Episode 429: Is Reason Enough? Why Your Opponents Won't Listen

Guest: Jonathan Haidt

WOODS: I had a guest on, several weeks ago at least now, who was joining me to talk about how to persuade people of particular things. And I asked him at the end to name me a few books that he thinks would be helpful in thinking about all this, and just right off the bat he said, Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*; you've got to read this book. And I am sorry to say, somehow even though you've had millions of views of your TED Talks and you've been tremendously successful in so many ways, I'm sorry to say I wasn't familiar with your word at all. But then I got the book, and I looked at it, and I'm extremely intrigued. And I can't say I'm 1000% persuaded, but I can't find what the hole is in your argument either, and it's driving me crazy. So can we start off by having you explain maybe the difference between how the average person thinks about how persuasion takes place and the dark truth about how it really takes place?

HAIDT: Okay. So when I die and I think about what I've left behind, eventually it will probably just be one metaphor. And that metaphor is that the mind is divided like a rider on an elephant. And the rider represents your conscious verbal reasoning, the stuff you're aware of, the stuff that uses logic. And everything else is the elephant, it's the automated processes. So 99% of what's going on in your mind, you're not aware of. And I developed this metaphor in my book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, and then it was made famous not by me, but by Chip and Dan Heath in their wonderful book, *Switch*.

And what the advice boils down to is most of us spend a lot of our time trying to persuade other people's riders. We give them all these reasons; here are the seven reasons why you're wrong or why you should see it my way. When in fact, the way to persuade people is to speak to the elephant first. The elephant is a lot stronger than the rider. If you get somebody feeling the truth of what you're saying or feeling that they like you or like what you're saying, and the elephant kind of wants to go in your direction, then it's effortless to persuade the rider to go along. But if the elephant is digging in its heels; the elephant doesn't want to go, doesn't want to be dragged along by you to the conclusion that you're trying to get him to, then there's really nothing you can say that will persuade the rider.

WOODS: All right, now that is deeply frustrating on many levels to learn this, because of course we for — certainly since the Enlightenment, but I would say quite a while before that, there was a conviction throughout Western civilization that reason, being the defining characteristic of human beings, must be the criterion that we use. And

this must be the arbiter through which we judge our disputes. Now, I want to focus primarily on political questions, as opposed to religious ones, just because of the nature of the show. But is your thesis effectively saying, or at least implying, that rational political discourse will always be impossible?

HAIDT: No, it's not that it's impossible. It's that it can't work on an enlightenment model. So, you know, I like the Enlightenment as much as the next professor, but the Enlightenment was not — let's just say, there weren't any psychologists involved in it. Psychology had not really been invented, in a sense. Well, let me change that. David Hume is the Enlightenment figure who really got it right. He and also Adam Smith, but especially Hume, were just so wise about the nature of human thinking. And now on the other side, you've got people like Immanuel Kant and others, who are very high systemizers, is what we say — the people who worshipped reason. I've written about what I call the rationalist delusion; I'm sure you and many of your listeners are aware of that funny scene in the French Revolution, where they pull the Jesuses and Marys out of all the churches, and they stick an image in of the God of Reason — I mean, they stick an image in of Reason — to take the place.

WOODS: Ugh, yeah.

HAIDT: And this does not work. You can't have a religion based on reason. And if you do, you're going to destroy reasoning. So what I'm saying is, political discourse can work once you recognize that we're all mostly elephants. I don't mean Republicans; I mean we're all mostly emotional, social creatures. It can work. But it can't work if you're psychologically unsophisticated. And this is the problem that plagued the Democrats for so long. They just kept thinking about messaging as though, if they could just get the right configuration of words and put it up into message space, it will somehow persuade people. And it doesn't work that way.

WOODS: One thing I drew from reading your work is that you yourself, in the course of doing this work and coming to these conclusions, maybe began to have a little bit more understanding for people who disagree with you than you might have had before. And you seem to be suggesting that instead of just writing off half the population as being irrational idiots, we ought to think about them maybe a bit more sympathetically.

HAIDT: Absolutely, that's what happened to me. I was always on the Left. When I was growing up, I was raised Jewish in New York. I went to Yale. I don't know if I ever met a conservative — I guess there where three or four conservative students at Yale when I was there. But I never spoke to them, because they were so yucky, and we all hated them. I mean, it was a really partisan time in the '80s, and it's just gotten worse since then.

So I actually started studying political psychology. I had been just looking at how morality varies across nations, and I started studying how it varies across the Left-Right divide, in part because I was so frustrated with the Democrats, you know, since Al Gore's failed campaign — I was so frustrated that they didn't know how to talk about

morality. But as I dug into it, and as I really made a commitment to understanding conservatives — and I didn't even think about libertarians at the time; I just saw Left-Right — I began to see that if you listen to people who differ from you, they actually know things that you don't know. Whereas when you only talk to people that agree with you, you don't learn very much from them.

So in the course of doing this work, I kind of dropped — I'm no longer a liberal; I'm just kind of nothing now. I'm a professor; I study this stuff; I find incredibly interesting — everyone's got insight into problems. So yeah, it helped me step out of "the Matrix," as it were.

WOODS: Once we adopt an ideology — and not everybody has one, of course, in the U.S. — but once we do, of course we tend to view the whole world through the lens, and that means that when something contradicts our worldview, we — instead of thinking, hmm, maybe there's something wrong with the worldview — we immediately rush to find some corroborating evidence for our view that can refute whatever the anomaly is. And I of course, have caught myself doing this quite a bit, and I've gotten to the point where I feel more at ease — even right here on this show, a daily libertarian podcast — I feel at ease saying, you know, I think this is a weak link in something I believe, and maybe it could be strengthened; I'm not saying it's impossible. But I'm willing to say this is a weak link. Whereas before, I think I would have just felt like we've got to batten down the hatches and we have to make sure that we don't admit any weakness at all.

HAIDT: That's right.

WOODS: And I think also we have to acknowledge that other people are coming at their views probably in many cases because of experiences they've had growing up that were formative for them, and that causes them to see the world in a particular way. And I used to think of people who were on the Left or people who were neoconservatives as just being incorrigibly wicked and evil and they won't evaluate evidence, but that's — you know, there are some people who are evil in those camps, that's true — but I don’t' think that's most people. I think most people just, as I say, they formed their opinions on the basis of things that are not stupid or irrational —

HAIDT: Mm hmm, that's right.

WOODS: Maybe non-rational might be a better way of thinking of it.

HAIDT: That's the word, that's the word.

WOODS: Now, in your work, you go ahead and list a series of categories, and you say these are the ways, these are the different ingredients in how we come to be who we are. Can you talk about some of those?

HAIDT: Sure. My research since graduate school has always been on morality, moral psychology, what it is, where it comes from. And in reading ethnographies, in reading

a lot of anthropology, in doing some fieldwork in India and in Brazil, I came to see that morality varies a lot around the world. It's as though there are these sort of issues that seem to just tweak our minds.

You know, if you see a child being harmed, it's awful. It's like having a drop of lemon juice on your tongue. It just activates a taste bud that says, "No, this is wrong." Or if somebody is shirking or not pulling their fair share of the weight or if somebody is disloyal or if somebody is disobedient or if somebody behaves in a way that is degrading or disgusting.

Now I just named five foundations: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. And some of your listeners might have thought that the last couple aren't really morality — what's this disobedience, sanctity? One thing we know about libertarians — my colleagues and I have done what I think is the largest study of libertarian psychology — is that libertarians focus primarily on liberty. So that's the sixth foundation, liberty. Libertarians have the strongest sense of personal liberty, and they want to extend it to others. And they have the weakest sense of group loyalty, respect for authority, or a sense of personal sanctity or purity.

So libertarians are quite unique in their morality — they're diverse, of course, as well — but libertarians in some ways are more different from liberals and conservatives than liberals and conservatives are from each other. So my approach has been to identify the taste buds of the moral sense and then the three major families of moral cuisines, what you might call progressive, social conservative, and libertarian.

WOODS: When you drew these conclusions about libertarians, you got some pushback. I know you spoke at the Cato Institute. But you did get some pushback from some libertarians who were offended that you would suggest that they're not as caring — I mean, I think you were trying to be scientific in applying these labels; I don't think you were rendering moral judgments on anybody —

HAIDT: Right.

WOODS: But I would just say that the libertarian view would be that maybe there isn't such a big division between being concerned about liberty and caring about others. Because it's not just I'm concerned about my own liberty, our view is that society, most people in society are victims of like a society-wide Stockholm syndrome, that the very institution that they look to to help them is the one that is screwing them at every possible opportunity. Oh, the Federal Reserve is going to give you economic stability, then it gives you a housing bubble and bust that ruins half the country —

HAIDT: Yup.

WOODS: Or the government is here just to protect you from the bad guys; whereas, we look at the foreign policy of the U.S. government and we say, because we care about mankind, we have to stop this military machine, so I think a lot of us took that very badly. We thought that's not the way we are.

HAIDT: Okay. So here's I think the cause of the misunderstanding: I'm not at all saying that libertarians don't care about others, don't care about the world. Here's the simplest way to summarize what's unique about libertarians: there are these two personality dimensions, empathizing and systemizing. And both of them are strengths. People who can think systematically, boy, you know, in academics — I know you have a PhD — in academics and engineering, being able to think systematically is an incredible strength. Libertarians are the best of any group at thinking systemically and systematically. That's why they're attracted to economics.

Then there's this other trait, empathizing. It's the degree to which you feel others' pain. I don't mean that you care about what happens to them. I mean that if somebody pokes themselves in the eye accidentally, you flinch because, boy, do you feel it. Or if they tell a sad story, you cry. Libertarians are much lower — no, I shouldn't say "much." Libertarians are statistically significantly lower than liberals or conservatives on those traits.

So it's not a coincidence that libertarians are overwhelmingly male, because these are exactly the traits in which men and women differ. What we found in our paper — so I'd urge your listeners, if you just Google "understanding libertarian morality" and you put in my name, Haidt, you'll find our paper; it's free online; it has all the graphs, all the tables — and what we find is that libertarians, whether they're male or female, have the most masculine cognitive style. So even female libertarians are more masculine — and I don't mean macho; I mean higher systemizing, lower empathizing. More rational. And so when I present these results, what I generally find is that libertarians generally say, yup, that's us. Yup, that's right. But it is true that some of them will say, wait a second, are you saying we're not caring? And I have to explain, as I just did; I hope that was clear enough.

WOODS: No, I think so. And incidentally, on the show notes page for today we will link to that article, as well as your book. It's TomWoods.com/429. And of course, the other — I mean, it's easy to misunderstand libertarians, so that's why there was this response, that, oh, here's another guy who doesn't understand us. Because another point that Charles Murray has made is that when the government takes over certain functions, then certain aspects of natural society just tend to atrophy. If the state is going to take care of this or that function, then ordinary people are not going to volunteer to do that thing. And then the result is that the natural sympathy that people might have for each other is interfered with, because this voluntary aspect disappears. So anyway, I realize that's not the central thesis, but —

HAIDT: No, no, but that is a perfect example of how — that is a really subtle point which you can't really grasp unless you're good at thinking systemically. And so it's kind of a meta-point. It's an understanding of how systems can crush personal caring and responsibility and relationships. But the average person, the more typical person just says, oh, but if people are suffering, the government has to care for them. We can't just abandon them. So what I'm saying is libertarians are the clearest thinkers. They are the best thinkers about complex social questions and problems.

WOODS: (laughing) All right, in that case, I'll let you get away with it.

HAIDT: (laughing) Okay. Well, there you go — and back to your earlier question about how do you persuade people: acknowledgment. The key is acknowledgment. So either we're in combat mode — and you used the phrase "battle stations" or "batten down the hatches" — or we're in discovery mode or in relationship mode. There's three different modes. And often, our discussions are in combat mode. And when that happens, when people have a sense that you're in combat mode, they just look for why you're wrong, and they just want to argue against you. But if you're in curiosity mode — you're really trying to figure something out, and you're looking to someone to help you do it — or if you're in relationship mode, where you value a person and you want to get closer to them, it's like people suddenly open up; their defenses melt down, and you can have really great conversations with people.

WOODS: I hope you won't think this is too trivial, but I wonder if you've taken your conclusions here and tried to apply them to understanding why debates and discussions via social media are so unproductive?

HAIDT: Yes, oh my God, it's so straightforward and it's just so frustrating to see it all happening. Because people have lots of social motives, and the people who are doing all of that nasty stuff, it's mostly men, and it's mostly I think young men. Men have a particular need to show off how smart they are. So social media is not a place to go where people are trying to find truth or relationships.

The places you're talking about, like especially the comments page, on pretty much anything — you know, anytime you give a talk or I give a talk, and you look at the comments page — well you may have a lot of people who just love you and praise you — but it's full of nasty, nasty stuff, typically, because people are trying to show off. They're not in — they're in show off mode; they're trying to gain prestige. They're not trying to find the truth.

So there's a great new site — I just signed on as an advisor to them — called Parleo; I suppose it's Parleo.com. But what they're doing is it's a social media discussion site where you basically get rewarded for being civil. You don't really have an option to be nasty. They limit membership. So I think there are ways — I mean, technology can be our greatest friend in finding the truth, in solving problems. But man, does it give a platform to idiot — no, I shouldn't say "idiots" — it gives a platform to normal people to show off in ways that are basically pissing on public trust.

WOODS: Well I'll include a link to that site as well at TomWoods.com/429, and I'll urge all my nice listeners to go over there —

HAIDT: Civil, that's right, all your civil listeners.

WOODS: That's right, check that one out. Let me raise an argument that the public choice school has raised to account for why, in political discussions and in forming political allegiances, we tend to see non-rational motivations take over. And one of

the reasons they'll give is that, especially when you're dealing with a presidential election, there is zero chance that your one vote is going to affect the outcome.

So you know the logic of this, but just for the listeners and everybody, whereas when I go out and buy a TV, well, my one TV vote is going to mean everything, because I go out; I cast my vote by putting those dollars down; I get the TV, so I'm going to make sure I know what the plusses and minuses are. I'm going to take a lot of care with it. Whereas, given that I know I'm not influencing the outcome, and even if I did, I still don't know if the person who says he's going to do X, Y, and Z will really do X, Y, and Z, or if he does something stupid, there'll be a long time lag. I won't feel the effects, so therefore, I'm going to be swept away by campaign slogans or an ad showing him with his dog. So that is what helps to account for why we're not really talking about whether the debt is something to worry about or not.

HAIDT: Yeah, well that's right as far as it goes, but you can go even further. I would say almost any social puzzle, you'd want to bring in psychology, but you don't just want to bring in cognitive psychology and the study of decision making. You want to bring in social psychology, look at people's social motives. So local politics seems to be mostly about self-interest. People care about their property values.

But presidential politics in the United States is nothing like that. And as you say, it's really not about self-interest. Certainly your vote itself won't change your outcome. But if you vote the wrong way, you could be ostracized from your social group. So voting is a way of displaying — it's a conspicuous display of your values, the kind of person that you are.

So that's why you get all this craziness. I mean, our founders didn't want a democracy, because they thought people do all kinds of dumb things in a democracy. I mean, democracies are fantastic for accountability, for calling back leaders that are bad. But the idea that we're going to debate complicated policies like healthcare by having people vote on them directly — you know, direct democracy, I mean, it can work in some countries like Switzerland, where people are really involved and really educated. But our country's pretty moralistic, and people aren't voting for their self-interest; they're voting to display the kind of person they want people to think they are.

WOODS: Yeah, that actually is another point that I think the public choice people would make. Because of course, from the public choice perspective, there's no reason to vote, given that no one person is going to —

HAIDT: That's right.

WOODS: So therefore you have to account for why are people voting anyway. And I think a very important reason they're voting is, as you say, to reflect who they are. And related to that, a sense of belonging. Like, I'm part of the American national project by voting.

HAIDT: That's right.

WOODS: Now what I want to do is I want people to take away something from this discussion about how they might go about talking to other people about things that matter to them when those people might come at questions very differently.

HAIDT: Sure.

WOODS: And I wonder if there's an analogy to be made with the "love languages" — that there are people who want to be loved in certain ways, and there are things that matter to them. Like, some people want physical things. Other people don't want physical things; they want affection, or whatever. They have their own love language. Is what you're saying that I should try to figure out — well, not the love language of the person I'm talking to, but the relative ranking of these different factors like care and fairness or whatever, and try to explain myself with reference to those things that matter to them the most?

HAIDT: No, don't start by trying to explain yourself. Try to start by talking to the other person's elephant by showing some appreciation or acknowledgment. The best thing to read actually isn't my book; the first thing to read is Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The man was an absolute genius. You don't go talking to a person about what you want or who you are; you start by asking sincere questions that show some appreciation for what he brings or has to offer, his experiences.

So for example, let's work through the case of a libertarian trying to talk to a progressive; that seems to be what's really on a lot of libertarian minds nowadays. So rather than starting off with, you know, you guys think that you're caring, but actually hurt the very people you're trying to help. So rather than starting off that way, if you would say, I think something that liberals and libertarians have in common is that we're really concerned about the plight of people who just aren't making it in today's economy. And let's talk about what — something isn't working for them. And right away you're acknowledging that the core concern of modern progressives — at least they say that the core concern is the poor; I think especially the African American poor.

So if you start out by saying, "I share your concern. Your concern is valid. I don't think you're a crazy person. And what do you think we should do about this?" Right away, that communicates that you're not in combat mode. You're not trying to defeat them. And that puts them on a fundamentally different cognitive purpose. So I don't think you have to speak their love language. I think you just have to start as Dale Carnegie would, by validating them. By saying your concerns are valid, and I'm interested in them. And then by the magic of reciprocity, you will find them much more open to what your concerns are.

WOODS: So is this more or less the conclusion that you draw at the end of your research, or what else do you want to add here to make sure that we've painted as full a picture as we can in 20 minutes?

HAIDT: That's sort of the first third of the book, is all these weird cognitive things, the confirmation bias, the fact that we're not very rational. The most important message to take from that, and one that I would love to leave listeners with on your show, is ultimately, you can call it moral humility or you can call it epistemological humility. It's the realization that as individuals, we're actually not all that smart on our own. We're certainly not as smart as we think we are, as individuals. But when you put us together in a system in the right way, amazing stuff happens. And I think actually libertarians are quite receptive to this way of thinking. They're the main people who understand the brilliance of a market, when there's no central mind.

So if you realize that we're all basically neurons, and neurons aren't really all that smart, and that our genius comes from getting the system right, and then you gotta kind of realize, boy, the American system right now is just not working very well. It's just not working very — markets work brilliantly, but man, our political system is just not doing a good job of either aggregating preferences or aggregating information from research — whatever it is, there's something really wrong.

And it's getting worse, because we're getting more emotionally polarized; we hate each other more. A moment ago, you talked about why we vote, and I forgot there's some new research: increasingly, Americans are voting in order to vote against something. The role of anger and hatred is getting much stronger in our democracy. And these are all worrisome signs. So a little more epistemological humility from all of us, I think would make our democracy work a little better.

WOODS: Before I let you go, I'm curious to know, your book apparently was a *New York Times* bestseller, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Did that surprise you? Had you already — had the success of the TED Talks come before or after this book?

HAIDT: The TED Talks came before, and I guess that helped. What really helped was that I did an interview with Bill Moyers, which was aired a couple weeks before the book came out.

WOODS: Oh, well, that doesn't hurt.

HAIDT: Because you know, I was on the Colbert Show, and that barely made any difference in sales later on, because —

WOODS: How funny.

HAIDT: Well, because people go to Colbert to laugh. But man, people who go to Bill Moyers, they're really thinking about — and they bought the book.

WOODS: Yeah.

HAIDT: So I was a little surprised, in that the way to be a bestseller is to say terrible things about the Left, and then conservatives buy you, or say terrible things about the

Right, and then liberals buy you. So that's a good way for political books to get on it. It's very hard for a non-partisan political book to do well. So I was surprised and very pleased by that.

WOODS: Well, I appreciate your time today, Jonathan Haidt. It was a great pleasure chatting, and of course, we're just getting to the tip of the iceberg here, but as I say, I always like to leave the audience wanting more. Because if you want more, there's a whole book on this; we've got resources linked at TomWoods.com/429. Of course we're linking to *The Righteous Mind*; we're going to link to your faculty page; I'm going to link to *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, everything we talked about: your article, Parleo.com. It'll all be there.

HAIDT: Okay, may I also suggest YourMorals.org, which is my research site. People can take surveys to find out how they score on those moral foundations.

WOODS: Oh, absolutely. YourMorals.org, that will also be there. My listeners will have fun with that.

HAIDT: Great.

WOODS: Well, Jon, best of luck with everything, and thanks so much for your time today.

HAIDT: Well, thank you, Tom. This was great fun.