

# The Importance of Uncertainty in Solving *The Problem with Everything*

by [Jamie Lee](#)

Meghan Daum is certain of only one thing: her uncertainty. In a world teeming with rage-filled outbursts on social media, polarizing purity policing, and frantic apologies for jokes made years ago, Daum has long felt troubled by the “maddening toggle between what I felt versus what I thought I was supposed to feel” (170). Daum identifies as a member of Generation X—a generation, in her opinion, uniquely characterized by “toughness . . . [o]r at least the simulation of toughness” (105). Every racist or sexist remark, act of violence, or heartbreak is brushed off by Generation X as “an occupational hazard,” the inevitable price to pay for entering adulthood (99). Daum believes millennials and Generation Z lack this toughness. According to Daum, it is this quality that differentiates fourth-wave feminism from its predecessors (67).

In *The Problem with Everything*, Daum relies primarily on her own experience, past and present, to examine what feminism means to her. In her essays, she reflects on current events with a critical eye. On the surface, *The Problem with Everything* is an honest and somewhat controversial critique of modern feminism, specifically its diversion from its original purpose of securing equal rights for women under the law (93). Daum exposes contemporary feminism’s worst moments and highlights its most unfavorable aspects; she calls into question “the sudden problematization . . . of masculinity” and feminism’s ineffective—even counter-effective—endeavors to take down men (7). However, true to its title, *The Problem with Everything* uses feminism as a vehicle to probe a broader

problem: polarization. Delving into today's shaky political climate, Daum shares her concern about how our culture is "being held hostage by its own hyperbole," causing us to ignore "the mostly unobjectionable middle" in favor of "outrage at the extremes" (211). Polarization, Daum worries, instills in us a tendency toward oversimplification and a detrimental disregard for the world's complexities.

At the root of this problem, Daum believes, is a lack of nuance. While outrage is the popular reaction to the many instances of sexism detailed in her book, Daum's reaction is one of uncertainty. She never allows herself to jump to conclusions and aims to always accept that, no matter her assumptions, "none of [her] hypotheticals were entirely right" (134). Furthermore, as a young woman, Daum's response to any discrimination she faced was to doubt that it constituted "systemic oppression of women" and to believe instead that it was "simply life in the big city," a symptom of that Generation X toughness (19). In her assessment of the contemporary political climate, as well as her own experiences, the uncertainty Daum embraces when evaluating controversial issues suddenly seems wrong to her. Now, Daum argues, uncertainty must be replaced with a relentless obligation to be "on the 'right side' of an issue" (143). And yet, to Daum, the need to be politically correct at all times comes at the expense of "shading and dimension" and seems at once impossible to fulfill and even detrimental to our causes (6). Frustrated as to why we no longer allow ourselves to question the status quo, to explore all sides in our dialogue about controversial issues, Daum pleads with us to rely less on what social media tells us is correct and more on our own sense of "complications and contradictions" (12). Accordingly, Daum's goal is not to persuade her reader to denounce the #MeToo Movement or to abandon feminism altogether. Rather, Daum seeks to reflect on herself through her writing, inviting us along on her journey through what she hopes are more nuanced discussions of contemporary activism. Through these discussions, she aims to question why we no longer accept that which makes us fundamentally human: being conflicted.

Daum is a personal essay writer, and many of her anecdotes are candid, substantial, and straightforward illustrations of her belief that the contemporary political climate “den[ies] us our basic human right to be conflicted” (208). She also includes stories of her personal life that seem unrelated to her central claims, however. In her review “In *The Problem with Everything*, Meghan Daum Interrogates the Purity Police” Melissa Giannini asserts that while these seemingly unrelated anecdotes may frame the book as a simple “‘coming-of-middle-age’ tale,” they are in fact what make her essays “the best argument against political tribalism.” In exploring her own aging and contemplating her past, Daum comes to “the inevitable, crazy-making revelation that the more you learn and experience, the more you realize you don’t know” (Giannini). And in sharing this realization of her fallibility, Daum reminds the reader that to be human is to have gaps in our knowledge and to make mistakes because we cannot know everything. This is why the political trends of ‘purity policing’ and ‘cancel culture’ are too harsh. We all make mistakes that do not deserve the level of criticism that ‘cancel culture’ entails, but in our haste to enforce political purity and prove our own political correctness, or ‘wokeness,’ we are merciless in persecuting those who take a single step in the wrong direction. Thus, the tendency to frame mistakes as intentional wrongdoings and exaggerate them almost to the point of false victimization ends up being the defining characteristic of fourth-wave feminism, a characteristic that troubles Daum the most.

By shifting from a serious pursuit of equal rights to a social media-centric movement preoccupied with “shallow expressions of badassness,” Daum believes feminism may have lost sight of its goals (9). According to Daum, contemporary feminism has become a display of “theatrical crudeness” and “narcissism repackaged as revolution” (63). To her, expressing outrage in the form of “pussy hats” or profanities on social media is an easy way to portray a veneer of social consciousness. Further, she contends that the “‘Fuck’ signs and the ‘Nasty Woman’ shirts and the ovary sweaters and the vulva costumes” displayed at the Women’s March in 2017 “threatened the seriousness of the project” (63-4). Although this apparel was meant to strengthen the message of the

march, Daum feels that instead it turned the march into an immature, easy target for mockery, therefore “self-sabotaging” the movement and taking away from its significance (64).

Later in the collection, Daum asserts the controversial claim that “expanding [sexual assault’s] definition into relative meaninglessness . . . denigrates victims more than it empowers them” (134). To her, placing a misdemeanor such as an unwanted touch in the same category as rape “minimizes the seriousness of assault” (134). At the same time as she asserts this view, however, also admits that she has hesitated to do so publicly before, fearing that she might be misunderstood or even cancelled. In addition, she recalls how she had always felt it necessary to assure readers that she neither condones sexual misconduct nor victim-shaming. The fact that Daum, a self-identified advocate for free speech, still feels the need to be so cautious in voicing her opinion exemplifies the harmful effects of reducing “complicated inquiries” to “moral absolutes” (170). Her deepest concern here is that we no longer give ourselves time to think.

According to Daum, our instinctive reaction to any claim that diverts from our definition of political correctness is outrage. She argues that rage-filled outbursts, especially on social media, are not only ineffective but also create online environments hostile to discussion. In his article “Political Polarization Is About Feelings, Not Facts,” political theorist Robert B. Talisse also contends that online environments can become “immense polarization machines,” driving advocates for any position “to overstate their differences, stress ideological purity, and vilify the opposition.” This has led to the ironic and detrimental situation in which members of the same party begin attacking each other for a lack of loyalty. Daum is preoccupied with this rejection of those who stay closer to the middle even within the “correct” or same political party. This phenomenon motivates her argument against voicing extreme rage towards the opposition.

Despite the value of her arguments, Daum is somewhat blinded by her privilege. She even admits that by doubting the effectiveness of rage in activism, she indirectly advocates for respectability politics. However, she still fails to see the full importance of anger in motivating contemporary efforts to obtain justice. As a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman, Daum concedes that she has always been unable to “see very far past the confines of [her] social bubble,” and as a result may be unaware of the injustices that others face in their daily lives (77). Even while she seeks to evaluate the issues she believes require more nuanced discussion, however, she relies primarily on her own experiences to form her opinions. “It is telling that Daum ignores the positive benefits of these movements, or the real risks to safety and reputation taken by the people who initiated them,” states Emily Witt in her *New Yorker* review “Meghan Daum to Millennials: Get Off My Lawn.” Witt criticizes Daum’s failure to acknowledge the role that outrage plays in bringing about change: “It was people unburdened by Daum’s ideas about ‘nuance’ who took to the streets after police shootings, and named the men responsible for serial sexual assault and harassment” (Witt). Witt implies that Daum’s fixation on “nuance” can be just as unhelpful as the “one-note outrage” she condemns. If we, like Daum, concerned ourselves with listening to the aggressor when there is a clear victim, we would never achieve progress. Further, Witt also questions Daum’s generalizations about Generation X and her resulting nostalgia, asking, “Where, exactly, was the ‘toughness’ that Daum fondly recalls?” Therefore, the very aspects of contemporary activism that Daum condemns are, in Witt’s opinion, crucial in changing society for the better.

The discussion of whether or not nuance should have a place in activism is, in itself, a discussion surrounded by nuance. We are undoubtedly becoming more polarized, not only in our political beliefs, but also in our opinions of the opposition; research shows that we now “more intensely dislike those we regard as politically different from ourselves,” regardless of their actual stances on issues (Talissee). Our obsession with political purity, fueled by the convenient platforms for self-expression provided on

social media, has driven us into a frenzy of “vilify[ing] the opposition” and finding ideological traitors (Talissee). This, in turn, prompts us to work harder to prove our own political loyalty. To do so, we resort to exaggerated outbursts that only pit us more fiercely against our opponents. Furthermore, as we stress political purity, we become resistant not only to having discussions with others who have different beliefs, but also to weighing our own conflicting thoughts about controversial issues.

Daum is troubled by this frantic obsession with solving “the problem with everything,” when in her view, the problem is a “gift” that rescues us from our own fallibility (215). She believes that “the problem,” never to be completely solved, is only meant to fuel our conversations with others and motivate our concern for each other. However, “the problem with everything” can also be viewed as everything that is wrong with the flawed world we have received: sexism, racism, classism, and all other forms of injustice. In this case, solving the problem is necessary. And it is likely that the consideration of nuance, as Witt argues, will not get us very far. Taking a stance in the center might be an easy, or privileged, way out of uncomfortable situations. In this case, the problem is one in which “[i]f you [call] for nuance, you [are] part of the problem” (Daum 170). However, we cannot solve anything in our current state of polarization. In our haste to solve society’s problems, we neglect the importance of discourse, we define others by their mistakes, and we allow ourselves to accept only the solutions that are deemed politically correct without further thinking.

If excluding nuance from our conversations increases polarization and emphasizing it hinders progress, how, exactly, can we solve any problem? On one hand, discriminatory or violent acts towards any group or individual are, without question, unjust. On the other hand, life “exists in the mostly unobjectionable middle”; it is more complicated, ambiguous, and nuanced than our precise, definite point of view (212). Nuance is not required to determine whether sexual assault is wrong. But in the cases of sexual assault we encounter in real life, there is often more than one side to the story.

However, when we leap to defend our passionate belief, we refuse to acknowledge uncertainty and avoid conflicting thoughts or circumstances. Uncertainty is uncomfortable. It elicits the terrifying feeling that we are wrong. Yet in order to draw fair conclusions, perhaps we, like Daum, must be able to dwell in it, enduring confusion, facing contradictions, and immersing ourselves in discussion to attain further clarity. Initially, Daum's audacious claims might provoke outrage. Following the reflexive shock, however, come our questions. And perhaps embracing this skepticism, however intimidating, is a key to solving the problem. After all, the rage, passion, and conviction essential to achieving progress cannot emerge without the courage to challenge an accepted belief – without the willingness to accept uncertainty.

---

## *Works Cited*

Daum, Meghan. *The Problem with Everything: My Journey Through the New Culture Wars*. Gallery Books, 2020.

Giannini, Melissa. "In *The Problem with Everything*, Meghan Daum Interrogates the Purity Police." *Elle*, 28 Oct. 2019, [www.elle.com/culture/books/a29579425/meghan-daum-the-problem-with-everything-review/](http://www.elle.com/culture/books/a29579425/meghan-daum-the-problem-with-everything-review/).

Talisse, Robert B. "Political Polarization Is About Feelings, Not Facts." *The Conversation*, 31 Jul. 2019, [theconversation.com/political-polarization-is-about-feelings-not-facts-120397](http://theconversation.com/political-polarization-is-about-feelings-not-facts-120397).

Witt, Emily. "Meghan Daum to Millennials: Get Off My Lawn." *The New Yorker*, 1 Nov. 2019, [www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/meghan-daum-to-millennials-get-off-my-lawn](http://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/meghan-daum-to-millennials-get-off-my-lawn).