



## Episode 1,772: How Bad Ideas Are Killing Common Sense and Rational Debate

Guest: Gad Saad

**WOODS:** All right, well, I love this book so much. I can't tell you. It was like a guilty pleasure. Every page gave me — it was just brimming with, at least for me anyway, delight, even though of course, the things you're talking about are immensely frustrating. But the way you smashed them is so deeply and profoundly satisfying, I couldn't help taking pleasure with each page. So let's start off, though, with the title itself, which is very significant, because this is a kind of a metaphor that you're using throughout your argument: *The Parasitic Mind*. What do you mean by that?

**SAAD:** Right, so as an evolutionary psychologist, I often look to other animals to contrast and compare when I'm making a statement about human behavior or human cognition. And that field is called comparative psychology. So for example, if you're studying toy preferences in human infants, you might also look at vervet monkeys and rhesus monkeys and chimpanzees to demonstrate that they exhibit the same sex specificity. And so when I was thinking about all these dreadful ideas that I've been watching spawning on university campuses, I thought these are just horrible ideas that are parasitic.

And so that led me to the neural parasitic literature, so a neural parasite is basically a parasite that looks to reside in an animal's brain. So for example, *Toxoplasma gondii*, is a parasite that can infect the brains of mice so that they lose their innate fear of cats. They actually become sexually attracted to the cat's urine. And so that was my a-ha moment, my epiphany: I will use this neural parasitological framework to argue that humans can of course suffer from actual brain worms, but they can also suffer from what I call idea pathogens, dreadful ideas that are parasitic.

**WOODS:** Well, we're going to get into some of those ideas as we go along, but I actually want to skip ahead to what I think may be chapter four in your book, because it's interesting — maybe it either says something about the lack of self-awareness among some people on the left or the diversity of the left, that right now, the left very often tries to portray itself as the party of science, because we are the scientists, and we're trying to fight back against the stupid backward, reactionary rubes who won't listen to the experts in the white coats. But yet, when we look deeply at their side, I wouldn't exactly say these are people who are scrupulously following the scientific method. How do we square this circle?

**SAAD:** Well, cognitive consistency is not the hallmark of people who are parasitized by BS, right? So you're expecting a lot from them, Tom. Look, I argue that the greatest idea pathogen, arguably, of all of the ones that I'm discussing in the book is postmodernism, because that actually attacks the epistemology of truth seeking. Because the scientific

method is a liberating framework, because it keeps our identity at the door. It frees us from the shackles of our identity, and it says that as we're trying to adjudicate a particular position, we can use an unbiased mechanism to decide whether something is truthful or not. That's what's beautiful about the scientific method. Well, postmodernism argues that there are no universal truths. Everything is shackled by subjectivity, by our personal biases, so it's a form of deep anti-scientific positioning. It's a form of intellectual terrorism. So never mind the specific positions that the left might take that might be deeply anti scientific. I argue that being a postmodernist is the ultimate form of anti-scientific positioning, because it rejects the possibility of using science to uncover truth. So it's really a form of science denialism on steroids.

**WOODS:** Postmodernism, though, the average person maybe has heard the word, barely knows what it means, and it might seem very theoretical and abstract and remote from day-to-day-concerns. How does it manifest itself in things that do matter to people?

**SAAD:** Well, as I said, you can't even teach science, because science or the scientific method is only one of several ways of knowing. So this is what I mean when I say it's an attack on the epistemology of truth. So for example, it is now considered racist to argue that the scientific method is the means by which you adjudicate scientific issues, because there are other ways of knowing. There is indigenous way of knowing, there is a tribal way of knowing. No, there isn't. There is only one game in town, and it's called the scientific method. There is no indigenous way of building planes. There is no Lebanese Jewish way of building bridges. There's the scientific method and nothing else.

Now, that doesn't mean, by the way, for example, that if we're studying some phenomenon where we know that, say, indigenous people have local knowledge of the flora and fauna, of course we seek their contributions. But in seeking their knowledge and in adjudicating across different positions, there is no *indigenous* way of knowing. There's only the scientific method. So if nothing else, that's already a very clear way by which postmodernism attacks people's abilities to engage in critical thinking. It's grotesque.

**WOODS:** Would they say that it's a myth to claim that somebody can really look at data impartially? That we all bring some kind of ideological lens to it? And if that's the case, how do we either disprove that claim, or how in fact do we leave our ideological commitments at the door? Seems easier said than done.

**SAAD:** Right. Look, the reality is that there are some disciplines that simply are more amenable to ideological parasites because of the topic that you're studying. It's difficult to incorporate your personal political biases if you're studying the molecular structure of some compounds, right? On the other hand, it's a lot easier to be parasitized by ideological biases if you're studying some sociological issues. So that notwithstanding, if you are honest scientists, you do leave your personal biases at the door. If I'm trying to study how the ovulatory cycle affects women's behaviors when they are engaging in a consummatory act, I simply look at the data. I study the data, and whether I love Biden or not, whether I am Lebanese Jewish or not, whether I am fat or transgender or not, it doesn't matter. The data is the data. Now, it's not always easy, but if you're an honest scientist, of course it's easy. That's what you're supposed to do.

**WOODS:** Let's take a specific example of an idea that you cover in your book, and that's feminism.

**SAAD:** Yes.

**WOODS:** Now, anytime you talk about feminism, man, are you opening a can of worms. I think most people even now, they have this sense that the definition of feminism is an ideology according to which men and women ought to enjoy the same rights and opportunities. And if that were really what feminism were all about, I think in the 21st century virtually everybody would agree with it. But I look around at people calling themselves feminists, and although some of them disagree with each other and there are different strains of feminism, I wouldn't say that that really, that benign summary really seems to cover what they're doing. So what really is going on here?

**SAAD:** Right, so Christina Hoff Sommers actually talks about what you just described as equity feminism. And as you so correctly pointed out, I think that most of us would be feminists, because most people, certainly in an enlightened society, believe that there should be no institutional, legal, or economic barriers to why men and women shouldn't be equal. And of course, we'd all sign up for that. The problem is – and by the way, what I'm about to mention is exactly what's common to all of the idea pathogens that I discuss in the book. They all start with a kernel of truth and with a noble goal, but in the pursuit of that noble goal, they end up murdering truth.

So we go from equity feminism, which as we said, is perfectly reasonable and we would support, to militant feminism, which in the pursuit of that original laudable goal, rejects the idea that there might be evolutionary-based sex differences, that there might be biological-based sex differences. In the pursuit of the original goal, we must have a narrative that says that men and women are indistinguishable from one another, and any differences between them must be due to social construction, which is another idea pathogen. And what I always argue is I could chew gum and walk at the same time. I could pursue normal social justice objectives without ever murdering an inch of truth.

**WOODS:** Indeed. Indeed, that's possible, but for some reason, it seems very difficult. It's very seductive. Some of these ideologies are very seductive. And why people get drawn to them – because there are distinctly anti reason aspects to some of these ideologies. I mean, I think people outside their bubble are often shocked to learn what, for example, a lot of modern feminists believe, and I wonder what it is that's so compelling to people about ideologies like this that are so at odds with the surrounding society.

**SAAD:** I think it comes down to – and I talk about this briefly in *The Parasitic Mind* – it comes down to a tension between two forms of ethical systems. So you have deontological ethics, which operates in the world of absolutes. So if I were to say, Tom, it is never okay to lie, that would be a deontological statement. Consequentialist ethics would be: Tom, it is sometimes okay to lie if you are sparing someone's feelings. So if you want to have a long-term marriage, you might want to lie to the following question: do I look fat in those jeans, sweetie? Well, I might want to lie about that, because I'm trying to maintain a harmonious marriage.

Now, the reality is, we're all at times consequentialist and at times deontological in our ethical bents, but when it comes to truth with a capital T, you should always be deontological, right? So to answer your question, I think the folks who find these idea pathogens alluring are consequentialists in their ethical bent. So they say, if I have to murder truth in the advancement of this noble goal, well then, so be it. Sorry, truth, I have to kill you

a bit. I say no, always pursue objectives that make society better, that free us from bigotry, that create more just societies, but never do it with truth being a victim.

**WOODS:** Of course, the way that we typically have thought we reach the truth has to involve a free society. People have to be free to say what they want, to get their ideas out there. Then we have a back-and-forth and we try to get to what the truth is. In chapter three of your book, you spend a good deal of time talking about the importance of free speech. Let me push back with the type of argument that your opponents would make, which is to say that, yeah, certainly there are some cases where we have different points of view, and we're not really going to know which one is right unless we have a free and vigorous debate.

But on the other hand, does it contribute to human flourishing to hear a lecture by a neo-Nazi, let's say, just to use one of their examples? There's nothing that person can teach me or society that's going to be beneficial, so there's no possible thing that we're losing. Yes, it could sharpen my arguments a bit, but I don't really feel like my arguments against Nazism really need much sharpening, so it's only a net bad for this person to be allowed to speak. So why would you be standing up for that person's right to speak?

**SAAD:** Right, so of course I think that's a nonsensical argument. I know you're not making it. You're taking the devil's advocate position.

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**SAAD:** Because it's a slippery slope to hell to decide what is considered something worthwhile or not. So let me give you an example that's not necessarily specific to the general freedom of speech. But let's suppose we were trying to decide whether research has any applied value. Well, many number theorists who were developing extraordinarily complicated mathematical theorems dealing with number theory had their work collecting dust for 200, 300, 400 hundred years until the advent of cryptography, computer security, where those mathematical insights that served no practical purpose suddenly served a practical purpose. So the idea that we should place some metric that decides which types of speech is okay or valuable or applicable or of practical value or not is not what I would call an epistemological purist. So in chapter one, I talked about why I am someone who's so indignant about all this, and that's because I am a true purist. I even support the right, Tom, since you mentioned neo-Nazis — I support the right of Holocaust deniers spewing their nonsense. I'm Jewish, Tom. I escaped execution in Lebanon, and I support their rights. So it's really difficult to be more of a free speech absolutist. Short of the usual provisos — you know, no libel stuff, no defamation — by the way, I currently have a neo-Nazi type of guy who's engaging in all sorts of libel defamation against me. Short of that kind of stuff, short of incitement to violence, anything goes. No one is the arbiter of what constitutes relevant or valuable research or language.

**WOODS:** I'm sorry I'm jumping around so much, but there's so many things I want to get to in this limited time.

**SAAD:** Oh, please, I love it.

**WOODS:** So right at the very beginning, you're trying to anticipate objections to the book itself, that maybe you should be focusing more on your specific area of expertise and science, and maybe you're focused too much on social justice warriors. After all, these are just a small

minority. But I want to stop right there. Because I went to college — my college years were 1992 to '94. And yeah, PC was on campus and we all knew it. And I was a dissident voice, but I didn't feel particularly intimidated or anything. I just felt like if the average kid were asked a question, he'd probably give the PC answer just to get somebody off his back. Not out of sheer terror, but just to get the person off his back. It seems to me things 30 years on, it's not just my imagination, are much worse, partly because we sat around saying, *Oh, this is just a small minority. Don't worry about it.* I don't think it is a small minority. And even if it is, wow, that small minority has intimidated entire academic departments. It affects the kind of speakers who come to campus. So anybody who's saying to you that you're not using your time wisely because you're focused on a group of crazy people, it is an extremely large group of crazy people, it seems to me.

**SAAD:** Yeah, thank you so much for bringing my attempt to address those objections right away. And as you said, I precisely did because I hear often those comments from people. And so let me kind of summarize some of my rebuttals that I discuss in the book.

Number one, the size of the number of terrorists doesn't really matter. When 9/11 happened, it wasn't 190 million terrorists who altered the skyline of New York. It wasn't 190,000. It wasn't 1,900 people. It was 19 committed zealots who woke up that morning, really believing in what they were doing, that killed many thousands of people. So the number of people who could cause chaos is not necessarily predictive of the amount of hell they will unleash on the world. So I don't need 3 million blue-haired radical feminists on campus to make sure that the rest of us are kept in check. So that's number one.

Number two, the idea that, *But Dr. Saad, aren't these just a bunch of kind of wacky quacks who maybe inhabit some of the esoteric humanities departments? Who cares about these stupid ideas?* Well, these stupid ideas are not sealed in a DEFCON-4 lab where they don't escape. Those dreadful ideas become our prime minister. So the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, is a walking manifestation of every idea pathogen that I discuss in the book. One of your two parties in the US is parasitized by all of those idea pathogens.

Let's take, for example, identity politics. Well, I am the product of what happens when identity politics reaches its ultimate culmination of hell, which is called the Lebanese Civil War. Everything in Lebanon was defined by identity politics. In that specific case, it's your religious affiliation. As a matter of fact, the Lebanese constitution establishes what the president will be in terms of his religion, what the prime minister will be. So I've seen what happens to a society when it is organized along identity politic lines. Well, now imagine that one of the two parties in the United States is saying, hey, identity, politics is a great idea. We should adopt what happened in Lebanon, and only good things can come about. So the idea that these dreadful ideas will be restricted to some esoteric little corner on campus is simply not true. They've now made their way into every nook and cranny of society, and we're seeing the consequences.

**WOODS:** I remember at the time thinking, thank goodness these crazy people are confined just to college campuses, because if they were ever in a position of power, you can imagine what would happen [laughing].

**SAAD:** Bingo.

**WOODS:** I am so sorry to have been a prophet on that. So let's turn to something a little bit more positive.

**SAAD:** Sure.

**WOODS:** You have in chapter seven is a section on how to seek truth. So this is by contrast to these other ways of seeking truth, which involve, well, feelings or, in effect, pursuing lines of argument that you think will benefit, frankly, your illogical camp —

**SAAD:** Tribe.

**WOODS:** Yeah. So then, how should a person go about seeking truth? I mean, it can't just be — I understand how the scientific method works. So if I want to make a scientific statement, if I want to say something provisional about the natural world, I know how to go about it. And I'm sure that it's more sophisticated than Francis Bacon had it, but that's the basic approach, and I understand that. But there are other truths in the world that aren't obtainable through that method. Like, for example, the idea that all people are entitled to equal treatment before the law, there's no scientific laboratory experiment that's going to yield you that conclusion. How do I arrive at a truth like that?

**SAAD:** So in chapter seven, I'm not necessarily talking about how do we take positions regarding a moral truth like the one that you just said, although we can certainly talk about that. In chapter seven, what I'm actually doing is I'm saying, if you wish to establish the veracity of a position that you are arguing, there is an epistemological tool that's extraordinarily powerful that we can use. And if I can just take two or three minutes to expand —

**WOODS:** Please do, yeah.

**SAAD:** So I call this nomological networks of cumulative evidence. So if you think back of Charles Darwin, when he was developing or amassing the evidence for his theory of natural selection, he didn't collect data from 30 undergrads and a psychology lab at Ohio State University, and then mic drop, he was done. Instead, he assiduously collected data over nearly three decades, from an extraordinarily different number of fields — geology and paleontology and ecology and animal husbandry and comparative morphology and biodiversity — so that when you put all of these distinct lines of evidence together, it became an unassailable tsunami of evidence in support of his theory. And so I argue that for many issues we can put on that hat, that nomological networks hat.

So for example, if I'm trying to convince you, Tom, to take the example I mentioned earlier, that toy preferences are not socially constructed, that there's actually a biological basis for why little boys around the world prefer certain toys and little girls prefer other toys, it's not a social construction, well, I could get you data from around the world that shows that very different cultures exhibit that sex specificity. I could get you data from developmental psychology showing little children who are too young to yet be socialized and they already exhibit those toy preferences. I could bring you data from other animals that exhibit that data, that preference. I could bring you kids, little girls who suffer from congenital adrenal hyperplasia, which is an endocrinological disorder that masculinizes little girls. Well, those little girls will exhibit toy preferences akin to those of boys. So you notice how, bit by bit, the

epistemological noose is tightening around your neck. I don't need to get hysterical. I don't need to trigger my affective system. I let the overwhelming amount of data speak on behalf of my position.

Now, the caveat about such an exercise is that it requires intellectual commitment. It takes effort. It's a lot easier for me to simply say, "Shut up, Tom. You're a Nazi. Go away," right? So I can understand why people trigger their affective system. But if you're truly dealing with important issues, put on your epistemological hat of Charles Darwin and tackle the data assiduously. Do you follow what I'm saying?

**WOODS:** Yeah, I absolutely do. And I knew that that was your point in the chapter, I was thinking about people who are scientists, though, and who are very, very good scientists and who are genuinely pursuing truth in the way that you describe. And I'm curious to know — because I think what drives much of the left and the people who hold the crazy ideas that you're talking about, a lot of it's coming from first principles that they've acquired in one way or another that I think are not subject to these kinds of methods, that aren't reachable in that way. And so, for example, even I, somebody who's not on the left, I hold certain ideas that I think are, I wouldn't say self-evident, but I would say are first principles. And one of them would be about the idea of equality before the law. Now, if you asked me, how do you arrive at that conclusion, I could give you a religious argument. I could try to make a moral claim for you. But my point is that sometimes I see people who are so focused on science and the scientific method, that I wonder how they would reach intellectual conclusions on topics that don't have data behind them. Do you know what I mean?

**SAAD:** Yeah, I know, I get you. And I'm not suggesting that for every issue the nomological approach is the right one, but even on issues that do have a tint of moralizing — let's take, for example, transgender activism, right? Well, I am a strong supporter of transgender rights. When it comes to that, I'm as a socially liberal as they get. Yet in the pursuit of that goal of having transgender people be free of bigotry, I don't accept the idea that a 270-pound man who is six foot, seven, who yesterday was known as Bob, who tomorrow is known as Linda could now, because he self-identifies as a woman, should compete with biological females, and to argue otherwise would be transphobic. So here, I would build for you a nomological network, where I would show you hormonal data and biological data and behavioral data and morphological data and so on and so forth that all point to the fact that you are arguing that there are no differences between men and women along all these things, and if he considers himself a woman today, there is no advantages he has, well, I will drown you in evidence.

So again, I don't wish to pretend that on every issue — because by the way, in the book, I can attest I'm addressing your concern, because I broke it up into axiomatic truths and empirical truths. There are certain axiomatic truths where the nomological network doesn't work. So for example, if I tell you that I prefer car A to car B, and I prefer car B to car C, then it must be that I prefer car A to car C. This is known as the transitivity axiom. So in this case, it's a mathematical axiom that establishes truth. So my point is not that every single debate could be adjudicated using this approach, but for many of the debates that we all get hysterical about, my approach certainly does work.

**WOODS:** Right, right, I agree. I was very happy to see you close with a call to action, because I actually think that, not for all my books, but for most of them, my failure as a writer, as I look back on it, is that I make some great arguments and I produce a lot of evidence, and at the end of the book, I haven't told anybody what to do. Okay, now you have all this

information. Now what? I don't give them anything that they should go to. And you actually do tell people what to go do. So I don't want to steal all the thunder of the book, but maybe you could give us one or two suggestions. And then I want to ask, could somebody who genuinely is concerned about his livelihood seriously follow these suggestions without damaging himself?

**SAAD:** Right. Well, first, I should mention that I appreciate you saying that you had failed in closing the book in that way. And I was very, very conscious of exactly that, which you failed at, and that's why I very strategically made sure. Because I viewed it akin to going to see a physician that diagnoses you – so I'm telling you here are all these brain parasites, but then you ask the physician, "Okay, Doc, so you've diagnosed me with this disease. So what do I do?" And he goes, "Oh, sorry, I don't operate in curing you. I only tell you what the problem is." And so I specifically made sure that I don't succumb to what you so kindly admitted to in your own books. So thank you for noticing that.

So I'll give you a few calls to action, and then I'll address the last question you mentioned. So one that I think that really sticks with people is I talk about activating your inner honey badger. And I use that metaphor, because a honey badger, for your listeners who don't know, is an extraordinarily ferocious animal. It's the size of a small dog, and yet it could be approached by six adult lions, and they run away intimidated. How could that be? Well, because it exhibits such ferocity that most animals say, I don't want to deal with that. So I argue that you need to be a honey badger when it comes to defending your positions.

Now, I'm not saying be a rabid idiot who screams just to intimidate others. But if your positions are well articulated, are well reasoned, if you have first principles from which the rest of your arguments can flow, then if you just watch me on social media, if people come after me, they'd better come correct, as I say, because if not, I'm going after you. I'm going after your ancestors. I'm digging up your dead ancestors and going after them. In other words, there is no end to how much I could become indignant if you rile up the cage, right? That's not because I'm a mean guy. That's not because I'm a bad person. That's not because I'm an A-hole – excuse the term. It's because I believe in my principles, and I'm willing to defend them. So you have to grow that spine, that reflex; otherwise, how could you enter the MMA arena of ideas?

So now to address your other point about the livelihood and so on, look, the young men – and I say young men because they were men; they weren't of different genders. The young men who landed on Normandy, knowing that most of them were going to be squashed like little bugs by Nazi machine guns and mortar fire and so on, weren't guaranteed safe passage. They knew what their likely outcome would be. And they said, *Yeah, sign me up, I'll go do it*, so that 75 years later, Tom Woods and Gad Saad could sit freely and have this conversation. So the reality is you can't go to war, whether it be an actual physical war or an ideological war for the soul of your society, while being guaranteed complete security. Now, I'm not suggesting that you be a reckless martyr. I understand that people, there are consequences to them speaking out.

Now, people will often say, Oh, yeah, but Dr. Saad, you have tenure. Well, guess what: tenure didn't protect me from the 10,000 death threats that I was receiving, where I had to go to the university campus with security. Tenure didn't protect me when I had to file a report with the Montreal police on the recommendation of my university because of the number of death threats I was receiving, where I would walk into campus, and when I would



leave, I would have something akin to an anxiety attack because I had survived another week. So there are many crosses that we bear in speaking out, and we all have to do our part.

All I'm saying is: get engaged. Sure, modulate the amount of risk that you're willing to bear, but simply don't subcontract your voice to a few courageous folks who are willing to put everything on the line. You have a say in it. Get engaged. If we all speak out — the silent majority hates these idea pathogens. If we all speak out, we will get rid of this nonsense by next Tuesday. If we don't speak out, it'll be a long train ride to hell.

**WOODS:** And I'm telling you, what we need, really, is not much more than a handful of high-profile people who not only refuse to go along, but make a spectacle of refusing to go along, because millions of people will rally to them.

**SAAD:** Exactly right.

**WOODS:** It astonishes me how few are willing to do it, knowing that there is a whole country — all over the West, there are many tens of millions of people who would say, finally, somebody, instead of apologizing for accidentally telling the truth once or twice, stands up and says, "No, go jump in a lake. I'm not going to apologize to you people."

**SAAD:** I mean, why do you think my message, if I may say — I'm not trying to boast, but why do you think my message resonates with millions of people? Because most of the silent majority hates that stuff, but they are cowed into silence. Regrettably, not to be too judgmental here, but I am going to be judgmental, the eighth deadly sin that should be added to the existing list of Seven Deadly Sins is cowardice, right?

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**SAAD:** Most people are afraid of their shadow. If you go boo, they run away. Well, no, that's why I say grow a spine. Be a honey badger. Be indignant. Look, there are two types of people: those who hear a woman crying for help as she's being accosted by three miscreants in an alley and walk away pretending they didn't hear her cry, or those who say, wait a minute, I'm going to intervene here. Well, the truth is being murdered in the alley every day, and most people walk away, pretending the truth is not screaming for help. Stand up and help truth. Get engaged in the battle of ideas.

**WOODS:** Now, I could say with a very hackneyed transition here: one great way to do that is by reading — and you know what? I think that is how I'm going to make the transition — is by reading *The Parasitic Mind: How Infectious Ideas Are Killing Common Sense* by our guest, Gad Saad. I'm linking to it on our show notes page, [TomWoods.com/1772](http://TomWoods.com/1772). Well, thanks so much again for your time. I appreciate it. And best of luck with this.

**SAAD:** Thank you so much. What a pleasure talking with you, Tom.