

Shrink Rap Radio #142, March 14, 2008. The Happiness Hypothesis

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Jonathan Haidt
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *“When you are surrounded by facts, and quotes and things like that, your eye can run over an idea, you can think about it consciously; but it won’t really become wisdom until you have, I think, a much more intuitive and emotional experience to it. Until you see connections and feel it’s importance.*

Just as we get inflation when you pump too much money into the money supply, you get a kind of an inflation which leads to ultimate cheapening of ideas when you pump too many ideas into every minute of your life. We are just surrounded by good ideas now.

You think about ancient times, when people had to trek up to a mountain to get wisdom from a guru; all you have to do is look down at the bottom of your friends’ emails these days, you’ll find plenty of wisdom right there. But there’s so much of it, that we don’t have emotional experiences to it.”

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Jonathan Haidt, Ph.D.

Dr. Jonathan Haidt is a social and cultural psychologist. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 and then did post-doctoral research at the University of Chicago and in Orissa, India. He has been on the faculty of the University of Virginia since 1995. His research focuses on morality – its emotional foundations, cultural variations, and developmental course. Dr. Haidt is the 2001 winner of the Templeton Prize in Positive Psychology, and a 2004 winner of the Virginia “Outstanding Faculty Award,” conferred by Governor Mark Warner. He is the author of the 2006 book, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, and his website is <http://www.happinesshypothesis.com/>. He was the Laurance S. Rockefeller Distinguished Visiting Professor at Princeton University in 2006-2007.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Jonathan Haidt, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Haidt: Thank you Dave.

Dr. Dave: I’m really glad to have you here.

Because of my long involvement with humanistic psychology I've been very intrigued by developments in the positive psychology movement. I've been kind of a viewer from the sidelines, and I've interviewed several other people who are prominent in the movement.

So how did you come to be involved with positive psychology?

Haidt: I got involved at the very beginning, just by a confluence of interests. My research has always been about morality, that's really what I do; and I look at the moral emotions. And I was studying especially the emotion of disgust. I'm kind of known as "the big fish in the small, stinking pond of disgust research".

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness; you're the "disgusting psychologist" (laughing).

Haidt: I am; I'm a student of Paul Rozin and the University of Pennsylvania.

And my aspect of it – I was so interested in why disgust was used so much as a moral emotion. Why the Bible, and the Koran, and most religions seem to moralise the body so much, and care so much about menstruation, and food, and how you handle corpses, and all those sorts of things. And they are all pointed to disgust as a moral emotion.

So that's what I did for a number of years, but then soon after I moved to the University of Virginia in 1995 I began thinking about the opposite of disgust. If disgust seemed to be functioning as a kind of a guardian of the lower boundary between humans and animals – alerting us to the presence of the monstrous – is there a corresponding emotion at the upper end? Is there some emotion alerting us to the presence of divinity, or angels, or super human virtue? And just from reflecting on it, it seemed to me – well yes, there certainly is. When I hear stories about moral beauty I feel something. So I started studying it systematically, and interviewing people, and doing experiments.

This was about 1997, 1998; and just then Martin Seligman was putting out the call for young researchers who were interested in issues related to the positive side of human nature. I answered the call, and joined about seventeen other young researchers at one of the first conferences at Akumal, Mexico in, I think 1998 or 1999. And that was it – I've been involved since then.

Dr. Dave: So you had already received your Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania at that point?

Haidt: That's right. I got my Ph.D. in 1992; then I did a two year Post Doc. with Richard Shweder at the University of Chicago where I learnt a lot more about cultural psychology, which has been just invaluable in understanding morality and emotion. Then I got my first faculty job at UVA in 1995.

Dr. Dave: OK, so that's interesting that the whole positive psychology thing emerged with Dr. Seligman as the founder after you left Penn, which is where he is. And by the way: that is where I did my own undergraduate work, and I have to tell you that when I was at the University of Pennsylvania it was all about rat psychology.

Haidt: That's right, things really changed in the late 60s, or 70s rather. When did you graduate from there?

Dr. Dave: Well it's quite a while back, it's 1962.

Haidt: Oh I see, that was before Paul Rozin and most of the people I knew were there.

Dr. Dave: Yes, so things have changed; I was really quite turned off to psychology, by and large, by my initial experiences there. It's only by a miracle (laughing) that I found my way back into psychology. I also noticed in your acknowledgments you mentioned Jonathan Baron, who I knew in graduate school at the University of Michigan; he was a friend of mine.

Haidt: Oh, that's right he went there. Yes he was actually my adviser. I ended up doing moral research with Paul Rozin and Alan Fiske, but technically Jonathan Baron was my adviser, because he studies decision making and had an interest in moral decision making.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's great, what a small world. I haven't had any contact with him in years and years.

Well the main title of your book is *The Happiness Hypothesis*, which suggests that there is some sort of underlying hypothesis or idea to be tested. So what's the hypothesis here in your wonderful book?

Haidt: Well first, let me say that whatever a title suggests, the main thing it suggests is that a few people at the publisher talked together in a hallway and picked a title and forced it upon the author.

Dr. Dave: Ahh.

Haidt: In this case I couldn't come up with a better one, but I'll tell you my original title was "Twelve Great Truths – Insights into Mind and Heart from Ancient Cultures and Modern Psychology". Then as I began to run out of time in writing the book, it became "Ten Great Truths" etc. So the book isn't really about happiness primarily; it's really about the greatest ideas of all time, at least ideas about how the mind works.

So I reviewed the ideas that I was just finding all over the place about psychology from the ancients; and there is a chapter on each of the ten main ideas, and each chapter reviews what we now know, that we can say is this idea true or not? And they are all true in some way, although some have some interesting exceptions.

The publisher's basic book just decided to call it something with happiness; I resisted that, but I couldn't really come up with a better title. By the time I really finished the book I actually kind of accepted their title, because it turns out there is sort of a happiness hypothesis here. The most obvious hypothesis is that people are happy when they get what they want; but that one we all know is wrong, and it's easy to demonstrate that empirically, that people are happy for hours maybe but rarely for days from a success.

The second hypothesis which is much more sophisticated, and more widespread is that happiness comes from within. Stop striving, you can never attain everything you want, therefore work on yourself; only by working on yourself can you find happiness. This one you find certainly in the wisdom of the East, you find it in the Stoics, and there is a lot to be said for it.

But what really excited me, and what I didn't know before I started writing the book, was that there is a further happiness hypothesis. One which I think is a little different, and I think kind of exciting. It's one that people don't seem to have guessed; it's not quite as obvious. It's that happiness comes not from within, but from between. That is happiness comes from getting the right kind of engagement: between yourself and others; yourself and your work; and yourself and something larger than yourself. We have to stop thinking about the world as being composed of these separate little atoms, and then each atom has to somehow work on itself. And rather see

happiness or wellbeing flourishing as something that emerges when a system is properly configured, and all the parts are deeply engaged and enmeshed. That's the happiness hypothesis.

Dr. Dave: OK. The sub-title, if that's due to the publishers, well that captures I think the core of what you were trying to get at in your original title; and the sub-title is, *Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*.

Haidt: That's right; that's what the book is really about.

Dr. Dave: I really loved that aspect of it, because it's really a tour de force in terms of integrating ancient wisdom traditions with some of the most recent findings in the whole world of psychology; and especially social psychology, and positive psychology. In fact you set out on a reading expedition in the world's major traditions, which was quite an astounding range you covered. Tell us a little bit about that.

Haidt: Well I was a philosophy major in college, and I was a philosophy major because I had a kind of an existential depression when I was in high school. Not a serious clinical depression, but just a sort of a depression at thinking through whether or not there was a god; and deciding that pretty well seemed clear to me there wasn't, and then what are the implications of that – is there any meaning in life? So I thought, well I know, I'll major in philosophy and see if I can find the meaning in life.

So I majored in philosophy, and I read philosophical works, East and West, and didn't find much – especially in modern philosophy – but I liked Buddhism very much. Then I forgot about all of this stuff as I studied morality; but many years later when I began teaching Psych 101 at UVA, I just found myself thinking of ways to illustrate psychological points. So here I was lecturing on say emotions, and the importance of appraisals; or lecturing on the balance between various psychological systems and showing the importance of balance.

I found myself just wanting to use other quotations: quotations from literary sources, from ancient religious works, to illustrate these principles. And I just started doing that in my lectures. Then in the following years I started numbering them, and saying these are major themes of the course. Major theme number 1- The mind is divided into parts that sometimes conflict. And as I got up to about seven or eight of these, I started thinking: hey, I wonder how many of these there are? And I decided – well maybe I could write a book on this. I could just do a little more systematic survey, and write down every idea I found in all these ancient texts, and then organise

them into clusters, and then write chapters. And that's how the book came about.

Dr. Dave: Oh, I'm glad to understand something about the process, because I really found myself wondering "how did he put this together" because it is just chock so full of great stuff. You actually draw upon Buddhism as you mentioned, and you refer to a number of the most important Buddhist texts; you draw on Confucianism, and Taoism, the ancient Greeks, the Romans, as well as a lot of classical philosophy. So my hat's off to you in that regard.

Haidt: Well thank you. It does represent just about every good idea I've ever had since I left high school. At the end of the book I felt like I can never write another one.

Dr. Dave: (laughing) Yes.

I got a chuckle in your introduction, where you say "we suffer from too much wisdom these days". You write "wisdom is now so cheap and abundant that it floods over us from calendar pages, tea bags, bottle caps, and mass email messages forwarded by well meaning friends".

Haidt: That's right; I think a really important idea in the book, well we will probably get into this, is the division between the rider and the elephant: the division between conscious, explicit knowledge and more implicit, automatic, deeper and more emotional knowledge.

When you are surrounded by facts, and quotes and things like that, your eye can run over an idea, you can think about it consciously; but it won't really become wisdom until you have, I think, a much more intuitive and emotional experience to it. Until you see connections and feel it's importance.

Just as we get inflation when you pump too much money into the money supply, you get a kind of an inflation which leads to ultimate cheapening of ideas when you pump too many ideas into every minute of your life. We are just surrounded by good ideas now.

You think about ancient times, when people had to trek up to a mountain to get wisdom from a guru; all you have to do is look down at the bottom of your friends' emails these days, you'll find plenty of wisdom right there. But there's so much of it, that we don't have emotional experiences to it.

So that was the idea; that I wasn't going to just try to make a long list. I was going to try to really draw readers though to seeing just how profound and important these ideas were.

And it was a real switch for me, to switch out of academic mode and to try to write really to trigger more emotions; much more so than one does when submitting to the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, for example.

Dr. Dave: Yes, that's the beauty of this book, is that it is really written I think, for the lay person, although in no way offensive to an academic. And it's got this almost off-the-cuff feel, as if – and I'm sure you do – you have all of this information at your command, and you are kind of telling us the story. And you use this metaphor very effectively throughout, that you just alluded to, of the rider, the small little rider on a great big elephant. In fact if one looks closely at the cover, one realises that there is actually a picture of that on the cover.

I'd like to have you step us through the book, through those ten great truths that you referred to earlier. You devote a chapter to each one. You just gave us a little preview I think of that first one, *The Divided Self*. So what are you referring to there: the divided self?

Haidt: So many, many experts, authorities, and reflective people have noticed: that we often want to do something, but we don't do it. It's clearest in the case of addictions, but we see it throughout our lives; when we resolve to do something; and there's no external obstacle, yet we just don't do it.

Dr. Dave: Right. St. Paul I think it is, who I seem to remember from my Sunday School: "that which I would, I do not; and that I would not, I do". Something along those lines.

Haidt: Exactly. "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other to prevent you from doing what you want" – so yes, that's St. Paul. Freud had a particular explanation of it, Plato had an explanation of it, Buddha – everyone has an explanation of it. I think in many ways it's really a jumping off point for psychology. If this wasn't the case, psychology wouldn't be particularly interesting; it would be just like taking apart a radio, and figuring out how it works.

Our lives are so puzzling to us because we get ourselves into such trouble, and we can see it so clearly in our friends, much more easily than we can in ourselves. Basically we are just not rational creatures; we don't behave as if we are making integrated use of all the information available to us.

So I'd noticed this in my own life: when I was an assistant professor I was dating, and I was living alone, and running my own life on my own. I just noticed there were certain mistakes I would make over and over again; and some decisions I'd make, knowing in part of my mind that it was the wrong decision – but that I was powerless to make another decision.

I wanted a metaphor to really capture this, and I could easily have used a horse and rider; it's what Plato uses and what many people have used. But you know a horse is only maybe five or six times bigger than a person, and I wanted to convey the sense that really the unconscious mind, the automatic processes are hundreds of times bigger. If you think about all the things a mind does in any moment, only one or two of them are conscious, the other dozens or hundreds are unconscious. So I just amped it up to an elephant and a rider, and then lo and behold: Buddha had this great quote about how you have to tame your mind, as a trainer tames an elephant.

So I thought that just kind of worked for me, and worked visually; and it seems to be an evocative image. It's the one thing that readers, when they write to me, and when they meet me, they almost always bring up that metaphor. I think that I was just very lucky in picking that metaphor for myself and having it also resonate well for readers.

Dr. Dave: Freud also tried to make that same point didn't he? Saying that maybe only about five percent of what we're aware of is in our consciousness, and that the rest was unconscious.

Haidt: Exactly. So modern psychology really gets its start – certainly not its start academically, but its start in the public eye – with Freud; and I think it's quite relevant that we tend to take our metaphors from the technology of the day. So in Freud's day, people rode horses; everyone was very familiar with horses, Freud thought about horses. Where Freud went wrong, I believe, is in positing this vast, arcane and bizarre architecture for the unconscious mind.

Since the cognitive revolution, I think we have much better explanations for how the mind works; it does its stuff unconsciously. It's not unconscious because we've repressed it, it's unconscious because it has to be – because

we're basically animals – we have these animal brains that do everything automatically, and unconsciously.

Then we also developed this little ability called language; so we can think consciously, but the mind didn't suddenly convert over to this whole new structure when we developed language in very recent evolutionary time. Rather, language has to be seen as a little additional ability that helps the animal mind do its job better. So that's a more evolutionary explanation of the rider and elephant metaphor: the rider is very, very new evolutionarily – it's just not actually all that good. Whereas the elephant is all these ancient systems, that have been through thousands or millions of product cycles; our sensory abilities, our motivational systems work extremely well.

So, that I believe gives you the same picture as Freud in terms of there being divisions; but it gives you a very different flavor in terms of what to think about the unconscious parts, or the elephant.

Dr. Dave: And yet it does capture that part that the elephant is so much larger than the rider, and therefore at times can be very difficult to control (laughing).

Haidt: That's right; and I think actually another advantage of the metaphor is that elephants are really smart. You know if you have a partnership between a horse and a rider you can't quite say they're equals; but elephants are really smart animals. And the conclusion that I came to by the end of the book is that if you want to change yourself, you've got to beware of the trap of thinking that the rider can do it by himself. Effective change means training the elephant; you've got to change your habits.

Dr. Dave: Well that probably leads into the next chapter, which is called *Changing Your Mind*. Is that what you're discussing there?

Haidt: Yes, that's right. Originally I thought the book would be ten chapters. I didn't know what the connections would be between them, but it ended up that there were some pretty natural transitions. And once you see the mind as being divided into an elephant and a rider, there is a pretty natural transition to the second truth.

The second truth is probably the greatest truth of pop psychology; in fact with this single sentence you can explain probably seventy percent of the contents of the pop psychology bookshelf. Here it is in two forms: here it is from Marcus Aurelius, "The whole universe is change, and life itself is but what you deem it"; and here it is from Buddha, "What we are today

comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow. Our life is the creation of our mind". That is, we make our own reality.

Dr. Dave: And not just pop psychology, but it's in a lot of cognitive psychology or at least cognitive therapy.

Haidt: Exactly, that's right. That was the essential connection: we all know the line from Hamlet I think is one of the best, "there's nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so". That's the line I would put up when I talked about cognitive psychology in my class. You talk about Aaron Beck, or any of the other cognitive therapists who point out that we don't react to the world as it is, we react to the world as we make it; and we tend to make it more scary, and uncertain, and negative than it is. So that was one of the original connections to the science that I saw in my class.

So in the chapter I go through why it is, why it has to be this way; why it is that we are set to be much more wary of threats, to see threats more so than opportunities. And why it is that people differ on this: why some people are prone to happiness and others are prone to fear and anxiety. What are the means to change it? So the three that I cover in the book I think are the three best established: that is cognitive therapy, meditation, and Prozac or other SSRIs. All three of those work because they change your automatic, habitual patterns.

The two methods that I would add, and readers have emailed me and suggested these things and I think they are right: one is exercise, and I didn't talk about that because it wasn't as psychologically interesting; but it certainly seems to be the case that if you simply get a good amount of exercise it brightens your mood, and it shifts you over more towards the approach side, and it just gives you more energy.

Dr. Dave: And what was the other one?

Haidt: The other one is hypnosis, hypnotherapy; that also seems to have a pretty good track record, and boy is it explicitly about talking to the elephant. That's really what a post hypnotic suggestion is, you say "OK rider, you just go to sleep, you just relax. Now elephant, let me tell you a couple of things, and you remember them". So I think self-hypnosis appears to be quite effective; I'm doing some experiments with it right now in my Psych 101 class to see if I can use it to help students change themselves rapidly. Meditation is just wonderful; it has amazing effects and no bad side effects. The problem is, if you assign a hundred people to do it,

as I have in my class, the great majority are going to be done with it in two or three weeks; it's just hard.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Haidt: Whereas cognitive therapy and Prozac are just much easier to do, so I think you have a higher success rate with them. I highly recommend meditation; it's just that most people, unless they have a great teacher and a lot of discipline, they are going to end up dropping it.

Dr. Dave: I think you're the only person I've ever heard recommend meditation and Prozac in the same breath (laughing).

Haidt: Hey, there are a lot of roads to the same end; many ways to skin a cat.

Dr. Dave: And that's one of the things I really love about this book, and about your approach. Well let's move along.

In the next chapter you talk about reciprocity, which in a way seems like an unusual word to use for what you're talking about.

Haidt: Well I think it's the correct word if you think evolutionarily and functionally, as I often do; I find it's a very useful unifying framework. Actually I'll defend my use of it, because it's the word that Confucius used when – here's the opening quote – Zigong, one of his disciples asked, “is there any single word that could guide one's entire life” The Master, Confucius said, “Should it not be reciprocity? What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others”.

I'm a social psychologist and I like to think about what are the most important principles in any field; and I think if I had to nominate one for social behaviour it would be reciprocity. Much more so than self esteem or a lot of other things that get bandied about.

Dr. Dave: So that's basically the statement of the golden rule, just a slightly different way of stating it.

Haidt: Exactly; that's why the golden rule is golden; that's why you find it in every culture. It's not because these cultures got together, it's not because god gave it to them, it's because we all evolved to become co-operative creatures, because we mastered the art of reciprocity. That's the secret to why we cover the earth.

Dr. Dave: OK; now was there more that you wanted to say about that before moving on?

Haidt: Sure, I could just say, this is a fairly short chapter because the idea is so straight forward, and so well understood. But the fun thing in the chapter was I read this really great book by Robert Cialdini, one of the leading social psychologists.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Haidt: He has a book called, *Influence*. It's a great book a lot of people read in the social psych classes. And he goes through some really wonderful techniques for using reciprocity to your advantage. We live in a world full of marketers who fully understand reciprocity. They give you free samples, and it turns out that you are more likely to buy with a free sample. The waitress puts a mint on your check, and she's given you a little gift; you are going to give her more money.

There are just so many little things where people use reciprocity to try to trick you into doing things. So in the chapter I cover some of Cialdini's advice for how to use reciprocity: how to fight fire with fire, and how to use reciprocity to make your relationships go better, and to avoid being manipulated. So I think it ends up being a pretty useful chapter.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now the next chapter is called, *The Faults of Others*. Isn't it their fault?

(laughter)

Haidt: Well we are all imperfect, but I think that the greatest imperfection is in the software of our moral psychology. This is the first chapter that I really got to get into the things that I most care about, about morality; and writing this chapter really affected me. And it actually is leading on to what's going to be my next book, which is going to be basically on self-righteousness.

So here everybody knows the quote from Jesus in the gospels: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye".

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Haidt: Buddha says the same thing: “It’s easy to see the faults of others, but difficult to see one’s own faults. One shows the faults of others like chaff winnowed in the wind, but one conceals one’s own faults as a cunning gambler conceals his dice”.

So we evolved to play social games; we have a lot of software up in our heads to manipulate our reputations. Our success doesn’t depend so much on outrunning lions, and tigers, and bears; it depends primarily on getting others to co-operate with us, and trust us and work with us. So we are masters of that. But we also take shortcuts, and then we deny that we took shortcuts. We are extremely good at telling stories about ourselves to others, and these stories are so loosely connected to our actual behaviour, that we are all hypocrites. We can see this in others: it is very easy to see in others but it is very hard to see in ourselves.

This is one of the areas that all the ancients seem to have gotten; when you look around the world at the wisdom traditions, they all seem to have this one. I think it’s the most important truth in moral psychology; it’s one that I’m very excited about. Ultimately it’s one that’s very freeing, once you realise that you’re a hypocrite. What I find happens is that I am so much better at apologizing now.

When I get in a fight with my wife or with anyone else, rather than doing all the usual moral psychology stuff, which is you set out to look for ever more evidence to back you up; that is what we do automatically. I find myself doing it and I say, wait a sec, let me just look at it from the other person’s point of view: in what way might that person be right about something – and you can always find a way that the other person is right about something. They might not be right overall, but they are always right about something, and you are always wrong about something.

And once you see that, what happens is that you get out of your state of high moral dudgeon, you get out of your state of self righteousness, and you are freed up to make an apology. Maybe just a limited apology, but you are freed up to say: hey, you know what honey, I understand why you got mad at me for this. You thought X; and I can understand that if you thought X it totally makes sense that you got so mad at me. And once you do that, by the very power of reciprocity, covered in Chapter 3, the other person is likely to say: oh, thanks, but I understand why you said Y – or whatever. So I think this is ultimately the key to liberation from our state of constant righteousness and anger.

Dr. Dave: And I suppose that you're able to draw support for this from psychology, and not "just" from Buddha and Jesus.

(laughter)

Haidt: Oh yes, there's wonderful work on biases, by Emily Pronin at Princeton, and Lee Ross at Stanford. There's just wonderful experimental work on just how biased we are: for example if you ask people how good are you at driving, or how big is your vocabulary, or how honest are you? People always rate themselves as being in the 80th or 90th percentile. And no matter what you do, it turns out if you say: look this is what everybody says, now are you really at the 90th percentile of leadership? No matter what you do, you can't de-bias people; nobody has yet found a way to really de-bias people, we really cling to these.

Dr. Dave: That is so fascinating.

Haidt: That's the nature of the creature; that's who we are, we are designed for self presentation and showing off. I should say there are obviously big cultural variations here. In Japan they actually have almost a cultural mechanism of self denigration. So these things do tend to show up in Europe slightly less than in the US, they do show up in Europe. I can't quite say that all of this – well of course I can say it's universal: Buddha said it about India, and you certainly find philosophers in China as well. So I do think it's a universal aspect of human psychology.

Dr. Dave: Your next chapter is called, *The Pursuit of Happiness*. What are you getting at there?

Haidt: So there's an enormous amount of research on happiness; this is really the first time the book turns to the subject of happiness. Here this chapter I began just by reviewing the enormous amount of work pouring in on positive psychology. It's a great story, the work is really coming together; not my work, I don't do research on this, but I just was standing on the shoulders of giants here, like Ed Diener.

Let's see, here's a quote from Epictetus: and this is that second happiness hypothesis I mentioned the one that happiness comes from within. So Epictetus says: "Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well". The basic idea here is that there is a very weak connection between what happens to us in the world, and how happy we are; very, very weak.

Events have very little impact on our happiness. Rather our happiness level seems to be mostly set by our genes. Some people are born to be optimistic, some born to be pessimistic; and we get little flashes of pleasure when we make progress toward goals, but the point of these is to drive us on to do things that are good for us. It's not to make us lastingly happy. If our ancestors were lastingly happy they wouldn't have striven very hard, and they wouldn't have gone on to become our ancestors.

In a sense we were not destined as a species to ever find contentment; we were destined to strive. So I cover some of the psychology behind that striving. Why we adapt so quickly to successes and failures; why there are differences between people; why some environmental factors make a difference in our happiness. They are primarily things that connect us to others socially, so relationships: being married; being religious. These things do matter quite a bit for our happiness, not because they satisfy our material needs but because they connect us to others socially: this is the huge benefit of religion and marriage.

So this is why I began to develop the idea that happiness comes from between. I didn't realise that until after I had finished this chapter, and then that conclusion, that third happiness hypothesis became the concluding chapter of the book. But that's what this fifth chapter on The Pursuit of Happiness is all about.

Dr. Dave: It seems like you end up taking issue a little bit with Buddhism, and the quote that you just read from Epictetus, where they seem to urge acceptance of what is.

Haidt: That's right. This is the one area where I have taken some flak from readers; a number of readers have criticised me here. Because the conclusion that I've come to – when I started the book I thought that Buddha was the best psychologist who ever lived, and I've always been very drawn to Buddhism.

Dr. Dave: Me too.

Haidt: Yes, as a lot of people in psychology are, and as a lot of Jews are. For some reason Judaism seems to not satisfy a certain aspect that Buddhism does; I don't know why that is. At any rate, so I think that Buddha is of course extraordinarily wise about the ways of the mind, and how to tame it and improve it. But the general view you get from reading Buddhist texts – it's even clear in the ancient texts – is that it's really, really important to calm the passions, and to separate yourself from the ups and

downs of life. That I think is absolutely at the core, at the heart of Buddhism. And many of us in the West read this, and we think: very wise, very wise; we westerners, we're too passionate we get angry about things, we get too happy about things then we get disappointed. Better to calm the passions.

Well the view that I came to after really thinking about Buddhism in the context of more recent research on flow, and meaning, and happiness is that there are many roots to a rich and fulfilled life; and I think the western idea of passionate engagement actually has a lot to recommend it. In particular when you're young; I don't think that a life of detachment, a life where you try to avoid the ups and downs as Buddhism and Hinduism urge you, is necessarily a good life for a young person. That might be a good state to come to when you are much more advanced in years. But I think we need to love and be burnt, we need to strive and fail, and we need to hurt. And as a result of this we grow from all those things.

So I do end up questioning the Buddhist wisdom, that happiness comes from within, and it comes largely from separating your mental state from the inevitable ups and downs of life. I think actually the roller coaster ends up being pretty good for us, as long as you can temper it; and that's where I think it's important to keep Buddhist insights in part of your mind at all times. Some readers have said I've misunderstood Buddhism, and certainly what I'm saying is not true of modern Buddhism, which is very Americanised and nice.

Dr. Dave: (laughing)

Haidt: If you read the ancient texts, it's pretty cold. They really say now, don't love your wife: a man who loves a woman is shackled like a beast to a chain, or something like that.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness.

Haidt: The ancient texts have a very different feel from say Tich Nhat Hahn or the Dalai Lama.

Dr. Dave: Exactly, I was thinking of Tich Nhat Hahn when you used the term passionate engagement. So you're right; there is a somewhat more modern spin.

Haidt: That's right; and that makes a lot of sense. I think Buddhism modernised would then be right, because as I said, the ancient texts I think are really not quite right, especially not for living in a western way.

Dr. Dave: Now in another chapter you talk about *The Uses of Adversity*; and I know we all have this tea bag wisdom that has come to us: that what doesn't break you only makes you stronger.

Haidt: That's right; and anybody who knows anything about post-traumatic stress disorder would say: no, sometimes what doesn't kill you just leaves you damaged for life. It changes your amygdala and your hippocampus, and you will forever be jumpier and more irritable and more depressed. That is what happened to an awful lot of people who were traumatised in war, or by rape, or by other atrocities.

So how do we separate this? How do we know when adversity makes us stronger and how do we know when it's going to damage us. I knew very little about clinical psychology before I wrote the book, but there was some wonderful work going on in clinical psychology, especially around an area called post-traumatic growth, which I thought was just fascinating. There is a lot of research on how people, who say survive cancer, end up being much stronger.

I guess a couple of basic principles here: one is, the rich get richer and the happy get happier. People who are born optimistic are much more likely to grow from adversity than people born pessimistic; that's the first thing.

Second thing is that there are certain kinds of traumas and adversities that connect us more closely to others. And suffering from cancer is a great one: boy do people rally around. There has been a lot of cancer in my family, and I have seen it among some friends; people really rally around. You lose some relationships, I hear; but cancer, generally speaking – if you survive it – it's a very good candidate for making you stronger. Whereas getting raped or something like that is a terrible candidate, it doesn't tend to strengthen relationships. It involves elements of shame, and damages your ability to trust.

So I don't think we can say 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' as a blanket statement. I think we do need some really important qualifications on what kinds of adversity, and what kinds of people.

Dr. Dave: OK. I'm going to want to follow up on that post-traumatic growth idea; I'm going to look in your references and find somebody to interview, because that's kind of a new concept that I haven't explored.

Haidt: Oh good; there's an edited volume on it. I can't remember the authors offhand, but you'll see in the references the edited volume; and I loved reading those papers.

Dr. Dave: Yes that's great. Then you've got one of your closing chapters is on *The Felicity of Virtue*.

Haidt: Yes, here we have the idea – you know it's another platitude like: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger – is 'virtue is its own reward'. It would be lovely to believe that; it would be lovely to believe that if people just do good, they will end up better off. There are surely times when that is true, but there are many times when it's not; there are times when giving away your money will just make you poorer, not richer.

So I just set out to look at what is known about when doing good ends up being good for you. What I found is that the key here is our notions of virtue and morality, which have so narrowed in modern times. For the ancients, virtues were excellences of living; they were social excellences, social skills that made you more appealing as a member of society. If you think about it that way: then living in a way that makes you more appealing, living in a way that is responsible, and frugal, and industrious, and all the sorts of virtues that Ben Franklin talked about – yes, if you've got those you're going to be just a better person. You'll be more successful in life, because you will have the basic skills of living with yourself and others.

What's happened is that since the nineteenth century, and especially in the twentieth, our notion of morality has narrowed to the point where we think that morality is helping others and not hurting them. And so much of moral psychology is on altruism; it's on giving money or help to individuals. So we have so narrowed our concept of virtue and morality, that now to say 'giving help or money to others will be good for you'; well that is a very different statement to the one that Franklin was making when he wrote about this. Sometimes it's true and sometimes it's not.

So I reviewed the literature on when charity, and altruism, and social volunteer work helps people; and it turns out there's not really any evidence that it does so for kids, for teenagers. But there's a lot that it does so for the elderly. And as with everything else, it comes back to relationships: kids are so immersed in relationships – you can make them do a bunch of

volunteer work – they don't need any more relationships. The elderly are losing their relationships; they are at great risk from isolation. When they do volunteer work they meet people, they do it with other people, and so volunteer work seems to be very, very good for the elderly. The story gets complicated in a number of ways but as with everything, the main place to look is relationships.

Dr. Dave: OK. It's interesting to hear about these complications, because the impression that I've gotten from positive psychology so far has been kind of validating notions about generosity, forgiveness, altruism, and so on.

Haidt: Those are the findings that are the most newsworthy, and they are the ones that we are hungriest for.

Dr. Dave: Yes (laughing).

Haidt: And they are generally true; I'm not disagreeing with them; I'm just saying that the platitudes that we would like to believe are usually only partially true, and there are often exceptions.

Dr. Dave: That makes sense. And then you say *Divinity with or without God*. What are you getting at there?

Haidt: So one of the largest categories, or the fastest growing categories in American religion is: 'spiritual but not religious'. Most people don't describe themselves as non-spiritual. My view, as a person raised Jewish but who became an atheist very early on, is that it is very, very unlikely that there is an actual god. Who knows, nobody can be certain; but it seems to me unlikely that the similarities in religions and religious experiences, and the differences are due to the fact that there's a god up there who made it all true.

On the other hand, the similarities of religious experience: in particular the feelings of awe, and transformation, and spiritual transformation which I studied as I was studying these positive moral emotions that I spoke about before – I got particularly interested in the feelings of awe and self transcendence. These are so similar around the world, and there are so many ways to get them: from drugs; from spinning around, the whirling dervishes, people use spinning, bowing in prayer; psychedelic drugs, there are so many ways to get into this state.

So I take the experiences of self transcendence to be just simply part of our nature; we have these feelings. We have these feelings of approaching god, of being higher versus lower, of being nobler or more base. After feelings of love, these are some of the most cherished, and subtle and important feelings we have. So this chapter explores this aspect of human experience; one which scientists and philosophers are often somewhat blind to in their desire to just state things clearly and to drive them logically. So this is where a lot of my research had been when I was studying these feelings of moral elevation, which means to be lifted up.

The conclusion that I come to here, is that religious people and religious texts really are advising us on an aspect of humanity that we in the sciences are kind of tin-eared to; we just do a bad job with.

As a result of doing this research over many years, and then writing this chapter, I end up becoming much, much more tolerant of and interested in religions, and religious traditions. I don't think I will ever be a believer, but the really important point that I think people need to keep in mind with regard to these wars over religion nowadays, is that religion isn't really about belief. Richard Dawkins and Dan Dennett and the people who write these atheism books they take it as though religion means believing in Jesus Christ, and that god created the world six thousand years ago. And those beliefs exist, but religion is really about practices that bind people together into co-operative communities. God is really just a maypole that allows us to circle around, and in the circling we join together; that's what religion really is.

So writing this book has really changed me, and I now write and sometimes appear on the side of people who are arguing in defence of religion. It certainly has aided and abetted many atrocities, but I think we have to at least understand this aspect of human nature. We have these feelings; these feelings sometimes do drive us on to do higher, nobler, better things; and the evidence for the social benefits of religion I think is pretty compelling.

Dr. Dave: OK. At the end of your book you stress the need for balance, and perhaps we should close off our interview with any advice that you might have for listeners on just how they would find that balance.

Haidt: OK, let's see I guess I should have some very succinct way to say this.

I think it's just to recognise that we are really parts of larger wholes. We evolved to be deeply enmeshed in families and groups and when we set off

to live on our own, we actually don't do so well. We tend to be self righteous; we tend to look only for evidence that supports us; we are very good at seeing part of the picture, the part we want to see then supporting that with every bit of evidence we can find.

I think mental health and a flourishing life come from living in a different way, and you can't just be the rider and say: OK I'm going to find balance! You have to change your life that it ends up coming to you. Part of that I think would be simply exposing yourself to people; especially people, not just books but people on the other side.

So if you're an atheist, get to know some religious people; go to some churches, people are extremely nice in church. I do an assignment in my moral psychology class where everyone has to do moral fieldwork, they have to actually go out and meet people and talk to them; people who they strongly disagree with. They almost always come back saying "wow, they were really nice! I still don't agree with them, but now at least I can understand why they think what they think".

Once again the theme of the book is it all comes back to relationships. If you can at least cultivate relationships with people who are different from you, especially on matters of religion and politics, I think you can at least come to respect people who are different from you; and that is very freeing. That has been so liberating for me. I'm still a political liberal, but I find so many conservative ideas really interesting. It's really helping my research, because I have this vast field, this vast area of ideas that I can explore in. Most of my colleagues in social psychology were all liberal, everybody is liberal but for them there is kind of a fence there that says 'do not enter', because these are ugly ideas, or these are not liberal ideas.

So I think that we can escape from a lot of traps, we can improve our lives, we can free ourselves from a lot of moralism if we seek out people – and ideas – who are different from where we are now.

Dr. Dave: Well you are a fascinating guy, and I've enjoyed this interview and really enjoyed your book and highly recommend it to all my listeners.

So, Dr. Jonathan Haidt thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Haidt: Well Dr. Dave it's been my pleasure; I've really enjoyed talking with you.