue from an early age. Plato did not give a single, fixed definition of virtue, but remained consistent in arguing that virtue must still be pursued and practiced. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge some important truths. First, that virtue is good for the individual and society, therefore it should be taught. Second, that children are not born possessing virtue and need to have it taught until virtue becomes a habit.

Contrastingly, in many schools today a Rousseauistic model of education is found. The Headmistress of Michaela school, Katharine Birbalsingh explains this:

Like energy, we cannot remove authority; we can only move it elsewhere. The attempts by Rousseau and his ideological successors to remove or lessen the influence of parents and teachers in the hope that children would grow up more 'authentically' was, at best, desperately naïve. It simply gave way to other new and untested authorities, the influence of which is only now starting to come into view.⁴¹

Birbalsingh hits the mark by identifying where Rousseau's philosophy of suspicion towards authority has lessened the influence of parents and teachers as educators, and this essay builds on this assessment that the result is the fostering of moral pride, in which the young generations are particularly vulnerable. In this case, parents need to be confident in their duty to instill virtue in their children, in particular humility.

Humility stems from the Latin word *humus* meaning earth; being humble is like being grounded. The connotations of being grounded means seeing the world as it is, whilst the earth also has connotations of growth and development. This helps us to think about Augustine's teaching of original sin as a teaching of humility. Understanding human nature as a continual struggle against the temptation to sin encourages deeper self-reflection and directs attention toward how individuals can contribute to the improvement of society. The difference between original sin and Rousseau's understanding of human nature is subtle but significant. Whereas Rousseau's emphasis is on identifying how society causes corruption in the individual, original sin emphasises how the corruption of the individual is brought into society.

The result of this can be both overwhelming and calming. It encourages the individual to take greater responsibility for their own shortcomings, which can feel less satisfying than an ethic that allows one to feel blameless and absolved of personal responsibility. Yet rejecting the perfectibility of human nature can foster a healthier acceptance of human flaw, especially when one finds solace in the impossibility of achieving perfection through one's own efforts. In sum, original sin reminds us that we are not and will never be without flaws, but that this is nothing to be ashamed of so long as we do what we can to resist being overcome by them.

Crucially, awareness of one's own flaws conditions one to be forgiving of others, as Augustine says: 'For the more anyone knows himself to be involved in sins, the more he is gentle toward others.'⁴²

Viewing failings as not simply a character defect but a shared flaw of humanity can create a sense of empathy and commonality with the other. This is a clear reversal of the tendency to see perceived sinners as 'alien' found in those who believe themselves morally superior. This is an important shift to help us to resist scapegoating. Whereas moral pride encourages us to view our resentment as valid

⁴¹ Birbalsingh K. *Michaela: The Power of Culture*. London: John Catt Educational; 2020.

⁴² Augustine. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 50.7. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

and our revenge as justice, original sin reminds us that it is our own defects that seek to view resentment and revenge positively and such desires should be viewed with skepticism.

In our interactions with one another, this demands that we avoid making hasty judgement on individuals based on past or present comments and having more empathy for the context surrounding those comments and the intentions behind them. Whilst past actions do and should have consequences, the mistakes of the past should not necessarily define or condemn a person for all time. Nor are those mistakes unique to that person.

Consequently, accepting the message of original sin would give individuals a greater interest in encouraging mercy. This interest does need not be motivated by selflessness for it to be effective in fostering a culture of redemption. This is emphasised by modern Augustinian scholar, Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote: 'The more we become aware of the sin in ourselves, the more we are inclined to deal mercifully with the sins of others.'⁴³ Here Niebuhr echoes the golden rule, 'So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.'⁴⁴

Whilst this principle is widely agreed upon in Western society, it is less obvious that the golden rule's effectiveness in promoting mercy depends upon the prior acknowledgement of one's own weakness to sin. If a person cannot conceive of themselves sinning and needing mercy, then they have little inclination to be merciful to others. In sum, for the golden rule to be effective, one has to have a humble view of one's own need for mercy, which means recognising our own weakness to sin.

Mercy and forgiveness are similar concepts, being perhaps differentiated only by timing. Mercy is the decision to forgo one's right to punish, and forgiveness is the decision to forgo one's right for revenge after punishment. True mercy requires forgiveness as it is defeating to grant mercy, only to then regret granting it later and seek revenge. Additionally, it is important to note that forgiveness can exist without mercy. It is not virtuous to deny punishment if the punishment is just, but when justice has been reached, forgiveness is important in allowing for the individual to be redeemed and not overburdened in unnecessary punishment. This is why the removal of social moral policing need not be recommended, nor could it be achieved even if desired. What matters instead is the discipline to preserve justice rather than revenge. Punishment should be regarded as occasionally necessary and strictly corrective, not as an act of righteous violence against perceived evil.

Augustine worried that our self-righteous pride would lead us to delight in the humiliation of punishment to others, which is why it is important that our cultivation of humility extends not just to our acknowledgment of our own capacity to fail but also in our scrutiny of our own motivations regarding punishment:

*It is better that a fault be corrected in secret, lest while the offender is made ashamed before many, he be either driven to despair or inflamed with greater pride.*⁴⁵

Augustine's argument is a practical one, even if somewhat frustrating. The idea that redemption works best in private can leave us uncertain about whether someone's redemption is genuine. It is also difficult to account for the invisible, internal punishment an individual may impose on themselves,

⁴³ Niebuhr R. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Vol. 1. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; 1952.

⁴⁴ The Holy Bible. *New Revised Standard Version*. Matthew 7:12; John 8:1–11. 2001

⁴⁵ Augustine. *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum*, Book I. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1402.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

which complicates any judgement about what constitutes a just penalty or an appropriate degree of humiliation. But the unspoken tension here is that Augustine strongly advocated for forgiveness from God, not man that the sinner ought to seek. And that is not an easy concept for us to understand or accept.

Perhaps the greatest strength of original sin is that it combines a pessimistic view of our propensity to sin with an optimistic reflection that humans were created by God and therefore by nature oriented towards good. Augustine made this clear when he stated;

*All good qualities, no doubt, which it still possesses in its make, life, senses, intellect, it has of the Most High God, its Creator and Maker.*⁴⁶

If the view of human nature being inherently flawed is the pessimistic side of original sin, it is balanced by the optimistic role of God as redeemer. Just as perfection cannot be attained through human effort alone, redemption likewise cannot be secured by individual effort in isolation. Consider the example of St Paul of Tarsus. He violently persecuted Christians, yet he was redeemed and redirected onto a saintly path by God. Paul would go on to accomplish impressive works that earned the admiration and forgiveness of his Christian peers. But the crucial point is that neither his fellow Christians nor even his victims had the power to redeem him; that authority lay in God's forgiveness and in Paul's willingness to accept it.

The instinct to accept original sin's emphasis of inherent human weakness whilst rejecting the corresponding side of God as redeemer is understandable if unfortunate. The optimism surrounding God's role in original sin is both clear and essential: God serves as the standard toward which individuals strive and as the constant source of redemption that enables continued spiritual growth when they inevitably falter and fall. Without this divine role and the possibility of private redemption, wrongdoers risk sinking further into sin.

As well as a warning against utopian pride, it is a message of constant hope in the face of despair and self-loathing: 'Let no one despair of himself, for God does not despair of him.'⁴⁷

The natural objection to this concept of God's abundant forgiveness is that it can be viewed as overly lenient and seems to prioritise redemption over justice. It is a view taken by Richard Dawkins, who stated; 'It is profoundly immoral to believe that you can commit a sin... and then be forgiven simply by asking.'⁴⁸

Dawkins' argument could be enlisted as a defence of the harshness of cancel culture. One may argue that cancel culture is an imperfect system but that at its best it effectively punishes culpable individuals, who may under the protection of this original sin thesis escape real punishment. However, this objection misinterprets the role of God's forgiveness. Augustine foresaw such objections and makes clear that seeking forgiveness is demanding, notably where he suggested, 'God does not

⁴⁶ Augustine. *Nature and Grace (De Natura et Gratia)*. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1502.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

⁴⁷ Augustine. *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Psalm 102 (101), sermon 2.8. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801102.htm> ([newadvent.org in Bing](#)) Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

⁴⁸ Dawkins R. *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam Press; 2006.

command impossibilities, but by commanding he admonishes you both to do what you can and to ask for what you cannot.’⁴⁹

Augustine requires the sinner to do everything in his power to reform and have the humility to ask for help in areas where he is weak. In short, Augustine demands a great deal of humility on the part of the sinner, but he does not require the sinner to subject himself to humiliation before a crowd. Additionally, Augustine is not suggesting that private redemption will or should necessarily prevent the sinner suffering crowd backlash and/or public justice procedure. The difference lies in the fact that in private the sinner has a greater chance to find redemption whilst putting the power of judgement and redemption in the hands of a crowd would likely only lead to vengeance, humiliation and scapegoating.

Even with a renewed effort to cultivate humility in society, it would be unrealistic to expect cancel culture to disappear entirely. Some degree of social policing is inevitable and necessary in any community, and at its best it serves to uphold basic moral standards through shared public judgment. If the public opinion is in favour of behaviour that is virtuous and disapproving of behaviour that is destructive, then it is these qualities that become memetic through society and forge culture. The point is not to abolish social sanction but to discipline its tendencies towards vengeance, humiliation and scapegoating. Humility offers precisely this discipline: a guiding principle that restrains the most destructive and divisive forms of moral policing, especially the prideful certainty and vengeful humiliation that characterise cancel culture at its worst.

Confronting cancel culture therefore requires addressing its deeper moral engine. Utopian interpretations of human nature, such as that of Rousseau’s, do not encourage the positive cultivation of character but the negative application of blame. Where Rousseau ascribes virtue to the absence of blame, original sin ascribes virtue to the intentional struggle over internal weakness. Where Rousseau first sees fault in the system of society, Augustine first sees the fault in himself. Where Rousseau accelerates the cycle of scapegoating, Augustine halts it with his directive of forgiveness over revenge.

Cancel culture is a symptom of a culture starved of humility: an honest recognition of our shared susceptibility to failure and our own need for mercy. Judgement of others must be re-evaluated, discouraging vengeful moralism and fostering empathy, restraint, and a commitment to justice rather than humiliation. Social moral policing will always exist, but humility provides a principled way to resist its most destructive expressions. Acknowledging our own flaws is what enables us to treat others mercifully, and any attempt to repair our fractured moral culture must begin with this recognition. But this humility should not be mistaken for a kind of self-sabotaging empathy that, through a commitment to relativism or an indulgent focus on one’s own failings, erodes the capacity to make firm moral judgments.

In the end, the antidote to moral pride lies in holding together two truths: that decisive judgment will at times be necessary, and that wise judgment is always a precarious balance, one on which individuals, by nature, are prone to lose their footing. As former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes:

⁴⁹ Augustine. *Nature and Grace (De Natura et Gratia)*. Available from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1502.htm> Accessed 25 Aug 2026.

‘To know oneself as a sinner is not to abandon judgment, but to abandon the fantasy of innocent judgment.’⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ Williams R. *The Truce of God*. London: Fount; 1990. p. 34.