Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

You are listening to the Great Simplification with Nate Hagens, that's me. On this show, we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment, and our society. Together with scientists, experts and leaders, this show is about understanding the bird's-eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals

(00:00:33):

Human behavior. The more I look at our current predicament, the more I think human behavior is at the root of our challenges. Today, I am joined by Professor Jonathan Haidt of the NYU Stern School of Business. John is a social psychologist looking at human behavior, the evolution of morality, how morality differs across cultures and political divides. John is the author of The Happiness Hypothesis, also one of my all-time favorite science books, the Righteous Mind, and more recently, the Coddling of the American Mind. John and I discuss the impact of social media on our current political discourse, the impact of technology and social media, and the decline in teen mental health, and generally the rise in political dysfunction and how we might change our social media commons. John is, along with Sapolsky and E.O. Wilson, one of the academic heroes of how humans socially form groups and make decisions and access to information. I hope this is the beginning of a series, because John thinks a lot like I do, and this was a wonderful conversation. Please welcome Professor Jonathan Haidt.

(00:02:15):

Jonathan Haidt, great to see you.

Jonathan Haidt (00:02:18):

Nice to see you, Nate.

Nate Hagens (00:02:19):

It's been like six months this has been on the schedule. Thank you so much for taking time. Off camera in the soundcheck, we just showed each other our super organism book by E.O. Wilson, so we are definitely of a tribe.

Jonathan Haidt (00:02:35):

That's right. We're both fans of the great E.O. Wilson.

Nate Hagens (00:02:38):

Yes, the recently passed E.O Wilson. I just had a podcast a couple weeks ago with David Sloan Wilson on the Evolution of Cooperation, my other favorite Wilson multi-level selection as well. In my world, you may not know this, you probably know this because we've spoken a few times. You are somewhat of an idol of mine along with

E.O. Wilson, and I use your videos and your books for my students at the University of Minnesota. I have written and spoken that we don't so much have an environmental problem or an economic energy problem as a human brain mismatch with our modern world versus our ancestral past, and you and your last 20 years of work are forging a path on this.

(00:03:25):

I personally believe that your work, both historically and your current work is central to what we face, you are right at the heart of it. Maybe just to get a step back to get a running start, we could maybe talk for a couple minutes about your three main books. Maybe you could give a two-minute summary. The three main books, what - 2006 or so - was The Happiness Hypothesis. What was the main thrust of that?

Jonathan Haidt (00:03:58):

Yeah. My first book actually doesn't grow out of my own work, although it does come back in to the later books. When I was teaching introductory psychology at the University of Virginia, I found myself reaching for quotations from the ancients to illustrate psychological principles. If you're going to teach cognitive behavioral therapy, well why don't you say there's nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so and explain that scene from Hamlet? For a while it looked like I wasn't going to get tenure, I had very few empirical publications and I thought, well, if I don't get tenure at UVA, I don't want to transfer to a second rate college. Maybe I'll just try to make it on my own as an author. Hey, what if I were to write up to write up all those quotations, all ancient ideas and see did the ancients really know anything?

(00:04:49):

And it turns out that they knew absolutely nothing about chemistry, biology, physics, there's no need to read them for that. But on consciousness and human relationships, they were brilliant. I don't mean they were brilliant on average because they were dumber than us on average, we're much smarter on average. But what we get from ancient civilizations is only the very, very best ideas that have gone through about a 700... I forget I calculated once. It was a 700-layer filter, only stuff that got passed from generation to generation over 2000 years. Anyway, it's a book about 10 ancient ideas and whether they're true, and they're all true to a large extent, things like what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, things like that. It really was just a popular book showing how to put together ancient wisdom and modern psychology. Then it turns out, and then I'll just put a little pin that actually ends up informing my third book, the Coddling of the American Mind.

Nate Hagens (00:05:45):

We'll get to the biggest takeaway I had from the Happiness Hypothesis, which is a visual that I've actually used in a lot of my presentations, is we have the limbic system and the neocortex, which you reference as the mahout riding

on top of an elephant. Together in tandem, they can accomplish amazing things, but sometimes the elephant goes off and does his own thing, which is our emotions in the limbic system, and you can't control it, which also informed some of your other work, which is highly relevant too.

Jonathan Haidt (00:06:16):

Oh, good. I'm glad to hear that. Let me just make one slight change on that, because there are a lot of divisions of the mind and the limbic versus frontal cortex is one of those divisions, and it is relevant. But when I came to see by the end of the book, and especially later when I began to call myself an intuitionist, is that the divisionist actually mostly between parts of the cortex. That is some parts of our cortex support conscious verbal reasoning. This is a very, very new cognition. Probably not more than a million years old. We don't know when language began, but yeah, I think it was less than a million years.

(00:06:53):

That's the rider. That's the conscious reasoning. It's slow. It's not very strong. It doesn't control our behavior. The elephant, the other 99% of what goes on in our minds is automatic intuitive processes. Those are all over the brain. Some are limbic, but many are also in the cortex. The cortex is mostly in a source associative organ or part of an Oregon, which animals have too. But yes, that division between this little tiny conscious thing that gets all the attention because that's what stands in the middle of the spotlight versus the other 99%, that's where the action is usually.

Nate Hagens (00:07:32):

Then you wrote a book that along with the Hobbit and Ishmael is among my favorite books ever. I'm not kissing your butt here, I really mean it, the Righteous Mind. Could you give a couple minute overview of that one?

Jonathan Haidt (00:07:48):

Sure. That is the summary of all of my life's work, at least my life up until 2011. I studied moral psychology. I began studying that my first year at the University of Pennsylvania in graduate school. At the time, the whole field of moral psychology was oriented around cognitive development. Lawrence Colberg was the main figure, and everyone was studying how children come to reason about harm, rights, and justice. I had the great good fortune to study the work of Richard Shweder, an anthropologist and cultural psychologist at the University of Chicago. I got a postdoc to work with him after my PhD. From him I learned and others, Alan Fisk, who's now at UCLA, I learned about how morality varies across cultures and how it's based not entirely in the emotions, but very heavily in automatic effective intuitive processes.

(00:08:49):

And so, the righteous mind was my attempt to lay out how moral psychology works, such as just add the thread that I was always on the left when I was younger, and I wanted to help the Democrats win, because most social scientists, almost all social scientists, I was a Democrat and thought that we should use our faculty positions to help our favorite political party. I now think that that is unprofessional, I regret doing that, and we'd all be a lot better off, I think if social scientists focused on social science, not on politics. In any case, the big revelation for me, I set out to try to understand conservatives in part to, again, help the left be more effective. Once I actually started reading smart conservatives as opposed to media will give you the worst of the other side. But once I started reading National Review and Thomas Sowell and Hayek and all kinds of really brilliant non-progressive or non-left thinkers, I realized, "Oh my God, you actually have to look at something from multiple sides to understand it, and there's wisdom all around and you cannot..."

(00:09:59):

I didn't know as much about John Stewart Mill back then, but he says, "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that." Anyway, sorry. That's all the background to the book. The summary of the book, I can give it to you in three sentences. Hold on a second here, I'll take it right here. As an intuitionist, I try to make my writing be really easy to grasp intuitively in part because if it feels easy, you'll believe it. That's a little trick for all of you who are looking to become more influential. I divided the book into three principles. Here they are. I can teach you moral psychology in three sentences. Here's number one, intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second. That's actually the rider and the elephant, that's what we were just talking about.

(00:10:43):

If you want to persuade someone, you got to speak to the elephant first. Don't go giving people reasons why they're wrong. First, get them to lean towards you to feel they have something in common with you. If the elephant is not opposed to you, well then actually you can persuade. Here's principle number two. There's more to morality than harm and fairness. That's what I learned from working with Richard Shweder and Alan Fisk about how western progressive morality is all about harm, rights and justice and care and equality. But most of the world is what we would call socially conservative that is they actually believe that people have positions in society, they have duties, they should show respect for those above them, they have notions of loyalty and purity and sanctity. That's principle number two.

(00:11:30):

There's more to morality than harm and fairness. Principle number three is morality binds and blinds. That's about how actually we evolved to be 90% chimpanzee, 10% bee. What I should say is our evolution is very, very similar to the other primates. We are like chimpanzees and bonobos in a lot of ways. But then we have this period again in the last million years of group of heavy group selection where once we became groupish or good at warfare, then a lot of evolution was group competing with group killing them, taking their territory out, competing them. As we

said at the beginning, we're fans of both EO Wilson and David Sloan Wilson, so it draws on a lot of their ideas. That's it. If you know those three principles, then you actually know moral psychology.

Nate Hagens (00:12:23):

Yeah, I thought it was a really influential book. It helped me understand the divide between Republicans and Democrats on different issues. I've actually led book conversations about that book with my systems ecologist. That brings us to your latest book, which is a couple years out now called The Coddling of the American Mind. You give us a brief summary of that?

Jonathan Haidt (00:12:50):

Yes, sure. The Happiness Hypothesis is these 10 ancient ideas. Here, let me just pull it down the shelf here. Suppose so suppose that sometime in the early two thousands we decided to do an experiment and we said, "What happens if we teach young people the exact opposite of ancient wisdom?" Let's take here chapter seven, the uses of adversity, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. But what if we told young people, no, actually what doesn't kill you makes you weaker, so do not expose yourself to people who criticize you, who doubt you, who might even make fun of you. Do not expose yourself to anything that will make you feel unpleasant, because that means you're unsafe. Okay, let's try that one.

(00:13:55):

Then the second one is... Well, the second great untruth. The book is based on three great untruths. The second one is always trust your feelings, which is the opposite of what the ancients tell us. The ancients tell the stoics, the Buddhist, they tell us that our emotions are about an illusionary world. Our emotions run away with us. A mature person has a way of questioning their emotions and getting to the core of things. But what if we told young people, "Always trust your feelings."? Then the most important one of all, I believe is, let's see which chapter is in the book. In the coddling It's life is a battle between good people and evil people. What if we told young people that everything is about groups trying to oppress groups, wherever you look, everything is about power and oppression and people grasping for power and wealth and try to step on others?

(00:14:54):

If we told young people that and we prevented them from reading ancient wisdom, and then they started to enter universities, they reached the age of 18 around, say 2014, then what might have happened is exactly what did happen, which is around 2014, the students coming in were really, really different. At the time we thought that they were all millennials. We didn't know about Gen Z. We thought millennials may... Who knows when the generation will end, maybe birth year 2000, we didn't know. Well, it turns out it ends very suddenly. The last millennials are around 1995, 1996 and those born in 1996 or '97 are Gen Z, they're very, very different. The main

difference, and that's actually my next book, the book I'm writing right now is on what happened to Gen Z? Why do they have twice the rate of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide compared to millennials twice the rate? What happened?

(00:15:47):

There are many causes, the main ones being social media and overprotection, but at a lot of universities, they were also greeted by an ideological establishment. The various student deans of students and freshman orientation, a lot of their classes taught them some ideas, some currently fashionable political ideas that are the exact opposite of ancient wisdom. Anyway, that's what the Coddling of the American Mind was about. It began as an Atlantic article in 2015 with Greg Lukianoff. It was his idea originally. Then it turned into, we wrote it up into a book in 2018.

Nate Hagens (00:16:23):

We're going to tie that all together. I think listeners so far can see where this is heading because it's all totally relevant to what our culture currently faces. I think your next book, tentatively titled still, Life After Babel, was also after an Atlantic article about the past 10 years have been unbelievably stupid in our culture. Could you give us a teaser about what you're writing on, what's your current research on? It looks like your books are like six years apart. Does it take that long to write a book?

Jonathan Haidt (00:16:55):

Yes, it does. Well, no, it actually does, because I mull things for a long time, and I work on other projects that sometimes don't come to fruition because I then find something that I think is even more important. In this case, I put a few years into a book that I'm working on called Three Stories About Capitalism, the Moral Psychology of Economic Life. Here I am, I'm at a business school. Morality has a lot to do with economic thinking, so I was very excited to write this book. But just as I got back from a trip to Asia to do research for it in 2015, the university's blew up with all this craziness and the safe spaces, microaggressions, bias, response teams, all that stuff that really killed the joy and the curiosity in university life since 2015. That really sucked me in as a crisis in my face in the universities.

(00:17:47):

Anyway, so I wrote the coddling book with Greg Lukianoff, and I was getting back to work on the capitalism book in 2021, a year and a half ago. I had all these ideas for what was going wrong. It really seems it's not just the universities, the problems we had spread to journalism, the media, the arts, the same things are happening. All these progressive institutions, cultural institutions, I would now say epistemic institutions, any institution that is structured to generate knowledge. I'd include museums, K-12 education, all of it. They were all malfunctioning in the same way in the late 2010s, and so I had an idea for a bunch of essays I was going to write for The Atlantic, and

I talked to the editor there that I work with Don Peck and Don and Jeff Goldberg said, "Actually, no, don't write eight essays. Write one, write one big one. Just give it your best shot to really lay it out."

(00:18:50):

That's what that article was that came out last April called Why the Last 10 Years of American Life have been uniquely Stupid. It's about, the central metaphor is that we are now living after Babel. The Tower of Babel, I believe, fell in 2014. It fell once 3,000 years ago in the Bible. When it falls, what happens is that people can no longer understand each other. It's not that we're polarized into two groups, it's that we're fragmented like a vase that's broken into a million pieces. That I think is our modern state of affairs because of the way social media rewired so much as society, and I hope we'll be talking about that later. But very briefly, I started to work on this book, Life After Babel, adapting to a world we may never again share.

(00:19:37):

The Atlantic article was one or two chapters of that book. I was going to start the book with a chapter on what happened to Gen Z, because they were really the canaries in the coal mine. They were the first humans to move their social life onto social media platforms. They did it very, very quickly between 2010 and about 2013, 2014. As soon as they moved on, they became depressed and anxious. It was instant. It was the same year, basically. 2012 is when it really all starts. That's not just America. That's exactly the same in Canada, Britain, a lot of other places. I was going to just write a chapter on what it did to teenagers and then show what it did to democracy. But by the time I wrote the first chapter and laid out the graphs, which are unbelievable, I mean, you would not believe these hockey stick graphs almost every look these hockey stick graphs -

Nate Hagens (00:20:30):

On depression and anxiety and such?

Jonathan Haidt (00:20:30):

And self-harm and suicide, especially for the girls.

(00:20:40):

For the boys, it goes up a lot, but it's not quite as sharp. The girls, it's like boom, 2012, they get on Instagram and they are depressed by 2013. Once I wrote that, I thought, "Oh my God, I need to really explain a lot more about childhood and what kids need. Then I need a whole separate chapter on girls because, wow, they're really hit hard." Then I realized I have to have a chapter on boys too, because they're not as affected by social media, but they're being affected by porn and video games and just spending their entire childhood on a screen. Anyway, I decided to split the book into two. The book I'm currently writing is called Kids in Space: Why Teen Mental Health is Collapsing. The metaphor there is, what if we decided to raise our children in outer space in a space station?

(00:21:28):

What if we sent babies up to grow up in outer space? What would happen? It would be horrible. Without gravity, their joints wouldn't form, their eyes would swell, you would die, literally, you physically could not grow up in outer space. You would die. I mean, of course, we're in a space station, we're not talking about outer space with pressure and oxygen and food and all the things you might think, but you can't grow up off of Earth. I don't think you could grow up on Mars either, but we did that to our kids socially.

(00:21:59):

What if we had kids grow up, not in a human world in which they're talking and joking and wrestling with small groups of other kids, but rather what if they're growing up on platforms run by private companies that are maximizing for engagement? What happened? We know what happened, you cannot grow up. If you go through puberty on social media and you're a girl, you will probably be damaged by it. You will probably be set for anxiety and depression much more so than you would've been if you had a normal human childhood. Anyway, that's what the book is about.

Nate Hagens (00:22:31):

I'm really looking forward to that. Is there any evidence or research available on countries and populations in the global south that aren't the western industrialized model that are accessing this technology or not?

Jonathan Haidt (00:22:45):

Yeah, there's not much. Here's the situation. Actually, everybody, if you're listening, go to jonathanhaidt.com/socialmedia. I've put all my work there. I have these giant Google documents where we've collected all the information we can find across countries. You'll see it there. It's a Google doc called Adolescent Mental Health, what happened to it. The US and UK have excellent statistics. Canada's a very small country, but they have some, so the English speaking countries and Australia too that we have studies from all of those. It's surprisingly hard to find good studies from Europe. There are some EU studies that will look at all the different countries. We're integrating those. That's just the EU. When we talk about the global south, then Latin America, there are hardly any good, really good nationally representative studies from those countries.

(00:23:44):

Africa, there's nothing I've found. Asia, even Asia, there's not very much. Now, there are a couple of international surveys, like the PISA study, I forget what it stands for, but it's the big education study, it's about 35 countries. Kids who are, I think 15, they always get them when they're 15. I think they fill out a big long survey. Jean Twenge and I found that embedded in this giant education survey, there are six questions about loneliness at school. Do you feel you have friends at school? Do you feel isolated, alone? What we found when we analyzed it, it's given every three

years roughly, is that those levels were actually pretty stable from 2001 through 2012. Then all of a sudden they go up afterwards. That's true in Latin America, Northern Europe, Southern Europe, the English-speaking countries, we don't have good data. Oh, Asia, there's a couple of Asian countries, they don't go up as much. Anyway, that's my summary of what we know now, but I have to learn more. What

Nate Hagens (00:24:47):

Happened in 2012?

Jonathan Haidt (00:24:50):

The iPhone comes out in 2007, and the iPhone is a miraculous, wonderful Swiss army knife. It's not harmful or dangerous, as Steve Jobs explained it. It's a phone, it's a camera, and it's an iPod, like, wow, that's fantastic. Totally harmless. But social media came out in 2004. Now, that in its early ages was also pretty harmless, like, "Hey, look, here's pictures of my dog and my girlfriend." But you put the two together as Mark Zuckerberg did, and as everybody did, and you have certain key changes that begin in 2009. Well, you got the newsfeed before then, and then and the retweet buttons, the share button.

(00:25:31):

You go from social media is this generally happy, nice thing, the iPhone is this great Swiss army knife. All is good. But in 2009, social media changes. By 2010, a lot of teenagers are getting it - because it's expensive, they didn't hand in their flip phones in until 2007. But by 2010, 2011, that's when you get a really steep adoption curve. By 2013, 2014, most teenagers have a smartphone. On their smartphone, they now all have social media. The average teen now is on nine different platforms. Girls used to all be on Instagram. They still mostly are. Now they're moving to TikTok. Anyway, the point is, when kids had flip phones, texting was a pain, you had to press three times to get a letter, so you could communicate, meet you at seven. Okay.

(00:26:27):

But once you got a smartphone, now it's like, I'm not meeting you with them all. I'm just going to sit on my bed and I'll post stuff and you post stuff and we'll talk. That all changes. 2010 to 2015, I call the great rewiring. That's when childhood change in the US and in all the countries where teens got smartphones.

Nate Hagens (00:26:47):

I'm pretty familiar with this because I've looked at it, and also I've taught college for eight years. I see that. I really speculated one year.

Jonathan Haidt (00:26:56):

What years were you teaching?

Nate Hagens (00:26:57):

Sorry? I taught from 2012 to 2019.

Jonathan Haidt (00:27:06):

Okay. That was a transition. Your first year you were teaching millennials, and by about 2017, 2018 they were all Gen Z. What did you see?

Nate Hagens (00:27:16):

I saw a progressive complaining every year about things that I wrote and said that someone would report it to the associate dean that this was made me feel uncomfortable or whatever, when it's just ecology and science.

Jonathan Haidt (00:27:30):

I'm sure they said unsafe.

Nate Hagens (00:27:32):

Yeah.

Jonathan Haidt (00:27:32):

Yeah. This was natural sciences? Yeah, that's right.

Nate Hagens (00:27:35):

Yeah. I mean it was...

Jonathan Haidt (00:27:35):

Do you remember any examples?

Nate Hagens (00:27:38):

... honors course called Reality 101. But eventually, yeah, I mean, I'm now doing the same thing on a podcast and a broader platform. I love teaching college-aged students, but the structure, like you said earlier, the joy wasn't there that it was 10 years ago.

Jonathan Haidt (00:27:59):

No, that's right. I just want to pull out, I just want to show you, I guess most people probably me listening to this, not seeing it, but I'm pulling up my NYU ID and on the back there are some numbers. Emergency, 911. Public safety gives you the number. Campus transportation, NYU alert for emergencies, and bias response line. If somebody says something, if I say something that offends a student, they know exactly who to call, they can call it in, they can go online. There's three different ways they can get in touch with the bias response line. Now I've tried, I've called the bias, they won't return my call. I don't know how many times I've been reported.

Nate Hagens (00:28:36):

How does that affect your teaching, John, and how does that affect your...?

Jonathan Haidt (00:28:45):

Yeah, it's terrible. It means I can't trust my students. They're overwhelmingly trustworthy, but in a large class, there's sure to be one or two who are offended by something I've said and now they are empowered to file a complaint. As we know from what just happened in at Hamline University, in many cases, if a single student complaints, action will be taken, because that's what administrators and bureaucrats do.

Nate Hagens (00:29:08):

If the goal of universities is to expand liberal education, to understand lots of topics, this is doing a disservice to the students, because you may be afraid and consciously or subconsciously to tell the cutting-edge science that you've researched and discovered you and many other people, so the education gets watered down in the process. Yes?

Jonathan Haidt (00:29:33):

Yep, yep. That's right. That's right, and it becomes a self-reinforcing cycle, because students have now gone through elementary and high school with the idea that they must be protected from anything, they can't read Mark Twain because it has the N word in it. They can't read to Kill a Mockingbird. They've been protected from any word, even a word. It's amazing how much of this is about individual words, not ideas. It's about words. They've been protected from any word that an adult thought might offend them. That means they haven't gotten tough enough to actually be exposed to words.

(00:30:13):

Then they get to college and we can either challenge that and say, "No, you know what, welcome to the real world. You got to be ready for the real world." We could do that, but nobody did. Instead, we accommodated. We have all these offices that are focused on accommodation and we're told, "Well, I shouldn't... It varies. Stanford just put out its language guide. Now that's not official guidance from the president's office, it was not binding, but they're told,

don't even say trigger warning. Why? Because triggers that could make someone think of a G-U-N, and that could be upsetting.

Nate Hagens (00:30:47):

This really concerns me. Again, I know much more about your work than about mine, but I think we're headed into very tough economic times, and the coddling of our youth who will eventually be our leaders has scary implications. We were just talking about depression, anxiety, especially among the young as a result of intense social media. But you've also written about the rewilding and pushing children back into nature and play. But given what you just said, is this to a challenge because we increasingly, we are moralizing nature because nature by definition is inherently unequal. What do you think about all that?

Jonathan Haidt (00:31:36):

Wait, say it again. We're moralizing nature. Wait, yes, I totally agree, we need to push kids out into nature, but what do you mean we're more or less nature?

Nate Hagens (00:31:47):

Well, nature, red tooth and claw is inherently unequal. There are no safe spaces in nature. I think increasingly, well, E.O. Wilson recently passed on sociobiology had water dunked on them 50 years ago talking about sociobiology. But I think the left particularly doesn't like talking about evolutionary psychology and the fact that we come pre-wired to some extent. I don't know if that's changed or not, but that's been my experience.

Jonathan Haidt (00:32:19):

No, it's gotten worse.

Nate Hagens (00:32:20):

Rally?

Jonathan Haidt (00:32:21):

Yeah. This has a longstanding left right difference, that the left, at least since the French Revolution, has had the idea that we can remake humanity into whatever we want. It's the Jean Jacques Rousseau idea. You find that certainly the Soviets had this idea, and I think a lot of modern progressive ideology is that certainly a lot of the stuff about gender, that sex is a social construction, all that stuff. Obviously, gender is to a large extent, but even gender is linked to biological realities, if not perfectly. In any case, the larger point that you were making is that if we are headed for some hard times, I heard your conversation with Daniel Schmachtenberger, so I think I know where

you're coming from on this. There's a bill to pay, there are ecological crises coming. What I'm saying, and where my babble book is going is in the same way there are major, major political and sociological crises coming.

(00:33:22):

I think that the conditions under which liberal democracy evolved are no longer with us because of the new age of the post-Babel era of the internet, social media. There won't be public squares, there won't be ways to talk about things. There won't be any shared narratives anymore. I think we're going to have a lot of instability. It's impossible to predict when things can... What is it? The market can stay insane longer that you can stay solvent, whatever it is. I don't want to put a date on things, but I do think that the known problems with democracy that Plato wrote about, that James Madison wrote about the known problems are so like social media just targets exactly those known problems about triviality, about outrage, about factionalism, faction is what Madison called it, but we'd call it partisanship or tribalism.

(00:34:21):

I think we're at the end of a cycle. Here's the thing I want to bring in right now, based on what you said. There's an internet meme some listeners will have seen hard times make strong men, strong men make good times, good times make weak men, weak men make hard times. That's a cycle. That's actually something that was Ibn Kahldun, a 14th century Muslim sociologist as it were, he had that theory as he observed tough tribes from the desert would come and invade the coastal city where all the riches were, and they'd take over, but their grandchildren were pretty soft, then the next generation, someone else would come in and take over. This theory, these cycles are real, doesn't mean they're inevitable, but there is something to these cyclical theories.

(00:35:14):

We are at the end of a cycle. World War II made tough people all around the world, certainly in Europe and America, and they built these amazing institutions that gave us the post-war order within which liberalism flourished, within which we had the most extraordinary advancement of women's rights, civil rights, gay rights, animal rights, human rights. You and I got to grow up in this incredible 20th century, this late 20th century, but it can't last. Structures can't last. They have to be rebuilt. I think what we're facing unfortunately, is that this technological changes that are breaking our institutions and that are causing us to have to reinvent things, we're going to have to reinvent governance for ourselves in this distributed era. Those same changes, I believe, I'm arguing, are so weakening our children that they will not be up for the task. The American experiment is an experiment in self-governance. That's what it means to say this is an experiment.

(00:36:16):

What we did starting in the '90s was we said, "You know that self-governing thing? How about no? How about you never get to try that? How about you never get unsupervised time?" Because if you're not supervised, you might

be kidnapped, you might bang your knee, you might get in a fight with... No, we'll have adult supervision all the time until you go off to college. At that point, if someone says something you don't like, here's the number to call, a dean will take care of you. I think we have inadvertently denied Gen Z, the ability to learn to be self-governing, and then we're handing off a broken democracy and a broken ecosystem to them in saying, "Okay, good luck with this."

Nate Hagens (00:36:55):

When I teach my class, we spend a whole month on human behavior, and I assign your chapter nine in The Righteous Mind, among other things. The kids, it's their favorite section of the course because they learn about cognitive biases, steep discount rates, status supernormal stimuli and all this stuff. My question to you is, how important is understanding our own psychology in creating benign pathways through the stuff you were just talking about, and can understanding our own psychology and that of other people like you write about in the Righteous Mind? Can we overcome our own psychology? Or is it in one ear and out the other? What's the process there? What do you think?

Jonathan Haidt (00:37:45):

We can approach that in a lot of different ways. If we look at an individual trying to change her habits, I can lecture you on how dieting works. I used to do this in Psych 101. Here's all the mechanisms that are against you. We evolved to not starve to death. Knowing that doesn't make it any easier really to diet. It's a rider an elephant thing. I can explain things to your elephant, but your, I'm sorry, other way, I can explain things to your rider, the conscious reasoning, but your elephant is very powerful and it's going to do what it was going to do. It's very hard to change. In fact, one of the quotes I use in the book, it's from Odes from Ovid. I see the right way and approve it, but alas I follow the wrong." Just knowing-

Nate Hagens (00:38:39):

Story of my lifetime.

Jonathan Haidt (00:38:39):

... it's not going to change your... Knowing stuff isn't going to change your behavior, I mean, it can sometimes on the margins, but generally not. But here's where I think it's really important. We're being rewired by engineers in Northern California, and they've given us miracles. I mean, the technology, I'm so down on it now, but I remember the first time I saw Alta Vista, the first web browser, and the first time I held an iPhone and the Uber and Wikipedia, I mean, these engineers gave us a utopia for convenience, for knowledge, information. Absolutely amazing. But I don't think there's a single sociologist employed anywhere in Silicon Valley as far as I can tell. They did all this stuff.

When it came to... If you're trying to solve for getting people and cars together, well, that's great. That's a social good to do that.

(00:39:46):

Now obviously Uber had some unethical practices, they certainly skirted regulations. I'm not saying they were great company. But the inherent problem of people and cars doesn't have the moral externalities that social media has. When social media companies at Facebook and Instagram in particular. When they rewired childhood, all they were thinking about was maximizing engagement. I'm sure they did not mean to hurt children. They were not thinking, "Let's hurt children," but they weren't thinking let's help children either. They weren't thinking, "Would it be healthy for kids to basically be able to gossip about each other and have them earn likes which the victim can see?" I don't think that ever occurred to them, because they -

Nate Hagens (00:40:30):

No, they're not bad people per se, they were optimizing for engagement, which gave them market share and dollars, which is what corporations are optimized for.

Jonathan Haidt (00:40:39):

That's right. Then it was a slippery slope, because once they started down that road, there were individuals, as we know from the Francis Haugen's revelations, there were individuals who saw that this is really bad, but it was too late, they couldn't stop the train. I should say, in this case, the companies are all different. Facebook is unique in that one man basically controls... I forget how it works with voting shares and non-voting shares, but Mark Zuckerberg basically can do what he wants. That's bad governance. That shouldn't be.

Nate Hagens (00:41:09):

I canceled all of them a couple years ago. Then given my role of trying to help society meet the future halfway, I reloaded them all up, and I joke with our mutual friend, Tristan Harris, that I'm using the devil's tools to do Gaia's work. I'm still on the platforms.

Jonathan Haidt (00:41:29):

Oh, yeah. We need to be on them to understand them. Look, they're useful. I use Twitter. What I was thinking this morning is, you know what, if we all just use Twitter to find information and guide people information, and if we don't opine, just don't judge, don't evaluate, don't put out your opinions, just say, "Hey, here's an amazing article," because Twitter is great for that.

Nate Hagens (00:41:53):

Yeah, no, I actually like Twitter. You focus in your work on individual levels, social and moral psychology. My work is more on the systems, social and natural systems integration at the broader level. Can you talk about how or what you study can inform a systems level analysis building from an individual level behavior perspective?

Jonathan Haidt (00:42:21):

Yeah. I like thinking that way. I'm very badly trained and socialized as a psychologist in that I was a philosophy major as an undergrad. I took some psychology courses, I took some political, some computer science courses. I think of myself as a systems thinker. I love to see how things mesh. Consilience E.O. Wilson, part of I think why you and I love E.O. Wilson is that he is the greatest figure at this thinking. Here, this entomologist was able to think not just about human evolution, but about the arts and why we landscapes and all sorts of things.

Nate Hagens (00:43:05):

For about five years, that was my favorite book. It's totally marked up, that black book with the white label, Consilience. Go on.

Jonathan Haidt (00:43:10):

On, yep. Yep. Great book. There's an idea that I tried to explain in the happiness hypothesis about cross-level coherence because, so out here's a quote. "Whenever a system can be analyzed at multiple levels, a special coherence occurs when the levels mesh and mutually interlock." You see this in personality. You might have stories about yourself that fit with your lower level personality traits. If I'm an extrovert and have high conscientiousness, I might have a story about myself. If that story matches my true lower level traits, then there's coherence. But if my story isn't consistent with my lower level traits, then I'm incoherent. All of this is nested within my understanding of society and American history or some larger theory of politics. When things match the sociocultural level down to the individual psychological level, down to even the neurological level, you have a cross-level coherence, and you're much less likely to break. You're much less likely to have a crisis where you realize that you don't make sense or you can't understand yourself.

(00:44:27):

In the same way, what I would tell students who on the rare occasions when we got this abstract is it's really good to be a reductionist to understand how thinking, how ideas are related to neurons and neurons can be explained in terms of neurotransmitters and chemicals and membranes. That's reductionism. That's great. Especially, or as long as you pair it with emergentism, because you can't understand life - as a physicist can't understand life. They can tell you all about atoms, but they're not going to tell, they can't have a grasp on meaning. Anyway, yes, I think that there's a thing that generalists can do, because they can think across disciplines and across levels. I think that's what you and I are struggling to do here.

Nate Hagens (00:45:17):

Yes, agreed. I'll see your quote, and I'll raise you a quote by Ilya Prigogine who said, "When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence can shift the entire system." I close a lot of my talks with that one.

Jonathan Haidt (00:45:37):

Wait, wait, wait. Hold. I got to get this, get this down. Hold on a second.

Nate Hagens (00:45:40):

It'll be in the show notes.

Jonathan Haidt (00:45:41):

Maybe your listeners will want to hear that again too. Okay.

Nate Hagens (00:45:46):

Oh my gosh, I have so many questions and we're flying along here. John, both of our work is trying to understand the observable and the objective side of the system of what I call a biophysical reality. How do you think, and you alluded to it earlier, how do you think about the role of post-modernism playing in weakening science's role in our culture? Has pos- modernism opened the door to current society, moralizing ideas and concepts that were not previously so before you refer to 2012? And why is this important to our future?

Jonathan Haidt (00:46:28):

I was a graduate student in the 1990s, in the early 1990s. There was a joke. That was like, there was the first there, because there was the first wave of PC and stuff in the late '60s and '70s. Then there was a second wave in the late '80s, early '90s when I was in grad school. Then there's the third wave began around 2013, that's the one we're in now. In the '90s there was a joke. What do you get when you cross a mafioso and a postmodernist?

Nate Hagens (00:46:54):

Don't know?

Jonathan Haidt (00:46:54):

You get an offer you can't understand. I tell that joke, because I did try to understand postmodernism. It was all the rage. I had a girlfriend in the linguistics department. I hung out with people in the humanities. I read some stuff like I tried to understand it and I really couldn't understand it, deconstructionism and all that stuff. It's like there must be a they are there, but I could never find it to the extent that it is a skepticism about our ability to know things and

noting that those in power have an ability to shape the structures by which people come to know things. Sure, that's fine. I mean, that makes sense that you don't need postmodernism for that.

(00:47:39):

But to the extent that it is not just an academic or theoretical project to understand the nature of knowledge, but I believe it is generally a political project to advance progressive or left wing political goals in ways other than persuasion. This is what bothers me, is that so much of these movements, they don't try to persuade, they don't do... Just talking and giving reasons. They try to play with language of... A lot of the what's happening on campus now, a lot of the arguments around diversity, equity, inclusion, they're not really arguments. They're just trying to win by playing with changing the meaning of words and saying who's allowed to use what words.

(00:48:27):

It should bring us all back to reading George Orwell in high school. I mean, a Newspeak was an attempt to eliminate wrong think by literally preventing people from having thoughts that would be at variance with the official program. I don't enough about postmodernism and deconstructionism and all those things to really evaluate it other than to see that this is an ideology that I believe is alien to the core mission of a university, which is the pursuit of knowledge.

Nate Hagens (00:49:03):

Let me build on that. It's currently quite easy, too easy to use moral leverage to bully, like you were saying, by being the loudest in the room, and social media has allowed us to each have our own AM and talk radio show, so logic and reason and other enlightenment values gets severely handicapped in this environment and continue to decay. How might you suggest that we slow this decline? And what would be the pathway from where we are today to a greater social trust based on those principles, logic, reason, enlightenment, values? A very easy question for you, John.

Jonathan Haidt (00:49:47):

Yeah, I know actually it is, because actually it's the central point of my Atlantic article on Babel. What I've found, wherever I go, most people are reasonable. I'm pretty up on humanity in terms of what we're like on average, but then all the interesting stuff is about the dynamics, what happens when you put us together in systems, and some systems allow the average reasonable person to have some influence, and then you get a humane system. Other systems allow extremists to have influence and you get an inhumane system. My central point in the Babel article was that social media as it began was perfectly innocent. But once they got especially the retweet button, that was the really big change. The retweet button allowed anything to go viral very quickly. If it was just, "Hey, look at my

puppies," that's fine. But once it became a lot about politics and attacking people and shaming people and calling people out, basically call out culture was born on 2013, 2014.

(00:50:55):

The metaphor I used in the article was it's as though the social media companies, especially Twitter and Facebook, handed out a billion dart guns with unlimited darts. Anyone could dart anyone at any time, you could do it from an anonymous account. You could shame or attack or humiliate anyone. No context. There's no room for context, 240, was 120 characters originally. There's never a backstory. There's just you take a quote, you take a word, you put it up for public ridicule with your comment, and then people jump on. My argument was most people are reasonable, but when you get this huge rewiring of social media, which begins in 2009 with the button and the retweet button, and it really reaches fruition by 2014, 2013 - 2014, you get threaded comments, you get now everywhere you go, it's not just comment on this post, it's comment on the comments on the post, so now you get people fighting and arguing within the comments.

(00:51:57):

That's when I believe the tower Babel fell 2014. You ask, how could we get in more humane system? Well, if what social media did in those years, I believe, is it super empowered, the far right, the far left, trolls, who are almost all men who have personality disorder and Russian agents or other foreign intelligence agents, those four groups, it was like Mark Zuckerberg and what's his name from Twitter. It was as though they said, "Here, how about you guys get 100X more influence? Let's just try it. Okay, you get 100X more influence." Then what happens? The middle 80%, they're like, "I hate this. I don't want to be here." Most people don't speak up. I believe what happened wasn't that humanity went insane or Americans went insane, it was that a country of overwhelmingly sane people suddenly found the dynamics altered within the space of just a few years, just a few years. Twitter was even a nice place when I first got on it, like 2009 or 2010, whatever.

(00:53:06):

In just a few years, the dynamics were altered. That now it's just nasty, and it's that nastiness that's made it easy for a single person who's upset to force a professor to be fired, to cause embarrassment to a university, whatever it is. This is what's driven us insane, and this is what I call structural stupidity. Anyway, I think as long as social media's the way it is, I don't think liberal democracy is sustainable. Doesn't mean it's going to collapse, or our ecology is not sustainable. It doesn't mean it's going to collapse anytime soon. It will eventually. I think the same is true of liberal democracy. If we go on the way we're going, we're not going to get very far, I think, and social media-

Nate Hagens (00:53:48):

How do we slow the decline of that?

Jonathan Haidt (00:53:48):

... reform is the most important thing we could do. Well, in the Babel article, in the Atlantic article, I made suggestions for reforms that would, I think bring it back... At least, I don't know if it would bring it all the way back to sustainability, but it would mitigate it. There's three buckets of reforms. The first bucket is we have to strengthen and reform our political institutions on our epistemic institutions, so that they can withstand the post-Babel era in which there's no ability to not know, but it's very hard to find truth and will never again have shared understandings, except not only how can we have elections,

Nate Hagens (00:54:24):

Not only are those four categories having outsized voices, but in doing so, those four categories are influencing further left and further right politicians being elected.

Jonathan Haidt (00:54:37):

Exactly. That's right. That's right. It's influencing who gets elected, especially... Okay, that's a good example of a reform needed. America is the only major country that has party primaries. Other countries have parliamentary systems, but we're the only ones who say, "Okay, before the election, let's have just the Republicans hold their election, and let's have just the Democrats hold their election. We know that only five or 10% of the people in each party will vote, so it's only the extremists who vote. What do you say?" Let's see who they elect. Oh, guess what? They often elect extremists. Then once in the places where that party is dominant, the extremist gets into Congress. That's why we see people like Lauren Boebert and all these crazies, especially now in the Republican party, although the Democrats have a few... But the Republicans are really vying for the prize for just outright craziness and irresponsibility.

(00:55:38):

But the thing that I think people don't fully understand is our electoral system doesn't just determine who gets elected. It strongly influences how they behave once they're elected. In very few congressional districts are competitive, even some senator seats aren't very competitive. Senator seats can't be gerrymandered, but some states are very red or very blue. The election doesn't matter. All that matters is the primary. When that happens, you get decent people. I've met a bunch of Congress people. They're generally very good, smart, hardworking people who got into politics because they want to make things better. They're good people for the most part, overwhelmingly. But if they ever cooperate with the other side, they're going to be slammed on social media. Their fundraising is going to take a hit. They'll be shamed, attacked. Social media is like all dark guns given to fanatics, and the rest of us are all dancing, trying to avoid the darts.

Nate Hagens (00:56:36):

So it's not only who they're electing but their behavior once they're elected. The political governance was your first point. You said there were three.

Jonathan Haidt (00:56:44):

That's the first We have to harden it. That's right, harden our electoral and democratic institutions. They can withstand much greater polarization and political violence. I think we're going to have a big upsurge in political violence over the next decade or two. Remember, in the early '70s, late '60s, there were bombs going off every week. There was more than one bombing per week. We don't remember that nowadays, but there was a lot of political violence in this country in the past. The second bucket is social media reform or reform to the tech technology so that it's less toxic to our political and epistemic institutions. There, the biggest single thing we can do, I believe, is identity authentication. Everyone freaks out and says, "Oh, but we need anonymity." Fine, you can have anonymity. There's no problem there. You have anonymity on Uber, you have anonymity on Airbnb, you have anonymity on eBay.

(00:57:47):

But because the company knows who you are and who the other party is, you can trust them, and you can unlock this incredible benefit of being able to transact with other people because they're authenticated. Now, you don't know their name and they don't know yours, but they're authenticated. You can't just be a criminal or a Russian agent and open 100 Airbnb accounts and start taking people's money when, hey, you don't even have a house. You can't do that on Airbnb, but you can do it on Twitter, you can do it on Instagram or Facebook, there's no authentication, so we're dealing with a lot of bots, a lot of assholes, a lot of liars. If this is supposed to be the public square of our democracy, we're doomed.

(00:58:27):

This is why I say we are so far outside the bounds of sustainability. If Facebook and Twitter and whatever platforms come next, if these are where our public discourse is, we're doomed. We have to require, I believe, that large platforms have identity authentication, and there are many ways already in existence to do it. Doesn't mean you show them your driver's license. There's already more than a dozen. I have a bunch of them listed on one of my Google Docs, so that's the next thing. Then the third, there's a bunch more social media reforms. There are reforms to the virality of things, the multipliers. We don't want content moderation. I'm sorry, I don't care about content moderation. It's not very important, and it really does border on censorship. You can't really trust a company to do it. You can't trust the government to do it. But Francis Haugen and other, and Tristan Harris have shown us there are so many reforms that are content neutral and language neutral. They're structural architectural reforms. That's what I think-

Nate Hagens (00:59:24):

Free speech, but not freedom of reach.

Jonathan Haidt (00:59:26):

Yeah, that's right. A lot of it's about the amplification as Francis Haugen pointed out. If you look at how many people, one a person invites to join a Facebook group, almost everybody invites fewer than a hundred people per week. Most people invite nobody or one or two. But if you look at the top 1% who are inviting thousands, they're almost all inviting into conspiracy sites. They're almost all garbage. What if you just limit it so that you can only invite 100 people per week or whatever the 99th percentile title is? It's just things like that, those are not censorship and they're just slowing down the outsized virality of certain amplification features.

Nate Hagens (01:00:01):

Well, I think-

Jonathan Haidt (01:00:02):

Then the third bucket just... Oh, go ahead.

Nate Hagens (01:00:04):

No, please.

Jonathan Haidt (01:00:07):

Okay. The third bucket is we have to change what we're doing to Gen Z, so that they or... It's possible that we're too late with Gen Z, but Gen Alpha is what the next generation will be called. We don't know when it starts. But at least Gen Alpha will be able to handle self-governance in 30 years. If we don't do that, then anything else we do is just useless.

Nate Hagens (01:00:36):

Well, I have to say-

Jonathan Haidt (01:00:42):

That means we have to give them a lot of free play and autonomy, send them out to play unsupervised before they get on social media. Whereas now we do it the opposite. We say, "You can get on social media when you're nine, just lie about your age and don't tell your mother." But you can't go out to the park, you can't walk to a friend's house until you're 11. That's insane. That's crippling Gen Z, I believe.

Nate Hagens (01:01:04):

How much of this is the responsibility or the fault of the parents versus the teenager? Isn't this becoming a bipartisan issue? The Francis Haugen and people on both sides are recognizing that they're losing the teenage human that they thought they had because of this?

Jonathan Haidt (01:01:25):

Yep, that's right. I would say almost none of it is the parents' fault. The reason I say that is because if we had lots of examples of good parents who were able to do this well and then a third of parents were not, we could say, "Well, hey, why don't you guys be the good parents?" But unless you go to an orthodox religious community in Brooklyn or an Amish community where you have a whole community that says, no, unless you do that, everyone's losing.

(01:01:58):

Now, there are people do it better or worse, but it's a collective action problem. The companies have hooked us into a collective action problem. None of us want our kids on Instagram in sixth grade, when they're 11. But when both of my kids, when they started sixth grade here in New York City public schools, they both said, "Everyone's on Instagram. Everyone has an account. They just lie about their age. They have an account." I said, "No, I'm not going to let you do that," and therefore felt left out. The only reason we ever let our kids on is because everyone else is on. The platforms have engineered it that way. Facebook says they're going to do all kinds of safety reforms. What they will never do is kick off the 11 and 12 year olds because they're desperate to get them before they go to TikTok.

Nate Hagens (01:02:50):

Yeah, you're right. It is a collective action problem. Well, I'll tell you this, John, your instinct was correct two years ago or whenever you stopped writing the Moral Capitalism book and switch to this, because this underpins all, climate change, geopolitics, our democracy. You're absolutely right. I have 15 more questions that I'm going to just discard for reasons of time and just ask a few more before I do my closing personal questions. Building on this, you're an expert on moral leadership. Given what you were talking about the Congress that we're electing the far left and the far right, and then that changes their behavior, could we change the system if we elected 10 or 20 moral leaders, or does moral leadership have to come from the bottom up and eventually results in electing people more capable of moral leadership as opposed to fame, money and destroying government as some of the narratives are today?

Jonathan Haidt (01:03:58):

Yeah. Well, as a social psychologist, I look at situations in which if 100% of people or 90% of people do something that looks unethical, probably it's the situation, and the way to understand situations where people seem like they're being jerks, if everyone's being a jerk, you got to assume it's probably more about the situation. Many good

people have gone to Congress and they say they're frustrated, they're stymied, some get corrupted, but I think most of them aren't so much corrupted as just to be successful, they have to do things. Now, we understand politicians always have to make compromises. You can't be a morally pure person and be successful. It may be a good politician. They do have to make compromises. But at the same time, leadership matters. Some people are better leaders than others. I guess what I'd say is to the extent that people are drawn to their short-term urgent issues, you get really, really bad ethical outcomes.

(01:05:11):

You get people in a cut corners because survival is at stake to the extent that anything about a system keeps people's eye on the long term, a much longer time horizon. The same would of course be true about the environment. If you're thinking about longtime horizon, and if the system rewards people for doing things that are in the long term good and punishes them for doing things in that are long term bad, there are a variety of situations in which doing the right thing will become easier. The US Congress is really, really messed up. The incentives are such that good people end up doing bad things. Now, it's not just the institution that's the problem. I think the Republican Party is the structurally stupid party. Now, just to explain briefly, in the Atlantic article, I said the Republican Party is the structurally stupid party because they've shot all of their moderates. They have essentially no moderates left.

(01:06:09):

The extremists, and look what we're seeing now, a few extremists can hold the whole party hostage. The Democratic Party is not like that. The Democratic Party has a far left, but it's usually the moderates who win. You couldn't have a couple of far left people holding the entire party hostage. In the Atlantic article, I argue that the Republican Party is the structurally stupid party, but the cultural left has made our key institution structurally stupid, because they are able to hold universities. The New York Times. Now the Times is getting better, I should say. But in 2020, the times really humiliate itself over and over again. Museums, teachers, unions, all sorts of the arts media companies. There's a lot of stupidity to go around. It's just that it's a little different on the writing and lab. Sorry, I veered off of your question.

Nate Hagens (01:06:59):

No, and this whole thing could veer off in many different ways. I have to just say that I know a lot of people in my network like you, but it's so refreshing to hear someone that simultaneously critiques both parties because in the broader public, a rarity, because they usually just critique one party.

Jonathan Haidt (01:07:21):

Okay, but wait, if I may, because I am often accused of both sides-ism and both sides-ism always saying, "Well, both sides are equally guilty." If you're committed to finding fault on both sides and you're committed to finding it to be roughly comparable, then that would be a cognitive error. That would be a bias, that would be wrong. But I am committed to both sidesism only in the sense that I will always listen to what people on both sides say. I will look to see whether they're right. It turns out, as John Stewart Mill said long ago... It was something like, the gist of it is in every conflict of society and politics, each side was right in what they asserted, though wrong in what they denied. In other words, if you look at what the main thing that Democrats are concerned about or critical about Republicans about, they're probably right. There's almost always something there. But then they're accused of things and they deny them, and that's where they're usually wrong. And vice versa.

(01:08:36):

I am committed to both sides-ism as a tactical plan or as a way to find the truth by always listening to both sides, taking the charges seriously. You usually find that they're right about something, although not entirely. So, yeah, I'm in favor for both sides.

Nate Hagens (01:08:55):

I have much the same attitude. Real briefly, since you brought that up, it seems to me that climate change and environmental justice tends to be a left moralizing issue, and energy, economic issues tend to be a right moralizing issue. What do you think about this?

Jonathan Haidt (01:09:14):

Yeah. Oh, yeah. The theme of the capitalism book is dynamism and decency. That is to have a good capitalist economy, you need dynamism and you need decency. The left always focuses on decency and is willing to sacrifice a lot of dynamism. That's why they're pro union, they're pro regulation, whereas the right is always dynamism and is willing to sacrifice a lot of decency. This is Ronald Reagan's economic revolution, Margaret Thatcher, you do get more productivity and they argue that in the long run that creates a more decent society, but they're willing to tolerate more exploitation of immigrants, even slave labor in the supply chain, human rights violations. You actually need the economic intuitions of people on the left. Well, let's start with the right. You must have an appreciation for the importance of dynamism and innovation and creativity and productivity. You must have that. Otherwise, you get in the extreme, you get the Soviet Union.

(01:10:26):

But in more moderate cases, you get France and Japan. Just those are good countries. They've been creative in the past. Now they're just like, I don't know what they're doing, but sliding into irrelevance. Whereas the Anglo countries, and also Scandinavia to some extent, has much more dynamism, but have to also have, you need

activists, you need rights groups looking out, you need journalism exposing the abuses, because a capitalist society, as we saw with in our discussion of Facebook, the pressures to keep share price growing mean you have to have increasing revenue by hook or by crook.

Nate Hagens (01:11:03):

I think that tension environment, economy, dynamism, decency, is just going to accelerate in how loud it is in coming decades. I'm going to read you a quote that you wrote in the Righteous Mind. Most societies have chosen the socio-centric answer, placing the needs of groups and institutions first and subordinating the needs of individuals. In contrast, the individualistic framework places individuals at the center and makes society a servant of the individual. Most ancient societies, which he wrote about, were socio centric, but modern western societies are individualistic. Is there a path to, again, becoming socio-centric? What do you think about that?

Jonathan Haidt (01:11:53):

Yeah, that's a good question. I don't know. Just briefly, I was drawing on both work from Richard Shweder and other anthropologists and also on this really powerful concept from Joe Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan called Weird. That is WEIRD, stands for Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. What they point out is that the countries that they're really different cognitively, even in perception, you give people perceptional experiments, what do you see in a pattern? And Americans will focus on the one fish that's out in front. Japanese people will actually see the stuff in the background. Weird countries think differently. The enlightenment both took off in Western countries and made us weirder in a sense. The enlightenment is all about the individual. It's a rejection of older socio-centric views and not entirely, you can have enlightenment traditions that value community.

(01:12:48):

You can still have that, but you're not going to get them to be as tight as they used to be. I think it's a good question whether maybe we've gone a little too far on the individualism and we need to just go back a bit. But the other possibility is that the gene is out of the bottle, we can never go back. People try to create communities like, "Hey, let's have Sunday sermon," or whatever it's called. Let's all just get together voluntarily and be a community. I shouldn't knock it, because I don't know how that group is doing, but there is research showing that, and I cover this from my sous was his last name, I covered it in the righteous mind, that if you look at 19th century intentional communities, cults and groups that went out to live on the prairie, the ones that had a lot of voluntary elements and respected individualism didn't last long.

(01:13:40):

They could never pass it on to their kids. Whereas the ones that required a lot of sacrifice, a lot of binding, a lot of ritual, those lasted longer. It's possible that the genies out of the bottle were so individualistic. Our technology means we don't need anyone else. We really don't - we don't need strangers at all anymore. It's noticed, it used to be when you and I were kids, some of us had to ask for directions. But now if you ask for directions, it's not going to be as good as Siri or Google Maps. We really don't need people anymore, for now.

Nate Hagens (01:14:14):

We're going to need people again in the not too distant future.

Jonathan Haidt (01:14:17):

If we lose electricity. Yeah, if we lose power for months or years at a time. You know what, maybe that's it. Maybe that's the answer. Maybe that's what will bring us the hard times and the strong men in the future.

Nate Hagens (01:14:30):

Are you teaching right now?

Jonathan Haidt (01:14:33):

Yes, I teach at NYU Stern and I've been teaching an MBA class called Work Wisdom and Happiness. In a few weeks I'm going to start an undergraduate version of it, which I've never done before called Flourishing.

Nate Hagens (01:14:47):

Let me just ask you, how many hours a week do you read either articles or books? Because you talk-

Jonathan Haidt (01:14:55):

It's very hard to say.

Nate Hagens (01:14:57):

... like a library in your mind, it seems.

Jonathan Haidt (01:15:01):

Well, I'm 59 years old and I find that the input slot to that library is really narrowing and narrowing now. But I did put a lot in when I was in graduate school and when I was a young scholar, and I almost never read. It's really sad, but people ask, "What's the best book you've read?" I have to say I almost never read books, because I'm flooded by... There's so much great writing now, there are podcasts, there's subsets, there's great essays in the Atlantic and

all sorts. I read a lot and I do touch a lot of books and I'll read the introduction, I'll get a sense of what's in the book, get the main idea, and then I'll put it in my Evernote file in the right place that, okay, if I write this article or when I get to this chapter of the book, then I'll read that book. But it's impossible for me to estimate. I mean, I spend most of the day reading, but I don't know what it amounts to.

Nate Hagens (01:15:56):

If you just really take a step back and forget about all our challenges, what a freaking amazing time to be alive, where we have the knowledge of our entire prior generations and the current at our fingertips. It is unbelievable. Our job is to find signal versus noise in that and communicate it to others to help navigate coming decades. But sometimes take that for granted. How fricking amazing is that?

Jonathan Haidt (01:16:26):

Yeah, no, you're right. I mean, obviously the tone for both of us. I'm worried about a sociological apocalypse. You're worried about environmental apocalypse. But let's put things in perspective here. We evolved to be hunter-gatherers out in the woods, living very short lives and being attacked by the neighboring group and starving during the hungry months. Life was really pretty miserable unless you happen to be situated as a hunter-gatherer group in Southern California with an endless supply of fish like, okay, there were some places where life was good, but for the most part, human life has been pretty nasty. Yeah, let's not forget that we have it pretty good. I think that I'm a big fan, a friend of Steve Pinker and his discussion of progress and certainly material progress, health progress, medical, all that, that's going to continue, unless there's some huge apocalypse.

(01:17:22):

But I am concerned that our expectations from when you and I were younger, certainly in the '90s when it looked like, oh, democracy forever, prosperity forever, technology forever, Internet's great. Those I think are wrong. It may be a long time before we get through this cycle and onto more of an upswing. Despite all of our concerns about bad things that can happen, we have to keep things in perspective that we do have it pretty good. We can take guidance from the ancients here. We can take guidance from people in past eras who lived in difficult times, which was almost everybody. Here I draw on Joseph Campbell, who was this great methologist. He taught, I think it was Sarah Lawrence College in the late 19th century, mid-19th century. He studied mythology and he wrote a book called The Hero's Journey, and he studied how hero myths are very similar across culture.

(01:18:25):

There's something deep, almost Jungian, like a Jungian archetype of the hero story. He sums up the lesson of the hero's life, he says, "Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world. We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy. The warrior's approach is to say yes to life, yay to it all." I keep that posted in my notes to

come across it now and then, because it is a reminder, we may go through some hard times, but we each get to choose how we do that.

Nate Hagens (01:19:06):

Thank you. I've heard that quote before and I quite like it. I have a lot of questions yet, and you are out of time, so let me just ask you two. If you could wave a magic wand, John, what is one thing that you would do to improve human and planetary futures?

Jonathan Haidt (01:19:30):

Well, let's see. My first thought was give us nuclear fusion and the environmental crisis. But actually no, because we still have the sociological apocalypse. I guess if it was one thing, I guess it would be really good, reliable identity authentication on social media platforms.

Nate Hagens (01:19:50):

Okay, excellent. I've been following a model on this podcast where I have a first conversation like this one to give a grand arc of a guest's work and their worldview, and then I invite them back to do a deeper dive. In your case, you are so busy, I don't know if you could come back in the next 6 to 12 months. But if you came back to take a deep dive on a single topic that you are curious about and think is relevant, do you have any suggestions on what that might be?

Jonathan Haidt (01:20:23):

Well, if I'm able to hide away for the next 6 or 12 months, then I will succeed in writing this book Kids in Space, which will come out in January or February of 2024. I'd be happy to come back on then. What I would want to talk about then, it would be childhood. It would be what I've learned about childhood and what we need as children and what we're not getting as children, because there's a lot about childhood and child development that very few people I think know. If they knew it, then we would redesign schools, we would redesign what we do with our kids, and we'd have much, much healthier, happier, stronger kids.

Nate Hagens (01:21:10):

Let's do it. I really look forward to it. I agree. We need a lot of changes and that sounds like a good place to start. Thank you so much, John. To be continued, and good luck with all your efforts.

Jonathan Haidt (01:21:24):

Well, thank you so much, Nate, and good luck with all of your important efforts as well.

Nate Hagens (01:21:29):

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