

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Thought Leader: Jonathan Haidt

Thought Leaders Forum

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Transcript

As part of the Carnegie Council Centennial Thought Leaders Forum, Carnegie Council president Joel Rosenthal spoke with Jonathan Haidt. He is the Henry Kaufman Visiting Professor in the Business and Society Program Area at New York University Stern School of Business and a social psychologist at the University of Virginia.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: My first question has to do with the moment we're living in now. There's a certain timelessness to your work, talking about human nature, moral argument. But is there anything morally distinct about the time that we're living in now?

JONATHAN HAIDT: I think the time we're living in now is distinct from a moral perspective in a number of ways. One is certainly the end of the [Cold War](#), the end of the threat of nuclear war, basically the end of the threat of global domination by force.

Another is the expansion of the moral circle to the point where people, while they may not care a great deal about what happens far away, care a little. That, to me, is kind of amazing and wonderful. At least when there are enormous natural disasters and genocides, many people around the world actually do care, do exert some influence on their leaders, and leaders feel some pressure to respond. So I think this is all very hopeful.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Are there stronger bonds of connectedness? Is that part of what we're living through now—global connectedness?

JONATHAN HAIDT: Connection in a thin sense, that if you simply know the name of a country and you can see images from it, then, yes, there's a connection. I think that human nature evolved to be very parochial, very much focused on our local groups. What we're doing now, what we're exploring, are sort of the furthest reaches of what human nature may be capable of, caring about people very far away. So I think we're learning to what extent we are able to do that.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: And do you see those bonds deepening in some way? The way I think about it is that in some ways our awareness of the world is two-dimensional. We see it through the media. At one level that might be fleeting; at another level it might actually matter what we would do. Do you think about that? Does awareness lead to action?

JONATHAN HAIDT: Awareness by itself doesn't lead to action. I think the most powerful forces operating on people are their emotional reactions. Certainly when we all saw images of the [Asian tsunami](#), that terrible devastation, those emotions led people to action.

But more powerful than that are reputational concerns. I think we are not, deep down, deeply altruistic. We are concerned about reputation. To the extent that we get some benefit, to the extent

people respect us for taking action, that's a more powerful spur, ultimately, than just the desire to help others far away.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: So would it be a stretch to say that there's an emerging global ethic? And as sort of a follow-up, how then do we think about our own national interest?

JONATHAN HAIDT: I think that an ethic emerges in relation to a community. To the extent that there is a functioning community where people are interdependent, where they know each other's names, where their reputation is on the line, then you'll get an ethic emerging. That certainly happens in local communities. It happens within companies. It happens, to a large extent, within nations.

It's very hard to scale that up to a global level. We're not really interacting with that many citizens in foreign nations. I would say there's a kind of thin global ethic emerging in which, when something terrible happens to a nation from a natural disaster or a genocide, there is a sense that it is both appropriate and virtuous for people in many nations of the world to come together to try to aid. So there's almost like a law of the sea type of thing. The law of the sea: If one ship is in trouble, all the other ships will try to help it. But beyond that, it's not like they're deeply involved in each other's affairs.

I think that's hopeful. I don't think it would be desirable to have the entire world be one giant global community. I think our minds were designed to function in much smaller-scale societies. Nation-states are probably the biggest we can scale things up to and still have all of the moral psychological mechanisms functioning. So to have this kind of thin, minimal global ethic—I'm pretty happy with that.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: To fill that in a little bit, what would be some of the issue areas from an interest perspective, a common global interest, but then also from an ethic perspective as well? Can we start to identify some of those areas?

JONATHAN HAIDT: I think that problems are generally best addressed at the lowest level possible. The conservative suspicion of the United Nations I think is often very warranted. The United Nations—many of the committees are corrupt. Many of the nations do not behave as good global citizens. So I think that when problems can be solved at lower levels rather than global, I think they should be.

There are a number of problems that are especially in the format of common dilemmas, issues where, if each nation pursues its self-interest and tries to solve problems for its benefit, in the long run we all suffer. Those are the areas where I think we really do need to focus our attention in terms of a global ethic, in terms of global institutions—obviously, things like overfishing the seas, exploiting the Arctic and Antarctica and, of course, global warming and climate change.

Those are the areas that cannot be solved by one nation at a time. Those are the areas that I think we need to attend to and think about how we can get around normal human psychology, which is "my nation first and I'm not really trusting that other nations are complying here," and then cooperation unravels.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: What would be the process to do that? Is it a process of raising awareness of common interests? Is it as simple as that? If you're concerned about global-level issues, what would be the next move?

JONATHAN HAIDT: Well, that's a question for political scientists and historians and economists and

people who study global international agreements and global law, so I can't really comment on that, except to say that these are problems which I think require large-level, institutional solutions. There's not a lot that citizens can do in the long run. We hope that we have leaders that will attend to these things. But it's so hard to get our leaders to attend even to national problems. I'm not very optimistic that global problems will become high on the priority list anytime soon.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Right. I can't resist asking you this question, in light of the [presidential campaign](#). One [candidate](#) has said that he's not running to "slow the rise of the oceans or heal the planet." I would imagine, in your way of thinking, that this would be a legitimate tack in terms of seeking a leadership position in the national community.

JONATHAN HAIDT: My research shows that liberals are more universalistic. They care more about people far away. Sometimes they care more about people far away than people close at hand. So it makes sense that one party is concerned about global issues and one party, generally speaking, is not. It's not that they are immoral. It's not that they're not concerned about moral issues. But conservatives tend to be more parochial and focused on problems close at hand.

Actually, I'd like to read a quote from [Adam Smith](#), which I think is very relevant here. I think parochialism is a very important issue for us to think about. The word "parochialism" generally has a negative connotation, especially on the left.

But here's a quote from Adam Smith that I think portrays it in a different light. Smith wrote:

"That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and his understanding."

In other words, think local, act local, and that will tend to lead to a lot of problems being solved, whereas if you think global and act local, you're probably not as likely to do anything.

So I think there is a lot to be said for parochialism. My general view is that left and right are like yin and yang. I think it's great to have one side that's calling attention to global issues and one side that's wary of the solutions and wary of some do-gooder schemes and says, "No, no, let's focus here at home." I hope that one side doesn't simply win out and get to dominate the conversation for a couple of decades.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: I'm just curious about your own disposition. Are you optimistic in thinking in a progressive way about making progress on some of these areas—in other words, to have local action that is consistent with global-level concerns? Optimistic, pessimistic?

JONATHAN HAIDT: When I look at the trajectory of humanity, it's kind of like a [Necker cube](#), which reverses. If you step back far enough and you look at where we have come over the last 10,000 years or even 1,000 years—even 50 years—the trajectory is overwhelmingly positive. It's amazingly positive. [Robert Wright](#) wrote a book called [Nonzero](#) around 1999 or 2000.

So when I step back, I'm very optimistic.

But as a citizen right now in the year 2012, looking at an America unable to solve its problems because of its political polarization and gridlock, then I'm quite pessimistic. On our current trajectory, I don't think America is going to be making much of a contribution to solving global problems in the

next few years. But in the long run, something's likely to happen. We can't just extrapolate current trends and say they're going to continue. There are many reasons to think that polarization and demonization will decrease at some point—not in the next few years, but in the next 10 to 20.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: I know you've thought a lot about polarization within the American society. I'm going to ask you for a minute to think globally. We're going through a period now of polarization, primarily between religious groups, religious belief, and secular society. Any thoughts about where that's going in terms of trajectory and ways we might think about that?

JONATHAN HAIDT: I don't know whether the world is going through a polarization between secular and religious societies in general. Again that's above my pay grade, to answer that question. I think it's pretty clear that there's a major fault line between Islam and non-Islamic countries. Islam obviously has been capable of being extremely tolerant at times in its history, when a group or religion is dominant or is not threatened. Islam certainly has the resources to have been very tolerant and progressive in its ways. Right now that doesn't seem to be happening.

Of course, one can't generalize about Islam in general, but my perspective as a moral psychologist is that morality binds and blinds. Some groups are more tightly bound, more cohesive, more able to function, and therefore more blind to outside evidence, to outside arguments. I think now we're seeing that many of those subgroups in the Islamic world are tightly bound, and therefore blinded, engaging in political action, engaging in military action, engaging in terrorism.

I don't know that I'd say there's a global division between secular and religious, but certainly Islam is very active, very moralistic, triggering a lot of right wing responses, especially in Europe. So Islam versus resistance to Islam, especially in Europe, is a major fault line, I think, for the next decade or two.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: When you run into a group that is blind, in the sense that "this is our belief" and the system is, in some sense, closed, what is your response to it? Is it to seek to understand it? Is it to agree to disagree? How do we deal with this idea of blindness?

JONATHAN HAIDT: As a moral psychologist, my response is, "Oh, here's something interesting for me to learn about." I enjoy reading far right stuff, far left stuff, anarchist stuff, even Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. I mean, it's a repulsive book, but it's fascinating. So that's me, as someone who studies this stuff.

In terms of what people can do, it's not clear that it's in everyone's interest to understand everyone. There are certain problems which, to be solved, are going to require toning down the demonization. What I'm focused on these days is helping liberals and conservatives in America tone down the demonization so we can get back to the level of polarization that we had in the 1990s. Things were bad then, but it was still possible to make deals.

Things have gotten a lot worse since the 1990s, actually. I think there are some institutional fixes. There are things we can do that will encourage parties to stop focusing on the base and return to the strategy that they have traditionally done, which is to try to win the center.

I am optimistic that there are things we can do. We can change the way we run elections. We can change the way things are financed. But none of these changes are easy, and each one tends to advantage one party over the other. Therefore, the disadvantaged party is going to fight like hell to stop them.

There's a lot we can do, but getting from here to there could take quite a while.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Have you thought about what it is in our society that led to “compromise” becoming a dirty word? It seems we're in a kind of winner-take-all system. How do we understand that?

JONATHAN HAIDT: There are about 12 different trends that have caused our descent into ever-deepening polarization. The first thing that everyone should know is that the graph of polarization in America goes like this. It's very, very high in the late 19th century, before the [Civil War](#) and after the Civil War. Then around the time of [World War I](#), it plummets and you get a lot of crossover voting in Congress, you get a lot of bipartisanship. In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, it's historically low. It begins rising in the 1960s and 1970s, accelerates in the 1980s and 1990s, and super-accelerates since 2000.

We'll never get back to the bipartisanship of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, when there were a lot of conservative Democrats, a lot of liberal Republicans. That was the anomaly. But things don't have to be as bad as they are today. One of the things that has happened is that the “Greatest Generation,” which was forged—their foundational experience in their teens and twenties was coming together to fight fascism—when those people went on and served in politics, most of those men had served in the military, for one thing. They all trained together and fought together. They were much more able to compromise. They were replaced by the Baby Boomers, whose foundational moral experience was fighting each other over [Vietnam](#) and racism and civil rights and women's rights.

So I think we have gone from the generation most able to compromise to the generation least able to compromise. As the Baby Boomers begin to age out in about 10, 20 years, I think we might find fewer demonizers in the politics.

Also there are a variety of changes in terms of how campaigns are funded and the flood of money coming in now because of [Citizens United](#), mostly spent on negative advertising. That promotes demonization, and demonization tends to alienate centrists, who say, “This is terrible all around,” and energize extremists, who get upset at the other side.

So changes in generations, changes in the media, changes in the way Congress works—they have all lined up to create this massive hyperpolarization, which makes it very difficult for us to reach negotiated solutions.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Given that, how do we move forward? If I understood your argument correctly, you've got these groups just reinforcing each other, over here and over here. How do you break the logjam? How do you think about it in terms of leadership?

JONATHAN HAIDT: Leaders respond to the landscape as they see it, and they have to fight the battles they fight on the landscape they're given. At present there are a lot of forces pushing them to focus on party versus party as opposed to what's good for the nation.

There are several great books out recently. One is [Mickey Edwards's](#) book [The Parties Versus the People](#). Edwards was a Republican congressman from Oklahoma. He points out how many changes, some started by [Newt Gingrich](#), created a much more partisan Congress, much more focused on victory over the other side than on solving problems. A lot of the Gingrich changes could be rolled back.

So there are specific ideas. Political scientists talk about a lot of them—changing the way electoral

districts are created, changing the way campaigns are covered and financed, changing the way that we vote so that you could have second and third choices, which would encourage more moderates—moderates would end up winning, once the extremists drop out. So there are a variety of changes we could make.

Most of these are changes that one side would oppose vociferously. But many of them, over the next 10, 20 years, are doable.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: I want to shift focus a little bit. We were founded as an organization to promote a more peaceful world. I know you have quoted [John Lennon](#) in “Imagine,” as someone who seemed to be somewhat suspicious of utopian schemes for peace. Could you share just some reflections on war and peace, as you see it now?

JONATHAN HAIDT: Let’s see, war and peace—again this is not my expertise—

JOEL ROSENTHAL: We just finished a war in [Iraq](#) and we’re still in [Afghanistan](#).

JONATHAN HAIDT: I’m newly arrived at a business school. I’m at the Stern School at NYU. I’ve been learning about the history of capitalism. One thing that has amazed me in learning about capitalism is the degree to which it is bound up with the “liberal project,” with liberal reforms.

I read a quote from [Voltaire](#) after he first visits the London Stock Exchange. He comments on how trade and capitalism allows the Mohammedan to deal with the Jew and the Christian. In terms of trade, it doesn’t matter. All that really matters is whether one can be trusted to keep his word in the deal. So capitalism, trade, commerce—these are great equalizers. These make other partisan and religious and ethnic identities matter less. It’s a solvent that lubricates international trade.

So I think in the long run our greatest hope is capitalism. That might sound like a strange thing to many people now because America is engaged in a debate on the ethical nature of capitalism. What I’m hoping is that we as Americans, and people in other countries, too, can think more clearly about capitalism as the engine of growth that lets people out of poverty, and that can only work when you have efficient markets, and that you can only have efficient markets when you have government tamping down on monopoly, exploitation of public goods, passing externalities on to others.

We have this unfortunate debate over whether we should go with capitalism to solve things or with the government to solve things. That’s the debate in America right now. I was hoping that this campaign would be about the left saying, “Yes, capitalism is good, and here’s why you need government to make it good,” and the right saying, “Yes, capitalism is good, and, yes, it’s prone to these problems, and here’s our recipe for being super-capitalists.” We’re not getting any of that from either side. So I’m disappointed about that.

But in the long run capitalism is triumphing all around the world, thank god, because countries that have turned away from it basically mired their people in poverty and are prone to war and exploitation and cruelty. So in the long run I’m hopeful that the Third World is developing. As people get rich, they then get rights. They then get more accountability from their government.

So I am hopeful for that reason.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: I just want to push on one little aspect of that, because it’s a theme that has come up a lot, the general moral proposition of accountability, in some way. How do you think about that, both in terms of accountability of governments and accountability, I suppose, of business as

well, if we're talking about capitalism?

JONATHAN HAIDT: An interesting finding in social psychology is that we think well and we think hard when we are accountable for our conclusions. In general, our thinking is pretty sloppy. We just justify whatever we want. We don't even bother looking for evidence on the other side.

But to the extent that someone is going to hold you accountable and you don't even know whether they are going to be on the right or the left, then we work harder to find the right answer—judges, for example. Judges are probably about as good as we get, even though they're human and they're biased in many ways. Judges always have the threat of an appellate court over them going to review their reasoning. So they are very, very careful. They reason in ways that can be justified.

When we know that we'll be held accountable, when we know that we'll be reviewed, we tend to be very careful; we're on our best behavior. When we're not, we tend to be lazy, sloppy, and often selfish, and we're good at denying to ourselves that we're doing that. We think we're doing a good job, but we're not.

So I'm a big fan of accountability. I'm a big fan of shame. I'm a big fan of using reputation and harnessing the power of reputation. There are many places, in government and elsewhere, where there is no accountability. One of the biggest problems we have in America is that Congress is not accountable; each congressman is accountable to his voters, but beyond that Congress is not accountable to anyone. The institution can decay into dysfunctionality, and there's no competition. It's not like there's some alternate Congress where, if this one fails, it's going to go bankrupt, and then we'll all go with the new Congress. If we had, in a sense, free trade in political institutions, Congress would have to get its act together. But we don't.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: I'm going to ask just one other big question. It's a personal reflection. When you think about a topic like a global ethic and global systems, what do you see as the greatest moral challenge for the world today?

JONATHAN HAIDT: I see two challenges. I think that ultimately, if we're going to reach our potential, if we're going to live in decent civilized societies that don't go to war, it's going to be because we have crossed the demographic transition and the political transition, where the whole world has effective political institutions, the whole world has democratic capitalism, and not crony capitalism.

This is more of a problem in each nation. I hope that each nation can get it right. Nations that do it well will rise and become the leading nations of the next century. Nations that do it wrong, like Russia, will stay mired in corruption and inefficiency.

So in the long run, I really hope that more and more nations can get capitalism and government regulation right.

In terms of a global ethic that is not focused on governments or countries but is focused on the global community, I think we need to have kind of a global discussion of commons dilemmas and of what it takes to solve them and a sense that many of the things we do do have global implications—not that I expect people to therefore curb their greenhouse gas emissions out of concern for Bangladeshis. I don't expect that ever to happen. But to the extent that we're going to solve these problems with international agreements and international institutions, there's going to have to be some political support for them in each nation.

What I'm hoping is that the next generation that grows up will grow up with more of an awareness

that there are these problems that can only be solved by sometimes giving up a little bit of sovereignty and more of a sensibility that on specific issues we're going to have to submit ourselves to—I hate to say—regulatory regimes or some sort of system that solves commons dilemmas.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: This is truly the last question. So then, given what you do—you're a researcher, a scholar, an educator, a teacher—is part of this project just purely educational in nature? I sense I'm hearing from you that there will be limits to the educational aspects.

JONATHAN HAIDT: Yes, that's right. I'm not a big fan of direct methods. Normally when there is a problem, psychologists and many other people say, "We need to educate people or do therapy. We need to focus on individuals." I don't think that's a good way to solve big problems. Usually indirect methods will be much more effective.

For example, on global warming, one of the biggest problems is that it has become a major issue—the major issue—of the left. That means automatically the right is now opposed. Because of the nature of polarization, to the extent that it becomes a partisan issue, that's going to force the other side to take the other side and to disagree.

An indirect method is not persuading the Republicans that we're right. An indirect method is depolarizing the whole issue and taking very seriously, for example, the fact that business and tech innovation are probably going to be a hell of a lot more effective in the long run than carbon caps and other command-and-control procedures.

So to the extent that our thinking about it can be depolarized and we can turn it into a technical problem where both sides can have some input, that, I think, will have an amazing effect on reducing the denialism that you see on the right, right now.

I had one other thought. I'm thinking of starting something called the Asteroids Club. The motto of the club would be, "I'll help you deflect your asteroids if you help me deflect mine." The idea is, both sides of the political spectrum see different threats. And both sides are right. If you just focus on one threat—global warming or the entitlement bankruptcy that we're facing, which the right is correct about—if you just focus on one, then you get this "either I'm right or you're right" dynamic. But if we can say, "Look, there are four or six or eight asteroids that are going to destroy us. How about if I help you with yours and you help me with mine?" I think there's room for negotiated settlement, for defusing the norm of polarization.

An alternative motto that I've considered is, "Common threats, not common ground."

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Excellent. That's good. It speaks to self-interest. That's how you mobilize. Can we start a website for the Asteroids Club?

JONATHAN HAIDT: I'm giving a [TEDx](#) talk in Washington. I think that's going to be the theme. So I'm hoping to do my best to make a case for this. I'm hoping that [Chris Anderson](#) will put it online at ted.com.

Point B Podcast

"My general view is that left and right are like yin and yang. I think it's great to have one side that's calling attention to global issues and one side that's wary of the solutions."

Video Clip

"When we know that we'll be held accountable, when we know that we'll be reviewed, we tend to be very careful; we're on our best behavior. When we're not, we tend to be lazy, sloppy, and often

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