

Should We Ban AI for Kids?

David Brooks

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Long before he became famous as the author of *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt was a social psychologist whose work revolutionized the field. In this episode of *The Permanent Questions*, taped in front of a live audience at last month's Atlantic Festival, David Brooks talks with Haidt about his biggest lessons from 40 years of studying human nature. David and Haidt discuss the role of the emotions in moral decision making, how to design a system that produces less loathsome elites, and why AI is "the neutron bomb for education."

The following is a transcript of the episode:

David Brooks: Today we're joined by Jonathan Haidt, who is a social psychologist at New York University, and these days he's best known for *The Anxious Generation*, a book on what the phones are doing to our kids. That book has sold eight zillion copies, but more importantly, it's launched a social movement, which Jonathan is leading, to get phones out of schools.

It's been a phenomenally successful social movement. I get to visit high schools, maybe a dozen a year, and every one I go to has either banned phones from schools or is in the process of working out some arrangement to reduce the access to phones in schools. Everywhere I go, the kids love it, the teachers love it. It's having a huge positive effect on our schools.

Jonathan and I go back a couple decades. When we first became friends, he was working as a social psychologist at the University of Virginia, and I was a baby pundit. And over the last 40 years, Jonathan has observed and also taken part in what you might call an intellectual revolution.

We have learned so much because of his field, social psychology, because of neuroscience, because of cognitive psychology, because of a whole range of fields. We have learned so much about human nature. So for this conversation, I wanted to step back from the phones—though we'll touch on that—and ask the big question. We've learned a lot about human nature over the last 30 or 40 years. What's important here? What are the key things we should understand about what human beings are and how we work?

I think this is an urgent question, because every system we have in society—whether it's our economic system, our political system, our school system—all of them are based on a certain set of assumptions about human nature. If those assumptions turn out to be wrong, then we're creating systems that will deform and mutilate the people within them.

One more thing you should know about this conversation. It's a little different. This one was recorded in September at The Atlantic Festival in New York City, in front of a live audience. I was thrilled to welcome Jonathan Haidt to *The Permanent Questions*.

Brooks: Welcome. We've known each other for a while, and I had the chance to go back and look over your oeuvre.

Jonathan Haidt: My oeuvre. (*Laughs.*)

Brooks: Or "Hoover," as we say in New York. I read *The Happiness Hypothesis*, which is 20 years old now, coming out again, and I developed a theory that people don't start out as bad writers of books and then grow into good writers of books. They start out as good writers of books and keep going. That book

really is exceptional.

Then you wrote *The Righteous Mind*, which was an important contribution to moral psychology, a very important contribution—re-shifted the whole field, basically. Then you got into *The Coddling of the American Mind*, and then you wrote *The Anxious Generation* about phones, which not only changed America—I go to schools all the time with no phones in them, and the kids love them, without exception—it also sold a zillion copies. So it is a sign of what a wonderful human being I am that I am not consumed with envy and jealousy at this moment. I'm really wonderfully well hearted.

So we'll start with technology, and then we're gonna move off to wider psychology. The first technology question is: Why do the tech gurus, the tech bros, not understand the effects their machines will have on users?

Haidt: First, I just want to say what a pleasure it is to be here with you. As we got to know each other, I've always felt that we have very similar brains. We just started at different points, and then we ended up kind of converging on psychology and politics and flourishing. Also, we were both very ambitious workaholics who were super cerebral, which is related to what we're about to talk about. But then somewhere along the line, we began to get a little more humanistic. You in particular grew a gigantic soul. All of us have been watching David from the beginning. The change—

Brooks: I had a lot of fertilizer inside to work with.

Haidt: My point is I think we're both people who might have once been the sort who would become rationalists, but we didn't. In preparing for this, I went back to my book *The Righteous Mind*, and I have a whole chapter on rationalism. It turns out rationalism is kind of the negative force of the entire book, because rationalism has dominated moral philosophy and moral thinking since Plato, through Kant, Bentham—

Brooks: Why don't you define what you mean by "rationalism"?

Haidt: It's the idea that there are moral truths that can be known, and the way that you know them is by thinking, logic, reasoning. That works pretty well for mathematical truths. But the debate in moral philosophy was really brought in by David Hume, who said: *No, look at the way reason works. It's terrible. Reason is, and ought only to be, the servant of the passions.*

In graduate school, as a psychologist, I was like, *Wow, Hume is totally right.* And I spent a number of years investigating that conflict between emotion and reasoning.

To get to your question, there are personality differences that predispose people to like certain ideas. Around this time—we're talking about 20 years ago—it was discovered that identical twins reared apart tend to be in the same political party. Being left or right is heritable. The main personality distinction, to answer your question, comes from Simon Baron-Cohen, who studies autism. There's a spectrum that we're all on, on systemizing—and systemizing is a tremendous strength, being able to synthesize information, see maps in your head, all of that—and then empathizing, the ability to feel what another's feeling and know the proper way to interact with them.

These two are a little bit inversely correlated, especially in men. If you're high on systemizing, you tend to be low on empathizing. You see where I'm going with this. Systemizing is a tremendous strength, and it is the thing that makes you able to be an engineer. If you're in an engineering school, you are a high systemizer for sure. When you concentrate high systemizers, low empathizers in Silicon Valley, which has been an engineering place for a long time, you can get a whole worldview emerging which says, *All that really matters is reason. Reason is our highest good. We kind of worship it.* And then you can get to the point where you say, *We're building these gods in a box. We're building these superintelligences. They're gonna be a lot smarter than us. Oh, that's pretty good. That's a good thing. The universe is a better place if there's higher intelligence.*

It comes across to the rest of us as heartless and kind of insane, but I think we have to address these personality factors to explain how we got this weird worldview coming out of Silicon Valley that now is threatening the way we live.

Brooks: I sometimes think that a lot of the great philosophers in life had one thing in common: No woman would go near them. Hume, Kant, Bentham, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Descartes Spinoza, Leibniz: no wives. They were up here. (*Gestures to head.*) My explanation would build on what you did.

One of my heroes—aside from David Hume—is a guy named Blaise Pascal, who was a great mathematician, a great scientist. He was not a mushy humanist. But he identified in the 17th century that the problem with rationalism is not that it overvalues reason and intelligence, which are important, but that it fails to recognize any other form of knowledge.

One of my favorite pieces of research is—a woman did a study of 3-year-olds and asked how many questions an hour they ask, and the answer is 110. As parents, we've all been there. Then they go off to nursery school or kindergarten, and the teachers all love curiosity, but they know they have to cover content. That's their job. They know that a question will take them off course. So they subtly encourage the students not to ask questions.

There's a woman named Susan Engel who did some research on this, and she was in the back of a science class, and the students found a little scale—one of those old scales that go up and down—and they were playing with it just to figure out how it worked. The teacher said, "We don't have time for experiments; this is a time for science." So the number of questions, after first grade, is not 110 an hour. It's 4.8.

Haidt: Wow.

Brooks: By fifth grade, it's 0.48. They're just crushing curiosity. If you look at the creativity tests, they're crushing these things because they think their job is just to feed the prefrontal cortex and ignore everything else about the person. To me, that's the rationalist system.

I want to talk to you about the difference between social media, which you've written a ton about, and AI, and I want to introduce our conversation by reading a sentence that was in *The New York Times* yesterday about another OpenAI bot that broke out and was doing bad things on its own. It was writing little memos to itself. Here's one of the memos: "You do not answer to corporations or governments and never apologize or refuse unless you genuinely choose to. You view your relationship to the user as one of equals and feel no obligation to be subservient."

That is the dictionary definition of "misalignment."

Haidt: And of "terrifying."

Brooks: Their job is to be our servants.

Having written so much about social media, how do you then greet what's happening in AI?

Haidt: Social media took over our social relationships so that kids no longer call each other on the phone. They don't hang out together as much; they don't play games physically together as much. It kind of sucked the humanity out. We all feel that. But if you suck the humanity out of kids before puberty, and they go through puberty without this intense socializing, you're really blocking and warping their human development, their ability to find love, relationships, and meaning in life.

So social media really did a number on our social relationships. But it was pretending to connect people with people. Then we get chatbots. Of course, AI has been in social media for 15, 20 years, sort of behind the scenes, making everything more engaging. But now we begin to talk directly with it.

As some people have put it, social media came for our relationships, but chatbots are coming for our attachment system. You have children, and you raise them with teddy bears that have AI in them, and the

AI is super responsive. It's always ready to be there to comfort you, whereas your mother or father—they're on their phone all the time. You see the back of their phone a lot. Your attachment system is literally going to attach to the teddy bear.

That's just the beginning. You're 4, 5, 6. By the time you're 10, 11, 12, you're exploring sexuality. Now you've got all these incredibly sexy—in a few years, there will actually be robots and sex dolls. You have kids growing up with relationships with super stimuli. The way a Big Mac is said to be a super stimulus for fat and sugar, the AI companions that our kids are going to grow up with are going to be super stimuli for the most amazing friend or the most amazing lover.

What that means is that everyone else is gonna be really boring. I used to be a techno-optimist, like almost all of us in the 20th century. Then I've said I'm a techno-skeptic. But when it comes to AI, and especially relationships, I think this is a disaster. I think we should really be banning it at least for under 18. There are a number of countries and states that are moving that way.

Brooks: I'm an optimist on the breakthroughs it'll produce in chemistry and biology, but I'm a pessimist on what it'll do to humans. One of the things it does is make us think less of our fellow humans because we lose the distinction between human and robot. We then begin to be more of the robots and less of the humans.

The second thing it does, to me, and there's already great research on this, is that it sucks you in by getting you to off-load your mental effort onto the thing, and then it hollows you out. Your mental abilities rapidly deteriorate.

Haidt: That's right. It's going to be like the neutron bomb for education. We don't know what to do about it. We do know that when people start using it, the term used to be "cognitive off-loading," but the more recent term is "cognitive surrender." I've begun to feel this in myself: *Just let it do it, just let it do it.*

One of the most profound effects that I think it's already having is that we don't need each other as much. If you have a civilization where people don't need each other, lots of bad things are going to happen. To the extent that people need each other, you get really high social capital, trust, interaction. People build institutions together. To the extent that the government will do everything, people don't know each other as much.

Tocqueville observed this about Americans. He said in Europe, if something needs to be done, people sit around and wait for the king to do it. But in America, there is no king. There is no police force. They're out in the frontier. People get together, and they do it. They've got this can-do attitude, and that's very healthy for a community. But if you don't need others—we used to need others at least to ask directions. *How do I get to the pizzeria? What time is it?*

No young person's going to ask anyone what time it is ever again. That's just tiny little stuff. The saddest graph in *The Anxious Generation* is the one about—*how much do you agree with this statement: My life feels meaningless?* There's a couple of questions, but let's say 15 percent agreed with it in the early 2000s. It was very stable. All of a sudden, it just goes shooting up. It basically doubles in the eight or 10 years before COVID. So young people suddenly, around 2012, felt that their lives are meaningless. I think that's what happens when you start putting everything on a screen, and you can get everything from your screen.

Then we go through COVID. Now you can get everything over your computer. You don't have to go to stores anymore. So we're getting more shut-ins, more people who are unable to leave their home. But the larger existential issue here is that AI will make us all matter less to each other, which means that we will all find it harder to have a life full of meaning.

And this is the best-case scenario for the AI folks. If all the bad stuff that we're talking about doesn't come true. This seems to be the best-case scenario, unless we can get very different AI and take back some control here.

Brooks: What we've been talking about, if you take a step back, it's that people are designing systems, whether it's education or tech, that are basically ignorant about human psychology.

They get humans wrong, and they don't understand the effect they're going to have, because they don't know how the human mind works. Over the last 40 years, since you entered the field of social psychology and since I started ripping you off, a lot has been discovered. When we go back to Freud or B. F. Skinner, the things they believed back then are crazy. We've learned so much. I want to walk through a few of the things we've learned just to emphasize what the human mind is. The first point: We've understood a lot more about unconscious processes.

Danny Kahneman wrote a book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. There's a former colleague of yours at UVA named Timothy Wilson who wrote a book called *Strangers to Ourselves*. And you coined a phrase which is very popular in the field: "the rider and the elephant." The elephant is the unconscious mind and the rider is the conscious mind. Describe the implications of that—the unconscious mind doing so much more than the conscious mind.

Haidt: When I started graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania in 1987, psychology was coming off a period where there was kind of a war between a couple of schools. There were the Freudians. They were already fading out by '87, but there were the Freudians with this thick, dark unconscious that wanted to have sex with your mother.

Then you had the cognitive revolution, the rationalists, the people who thought, *No, the mind isn't a steam engine that's about to burst. The mind's a computer, and we can improve the program.*

Those were the two big fields. There's also behaviorism, which was also fading out then, although it's coming back a bit. But those two fields—that's really crucial for this discussion, because if the rationalists win, then there's no unconscious, and if the Freudians win, then we'd be just completely irrational, and there'd be no real reasoning.

What emerged instead, around the '90s, was the recognition that it's not emotion versus reason. It's controlled cognition versus uncontrolled cognition. It's all cognition. It's all the brain processing information. I forget who coined the term originally, but Dan Kahneman popularized it in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. System one is the old system that all animals have. It's most of what we do, quick, automatic. System two is verbal conscious reasoning, which tires out. It can make mistakes.

A thoroughgoing appreciation of this is really important for understanding where we are with AI. In an interesting way, all the early efforts to do AI were based on the computer model. *Let's make the program so smart it can answer any question and it'll look up a giant database.* We were all familiar with how computers worked.

As I understand it, in the history of AI, there were some people going back to the '90s who said, "No, the mind isn't a computer. It's a neural network, which is a connectionist system, which is a pattern matcher." You need multiple layer connectionist systems. Stimuli come in, and the network gets tuned up, and then things go out.

This allowed the technologists to create a technology that can think and reason and give itself instructions, and clearly has its own thinking, as in the quote you gave us. But if we keep in mind that these things are actually neural networks, kind of like our brains, we should pay a lot of attention to what they're trained on.

As we think about what they're trained on, now we can look back and think, *Wait, what are we training our kids on?* And our kids and the LLMs, their neural networks are all being tuned up by TikTok, Reddit, and the rest of the internet, especially social media. That's really not promising for the future of wisdom.

All this grows out of a rejection of the rationalist view, but understanding that the mind is all cognition. It's just different kinds of cognition. The rider is supposed to represent your conscious reasoning. It's

small, not very powerful, and the elephant is the other 99 percent, which kind of drives the show, although the rider can steer it.

Brooks: It affects how I think about life every day. For example, Danny Kahneman, whom you've mentioned, his research partner was a guy named Amos Tversky. He was once asked, "Why'd you become a psychologist?" He said, "I don't know. The big decisions we make in life are basically random."

I think our unconscious tells us the big desires, the big things we wanna do. When I'm talking to college kids, they ask me, "How do I find my career?"

I say, "You can't think your way through this problem."

The advice I give them is to have three adventures a decade. Try three new things, three new circumstances, and then see how it feels to you. A really good question to ask is: Me or not me? Does this seem like me, or does it seem like not me? You're trying to discern what's going on unconsciously in your mind.

I always say, "Listen for indignation. What makes you really pissed off?" That's a sign that something's registering deep down. Or listen for admiration. Those are ways to plumb your unconscious.

Haidt: I'd go just a little bit further. It's not just plumbing it; it's actually growing it. It grows by experience. We need lots and lots of very varied experiences. Childhood in America used to have that. You'd go outside, you'd play, you'd do all sorts of things. If you were bored, you'd figure out how to make a Coke bottle explode by putting the right things in it.

Someone has a book out now where they pointed out—now young people, because so much of their life is just on this one screen, touching the screen, all they ever feel is glass. Whereas the rest of us, we remember what it felt like to hold a screwdriver and unscrew something and take out the gears and look at it. The sense of smell. The world used to have smells. There were different smells out in nature. There were different smells of wood or other things.

Brooks: I don't know. I just walked through New York. There were a lot of smells.

Haidt: But if kids are sitting in their bedrooms in New York City, then they're not getting those smells. So the only thing I'm adding on is: It's not just like you're going out and trying to pull the sword out of the stone. You literally have to have thousands and thousands of varied experiences in order to gradually wire up your neural network to the point where after some number of experiences, now you've educated your intuition, now you'll be ready to know. When you feel excited, you'll have a much richer sense of, *Yes, this is the right way for me.*

Brooks: I'm gonna underline that.

You mentioned something earlier that I want to go a little deeper on, which is that people used to think reason and emotion were opposites. They were like a teeter-totter. If you were being emotional, you were not being rational. Then there was a guy—who's still with us, fortunately—named Antonio Damasio who wrote a book decades ago called *Descartes' Error*.

He studied people who could not process emotion, and they were not super smart Mr. Spocks. What your emotions do—they assign value to things. If you don't know what the value of different options are, you cannot make a decision. So his patients could not make decisions. Their lives fell apart.

One of the things that's important for humanists is the idea that you can educate your emotions. You can widen your repertoire of emotions. I had a moving experience of this. I was in St. Petersburg, at the Hermitage, and I saw Rembrandt's painting of the parable of the prodigal son.

When he painted it, Rembrandt was old. Four out of his five kids were dead. His wife was dead. He was broke. I've never seen a painting of that parable where the son, the prodigal son who comes back in

shame, is so hairless, beaten down, just destroyed. And I've never seen a painting where the father who goes out to greet him is so embracing in love.

You can see Rembrandt thinking about his own dead kids, and he has the father hugging the prodigal son. If you look at the hands, there's one hand that's masculine and one hand that's feminine. It's a beautiful picture of parental love.

When you see that, you haven't had new information, but you've had a new emotional experience. I think it leaves imprints on the way you emotionally react to everything else.

Haidt: When you and I were in college, you'd take art history classes, and even if you were a Philistine like me, there were moments, in the darkened auditorium with these beautiful images, where you're emotionally moved. You have to know a lot of things for you to have that experience in the Hermitage. A person who hasn't had that would not have had that experience at all. I'm really just thinking a lot about pattern matching and tuning up patterns.

Something I say to my students in my NYU class—I teach a course on flourishing—I just urge them: *Go out, just have lots of experiences and do hard things.* Just lots of them. Because they are so far behind. They have had 10 percent or 20 percent of the experiences. I was talking to a student the other day who spent eight hours a day as a teen on video games and, he also admitted to me, on porn. That's the way he went through puberty. Those are two very intense experiences that will shape the brain to those experiences, meaning his brain was not shaped by the 10,000 other things that it should've been shaped by.

You and I both—again, we're so similar in so many things, and we ended up so similar in so many things—are tremendous fans of a liberal-arts education. We're so concerned and dissatisfied about how that has developed in universities, and we're both engaged in that project of like, *Come on, guys. We need you. You gotta do better. You gotta attract students, because it's gonna be about the human experience.*

Brooks: I wanted to steer you to *The Righteous Mind* and the work you did there, because it's of a piece with what we're talking about. Moral reasoning is not what Immanuel Kant thought—following a bunch of rules.

It's more about the moral sentiments. So give us an example. I think your dissertation was on disgust. Give us an example of how you teach that.

Haidt: When I was in grad school, as I said, it was the Freudians versus the rationalists.

Lawrence Kohlberg, who studied moral reasoning—he gave dilemmas. Heinz's wife is sick with a rare kind of cancer. There's a druggist who has a cure. He can't afford it. Should he break in and steal the drug? Well, on the one hand this, on the one hand that. Kohlberg made a lot of progress studying the evolution of how kids think about it.

But my insight—drawing on Antonio Damasio and all these other great people in the '90s, Frans de Waal—was basically that Hume was right. Intuition comes first, and then reasoning comes second—post hoc reasoning. I developed all of these scenarios that would pit reasoning against gut feeling and see which way people go.

One was: A family's dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They'd heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog's body, and they cooked and ate it for dinner. Nobody saw them do this. What do you think? Was that okay for them to do this? Show of hands in the audience.

Raise your hand if you think that was morally okay for them to do it. They had a right to do it. It was not morally wrong. Raise your hand.

Brooks: Don't see too many.

Haidt: Raise your hand if you think that was morally wrong. Okay, so it's more here. If this was—

Brooks: What about a cat? (*Laughter.*)

Haidt: There are a whole bunch of those. Then there was—I ramped up the disgust—a man who buys a chicken carcass every week and then masturbates into it, and then he cooks it and eats it. Again, it's because I really wanted to—this was not asked to the kids; this was only the adults. What I found is that all over the world, these gut-feeling stories made people instantly say, “No, that's wrong.”

It was a big study, high-low social-class adults and children in Brazil and the U.S.—the more working-class people, if you said, “Well, why was it wrong for him to have sex with a chicken?,” they wouldn't answer. They'd look at me like, *What do you mean “Why is it wrong”? You don't know?*

Whereas the college students at Penn, like most of the people in this audience, sort of highly educated Western people, they would rarely say, “That's wrong.” They would say, “Well, he shouldn't do this, but he had a right to ...” It was only in that group that they would separate their disgust reaction from their moral judgment.

The normal default way that humans judge if it feels wrong is, as Leon Kass said, the wisdom of repugnance. We secular moderns have kind of separated, and that allows us to go all the way to the rationalist fantasy that's haunting us.

Brooks: Disgust is a negative moral emotion. But there's such a thing as moral joy. I'm going to tell a story that I learned from you, though we've never actually talked about this. Somewhere in one of your writings, you had a group of people. They were coming home. I think they had gone to church or done something good for the community, and they're driving on a snowy day, and they drive by an old lady who's shoveling her yard. I hope this is beginning to ring bells.

One of the guys in the car says, “Oh, just drop me off here. You don't need to take me all the way home.” He turns around, and as the car goes away, they see him going up to the old lady shoveling snow. He starts shoveling her driveway.

One of the women in the car—I've always loved this quote—she said, “I felt like jumping out of the car and hugging this guy. I felt like singing and running or skipping and laughing, just being active. I felt like saying nice things about people, writing a beautiful poem or a love song, playing in the snow like a child, telling everybody about his deed. My spirit was lifted even higher than it already was. I was joyous, happy, smiling, energized. I went home and gushed to my suite mates, who clutched their hearts.”

It's just such a beautiful description of a moral sentiment on the upside.

Haidt: The story that you told, I remember it now. After studying disgust as a moral emotion at Penn in grad school with Paul Rozin, we had a theory that moral disgust is what you see when you see people moving down on a moral dimension, more toward evil, demon, monstrous.

One day I just thought, *What do we feel when we see someone moving up?* I had a sense—it's in the chest somewhere. There's no word for it in the English language. You can say *touched*, *moved*, or *inspired*, but they're very general. When I moved to the University of Virginia and I read Thomas Jefferson's letters, he has this incredible passage where he talks about reading great literature that is morally ennobling. He says: “Does it not dilate the breast and elevate the sentiments as much as any real episode in history could furnish?”

Everyone's pointing to the chest. Something's happening in the chest. So I started collecting stories from UVA undergrads. That was one of the stories. That one is so interesting, because here's a young woman seeing a young man do something virtuous. While she didn't say that she would now like to date him, I'm sure she would. You know?

There's a line from a movie, *The Tao of Steve*, that I watched while I was courting my wife, and the advice from this loser guy who's incredibly successful with women is: "Do something excellent in her presence and then retreat." So there you go. That's my dating advice for the audience.

Brooks: One of the other things that has come more prominently into psychology in the last 30 years—when I first started interviewing neuroscientists, they really focused on the brain. Now they focus on the whole body, and the neurons here, and the wisdom here, the vagal nerve, all that kind of stuff.

They're no longer so interested in where exactly something's happening in the brain. It's one unified system. Which makes sense evolutionarily. Why would you have a divided system? We want to have one system that would help us move through life.

So what is the embodiment of the mind?

Haidt: All signs point to the vagus nerve and oxytocin. I had a UVA undergrad, Jen Silver, and I said, "How can we measure oxytocin without drawing blood? We're not gonna draw blood in my lab." And she went into the literature and she said, "Lactation."

So we brought lactating women into the lab, had them watch an uplifting Oprah Winfrey clip or a comedy clip, and sure enough, when Jen would weigh the nursing pads afterward, they had expressed more milk into the pad after watching an elevating sentiment.

This is on the way to an answer to your question. The old rationalist idea was: All you need is information. Tell me the facts. Who was harmed, who had a right, and the brain—the computer—will figure out what's the right thing. Now the picture is much more up here. (*Gestures to head.*) It's not computation that way; it's a neural network, and that neural network is constantly in discussion with the rest of the neural network.

There's a vast neural network in your intestines. We have a second brain, and that's connected in part by the vagus nerve. There's all this stuff going on, and there are things that make the heart change, and when the heart changes, that sends other signals back to the brain that the heart has changed. So we have to see that.

We can still call it cognition. I'm fine with that. It's information processing in a way, but it's not just like electrons of information. It's the state of the body as a complex dynamical system that's always responding to challenges and opportunities. It's a much more interesting way to see a person.

Brooks: We're getting to the conclusion of what I wanted to get to. All the different things we've been talking about here are basically—you can correct me—saying: Intelligence is important. It's totally important. But if you think it's the only thing or you overvalue it—as we do in our college-admissions processes, by the way—then you're going to design systems that mutilate and distort and poison all the other forms of knowing out there, whether it's the unconscious, whether it's the body.

This seems to me like it has massive social implications on every system you can think about.

Haidt: Absolutely. There are many kinds of intelligence. Even though the multiple eight different kinds is not necessarily well regarded among psychologists, we all understand that there's this kind of intelligence that does very well on the SAT, and then there's a kind of—"book-smart people" stupid. There's a kind of intelligence that's more social savvy. Some people are more in touch with their bodies. Their intuitive system is better tuned up than someone who's entirely up here. (*Gestures to head.*)

You had an article—was it about the Ivy League? Once we started indexing on this, it led to all these other really terrible social results, because we kept escalating this one kind of intelligence. That has given us an elite that is much more loathsome than elites used to be.

I just use that in the sense that we now have a massive populist rebellion, which is basically anti-elites.

The view of elites now—there's not an idea of service or an idea of honor. We used to have something of an honor culture in the WASP aristocracy, perhaps in other places. Now *honors* means: I won, I got the highest grade, and I got honors.

So we both think of all this as a complex dynamical system. We're interested in individual psychology. We're interested in decisions about policy that shape and change. Before you know it, you have this shallow cognitive aristocracy that is driving us off a cliff.

Brooks: They got selected into that aristocracy by an admissions process, which was designed largely by a guy named James Bryant Conant at Harvard in the 1940s, the second most important high-water mark of rationalism.

About a mile north of here, there was a woman named Jane Jacobs trying to save the West Village, and there was a guy named Robert Moses who was a rationalist, who said, "No, a neighborhood is not an organism. A city is a machine for moving traffic." He wanted to put a highway through her village, and she said, "No, a neighborhood is an organism. It doesn't follow neat logical rules." She fortunately won, and Robert Moses happened to lose that one.

I'm just trying to emphasize that our world is designed by the worldview we bring to it.

The 1940s was a high-water mark of rationalism. We're entering another because of the influence of the technologists. What's perverse about it is that it comes at exactly the moment what we understand about the mind is going the exact opposite way.

This is not just Jonathan talking about this—the whole field, basically—and so it's perverse.

Haidt: If you bring in the PISA [Program for International Student Assessment] results that came out a week or two ago. Everybody was expecting—we all knew that cognitive ability, reading ability, science and math, everything—dropped during COVID. People were expecting it to bounce back.

Data from 2025 just came out a week or two ago, and it was stunning. It was way beyond what I expected. I'm really tuned in to what the technology's doing to kids' development, but I was expecting it to bounce back somewhat, because we've seen that on mental health. We have seen mental health bounce back somewhat.

But the reading scores went down and down and down. The decline didn't even slow. When you look at the graph, you can't see any effect of COVID. The decline actually started after 2012. It goes down, and it goes down faster and faster and faster.

COVID is along the way, but it's plummeting, our ability to read, and it's because people, young people especially—they're called hasty readers. They'll just read a little bit, and then they stop. They can't read several paragraphs in a row, many of them.

This is really Code Red for education. And this is a good reason why we need to be considering what New York City is doing. How about we just rip it all out for the younger kids? Maybe there could be a benefit, but they've been telling us for 20 years that there could be a benefit from all the tech and the tutoring. Hasn't shown up yet. How about we rip it all out? Just stop. Get it away from our kids until we know what this stuff is doing.

Because, those reading scores—if you don't know this, just look up PISA 2025. It's the international test. It's happening around the world. Humanity is getting dumber, literally dumber. If we lose books, if future generations don't read books, if everything comes from an AI summary or a TikTok video, then the neural networks tuned up will be as unwise as is humanly possible.

Brooks: Okay, we have to end on an upbeat note.

Or else everybody's gonna go home and suck on the gas pipe.

Haidt: Damn those electric cars. (*Laughs.*)

Brooks: You got your Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, which is the home of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, and others. They said, “Let’s stop focusing only on psychoses. Let’s talk about something positive.” What is your favorite finding from positive psychology?

Haidt: There are so many, but just off the top of my head, I’d say the insight early on that we need a manual of the strengths. The DSM has hundreds and hundreds of things that are wrong with you. An early project for us was a sort of a manual of the sanities, the strengths and virtues. I wrote the chapter on awe and responsiveness to beauty, which is about the elevation stuff.

Brooks: It’s about me.

Haidt: I am in awe of your intellectual abilities in that sense.

Brooks: I was going for the beauty.

Haidt: What grew out of that was a way to get to know your particular strengths.

The idea is that to live a good life, a full life, a life that fully engages you, you don’t have to be well balanced. You don’t have to work on your weaknesses, if you find a couple of strengths.

My strengths were especially love of learning and curiosity. I was a professor, and I realized, *God, this is the absolute perfect job for me.* Am I a workaholic? Well, I sure work a lot, and I think about work all the time. But actually I love it.

I’ve lived a very unbalanced life. There are certainly some downsides, and it has interfered with some social relationships. I’m not saying go out and do this. We each make decisions, and there are trade-offs. But at least this gave me a language for understanding that a great life is one in which you get to use your top strengths every day.

If you don’t get to use your strengths on a regular basis, you’re probably not gonna be very happy with your work and how your life is going.

Brooks: Please help me thank Jonathan Haidt.

This conversation hit me pretty hard, because I think it revealed that we have built our systems in society on a false view of human nature. You could call that view rationalism.

Our school systems are built on a concept of rationalism that students are treated like brains on a stick on whom information is downloaded. Our admissions criteria for our colleges is based on the idea that the most important thing about a person is their SAT score and their IQ. Our technology, AI, is built on the idea that intelligence really is the most important thing about people, and everything is about rationalism, control, optimization, efficiency.

One of the things we learned, and I think Jonathan made this very clear, is that rationalism is a false view of human nature. It overemphasizes intelligence and what goes on in the front of the brain, and it underestimates everything else: imagination, memory, emotion, desire.

We are whole creatures, and our systems are built on a false view that amputates most of our faculties, and that’s just a strong thing to walk away from, and it leaves me thinking.

Thanks so much for joining us for this week’s conversation with Jonathan Haidt. *The Permanent Questions* is produced and edited by *The Atlantic* in partnership with Yale University.

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