TEACH[R]

Happiness in schools: Can Haidt help us hope?

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Keywords: Haidt, wellness, holiness, self-consciousness

Abstract

Jonathon Haidt has written a number of books that reflect his social psychological research (Haidt 2006, 2013, 2024; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). His latest one has had wide coverage, in part because of his recommendations about school and home life. In the midst of these writings, and in subsequent online posts (on his After Babel Substack column), he admits that he respects religion and that he sometimes needs the language of religion to make sense of what he observes. He also admits that the Christian argument on the human search for ultimate meaning "… is so complicated that I cannot understand it" (2006, p. 73).

This review of Haidt's work will suggest that an anthropological framework that accepts an 'embodied soul' description of personhood would enable better applications of his observations, which could offer deeper hope for our students – that is, that hope is better built on understanding and engaging with the holy, more than in reductionist happiness strategies.

> *Haidt gives credit to the apparent good impact of religion, regardless of its genesis*

The Search – Happiness, Politics, Social Media and the Holy Grail

Jonathon Haidt has been one of the researchers at the forefront of discussions about understanding happiness (Haidt 2006), understanding why good people are divided by politics and religion (Haidt 2013), understanding the impact of patterns of thinking on youth (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018) and understanding the impact of social media on the young (Haidt, 2024). This last book, in particular, has had a strong influence on schools. Indeed, it can be said that his claims of learning difficulties arising from poor use of social media have been a main reason for government intervention, firstly in state-run schools banning smartphones at school, and secondly, in working to ban under-sixteen-year-olds from having access to social media platforms.

For those teachers whose Christian faith informs their teaching practice, it is interesting to note that a careful reading of Haidt's work suggests that he knows that there are limits to traditional social psychology's description of what is happening for people in these aspects of life. He points to other dynamics at play in understanding who we are. He explains this very openly in *The Anxious Generation* (TAG): "I am an atheist, but I find that I sometimes need words and concepts from religion to understand the experience of life as a human being. This is one of those times" (p. 201).

We can see this kind of thinking in his first major work, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006 - THH). The subtitle of THH describes that the book incorporates "*Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom*". The cover of the book describes that Haidt is not becoming an ancient text guru, but that his work looks to discern ten great ideas from across some ancient civilisations and to then compare and contrast those ideas with what he believes contemporary social science (social psychology in particular) is reporting on those same themes. Those themes ultimately lead him to engage with what religious communities may have contributed to in the building of contemporary Western society.

Similarly, in his second book, *The Righteous Mind* (Haidt, 2013 - TRM), Haidt explains that "… I'm going to make the case that morality is the extraordinary human capacity that made civilization possible" (p. xviii) and that "I'll show that religion is (probably) an evolutionary adaptation for binding groups together and helping them to create communities with a shared morality" (p. xxii). This exemplifies Haidt's use of the language of religion, but also his commitment to social evolutionary theory.

In these kinds of moments, Haidt gives credit to the apparent good impact of religion, regardless of its genesis. It is why, towards the end of TRM, Haidt reports on the impact of religion from others' research in this way:

> Putnam and Campbell put their findings bluntly: By many different measures religiously observant Americans

> are better neighbours and better citizens than secular Americans – they are more generous with their time and money, especially in helping the needy, and they are more active in community life. (p. 310)

Similarly, in TAG, Haidt observes, in a chapter called "Spiritual elevation and degradation" (Ch. 8) that:

> DeSteno found that there is abundant evidence that keeping up certain spiritual practices improves wellbeing. … reducing self-focus and selfishness, which prepares a person to merge with or be open to something beyond the self. (p. 202)

In contrast to the reported negative impact of social media on the young, Haidt reports the apparently constructive effect of spirituality as a buffer against the dysfunctional aspects of social media in overtly religious terms, with more than a little nod to St Augustine's *Confessions*:

> There is a hole, an emptiness in us all, that we strive to fill. If it doesn't get filled with something noble and elevated, modern society will quickly pump it full of garbage. (p. 216)

The Anthropology

Haidt's conceptualisation of this religious process is framed by his belief that the basic structure of society has been formed by social evolutionary processes. His basic anthropological metaphor, introduced in THH and used in subsequent work, is of the elephant and the rider. In this illustrative description, the rider is the reasoning process (rationality) that can act as a guide to the elephant (intuition). Haidt suggests that the "surprising" aspect of this rider-elephant relationship is that it is the latter often "holding the reins" (THH, p. 22) when we are responding to moral situations. Haidt notes this as the opposite of everyday expectations – that is, that we believe we act by reasoning most of the time. He posits not.

His anthropology is further described when he starts to explore the possible causality of this emotion-based moral decision making. He, like other psychologists, recognises the dominant paradigm of the influence of 'nature' (physical inheritance and capacities) and 'nurture' (social influences, past and present). His next 'surprise' in this book is reporting that genes seem to have more influence than people recognise.

In all this, Haidt is revealing his socially contextualised physicalism. There is no explicit recognition that Haidt acknowledges non-physical realities in understanding persons in relationship – it appears that, in his understanding of human nature, our task as humans in society is a matter of getting the mix right between accepting and managing our physical attributes within our social contexts. This becomes clear when he comments relatively early in the THH book on the three best options to help us change our "affective styles" (THH, p. 34). His summary of the research is that:

> … three of the best methods for doing so [are] meditation, cognitive therapy, and Prozac. All three are effective because they work on the elephant. (THH, p. 34)

Each of these interventions is credited with helping to "change your repertoire of available thoughts" (THH, p. 34). But it seems that Haidt asserts the role of genetics over (developmental) social influences and insists on using a social-evolutionary psychological approach to explain why. It is at this point that Haidt seems to lose some coherency in his framework. On one hand, he paints a deterministic picture of human moral development. On the other hand, he points to two of his three methods (meditation and cognitive therapy) that can only be feasible if self-conscious thinking is available to us. For how can one meditate on one's first-person introspective experience unless there is some aspect of our nature that is beyond the physicalism of our genetics within externally controlled social contexts? Similarly, what is it within human thinking that enables the self-reflective and evaluative processes necessary for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (which he highlights with Lukianoff in *Coddling of the American Mind* - CAM) to have any impact on how we think and thus act?

> *humans are embodied souls, made in the image of God, but fallen and needing grace.*

Although Haidt seems to admit some aspects of this dilemma while giving a brief review of distinguishing between, and choosing between, good and evil, he does so with some ambivalence. For example, Haidt says of Christian teaching about ultimate meaning: "The argument is so complicated that I cannot understand it" (THH, p. 73).

What does this mean for how we might approach Haidt's research and his suggestions for helping others?

Some Contrasting Biblical Principles

First, it may be fair to recognise that Haidt's confusion is perhaps understandable given his attempt to reduce Christian thought to some form of determinist structure. This indicates that he might have read some Christian Biblical texts, but he has not studied them theologically. Christian morality does not make sense if one does not accept that humans are embodied souls, made in the image of God, but fallen and needing grace. This, in turn, does change how one makes sense of personhood when exploring psychological descriptive data in front of us.

This is taught openly in Scripture. The role of the Holy Spirit in helping us as broken human beings, still called to be image bearers of the Creator, doing

good in His creation, is one of the main themes of the overall Biblical narrative.

For example, in Deuteronomy 4, the children of Israel are taught to live as they are made to live. They can do so because God has revealed to them His Word (or commandments). When they achieve this task as a community, then they will live more wisely, and this wisdom will be seen by others (Deuteronomy 4:5—6). The explanation of this wisdom is that they – the chosen tribe of God – have their God near them (v. 7), who has made what is expected explicit (v. 8). It is God's presence that matters in understanding how to live.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 2:10—16 we read the apostle Paul explaining to his Christian brethren that the 'deep things of God' can only be understood if we have the presence of God with us. Paul was writing post-Pentecost, and so his language is of the Holy Spirit being active in the congregation's discerning of God's ways as they seek to live the way they were made to live, as did the called people of God before Christ's being with us.

> *this call to take religion seriously is professionally counter-cultural*

Such theological considerations appear to be a 'step too far' for Haidt in his work at this stage. Some of the evidence for this is his continued 'soft determinism'.

For those of us in explicit faith-based schools, we can consider whether it is a 'step too far' for us, or whether inviting God's presence to guide us is an essential part of doing what Haidt suggests – inviting our students to be 'filled with something elevated'?

Soft Determinism is Still Determinism

And perhaps this is central to critiquing research as offered by people like Haidt. Do we believe we need God's help to do good, or do we accept the self-sufficiency of our clever techniques? Do we choose transcendency as core to our teaching and learning reality, or do we slide into some form of soft determinism that we have been offered in our professional training?

It can be seen that Haidt clarifies his preference for deterministic causality when he summarises his Happiness Formula as follows: "H = S + C + V" (THH, p. 91), where S represents the biological set point, C represents conditions of your life, and V represents voluntary activities. And the next statement by Haidt demonstrates what can be called weak scientism:

> The challenge for positive psychology is to use the scientific method to find out exactly what kinds of C and V can push H up to the top of your potential range. (THH, p. 91 – emphasis added)

Why is this suggestive of weak scientism? Moreland (2018) describes the concept of scientism as representing those who believe that the scientific method is "vastly superior to what we can know from any other discipline" (p. 6). The 'strong' version of scientism has as its central idea "that science and its methods provide the *only fully valid route* to gaining knowledge and for answering questions, to the exclusion of other methods and disciplines" (p. 29). Clearly, Haidt is not excluding all other methods of knowledge, as he uses 'ancient texts' to describe 'ancient wisdom,' and he turns to the language and efficacy of religion in describing what he observes in human behaviour.

But because "weak scientism acknowledges truths apart from science, granting them some minimal rational status even if they don't have scientific support" (Moreland, 2018, p. 30), and because Haidt appeals to the 'scientific method' to find out 'exactly' what drives his proposed happiness formula, 'weak scientism' seems to be appropriate to describe Haidt's philosophical approach to exploring human life.

The 'softness' of Haidt's scientism is further demonstrated in other aspects of his work. In THH, in his reflections on the shift from character ethics (training in constraints of the desires that hurt others) towards quandary (problem solving) ethics; and his exploration of the "Holy Grail" of moral formation, he comes to the "Holy Question" which asks, "What is the meaning of life"? (THH, p. 211).

With reference to the shift from character ethics, and similarly to Szasz (1974/2010), Haidt expressed concern "that life in a society that entirely ignored the ethic of divinity would be ugly and unsatisfying" (THH, p.211). He even believed that the scientific community "should accept religiosity as a normal and healthy aspect of human nature – an aspect that is as deep, important, and interesting as sexuality or language (which we study intensely)" (THH, p. 211).

With reference to the Australian context, and now much of the West, this call to take religion seriously is professionally counter-cultural, even in this limited way. Any review of Australian psychological and educational research will demonstrate a dearth of focus on the impact of religion. Such warnings have been given since at least the 1900s (e.g. Vitz, 1977; Cosgrove, 1979; White, 1987; John, 1987). The Nobel Prize winner Sir John Eccles expressed the depth of the problem with this anthropological assertion:

> The coming-to-be of each unique selfhood lies beyond scientific enquiry... we have to recognize that it is the result of supernatural creation of what in the religious sense is called a soul. (1987, p.101)

Haidt's pursuit of understanding the "Holy Question" does take him further along this road of reflecting on the relationship between some kind of physicalism and acceptance of the 'third dimension' (as per Eccles, 1987) – which he sometimes calls the 'sacred', and in later books the 'transcendent' or the 'elevated'.

In THH, Haidt attempts to deal with this lack of an anthropologically complete framework by splitting the generic question about the meaning of life into two sub-categories. Each has a different orientation – the purpose *of* life and the purpose *within* life. He acknowledges the metaphysical choices inherent in the 'Why are humans here?' question: that between believing in an ultimate first-cause Creator of some kind (the spiritual option) or believing that life is time + matter + chance (the materialist option).

Haidt does explore the role of religion in this consideration of human life, and then suggests, somewhat ironically, that the answers to the second kind of question can be found by being more 'objective,' because it is a question that is internally experienced by each individual. That is, people can be given tools to help answer the question "How ought I to live? What should I do to have a good, happy, fulfilling and *meaningful* life"? (p. 218). He even notes Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* as one way of answering this question of meaning. But then Haidt explains that he will "ignore the purpose *of* life and search for the factors that give rise to a sense of purpose *within* life" (p. 219).

Herein is a problem for Haidt. Searching for meaning within life without resolving the purpose of life leaves one open to incoherency, and even wrong directions. For example, what if one's metaphysic is so wrong that it is dangerous? O'Hear (2002) explained this possibility in his philosophical exploration of the limits of evolutionary theory as applied to our understanding of humanity. After describing why Darwinism cannot provide any coherent understanding of the source of absolute morality, he noted that because of this, "from a Darwinian perspective, truth, goodness, and beauty and our care for them are very hard to explain" (p. 214). More generally, O'Hear concludes with this critique:

> … one moral to be drawn from this study is that Darwinism, if applied to our forms of intellectual, moral and aesthetic life, is indeed a dangerous idea, as Dennett at least recognizes. For even though we and our capacities may have evolved in Darwinian ways, once evolved we and our capacities take off in quite un-Darwinian ways. … It is rather that the account that they give of ourselves and our capacities involves a radical and unsustainable redescription of what we are and what we do. (p. 214)

A similar conclusion is described by Nagel (2012), whose subtitle summarises the dilemma well: "*why the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false.*" One of Nagel's introductory comments explains his concern: "But it seems to me that, as it is usually presented, the current orthodoxy [naturalism] about the cosmic order is the product of governing assumptions that are unsupported, and that it flies in the face of common sense" (p. 5). Nagel then calls his fellow atheists to consider 'mind' as a basic element of the universe, while acknowledging that he does not yet have a philosophically coherent logic for understanding such an assertion.

Another author who highlights this difficulty – of ignoring the resolution of the question of the meaning of life for human beings – is MacIntyre (2007). In his third edition of *After Virtue*, he noted that, on reflecting on what he had learned since he first published the book twenty years earlier:

> But I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding. It is only because human beings have an end toward which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, tradition and the like are able to function as they do. (p. xi)

This leads MacIntyre to a very different conclusion from Haidt. MacIntyre's exploration takes him to the Biblical Christian bases for the expression of the virtues necessary for the good human life. Haidt, even though seemingly close to this in his exploration of the centrality of love, work, and the 'third way', gives no certainty for the meaning of human life, and thus no real confidence for meaning within life. Because Haidt cannot 'have an end' towards, we are directed to what is greater than our internal states; he offers happiness devoid of hope. Thus, near the end of this first book, he concludes that:

> I don't believe there is an inspiring answer to the question, "What is the purpose *of* life?" Yet by drawing on ancient wisdom and modern science, we can find compelling answers to the question of purpose *within* life . (p. 238)

> *what if one's metaphysic is so wrong that it is dangerous?*

Such thinking is why his closing reflection about selfishness does not appear convincing:

> Selfishness is a powerful force, particularly in the decisions of individuals, but whenever *groups* of people come together to make a sustained effort to change the world, you can bet that they are pursuing a vision of virtue, justice or sacredness. (p. 242)

Continuing Incompleteness

However, the more recent analyses of social phenomenon such as social justice theory and other new movements based in critical identity theories (e.g. Thomas, 2023; Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2021; Sowell, 2023) suggest that there is not much development of classical virtue in many current groups of people coming together, but instead, intentional social deconstructionism. These critiques are much closer to MacIntyre's remark that modern trends towards more totalitarian and centrally-controlled social life are not focussed on virtue at all – that is, "What this brings out

is that modern politics cannot be a matter of genuine moral consensus. And it is not. Modern politics is civil war carried on by other means…" (p. 253).

C. S. Lewis warned of this in his *Abolition of Man*, where he noted that to not have a basis for deciding right and wrong (what he called 'natural law', or 'Tao') was like sitting on a branch while pruning it from a tree. Similarly, J. I. Packer, who became well-known for his treatise on *knowing God* (which he repeatedly described as so very different to *knowing about God*), then wrote *Knowing Man*. This latter essay was the mirror image of *Knowing God*. In the first book, Packer clearly explained the reasonableness and life-giving focus of reconciliation with the Creator. In his second one, he warned of what would happen if society rejected God and replaced Him with human traditions based on secular humanism. This is the loss of metaphysic which MacIntyre described, with the ensuing results of a loss of moral direction, and that includes deciding whether something labelled 'progressive' is properly an improvement or not.

"sacredness enables belonging-ness beyond self-interest, which gives evolutionary advantage."

It is on this matter of humanity and politics, as an expression of what happens when "groups of people come together to make a sustained effort to change the world" (as above), that Haidt then turned his attention in *The Righteous Mind* (TRM). Again he reports on the importance of 'morality', which he notes is the social glue (later called the 'social capital') that holds civilizations together, even in the face of humans being "90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee" (p. xxii) in the ongoing tension between the rider (reason) and the elephant (intuition – the metaphor developed in THH).

The use of religion to describe what Haidt is seeing in human behaviour continues, and in these earlier pages, he described it as "(probably) an evolutionary adaptation for binding groups together and helping them to create communities with a shared morality." (p. xxii) It is why the metaphor of acting like 'bees' is introduced. But again, notice that this is animal instinctual behaviour.

Haidt uses Durkheim to help explain what he calls this 'Hive Switch', which he summarises as "'the ability (under special circumstances) to transcend self-interest and lose ourselves (temporarily and ecstatically) in something larger than ourselves." (p. 283) But even here, his language seems to fail him. What exactly is the 'switch', and what enables it to move from one position to another? His lack of investigating the nature of the human mind seems to make his ideas highly speculative in terms of understanding the cause of our human 'beehive' behaviour, and also our human natures per se.

For example, his speculation about the sacred / degradation moral values foundation is focussed on its utility in forming social cohesion that overcomes the urge for selfish self-survival. How the need for such a utility is derived is not clearly explained in Haidt's ideas in these works. As Nagel (2012) noted, it is hard for a philosophy based on materialist determinism to coherently explain how self-conscious behaviour commenced, let alone for it to develop into ethically based morality.

So, is Haidt suggesting that human society is simply an emergent higher-order animal instinct that became entrenched through natural selection?

It seems so, given that the two dominant lenses that Haidt uses in this later work are evolution (in the social evolutionary context) and Durkheimian sociology. The philosophical thought of authors such as O'Hear and Nagel cited above gives grounds for raising serious concerns about Haidt's dependence on social evolutionary thought as an explanatory tool for what he is observing in human conduct and thought, even if it is couched in the language of the sociology of religion. In a structural sense, other authors such as Moreland (2018), Lennox (2011), Swinburne (2013) and Smith (2019) also cast doubt on the veracity of social evolutionary theory as an explanatory tool in understanding the human mind and the thinking processes that are the basis of persons in relationships. Such matters are of prime importance for educators, even in answering the simple question, "From where do our thoughts come"? (Fyson, 2024). How we answer that question has direct implications for how we go about instruction to overcome ignorance and how we go about teaching for good commitment before God (Fyson, 2022).

The Centrality of our Personhood

Comparing Haidt's analysis of the 'sacred' to the work of sociologist Christian Smith provides an opportunity to see two very different understandings of who we are as people: either emergent animals with better instincts, or embodied souls. For Haidt, sacredness enables belongingness beyond self-interest, which gives evolutionary advantage. He believes belongingness is an inherent good because, as he notes, without it, there would be no civilising developments. Sacredness (the belief that some things in life are "noble, pure and elevated" (p. 174) is the means to that end.

Smith's (2019) interest is in the transcendent realm of human thinking, with reference to understanding people in relationships. In his introductory comments, Smith describes the current confusion in the West with reference to "what a person essentially is…" (p. 5). Similarly to Adams' (2021) comment about messages we give students within our classrooms, which they reflect on when they look in the mirror – "Do they see themselves as random specks of dust or as purposeful children of

a loving and almighty God?" (Adams, 2021, p. 66) – Smith outlines the kinds of messages we assume, and then transfer, when undertaking research about, (and teaching of), people:

> Are we simply self-conscious animals improbably appearing for a moment in a cosmos without purpose or significance? … Are we instead really materially acquisitive hedonists or carnally desiring sensualists who have nothing higher to which to aspire than the gratifications of possessions and physical sensations that we can use… Or perhaps are we children of a personal God, whose perfect love is determined to rescue us from our self-destruction in order to bring us into the perfect happiness of divine knowledge and worship? (p. 7)

Smith, who is also a scholarly researcher into patterns of human behaviour, then explicates the theoretical approach that he believes is preferred when doing such research into persons in a relationship:

> The point of science is to understand as accurately as possible what reality is and how it works. Theory is a conceptual tool we use to model the structures and causal mechanisms present in reality at different levels, whether directly observable or not. Thus, what we should want to know about human beings is what is actually real about human beings. (p. 11)

Haidt's operational focus on determinism within evolutionary social selection is in contrast with the following conclusion by Smith (2018):

> Human beings, I will suggest, are free, ensouled creatures of a particular kind… When it comes to the human, therefore, reductionistic moves towards either the physical or the mental, the material or the ideal, the corporeal of the spiritual are unacceptable and self-defeating. Humans are embodied souls who can only be well understood and explained in light of this complex reality. (p. 22)

Some Implications

Smith adopts a "critical realist personalism" (p. 198) as the basis for social research, and he claims that such realism shapes how we must view the humans we are researching and describing: "… embodied, spiritual human persons exist in solidarity with the rest of the material and animal world, yet also transcend it in limited but dramatic ways" (p. 383). Haidt also reports the transcendent patterns in communities, but does not accept that it is because of a core inherent spirituality that, in the Christian understanding, must be properly oriented to its core purpose (love of God and others).

If we ignore the transcendent aspects of reality as they relate to persons in relationship, it results in such basic questions as the nature of our thinking and thus our learning, as indicated above.

It is why Oxford Professor Emeritus John Lennox noted that these anthropological considerations are also central to the reflection on the role of universities (and schools) training future civic leaders:

> [quoting Brian Jones] "most contemporary universities [and schools?] are ostensibly concerned with cultivating students who will go out into the world and do good. However, they lack the robust, theological anthropology required to accomplish this goal. An intellectual account of what a human being is must frame our understanding of how human beings are to act in the world. Such an anthropology is the proper place to being discovering and fostering *thinking as a practice*". (p. 90)

Haidt's ongoing curiosity on such matters can be seen in how he is still asking anthropological questions about the role of religion in building more humane communities. For example, on Haidt's Substack account (known as After Babel), he has posted a number of articles that explore dynamics such as "Religion protects young people's mental health" and "What religious communities are getting right" (Zach Rausch, on Haidt, Jun 11, 2024). However, the focus of these studies, while continuing to affirm the life-enhancing impact of religions, is focussed on the impact of living in a close community, and not about the nature of the spiritual self in relationship. To their credit, Haidt and colleagues do admit what they don't know as they explore these dynamics. As Rausch concluded in his entry on *After Babel*:

> This research has led me to questions that I regularly grapple with and do not know the answer to: What are the ingredients needed to create long-lasting and stable real-world communities? To what extent is religion necessary? And what might we—adults—need to sacrifice to provide community for our children? (in Haidt, 2024, f/n 3)

"*Religion protects young people's mental health*"

A Concluding Example

As discussed in this paper, a worthwhile starting point in understanding why faith helps young people, and in what ways, would be to recognise that humans are embodied souls. Understanding that reality for humans has both physical and non-tangible aspects to it would add depth to our understanding of developing community. An example of taking spirituality more seriously as part of social research is Horwitz (2022). She decided to investigate the possible impact of sincere spiritual commitment of young people and their families on educational outcomes.

One of her summaries concluded the following for students who abide in a faith in which they *believe* as part of a community to which they *belong*:

> On all indicators, abiders across social class groups fared better than nonabiders. … abiders are significantly less likely to experience emotional, cognitive, or physical despair. They feel less anxious,

> healthier, and more optimistic about life. Without a doubt, their deep relationship with God helps them overcome several challenges they bump up against. Abiders are simply more resilient. This is driven by their involvement in a religious social community but also their steadfast belief in God. (pp.179—80)

Horwitz accepts their "deep relationship with God" as a real outworking of "their steadfast belief in God" (p. 180). It seems that Haidt (and some of his colleagues) cannot take that metaphysical step. Poplin (2017) explains this kind of reluctance as being part of the secular border patrol:

> If reality is not secular, the university is woefully intellectually and morally diminished. … Without understanding religious knowledge in its specificity and its spirituality, the university at best, promotes a false perception that all religious/spiritual knowledge is essentially the same and thus fails to distinguish between religious and spiritual worldviews that are radically different and result in very different outcomes. (pp. 22—23)

Wisdom is spiritually discerned

It has been suggested in this paper that Haidt would be able to understand what he is observing more fully if he could accept our embodied soulness. Without accepting the non-physical aspects of human reality, his explorations of what he calls "communities that maintain ties to ancient wisdom, communities in which adults share the work of morally forming the next generation" (Haidt, 2025), will stay at the shallower sociological level.

Does a relationship with God count? As we saw in the Biblical pointers above, Christians would say "yes". Wisdom is spiritually discerned. Good commitments are spiritually enabled. But if we want those spiritual practices oriented towards the good, then according to the Christian Scriptures, we need God and His grace and mercy. All good things are from Him (James 1:17).

Haidt, in common grace, is describing what some of those common goods can look like. Perhaps we can pray that eventually he will not continue to find the Christian teaching on ultimate meaning too hard to understand. Then some of his practical advice might be nurtured into enduring wisdom. TEACH

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