

10 Stepping Out of the Bubble of Views: Jonathan Haidt

Jonathan Haidt is a heterodox thinker and social commentator.

I describe him as ‘heterodox’ because, like the “Heterodox Academy” he helped to establish in the United States, he believes in open inquiry, allowing a diversity of viewpoints, and ‘constructive disagreement’.

Using his academic background as a social psychologist he writes articles and books for a wider audience, where he explores what is happening in the world, and what might be done to make it better.

In my earlier series “Trying to make sense of what’s happening in the world” I spoke about Jonathan Haidt and his concerns about the effects of social media especially on young people.

(See <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/foecj6tnxozfv7d4cdizs/05-Is-Social-Media-Making-Us-Stupid.docx?rlkey=4ag2kiihi8p3juvbfcfq4kehf&dl=0>)

I mentioned then that he is the author of several best-selling books written for a popular audience. Today I want to focus on two of those books; the first being ‘The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure’ which is co-written with Greg Lukianoff, and the second being ‘The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion’.

First, “The Coddling of the American Mind”.

In this book Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff identified what they called ‘Three Great Untruths’. They argue that these ‘untruths’ are increasingly prevalent ideas in American society. They damage young people and cause them to be unhappy.

The first untruth is ‘The Untruth of Fragility: What doesn’t kill you makes you *weaker*’.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche coined the opposite phrase ‘What doesn’t kill me makes me *stronger*’, understanding that to grow and develop you must have challenges, shocks and setbacks. This is the opposite of the ‘Untruth of Fragility’.

A young person that grows up, shielded from all risk and adversity, will be incapable of dealing with the difficulties and suffering that life inevitably brings.

But, say Haidt and Lukianoff, young Americans from childhood through to university are being over-protected from just those situations that will help them to grow and better deal with suffering and adversity later in life.

In the story of the four sights from early Buddhism the Buddha-to-be's father tries unsuccessfully to shield him from the truths of old age, sickness and death. It's the very realisation that life has inescapable suffering that leads the Buddha to leave home and to seek awakening.

It's the experience and recognition of suffering that leads to questioning, to growth, and to the search for fulfilment in life.

The second untruth is 'The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always trust your feelings.'

As Haidt and Lukianoff recognise, this is the opposite of one of the most fundamental teachings of Buddhism. Buddhism teaches us not to place our unquestioning trust in our feelings. Our feelings can lead us astray.

In Buddhist meditation we learn how our experience of pleasantness or unpleasantness in response to a sense contact, conditions our mind to react with craving or aversion, and leads to grasping or pushing away.

We learn through meditation, and by applying what we learn in meditation in daily life, to be mindful of this conditioning, and to create a space in which we can choose how to respond, instead of mindlessly reacting.

We should not simply trust our 'feelings'.

The third untruth is 'The Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a battle between good people and evil people'.

Haidt and Lukianoff believe that this is the most destructive of the Great Untruths. It leads to conflict between groups. It leads to rapid escalation of distrust and hatred.

In a just published book Greg Lukianoff has added to this a fourth untruth that he calls ‘The Great Untruth of Ad Hominem’, which supposes that “bad people only have bad opinions.’

With his co-author Rikki Schlott, Greg Lukianoff argues that too much of modern discourse is focused on a moralistic evaluation of the speaker:

“ ... if you can show someone to be “bad” by any measure, you don’t have to listen to them anymore. Today, basically anything can be used to dismiss someone as “bad” depending on your political orientation—from dubbing them “conservative” to accusing them of being “woke.”

(Lukianoff, Greg; Schlott, Rikki. *The Canceling of the American Mind*)

Once a person is identified or labelled as belonging to this or that group we fail to see them as individuals, with a complex mixture of motives and experiences just like us.

As Jonathan Haidt has recently re-emphasised “The last thing we need, in a complex multiethnic liberal democracy, is for educators to teach young people to divide everyone up into groups and then to teach them that some groups are good, others are bad.”

(From the foreword to Lukianoff, Greg; Schlott, Rikki. *The Canceling of the American Mind: Cancel Culture Undermines Trust and Threatens Us All—But There Is a Solution* (p. XIII). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.)

None of us is perfect. Lukianoff and Haidt remind us of the words of Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

(Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Archipiélago Gulag I (1918–1956): An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper & Row, 2007).

The process at work here is similar to the ‘empathy wall’ that Arlie Hochschild describes in her book “*Strangers in Their Own Land*”. I spoke about that in the last talk. It’s the opposite of metta, the cultivation of kindness and openness to all beings.

These four ‘untruths’ identified by Jonathan Haidt, Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott, are increasingly influential and detrimental beliefs in

American society. They run counter to basic Buddhist teachings and practices. They need to be opposed.

Now on to the second book - 'The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion'.

From his research around the world Haidt identified six fundamental ideas or values that commonly provide foundational moral systems: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty.

According to his theory how important each value is to us as individuals, determines our behaviour, and helps to explain why people vote for different political parties.

The values can be presented as a spectrum from positive to negative.

Here are the values (and their opposites):

1. Care. Human beings are interconnected. We should have compassion for everyone else, as much as we can. Suffering should be eliminated if it can be. The opposite end of the spectrum is harm.
2. Fairness. A society should strive to be fair. Justice should be equal for all. Cooperation is better than cruelty. Those that cheat should be scorned or punished. The opposite end of the spectrum is cheating.
3. Loyalty. Loyalty to one's family, community, team, business and nation is essential. It is the force that holds things together. The opposite end of the spectrum is betrayal.
4. Authority. One must abide by the law, whether one agrees with it or not. Our collective agreement to obey social and legal institutions is what makes us function as a society. The opposite end of the spectrum is subversion.
5. Sanctity. Purity, temperance, restraint and moderation stabilize our world. Certain behaviours are immoral and must be shunned. The opposite end of the spectrum is degradation.
6. Liberty. People should be allowed to be free in their speech, thoughts and behaviours as long as they aren't hurting others. The opposite end of the spectrum is oppression.

Thanks to David Byrne for this summary of the values. (https://wearenotdivided.reasonstobecheerful.world/moral-values-liberal-conservative-politics-righteous-mind/?utm_source=Reasons+to+be+Cheerful&utm_campaign=ca911f37cd-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_10_20_02_56&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_89fb038efe-ca911f37cd-372573193)

As David Byrne comments, it's possible to see at least some worth in every one of these six values. None of them seems completely wrong.

But we each individually prioritize these values differently. Which ones we prioritize determines our politics, how we behave and how we think of others.

According to Jonathan Haidt the values we prioritize, determine where along the political spectrum we fall.

Whereas liberals tend to emphasize care and fairness, conservatives are somewhat more likely to value loyalty, purity and authority.

When he examines the programmes of the two main American political parties, Haidt identifies a marked contrast between the Republicans and the Democrats.

Republicans emphasise faith, patriotism, valour, chastity, law and order. These touch all six moral foundations. On the other hand, Democrats, in Haidt's analysis, focus almost entirely on care and fighting oppression.

The startling conclusion is that when it comes to morality, conservatives are more broad-minded than liberals. As the New York Times commented "They serve a more varied diet."

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/books/review/the-righteous-mind-by-jonathan-haidt.html>)

Like Arlie Hochschild in "Strangers in Their Own Land" Jonathan Haidt is concerned to understand what motivates people to adopt the political positions they hold.

And like both Arlie Hochschild and like Rosa Brooks who I spoke about in the last talk, he raises more fundamental and uncomfortable questions about grasping after views, and how we, as Buddhists, should approach politics and political issues.

So, to finish this talk, I want to return to the subject of views, and political engagement. To do this I am going to turn to a recent article written by a friend, Vishvapani, of the Triratna Buddhist Order.

In the article Vishvapani is trying to formulate principles to guide Buddhists who want to engage politically.

His approach to this problem is grounded in two areas of personal activity. The first is his involvement in a UK Parliamentary report entitled 'Mindful Nation UK'.

This report proposed that mindfulness practice should be supported by government, especially in the areas of Education, Health, Criminal Justice and the Workplace. The report was issued by a group of MPs, the Minister for Education spoke at the launch, and, he says, much progress has since been made since its original launch.

In this same area he has been active in advocating for mindfulness in Wales, where he lives. He is realistic in recognising that mindfulness is not a panacea for the world's troubles, but for him, it's an example of what Buddhists can contribute to society *as Buddhists*, drawing on our experience of Buddhist practice.

The second area of Vishvapani's activity has been the "Thought for the Day" talks he's done for seventeen years at prime time on the main BBC breakfast radio news program. Here he has just a few minutes to comment on current affairs from a Buddhist perspective.

In his talk he is not allowed to take sides politically. That means he must look for nonpartisan and clearly Buddhist responses to events.

Reviewing the talks over the seventeen years, he says the most resonant starting points include compassion, nonviolence, and an understanding of the centrality of the mind.

He also thinks that the Buddhist teachings on conditionality imply a concern for the long-term implications of our actions and a rounded, holistic perspective to our challenges that chimes with environmental concerns. In areas like these, the connection to Buddhist principles seems clear to him, and he feels confident in advocating them, along with mindfulness, in public spaces.

But, he stresses, even if Buddhists could all agree that principles like these should underpin a Buddhist view of culture and politics, it doesn't follow that we will then arrive at the same political conclusions.

As Buddhist psychology tells us, our conclusions and interpretations are bound to be influenced by our past, our preferences, our allegiances, and a host of other subjective, emotionally loaded factors. He writes:

“The Buddha taught that beliefs and opinions are important constituents of the fixed sense of self that both gives us a feeling of security but also causes us to suffer. He says in the *Brahmajala Sutta*, his magisterial analysis of ‘views,’ that even the most impressive-sounding beliefs at root are expressions of ‘the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving.’ Practicing Buddhism should therefore mean questioning our views about things like politics. I notice in myself an impulse to believe that what I think is correct, simply because it's what I think, and I try to recognize how that feeling shuts down my curiosity and stops me listening.

There are degrees of rigidity in how we hold our beliefs, and some beliefs seem to have rigidity baked in—that would be my definition of an “ideology.” Rigid ideological beliefs grow from emotions like frustration and fear and reinforce the same emotions by filtering our perceptions. Buddhist teachings tell us that the craving and aversion have always produced differing subjective realities, but the filter bubbles and echo chambers of our fragmented news and social media supercharge the process. The more insecure and defensive we feel, the more tightly we cling to our beliefs and the more estranged we feel from those who disagree with us. The result—in the words of the Buddha in the *Madhupindika Sutta*, is “taking up rods and bladed weapons, arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive tale-bearing and false speech.”

[\(https://tricycle.org/article/suella-braverman-buddhist-politics/\)](https://tricycle.org/article/suella-braverman-buddhist-politics/)

To escape what the Buddha called the “morass,” or “thicket,” or “net” of views means something other than picking sides in a political fight. We must examine our own views for signs of our own ideological rigidity.

Vishvapani also recommends that when engaging politically we should remember the Buddha's four speech precepts. These four ethical

precepts ask us to avoid words that are false, unkind, unhelpful, and foster disharmony. Instead, our words should be true, kind, helpful, and harmonious.

Taken together, he argues, the four speech precepts challenge the assumption that our speech is justified if we think it's true. It also needs to be kind, helpful, and conducive to harmony.

In particular we need to consider whether what we say or write will bring people together or drive them apart.

As he points out, when we say that a political message “fires up the base,” ‘what we really mean is that it affirms certain emotions and encourages people to identify with a particular view of the world, regardless of whether it’s based in reality.’

We need to be careful that our rhetoric is not so fuelled by anger that it overwhelms our own capacity and other people’s capacity to listen to our opponents.

I take this to mean that we can still be passionate in advocating our views. But, at the same time, we need to be skilful in how we speak, to encourage open discussion. And, we should be mindful of any rigidity in our views, being prepared to listen and be curious about the views of others.

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/jzwflynnukzkzgoalsou1/10-English-Only-Jonathan-Haidt.MP3?rlkey=occ1u2ojlhyheg9vojd62ngkm&dl=0>