

#252: Understanding moral disagreements (Jonathan Haidt)

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and my guest for this episode is Jonathan Haidt. He is a social psychologist at New York University and the author of several bestselling books including *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.

That is the book in which Jon talks about his work on moral foundations theory, which you may have heard of, even if you haven't read the book – it argues that all of our moral judgments are grounded in a short list of moral foundations such as fairness, and loyalty. And that liberals and conservatives tend to differ in which moral foundations they use.

That is the focus of our conversation in this episode – we talk especially about why and how people should try to understand the moral foundations of people across the political aisle from them. This is something I've wanted to talk to Jon about for a while now, but the immediate reason I got in touch with him was a recent episode I did with Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel in which we tried and didn't quite succeed at understanding our moral disagreements with each other. And a number of listeners commented afterwards "Hey, that sounded like a moral foundations disagreement. You should really get Jon Haidt on the show to talk about that."

And I thought that was a great idea. So here is professor Jonathan Haidt. He's talking about how he developed moral foundations theory:

[musical interlude]

Jon Haidt: So I study morality, and I've been focused on that since graduate school. When I was in grad school at the University of Pennsylvania, I was reading a lot of evolutionary psychology about where reciprocity comes from and various aspects of our moral sense.

But I was also studying cultural psychology with a brilliant cultural psychologist named Alan Fiske. So I was reading about how morality varied around the world. In societies that have never communicated, you'd have the same or similar kinds of taboos around, say, menstruating women could not come near sacred objects. That's true in a lot of places. And food taboos, and the moralization of the body, that's kind of faded out in the West.

So this made me think, "Wow, something's going on here, where there's something universal. The moral mind is a product of evolution, but yet it develops differently in different cultures. So how do you reconcile that?"

A lot of psychologists have used the metaphor of language: Language is universal, but languages differ. But I found that the metaphor of taste

works better: So, we all have the same taste buds on our tongue with sweet, sour, salt, bitter, and umami, which is a meat flavor. But our cuisines differ around the world. This, to me, has been the most fruitful metaphor.

So the question is what are the taste buds of the moral sense? By just looking at what are the places where there's an existing evolutionary theory, and it shows up in lots of cultures -- what are those connections?

And working with Craig Joseph -- we were both studying with Richard Shweder at the University of Chicago -- we modified one of his theories. And the taste receptors that we think are the best candidates are care, fairness, loyalty, sanctity, and liberty. You see something on television, and it triggers ... Well, we can take the Capitol riot. People watching the Capitol riot, what did they see? Of course, some people saw what they thought was a heroic revolution.

But a lot of us, I think most of us saw ... First of all, we saw violence. We saw innocent people being harmed. We saw tremendous unfairness in trying to overturn an election. We saw violations of sanctity, because this is a sacred place. This wasn't just some auditorium somewhere. This was the US Capitol, the center of US democracy.

So it produced a complex set of tastes, as it were, and obviously different on the right and the left. But that's the gist of the theory right there.

Julia Galef: Great. And has your theory changed at all since you first formulated it? And since *The Righteous Mind* came out?

Jon Haidt: Yes. It was never intended to be an exhaustive list of moral foundations. There are many people in science, and maybe this is even more true in the rationalist community ... Actually, what do you call your community? Is it the ...

Julia Galef: Well, that's a point of eternal debate in the community... Typically what happens is that people will, they'll use the word "rationalist," then they'll pause and then explain why that's not an ideal name for the community.

And so far, no one has come up with a better name to replace "rationalist." Although sometimes people say "aspiring rationalist," which more accurately captures the spirit of what we're about. But it flows less trippingly off the tongue. So it hasn't completely caught on.

Jon Haidt: Okay. Okay, good, because I'll critique rationalism as a property of individuals later. I'm sure we'll get into that.

Julia Galef: Yes, I do want to talk about that.

Jon Haidt: But I'm not anti-rationalist, in that I think we can be rational when we're put into the right institutions that counteract our flaws. Okay. Back to your previously scheduled question: How has the theory changed?

So, lots of people believe in parsimony and, of course, Ockham's razor. People talk about Ockham's razor all the time, that if there's two theories and one is more complex, you should prefer the simplest. I think his original dictum in Latin ... I don't know the Latin, but it was "cut away needless things," which I guess is also Strunk and White on words.

But anyway, it's as though there's been a prize, and anybody who can reduce morality to one thing wins the prize. So Lawrence Kohlberg tried to say, "Well, morality is justice. Kids develop through different stages of justice, and that's what morality is." Others have said, "No, it's care and compassion," and others have said, "No, it's fairness and justice and rights."

From reading anthropology, from reading cultural psychology, it looked to me like, "Wow, this is just a big mess. Morality is lots of things." While the five that I mentioned are the best candidates, there's a lot of others. So in addition to the ... Well, okay, there were five originally when we first formulated the theory: care versus harm, fairness versus cheating, loyalty versus betrayal, authority versus subversion, sanctity versus desecration.

Julia Galef: Those are the five that I was familiar with, yeah. When you were describing the book, it sounded a little different from what I remembered.

Jon Haidt: Yeah, it's those five, but my colleagues and I ... So I should say this was also developed with Jesse Graham, Pete Ditto, Sena Koleva, Ravi Iyer, Matt Motyl. So we're all social psychologists, and we wanted to see, what did we forget? So we offered a prize: \$1,000 to anybody who can make an argument that there's some other thing which is a good candidate for being a universal taste bud of the moral sense.

Julia Galef: Nice.

Jon Haidt: The prize was actually won by John Jost. He's a colleague here at NYU, and he talked about oppression. For a variety of reasons, we call that... Liberty is the positive side, and oppression is the negative side. When people feel that they're being bullied or dominated, it causes an urge to band together to take down the bully. Here I'm drawing from Chris Boehm's work. He's an anthropologist who wrote a book called Moral Origins. Anyway, so that's the sixth foundation, and he made a good case for that.

And then another one that I think is a very good candidate for being a moral foundation, or a taste bud of the moral sense, is property, or ownership. I realized this when I was at a conference, sitting next to an anthropologist who studies the Kung Bushmen in southern Africa.

I thought, "Well, they don't have property. They don't have possessions. They share everything. So it's not universal." She said, "Oh, no. No, actually, it is very much a social order built on gifts and exchange. You do have to share things, but you have to be the possessor of something in order to get the credit for giving it." So they absolutely have a sense of property and ownership.

Then when I thought about it and looked at ... One of the features of a moral foundation is that there's some precursor in other animals, in other primates. When you look at chimpanzees and other primates and certainly other animals, all the way down through insects, territoriality is a feature of many, many animals. So evolution has over and over again built into different species the behavioral tendency that the resident wins. That is, if you're on a stick or a leaf or whatever it is that you're claiming is your territory, you're going to fight a lot harder, and you will usually win against an interloper. That's the general rule. Among humans, we say possession is nine-tenths of the law. If you're in possession of something, you have certain rights over it that can only rarely be taken away.

Anyway, that's a long-winded way of saying that I don't believe in parsimony. I think evolution created our minds, and evolution doesn't give a damn about parsimony. So there's a lot of moral taste buds. That's how the theory has changed.

- Julia Galef: Got it. Cool. Presumably you want it to be as simple as possible, but no simpler? So if there's a theme in people's moral judgments that can be characterized in terms of other moral foundations you already have in the theory, then you don't want to add that additional thing onto the theory.
- Jon Haidt: Yep. Exactly.
- Julia Galef: Yeah. So I was trying to think before this call if I could think of common moral judgements that didn't seem to fit into the theory. Which maybe I should have been doing back in 2000-whatever, when the prize was up for grabs, but...
- There's a moral judgment that I hear a lot, which is: It's immoral to not have children, if you could have children. It's immoral to choose not to have children. How would that --
- Jon Haidt: Well, you've got to tell me the reasoning. Is this a utilitarian thing, like you are failing to create a being that could experience pleasure? What's the justification?
- Julia Galef: Well, I mean, often it's something kind of like, "It's selfish of you to not have children."
- Jon Haidt: Is this from your mother or grandmother? Who's --

Julia Galef: Have you not heard this? Oh, god, I'm so jealous of you that you haven't heard this.

Jon Haidt: Well, yeah, I mean... I see. So there is the idea that if you elect not to have children because you're enjoying your life and you just want to jet around the world and ... Yeah, I mean, I guess in more conservative circles or family-oriented cultures, that would be the case...

Julia Galef: Well, another example I was going to bring up was people who think that it's immoral not to take your husband's name. I saw some poll that some shockingly large fraction of the American public thinks it should be required for women to take their husband's name when they get married. Technically they didn't ask, "Is it immoral?", but I can kind of infer that if they think it should be required that they think it's a moral issue.

Jon Haidt: Well, the first thing -- oh, go ahead.

Julia Galef: Well, I was just going to say, both of those things -- it's immoral not to have children if you can, and it's also immoral not to take your husband's name -- they both seem like examples of a category that doesn't, to me, seem to fit into the moral foundations theory as it stands, which is just: traditionalism.

People often just get very affronted if you're doing something that's kind of subverting tradition, even if they can't really justify that easily in terms of the other moral foundations.

Jon Haidt: That's a good one, but that we include with authority. So authority versus subversion is about maintaining the moral order, and conservatives... This is the biggest left-right difference.

Julia Galef: Oh... I was thinking of authority just in terms of respecting authority figures, as opposed to respecting the authority of tradition.

Jon Haidt: So the question is, do you see the world as being composed of people who inhabit roles, and the moral order is about guarding those roles and making sure people live up to them, because if we don't, then we get moral chaos, and it's just terrible? Lots of cultures have some story in which everything is upside-down, and sons ordered their fathers about, and this is said to be a precursor to the end of the world.

And so the conservative mind... and I take as the prime conservative is Edmund Burke. Reading Burke really actually taught me to respect conservatism. He saw that the French Revolution was going to be horrible, and he wrote reflections on the French Revolution before all the beheadings.

Anyway, the conservative temperament, or conservative cultures, see authority as essential for guarding social order, and that's why they value tradition.

Also for that poll, you have to remember when people are answering a poll, they're not looking within and saying, "What do I really believe?" Rather, they're answering based on gut feelings at the moment. And a question like that is culture war red meat. And so if you're on the red team, and someone asks that question, and you're a social conservative or a Christian conservative, you're going to say, "Well, damn right, that should be required!" And if you have a cousin who didn't take her husband's name, you probably wouldn't care, but when you're being asked on a poll to express yourself, like, "Yes, I think it's terrible the way those feminists are, whatever."

I don't think we need a special foundation of "husband name-taking," you know, as the 97th foundation. I'd rather just say some people believe in authority and are concerned about social structure and want to preserve the structure that we have.

Julia Galef:

Got it. Okay, let me ask you another confusion that I've had about the moral foundations:

So, if you asked me if my morality included things like authority and loyalty, I would probably say something like, "Well, you should respect authority *if* the authority has shown itself to be fair and just and worth respecting. And you should be loyal to people *if* they treat you fairly. But if your family has been abusive to you your whole life, then you don't owe those people your loyalty. Get out of there."

So I value authority and loyalty *conditionally*, but not for their own sake. And I bet a lot of other people, especially liberals, feel the same way. So does that count as us having those moral foundations, or not?

Jon Haidt:

Yeah, this is something I hear a lot from people on the left. And so another thing you have to keep in mind is that people use words, and we each think we understand what the other person means because we use the word, but often they mean something very different.

Julia Galef:

Oh, indeed.

Jon Haidt:

And this is the thing. You know, "Well, sure, I mean, authority is like... science is an authority, so I think we should obey science" -- but what we mean by the moral foundation is you have to really put yourself in the mindset of this deep thing in us that evolved out of our hierarchical nature. And most primates have clear... Well, it's a sort of precursor of authority, but there's rank, and there's fear of the superior.

And human loyalty or human ranking, and human respect, are a little different than chimps. But it's sort of a visceral feeling of where you stand in relation to someone else. And when it's well developed, the authority has actual responsibilities to protect the subordinate, and the subordinate has duties to respect the authority.

And so believing like, "Yes, we should respect the CDC," that's not it. That's just more of a progressive or rationalist... just a belief that they're experts.

Bruce Springsteen is a good guide to the loyalty foundation. There's a... Oh gosh, the song on Nebraska. Oh, I forget most of the words, but the key line is, "But when it's your brother, sometimes you look the other way..." and then about blood is thicker than water, and that idea that even if family has done something wrong, you stand by them.

In fact, the Unabomber, when the Unabomber was turned in, he was turned in by his brother, and it was a big debate on AM radio at the time or whatever it was, with people on the right saying, "You don't turn your brother in," and people on the left saying, "My goodness, he killed people. Of course, what a hero that he turned his brother in."

Julia Galef: Yeah... again, this is one of those things that is so alien to me that even after it's explained to me, I will probably forget at some point in the near future that this is really a thing that people feel, because it just doesn't stick.

Jon Haidt: Okay. So can I recommend the best thing for you to read?

Julia Galef: Yeah, please.

Jon Haidt: Have you ever read Flatland by Edwin Abbott?

Julia Galef: I loved Flatland. Yeah. I mean, years ago.

Jon Haidt: Okay. So just very briefly for your listeners, Flatland is a kind of a geometric fable about a square who lives in a two-dimensional world. And one day, he's visited by a three-dimensional object, a sphere, who appears in the square's world as a circle. And the square can't understand what he means when the sphere says that he's got three dimensions. The square can't understand --

Julia Galef: ... Oh my god, am I the square in this analogy?

Jon Haidt: Well, yeah. We all are, about moralities that we don't understand.

And when the square says, "Where did you come from? How did you get into my house?" the sphere says, "Well, I came from above." And the square says, "You mean north?" [And the sphere] says, "No, no, no. Above."

Because he can't conceive of an "above" that isn't north.

So I found this really helpful. Because look, I'm a, you know, secular Jewish atheist. I used to be very anti-religion. And when I was preparing to go to India as a post-doc, when I was working with Richard Shweder,

and I was reading all these ethnographies and learning about purity and pollution and about Hindu families and social structures, I really felt like I had a stripped-down morality, and I was going into this much richer, thicker world. And Flatland was the best guide for how to think about that.

Because the moral foundations are universal. So I have the capacity to do sanctity, it just wasn't very developed. And in my three months in India, in 1993, I started using it a lot more. And I actually, when I got back to America, I could use it a little more. I felt like certain things that I really respect, even like a book that I love or a record album, like the Rolling Stones' Tattoo You. The second side of that album.

There are certain things that I really kind of treat as sacred. And it's a kind of a thin, washed-out sacred as compared to what somebody raised in a rural Hindu village would feel, but Flatland really helped me see that I was a square in a three-dimensional world.

Julia Galef: So yeah, this reminds me. I've seen you argue before, I forget where, if it was in The Righteous Mind or maybe in your TED Talk, that liberals who...

Well, I guess I should back up. We've kind of danced around the fact, but never actually stated explicitly, that one of your most famous findings is that liberals disproportionately use only two of the moral foundations, the harm/care and the... I forget if you call it fairness or justice... fairness? – foundations. While conservatives are much more inclined to use all of the foundations. And so the area of non-overlap, the foundations that conservatives tend to use and liberals don't as much, are authority, loyalty, and sanctity.

Jon Haidt: Yeah. That's right. That's it.

Julia Galef: Great. Glad I highlighted that.

So, to return to the question I was about to ask, I've seen you argue that liberals who use only those two foundations of morality should expand their moral foundations to... just as you were describing, as you did when you went to India, to include the ones that they typically neglect.

And so I was wondering *why* you think we should. Is it a cognitive empathy thing, where it's good to understand the people you share a society with? Or is it an actual truth-oriented thing, where you think there's moral truths out there that we are missing and we should appreciate them if we want to be more morally wise or correct?

Jon Haidt: Yes, so it's mostly the first. And I say that with great confidence, that progressives would do much better politically and with their policies if they understood all the foundations.

And there's plenty of evidence now. Robb Willer and Matthew Feinberg have shown that if you ask people to make an argument to the other side, they make it in their own preferred moral foundations, and they're not persuasive. But if you teach them about moral foundations theory and you say, "Now try to make an argument for environmental policy or whatever using loyalty, authority, or sanctity," they can do it. And then they're more persuasive.

The book began because I was so frustrated that the Democrats kept losing elections in 2000 and 2004. I didn't like George Bush, and he was not an eloquent man, but yet he had good speechwriters, and he could touch more moral buttons than could Al Gore or John Kerry. And so that was the origin of the book, was using my research to understand this political mismatch and why the left is so incompetent, or was at that time. And still, well... All the way up through Hillary Clinton's race, I would say, they were incompetent in that way.

But I think, and I'm much less confident, but I think there is also some moral truth there. That is, I would not say, "Hey, liberals, you should change your morality so that you care more about sanctity and purity." Because that's... Martha Nussbaum has done a great job, I forget which of her works, showing that disgust is usually used against homosexuals, against women. Disgust, she argues, should have no role in the law. It just does bad things.

Whereas the conservative view going back to... Oh, it was a debate in British law 120 years ago. Lord... Oh, shoot. Whatever. But described most prominently by Leon Kass, the philosopher...

Julia Galef: I was just going to ask if you had... Of course you've read Leon Kass. I actually tried to get him on the show to talk about the disgust criterion, and couldn't get him to come on. But, yeah.

Jon Haidt: Oh, good. Oh, he's brilliant. He's brilliant. Yeah. He has a famous essay, and the key line from it is, "Shallow are the souls who have forgotten how to shudder."

Julia Galef: But, okay, also, but -- his example, or one of his examples, of proper shuddering was at someone licking an ice cream cone in public. Which, to me...

Jon Haidt: I know, I know...

Julia Galef: If I could come up with a reductio ad absurdum of the... Yeah. Anyway.

Jon Haidt: That's too social conservative. Yeah. Yeah, he probably shouldn't have given that example.

But on the other hand, I've studied the emotion of disgust a lot, and... Oh, shoot, what's-his-name at the University of Michigan has a great book

called *The Anatomy of Disgust*, and he says the rule is your inner biological processes are not shared with others. So just as you don't deprecate or urinate in front of others, you don't digest your food in front of others. You don't let food fall just out of your mouth.

In fact, I had... I want to say Bill?... William Ian Miller is his name, he's a great writer. And so I actually had dinner with him in Charlottesville when we brought him in to speak at UVA, and he said he's actually a little uncomfortable in restaurants, like seeing people eating and smacking and putting food in their mouth, and you see the food... So you and I can say, "No, that's not morality. That's just his individual neurosis." And while I can understand that, but I think what Kass is after is a world in which people feel constrained by others to act in ways that don't disturb them, a kind of politeness.

And so social conservatives see that having gone by the wayside. And perhaps each generation thinks the one after it is rude and uncivilized, because "they don't have our morals. But then of course, they're more tolerant about interracial marriage and gay marriage and they're more concerned about the environment. So morality changes from generation to generation, and perhaps it is a conservative thing that says more, treat the body with reverence, and don't just eat out in public.

Julia Galef: See, the description you just gave there of why it might be good for liberals to learn to appreciate the sanctity criterion more, that's something I'm sympathetic to, but it seems like... unless I was misunderstanding you, it seems like that defense boils down to a harm or fairness defense.

Jon Haidt: No, no, you're right...

Julia Galef: Where, if it's psychologically upsetting for people to be around someone who's licking an ice cream cone -- or to use a less absurd example, urinating or defecating in public -- then yeah, that's doing psychological harm to them. They're uncomfortable. And so maybe that is a good reason to...

Jon Haidt: No, you're right, you're right...

Julia Galef: But that feels like the kind of Flatlander thing I was doing earlier where I was like, "Well, yeah, you respect authorities if they have a good reason to be respected."

Jon Haidt: Yeah. Okay. Right. Okay. What I just gave you was trying to explain why Kass would say that. I don't think that's a good normative argument for why anybody should value sanctity, but here's some better ones:

People, human beings, the way we are, we crave meaning. We tend to infuse meaning in things. We need groups. We thrive in groups. And we sometimes lose sight of these facts, especially people who are rationalist or libertarian.

The Your Morals group, we have the world's best dataset on libertarian psychology, because half a million people have taken our various surveys, and we have evidence... I'll see if I can find the title that people can use to find it. It's free online. Actually, if you just look up libertarian morality and then Haidt, H-A-I-D-T. And Iyer, I-Y-E-R. Ravi Iyer is the first author.

So some people are better reasoners. They have weaker ties to other people. They have fewer emotions, or they're not as emotional, and so it might not resonate as much with them. But the great majority of people, if you strip away sort of binding groups, and your place in a social order and...

Okay, I'm not very coherent here, but I'm trying to communicate is the insight that I got originally from Emile Durkheim's book *Suicide*, which was the first sociological work I ever read. That, Durkheim noted that people might want freedom, and they might think that they're better off being free, but in fact, what he found was from looking at suicide rates in Europe in the 1890s, was that Jews had the lowest suicide rate, followed by Catholics, and Protestants had the highest. Single people had the highest suicide rates, married people with kids had the lowest.

Over and over again, people who are bound in, even if they might think that they'd be less happy, being bound in actually is a setting in which we thrive.

Okay, now you might say this is going back to a utilitarian justification --

Julia Galef:

I might, I might!

Jon Haidt:

... Yeah. Okay. Yes. And for me, that is what I would base a normative recommendation on.

In fact, the idea that I'm proudest of in *The Righteous Mind*, which nobody has ever referred to other than me, is what I call Durkheimian utilitarianism. That is, if we're going to do public policy, if you're going to look for what should the laws be based on in the United States or in the state of New York or whatever, ultimately, if you're a legislator, there is no basis other than consequentialism. If you go saying, "Well, we're a Christian nation," or, "We're going to have Sharia law," no. You don't get to do that in a multi-ethnic liberal democracy. The only justification is going to be that this leads to better outcomes or more flourishing for the people.

So that's the utilitarian part, but the problem is that utilitarians tend to not understand that people need these ties. They need irrational things. They need either religion or something like religion.

And so in some of my talks for a while, I was pointing to what I called the Singer-Kass dimension. I spent a year at Princeton with Peter Singer and

Anthony Appiah, and during that year, Robbie George at the Madison Center brought in Leon Kass for a series of lectures. And they were just brilliant. But there was one day after one of the lectures that we all went for lunch at the faculty club, and it was Peter Singer sitting right across this fairly narrow table from Leon Kass. And about 15 of us, all just on the edge of our chairs, like, "What's going to happen?" As the world's greatest-

Julia Galef: I'm surprised that they didn't annihilate each other, like --

Jon Haidt: No, they're both such gentlemen.

Julia Galef: Oh, no, I just mean because of the difference, the contrast between them. Matter and anti-matter.

Jon Haidt: Yeah, that's right. No, but it was one of the high points of my academic life. It was like, "This is the university at its best." And they just really went at it, and I don't even remember any of the arguments, but they were both so brilliant arguing from different frames, but understanding to some extent each other's frame.

And ever since then, I've thought about, there's this Singer-Kass dimension. And if you're at a zero -- that's the Singer side -- then you say, "No, souls that have forgotten how to shudder, as long as they respond to harm, that's all you need. You don't need these ideas about sanctity and purity and divinity and mankind being so arrogant as to arrogate for himself the right to decide life and death," and all these things that Leon Kass talks about. But if you're at a hundred you're fully on the Kass side. Then you would prohibit a whole bunch of things that might have some utilitarian benefit.

So, anyway, I'm sorry, that was a long-winded way of answering your question.

Julia Galef: No, that was great.

Jon Haidt: So I suspect that there is some normative basis for loyalty, authority, sanctity, but it just takes more work to make that clear to progressives.

Julia Galef: So maybe now is a good time to talk about one of the reasons that I wanted to have you on the show, which is, I recently did an interview with Michael Sandel at Harvard, and we ended up spending the bulk of the interview kind of trying to understand each other's positions on the question of consensual cannibalism, which-

Jon Haidt: Oh, no. Uh-huh, yeah.

Julia Galef: For listeners who didn't hear that episode or haven't heard the term, there was this case of this guy in Germany who put out an ad saying, "I have a thing for cannibalizing people, does anyone want to be cannibalized?"

And someone actually replied, and was like, "Yes, you may kill and eat me." And so the guy did, and it was all consensual.

And then the question is -- is that immoral, that act of consensual cannibalism?

And I kept saying, "Well, look, if they consented and if I had reason to believe that the person was in their right mind and genuinely wanted this, and if I had reason to believe that this wasn't going to have a ripple effect of terrible consequences on society -- like I don't know, maybe, respect for life in general would go down if we allowed consensual cannibalism, I don't know -- But if we strip away those potential concerns, then I don't think it's immoral.

And Michael basically kept pushing back and asking me to do kind of sanctity-focused thought experiments, like, "Don't you cringe at it? Doesn't it..." I forget exactly what he said. But basically, I agreed that I cringe at it, but I kept trying to say that I don't take that as a determinant of what is moral or not. I cringe at a lot of things, and --

Jon Haidt: Yes, this is a perfect Flatland issue. In fact, I cover this exact issue in *The Righteous Mind* in chapter seven, where I try to explain what the sanctity-degradation foundation is. And I opened that with exactly the case of Armin Meiwes, a German computer technician. Here's his ad: "Looking for a well-built 21 to 30 year old to be slaughtered and then consumed."

That was the ad. And hundreds of men responded to it, and he picked one of them. Anyway, so no... Yeah, but your argument with Sandel, that would be exactly the Singer-Kass thing.

Julia Galef: Well, yeah, so-

Jon Haidt: Just a second. And I try to defend it, I try to make sense of both sides, but here's the way I kind of justify it in this quasi-normative way: "If we had no sense of disgust, I believe we would also have no sense of the sacred..." And then I say that, the sense of the sacred is actually how humans solve the problem of cooperation, by worshipping things together:

"Why do people so readily treat objects such as flags and crosses, or places such as Mecca or a battlefield related to the birth of your nation, or people such as saints and heroes, or principles such as liberty, fraternity, equality -- why do people treat these as though they're of infinite value?"

And so I would ask you -- maybe this is exactly what Sandel asked you -- imagine you've got two different countries. In one, all kinds of things are sacred. Battlefields, holidays, founding fathers, flags, all sorts of things are sacred, and there are a variety of restrictions on what you can buy and sell. And in another country, it's all people like you and Peter Singer and people who are pure utilitarians, and if you want to be cannibalized, hey, go for it. Who am I to stop you? So first, which country would you rather

live? And then second, which country do you think most regular human beings would thrive in?

Julia Galef: So first I just want to make a distinction. Are you hinting that there might be bad spillover consequences of allowing things like consensual cannibalism?

Jon Haidt: No, I'm not making that argument.

Julia Galef: You're not, okay. So you're just talking about, would I rather live in a society where people happily, consensually, cannibalize each other or not?

Jon Haidt: No, not that it's common, just that it's allowed and it might happen very rarely.

Julia Galef: Oh, I mean, I'm fine with that.

Jon Haidt: I know you are, but my question is, which one would you want to live in?

Julia Galef: Oh, I guess I would rather live in the world where people don't do that. Although it's not a strong preference. But it is a preference, if I had to pick.

I just don't call that a moral judgment, and I...

Jon Haidt: Right, I know you don't, I know you don't. Because this is the Flatland thing. Because if you have-

Julia Galef: Is it? Are we sure that it's not just about using words in different ways, though?

Jon Haidt: Oh, it could be, it could be.

Julia Galef: Because that's what I was wondering, with Sandel. Are people like Sandel and other Leon Kass-type people just using the word...

Okay, let me give another piece of evidence for this theory. I saw an article by, I think it was Megan McArdle, in which she was talking about your work -- specifically about your finding that liberals only use the harm/care and the fairness foundations -- and she said:

"Oh, come on. Liberals really do have the same reactions as conservatives do, they're just less honest about them. They actually do think things like incest are morally wrong, they'll just deny it if you ask them, because they think they can't justify it in the language they're supposed to use. But you can tell they actually think it's morally wrong, because they wouldn't want to be friends with someone who practiced incest or necrophilia or whatever."

And that was her proof that we think it's morally wrong. And so it sounded to me like she, and probably a lot of people like her, are just... The fact that they would be uncomfortable being friends with someone who does X is -- *by definition*, that means that X is morally wrong?

... I don't know, that can't be right.

Jon Haidt:

Okay, yeah. So let's unpack that. So my argument is that everybody has all of the taste buds, and if you grow up in India or an Orthodox Jewish community where you're treating objects as having these properties that are kind of magical, or if you're a Catholic and this is the blood of Christ and body of Christ, then your culture has elaborated on this foundation.

So this is the main thing to get across. The foundations are just foundations, they're not your morality. And so everybody has all the foundations, but if you grow up in Hindu India or Orthodox Judaism, the morality is going to have a lot of ritual and things that have to be done a certain way and a lot of physical stuff. Whereas if you grew up in a scientific rationalist community, you might still have the foundations, but your morality, the matrix of beliefs and meanings and understandings that you have is not going to be built on that.

And so what happens is when you hear about a case like Meiwes and Brandes, you are horrified, you're disgusted. But you don't have a language to convey that disgust, so you fall back on harm or fairness or rights.

And this is something I found, that you can see it really clearly in a lot of political arguments, the process of judgment and justification are very separate. So we make a judgment right away for whatever reason, usually intuitive or emotional, and then we come up with a justification. But the justification is not a direct readout. It's like with the poll questions, it's not a direct readout of why I made the judgment. The justification is what you make up based on what you think will be effective within the context that you're talking. And if you're with secular liberals, it's just not going to work to talk about our God given this, or... It's just degrading for a person to do that.

So yeah, I think Megan is right that liberals have them, they have the receptors, they can have the feelings, but they don't couch their arguments in those terms. And that's what I was trying to convey in *The Righteous Mind*, that all around the world, at least in the Western world, the left tends to underperform politically because they don't make appeals on these foreign... They leave, they cede a lot of the moral landscape to conservatives.

So when there's a surprise, when there's an electoral surprise, how often is it the case that you wake up in the morning and, "Oh, surprise, the left swept everything." No, that almost never happens. When there's a surprise it's usually, "Oh my God, Brexit passed. Oh my God, Trump got elected. Oh my God, this neo-Nazi just almost won the..." Whatever. It's

usually the case that the right surprises, because most people have these concerns, they build on these moral foundations, but left leaning parties tend not to address them.

Julia Galef: But do you feel like you understand what a person towards the Leon Kass end of the Kass-Singer spectrum means when they say that something is immoral? Like Sandel specifically was making the distinction between wanting to ban something versus thinking it's immoral. He said, "Look, I'm not talking about banning consensual cannibalism, I'm talking about whether it's moral to engage in."

And at that point, I just kind of feel lost. I don't even know what people are talking about when they talk about whether a thing is moral or immoral, if they're not talking about wanting to use legal pressure to change people's behavior, or...

Jon Haidt: So Julia, tell me... Okay, do you read or did you used to read novels from other times or cultures, like 19th century British novels or anything like that?

Julia Galef: Oh, sure, yeah.

Jon Haidt: And have you ever read an ethnography, a full book length treatment of something in a non-Western culture?

Julia Galef: Probably. Although I'm not thinking of a good example right now, but yeah.

Jon Haidt: Okay. Okay, because those are the two... Short of traveling and spending months in another culture, you can get a lot of that from reading an ethnography or from reading a novel about another time and place. We live in a very different moral world than the Victorians, but if you've read Dickens or if you enjoyed 19th century British novels, it's a very alien culture. It's an honor culture. It's prudish sexually. Everyone's really concerned about their status and their rank and class and all that stuff.

So it's a different world, but if you read enough of those novels, you actually feel like you can kind of understand it. Because we do stories. Humans do stories, it's a basic mode of cognition. And we have empathy, and a really great writer takes you into that world. And you can, with our extraordinary imaginativity, we can inhabit that world.

And so when you ask me, do I understand what they mean? I would say yes, in that sense. I don't really have those, but from listening carefully to people in India and conservatives and in various places around the world, yeah, I think I've cultivated some understanding of what it's like.

Julia Galef: Well, I mean, to me, the really interesting cases are the one in which both Megan McArdle and me, or Michael Sandel and me, both have the same kind of disgust reaction. And we both say that we would prefer to live in a

society in which people didn't consensually cannibalize each other. But they call that a moral judgment and I call it *not* a moral judgment.

And I don't know what's going on there, if we're just using words differently, or if there's something else?

Jon Haidt: Yeah, when we talk about, is it a moral judgment or not, that is tricky. And what is the moral domain, and maybe we all have the same judgments, but some people just draw the line differently...

I haven't read enough Sandel to know for sure, but I suspect that he is more... He's progressive, right? He's on the left, as far as I know.

Julia Galef: I think so, yeah.

Jon Haidt: But there is a pattern on the left that we find in moral foundations theory of people on the left who actually do score some what high on the loyalty, authority, sanctity. And they tend to be communitarians, and he might be that. Again, I shouldn't say, because I haven't read enough of him.

But you do get people who are politically progressive and they vote for the Democrats, but they... And especially the religious left, that's where you see it most, people who are on the religious left, which is much, much smaller than the religious right. And it tends to be, it's based much more on like the Sermon on the Mount, and "love your neighbor," and they are devoted to helping the poor. But they have more of a five foundation morality, the religious left.

And I don't know that Sandel is -- well, I don't think he's religious, but I suspect he's more of a communitarian. And that would also be a wider moral... Communitarians can use, or often do use, all of the moral foundations, more so.

Now, would you say that you're a libertarian, are you sympathetic to libertarianism, or are you a straight progressive?

Julia Galef: I'm sympathetic in some ways. I mean, I probably fall into that category of... I don't know if there's a good name for it, but I want whatever policies and approaches work best in society to promote human flourishing. And sometimes those strategies will involve the government, and sometimes they'll involve markets.

And probably, I would say that markets work more often than most people think they will. Or, they work better than government solutions more often than most people think they will. But certainly not all the time. So that's...

Jon Haidt: Great, I agree with every word you said, that describes me too, exactly. Okay. The only difference, I think, is that I'm a Durkheimian utilitarian and you're not.

So I believe exactly what you believe there, but I believe that a world in which there are still some, maybe even tribal loyalties, and there is maybe still religion, and just a sort of a richer, thicker social world full of... some of this irrational stuff -- I think that's the kind of world that humans thrive in.

Julia Galef: Well, I might well agree with that.

Jon Haidt: Okay, well fine. Oh good, then I've converted you to Durkheimian utilitarianism!

Julia Galef: Well, I like the term! I hadn't remembered it.

But to me it's all an empirical question: Is it in fact, the case that people thrive better under some of these traditional structures? And what are the actual costs of those structures? And how malleable are people -- could people learn to do just as well without structures that are costly in other ways?

So those are all empirical questions for me, but I could certainly imagine it being the case that our best guess about the values of those parameters indicates that we should retain a lot of traditional things in society. That seems very plausible to me.

Jon Haidt: Great, so I think we're really making progress here, because now we can say that... Now let's bring in individual differences, and say that most people have this sort of thicker morality, or they feel that a sort of modern secular world is empty or thin or degenerate or whatever it is they think about it. And we can say that there are lots of people like you who don't feel that way.

So how about if we have a system in which laws are not made centrally, but to the greatest extent possible, states get to make their own laws. And we try to push things down to a local level so that we have some red States that are... they should not be explicitly Christian, but they would have a much more conservative feel to them.

And we have either blue states or blue cities, so that people who don't fit -- these thicker matrices sometimes require more conformity, especially back when being gay was even a crime, literally a crime, gay people would flock to a few cities. So of course now it's amazing how quickly the broad acceptance of gay marriage and homosexuality has come about. It's a wonderful thing about American society, I think.

But the point is, if we're Durkheimian utilitarians who also understand that there are big individual differences, then we're going to want to have some parts of the country set up with this thicker stuff and some parts of the country, like New York and San Francisco and Cambridge, Massachusetts that are set up in the other way. And how about if we all

just learn to live with each other and accept that there'll be different moral matrices in different parts of the country.

Julia Galef: I mean, that sounds pretty good to me, honestly.

Jon Haidt: Okay, good.

Julia Galef: This gets at a thing I was wondering about in adjudicating debates like the one I had with Sandel, which is... It seems like likely to me that if we were to pose a kind of Rawlsian veil of ignorance type question to people, Kass-type people, where we ask them:

“Suppose you didn't know what the disgust judgments, or disgust intuitions, of society were going to be. So you were going to be born into a society full of people who have strong disgust reactions about certain things, but you don't know what those things are, and you don't know whether they will match your intuitions.

And you can choose now, behind the veil, you can choose whether that society makes laws or uses coercion based on its disgust, the consensus about what is disgusting or what is not. Would you choose for that society to use disgust in its society-wide decision-making or not?”

I don't know for sure, but I feel like people would, like me, say, "No, I don't want people to coerce me based on what *they* think is disgusting or degrading." And so that seems to me like a kind of universalizing... That's a thing we could all agree on. Even if we disagree about whether we have disgust reactions, and to what.

Jon Haidt: Yes, here too, I think I'm basically with you. That if this was going to be a society-wide thing, where this is imposed on everybody, then I probably would choose not to have that. On the other hand, if it's a society-wide thing that nobody can have that --

Julia Galef: Oh, yeah, no.

Jon Haidt: ... And actually, this is very funny. I just looked up Michael Sandel's Wikipedia page, and look what it says. It says, "Sandel subscribes to a certain version of communitarianism," it says, "Although he's uncomfortable with the label."

Julia Galef: Oh my God, you were so spot on.

Jon Haidt: Okay, but hold on, but it gets better. "And in this vein, he is best known for his critique of John Rawls' 'A Theory of Justice.' Rawls argument depends on the assumption of the veil of ignorance, which he claims allows us to be unencumbered selves." And then it says, "Sandel's view is that we are by nature encumbered, to an extent that makes it impossible even in the hypothetical, to have such a veil... or to discuss it with Julia Galef."

It says that, right there in the Wikipedia page!

But that word “encumbered”... I think that's actually kind of a Durkheimian word, that... I guess that's kind of what I'm getting at. That yeah, people are encumbered in those ways. We're complicated and we need more than just oxygen and water and vitamins and whatever.

Okay, this is the Rationally Speaking podcast and I'm philosophically or temperamentally, I'm the sort of person who should be a card carrying member of your group. But just as a psychologist, I think that most people aren't quite like that.

Julia Galef: Okay. Well, we were going to talk about rationalism and your views about rationalism, and a concept that you mentioned -- I think this was in *The Righteous Mind* -- called the “rationalist delusion.” So maybe now is a good time to segue into that.

Jon Haidt: Okay, let's do it.

Julia Galef: Do you want to talk about ... I'll just foreshadow and say, I suspect we don't actually have that much disagreement over this, but we'll find out.

So do you want to talk about what you mean by the rationalist delusion?

Jon Haidt: Yes. So, I was very critical of the new atheists. I'm the sort of person who should have been a new atheist, but because I study morality and I came around to just, I thought the empirical evidence that religion, at least in the United States makes people better citizens. And this is a Putnam and ... oh, shoot, what's his name, Putnam and Campbell. Anyway.

So I was very much opposed to the New Atheists. And I thought that there was a real sort of dogmatism in their writing. And it even looked to me and a lot of people said this, like, “Oh, well, they're turning it into a religion. The New Atheists are actually, they're turning into a religion and they have these beliefs and they excommunicate people or whatever.” I don't remember what the critiques were. But as I was writing the *Righteous Mind*... so, the three principles of the *Righteous Mind* are:

Intuition comes first, strategic reasoning second.

Second principle is there's more to morality than harm and fairness, which we already talked about.

And the third principle is “morality binds and blinds.” And this is just a thing about humans, is that we like to make something sacred. We circle around it, then we worship it together and then we can't think clearly about it. And we get mad at people who say true things about it.

And so, as I was writing the book and developing these ideas, I noticed that there is a kind of a worship of reasoning. And Richard Dawkins, when

he writes in the God Delusion, he gives a very clear definition of delusion... so if you Google “the Rationalist Delusion,” I gave a talk at Rutgers where I laid that out. But it's also in the Righteous Mind. Let me just find where that is... It's at the end of chapter four.

Okay, I say: “Anyone who values truth should stop worshipping reason.” And what I mean by that is once you see all the psychological evidence on how biased we are, on how people with higher IQs aren't less biased, they're just better at coming up with post hoc reasoning... You look at all the research on how self-interest, or group interests or reputation, biases our reasoning, and how nobody has found a way to de-bias judgements... Nobody's found a way to teach critical thinking that makes people basically rational and unbiased...

And so just being realistic, I say that it is a delusion to believe that humans have, or could have this faculty, which New Atheists think that we do, or think that this should be the basis of society. So, I think it's a delusion to think about reasoning that way.

But here's the key thing which will bring me back probably to agreement with you: “I'm not saying we should all stop reasoning and going with our gut feelings, I'm saying we must be wary of any individual's ability to reason.” We should see that each individual is like a neuron, very limited, very good at this doing one thing, which is, it sums up the stimulation from the dendrites. And if it reaches a certain threshold it fires and you get a signal down the axon.

Each neuron is kind of dumb, it just does one thing. But if you put them together in the right way, you get a brain which can do amazing things.

And in the same way, if you put biased, post hoc social creatures like us together in the right way, so that we cancel out each other's confirmation biases, then you get rationality. But you're not going to get it from an individual, or from teaching individuals to be rational. You're going to get it from setting up the right institutions -- a university, or a jury, or an intelligence agency is that sort of institution.

Now, unfortunately, those can all be skewed. And this is why I founded Heterodox Academy. Is it became clear by 2011, it was really clear that in social psychology, if someone makes a claim that goes along with a kind of a social justice orientation, either nobody wants to challenge it, or nobody thinks to challenge it, or nobody dares to challenge it. And therefore, institutionalized dis-confirmation was breaking down. And universities were not producing -- or social sciences, I think -- were not necessarily producing reliable research on many topics.

So that's my point. That it is a delusion to think that people can be rational and that that's what we should go for, is every individual being rational. I put my faith or my trust in institutions that bring rationality out of irrational, raw ingredients.

Julia Galef: Yeah, great. Okay. That's really --

Jon Haidt: We agree?

Julia Galef: I think mostly. Let me highlight two things.

So the first and probably most important to mention is just that this is one of the multiple reasons why the term “rationalist” is not the best choice for describing this community of people. Because it's a reference to a definition of rationality, an academic definition of rationality, that is different from other common ways people use the word.

So the one that we were referring to is the one that Keith Stanovich describes in the Oxford Handbook of Thinking and Reasoning. He says “Cognitive scientists recognize two types of rationality, epistemic and instrumental. And epistemic rationality concerns how well beliefs map onto the actual structure of the world.”

So it's basically -- rationality is about trying to make your view of the world more accurate. Caring a lot about truth and accuracy. And that has a complicated relationship to the “reason versus emotion,” or “reason versus intuition” distinction. Where, as you say, our reason is very flawed -- but then again, so are our gut intuitions, in many cases.

And so the project of trying to make our views more accurate, trying to see the world more clearly, involves trying to figure out: How exactly is our reasoning flawed and in what contexts? How exactly are our intuitions flawed, and in which contexts? And learning how to synthesize the two -- when you can rely more on intuition, when you can't....

Jon Haidt: Yeah. Okay. I think I've been too harsh on rationalism then. Because I totally approve of that project. And especially if you create a community that's doing it, then it might be more possible. So, I'm always a social psychologist and I'm skeptical of our ability to just say, “Well, I'm going to make myself more rational.”

But if you have a whole community that is valuing certain ways of thinking and giving more prestige to people who can actually do it, then maybe I imagine it does work to some extent.

Julia Galef: You really hit on what I think is one of the key things that makes improving rationality work, when it does work, which is certainly not always. And it's something that I think people in general tend not to notice or appreciate, so I'm delighted to hear you mention it.

Which is, creating norms in a community where truth seeking and intellectual honesty are valued and praised. That is just as, if not more, important than the sort of nitty-gritty technical details about, “Okay. How and when do you use reference class forecasting,” and improving your calibration through ... I mean, those technical things are important too.

But if I had to pick one thing, I think the social incentives, and immersion in a community where these kinds of things are very salient and valued, would probably be the most important.

Jon Haidt: Great. I'm totally in agreement. There's a dictum that I'm told was said by Robert Zions, who's a really famous, wonderful social psychologist. And I'm told that he said, "Cognitive psychology is social psychology with all the interesting variables set to zero."

Julia Galef: What does that mean?

Jon Haidt: What that means is: Suppose you thought that people are not really influenced by what others are doing, that they're just these computing machines. Cognitive psychologists study biases in reasoning and probability – so, Kahneman and Tversky, or Danny Kahneman's book *Thinking Fast and Slow* is a book of cognitive psychology. So, it's very important research, but it's about how individuals make choices about their own utility under uncertainty. And that's with all the social stuff set to zero.

And bring the social stuff in, is like what you just said. If you have a community that is praising or critiquing or whatever, if you gain prestige by thinking in a certain way, well, that's going to really supercharge it. That would be setting a social variable to a non-zero value.

That also is like, Buddhists -- I forget what it's called, is it the noble path? -- but Buddhism is very clear on the need for a community. So enlightenment, it's something that you get on your own, but the practice is so hard that you're much more likely to make progress if you are in a community of people who share the same goal and practices.

Julia Galef: Great, excellent. I like that.

Jon, thank you so much. It's just been such a pleasure talking to you --

Jon Haidt: Yeah, this discussion has been unusual, in that almost every discussion I have is about Republicans and Democrats and the Capitol and Trump and other stuff. And this was really a much more philosophical and academic one, which I enjoyed.

Julia Galef: And I will strive to be more of a three-dimensional flatlander and less of a flat square.

Jon Haidt: Okay. Well, if only everyone in the country did, maybe we'd understand each other a little better. And it's been great fun talking with you. You and I both speak quickly and sort of interrupt each other at about the same velocity, which always --

Julia Galef: Excellent.

Jon Haidt: -- gives a good dynamic. Thank you, Julia.

Julia Galef: Until next time!

Jon Haidt: Okay, great. Bye-bye.

[musical interlude]

Julia Galef: That was Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.

I really enjoyed this conversation and it was gratifying to see how much we ended up agreeing about.

One thing I did want to revisit, after listening to the episode myself, is the Flatland analogy, where we liberals and libertarians are like the two dimensional squares unable to comprehend the sphere – i.e. the conservatives and communitarians who use all five moral foundations whereas we use only two – harm/care, and fairness.

I love the analogy, but upon reflection, I'm not sure I think it's fair. In these disagreements I have with people like Leon Kass and Michael Sandel who use the "sanctity" foundation and I don't, I'm not sure I agree that what's happening there is that they have a moral sense that I lack. Instead what it seems to me is that I have gut reactions to things just like they do – reactions of disgust and outrage and judgmentalness – maybe not to the exact same things but still, I have those intuitions. And the difference between us is instead that I'm taking a step back and questioning those intuitions, and saying "I don't actually think these intuitions are a good basis for moral judgments and certainly not for rules I want to impose on other people."

And I thought Jon did a great job of articulating why those sanctity judgments can be justified – in that treating some things as sacred or profane could be the best way to maximize human flourishing – but as we talked about, that's still ultimately justifying things in terms of the more liberal-friendly moral foundation of harm/care. And I still haven't heard a compelling defense of the quote-unquote conservative moral foundations of sanctity, loyalty, and authority that doesn't ultimately justify them in terms of harm/care and fairness.

So I'm definitely still interested in this question of how to think about disagreements over the moral foundations, and kind of tempted to tackle it again at some point with another guest... although I don't know how many times I want to subject you guys to the story of the German dude eating someone, so maybe I should hold off. I'll think about it.

Regardless, I hope you enjoyed this conversation and encourage you to read *The Righteous Mind* and Jon Haidt's other work. I'll put some links up on the website. That's all for this episode, I hope you'll join me next

time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.