Sheldon Solomon: Death and Meaning (Lex Fridman Podcast)

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Sheldon Solomon is a social psychologist, a philosopher, co-developer of Terror Management Theory, co-author of The Worm at the Core.

`https://youtube.com/watch?v=qfKyNxfyWbo`

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The following is a conversation with Sheldon Solomon, social psychologist, a philosopher called developer of terror management theory and co-author of The Warm at the Core on the role of death in life. He further carried the ideas of Ernest Becker that can crudely summarize the idea that our fear of death is at the core of the human condition and the driver of most of the creations of human civilization.
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It really is the best way to support this podcast. Let me say as a side note that Ernest Becker's book, Denial of Death, had a big impact on my thinking about human cognition, consciousness and the deep ocean currents of our mind that are behind the surface behaviors we observe. Many people have told me that they think about death or don't think about death, fear, death, or don't fear death. But I think not many people think about this topic deeply, rigorously in the way that Nietzsche suggested this topic.
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Like many that lead to deep personal self reflection, frankly, is dangerous for the mind as all first principles. Thinking about the human condition is, if you gaze long into the abyss, like Nietzsche said, the abyss will gaze back into you. I've been recently reading a lot about World War two, Stalin and Hitler. It feels to me that there's some fundamental truth there to be discovered in the moments of history that changed everything, the suffering, the triumphs.
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If I bring up Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin in these conversations, it is never through a political lens. I'm not left nor right. I think for myself deeply and often question everything changing my mind as often as is needed. I ask for your patience, empathy and rigorous thinking. If you arrive to this podcast from a place of partisanship, if you hate Trump or love Trump or any other political leader, no matter what he or they do, and see everyone who disagrees with you as delusional, I ask that you unsubscribe and don't listen to these conversations, because my hope is to go beyond that kind of divisive thinking. I think we can only make progress toward truth through deep and pathetic thinking and conversation and is always love.
[Ad break]
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What is the role of death and fear, of death and life?

Well, from our perspective, the uniquely human awareness of death and our unwillingness to accept that fact, we would argue, is the primary motivational impetus for almost everything that people do, whether they're aware of it or not.

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So that's kind of been your life work, your view of the human condition.

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Is that death you've in the book worm at the core, that death is at the core of our consciousness, of everything, of how we see the world, of what drives us.

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And we can you can you elaborate? Like what? How you see death fitting in? What does it mean to be at the core of our being?

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So I think that's a great question. And, you know, to be pedantic, I usually start, you know, my psychology class and I say to the students, OK, you know, let's define our terms and ology part. They get right away. You know, it's the study of and then we get to the psyche part.

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And understandably, you know, the students are like, oh, that means mind.

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And I'm like, well, no, that's a modern interpretation. But in ancient Greek, it means soul, but not in the Cartesian dualistic sense that most of us in the West think when that word comes to mind.

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And so you hear the word soul and you're like, well, all right, that's the non-physical part of me that's potentially detachable from my corporal container when I'm no longer here.

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But Aristotle's who coined the word psyche, I think he was not a dualist.

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He was a modernist. He thought that the soul was inextricably connected to the body and he defined soul as the essence of a natural body that is alive. And then he goes on and he says, All right, but let me give you an example. If if. An axe was alive, the soul of an axe would be to chop and you can pluck your eyeball out of your head and it was still functioning. Then the soul of the eyeball would be to see, you know, and then it's like, alright.

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The soul of a grasshopper is to hop the soul of a woodpecker pack. Which raises the question, of course, what is the essence of what it means to be human?

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And here, of course, there is no one. Universally accepted conception of the essence of our humanity. All right, Aristotle, you know, gives us the idea of humans as rational animals. You know, we're Homo sapiens, but not the only game in town. Got Joseph

Hoisin, you're an anthropologist in the 20th century. He called us homo glutens that were basically fundamentally playful creatures. And I think it was Hannah. Our Rent Homo Faber were toolmaking creatures.

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Another woman, Ellen Dissanayake, wrote a book called Homo Aesthetics and following Aristotle and his poetic, she's like, well, we're not only rational animals, we're also aesthetic creatures that appreciate beauty.

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There's another take on humans. I think they call us homo narratives. We're all we're storytelling creatures. And I think all of those designations of what it means to be human are quite useful, heuristically, and certainly worthy of our collective cogitation. But what what garnered my attention when I was a young punk was just a single line in an essay by a Scottish guy who was Alexander Smith. And in a book called Dream Pailthorpe, I think it's written in the eighteen sixties.

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He just says right in the middle of an essay, it is our knowledge that we have to die that makes us human. And I remember reading that and in my gut I was like, Oh man, I don't like that, but I think you're on to something.

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And then William James, the great Harvard philosopher and arguably the first academic psychologist he referred to as the worm at the core of the human condition. So that's where the worm at the core idea comes in.

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And that's just an allusion to the story of Genesis back in the proverbial old days in the Garden of Eden, everything was going tremendously well. And so the serpent tempts Eve to take a chomp out of the apple of the Tree of Knowledge. And Adam partakes also, and this is according to the Bible, what brings death into the world.

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And from our vantage point, the story of Genesis is a remarkable allegorical recount of the origin of consciousness, where we get to the point where, by virtue of our vast intelligence, we come to realize the inevitability of death. And so, you know, the apple is beautiful and it's tasty. But when you get right into the middle of it, there's that ugly reality, which is our finitude. And then fast forward a bit. And I was a young professor at Skidmore College in 1980.

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My Ph.D. is an experimental social psychology, and I mainly did studies with clinical psychologists evaluating the efficacy of non pharmacological interventions to reduce stress.

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And that was good work. And I found it interesting. But in my first week as a professor at Skidmore, I just walking up and down the shelves of the library, saw some books by a guy I had never heard of, Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist, recently deceased.

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He died in 1974 after weeks before actually he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction for his book The Denial of Death.

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And that was his last book. It's actually his next to last book. I don't know how you pulled this off, but he had one more after he died called Escape from Evil. And evidently it was supposed to originally the denial of death was supposed to be this giant thousand page book that was both. And they split it up. And the what became escape from evil. His wife, Marie Becker, finished.

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Well, be that as it may in it is in the denial of death, where Becker just says in the first paragraph, I believe that the terror of death and the way that human beings respond to it or decline to respond to it is primarily responsible for almost everything we do, whether we're aware of it or not, and mostly we're not.

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And so I read that first paragraph, Lex, and I was like, wow, OK, this dude, you're onto something, you're on to something.

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It's the same thing. It's the same thing.

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And then. It reminded me, I think, not to play psychologist, but, you know, let's face it, I believe there's a reason why we end up drifting where we ultimately come to.

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So I'm in my mid 20s. I got the inspectors book in my hand. And the next thing I know I'm remembering when I'm eight years old, the day that my grandmother died and, you know, the day before my mom said, oh, say goodbye to grandma. She's not well. And look, I so I was like, OK, Grandma. And I knew she wasn't well, but I didn't really appreciate the magnitude of her illness.

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Well, she dies the next day and it's in the evening. And I'm just sitting there looking at my stamp collection and I'm like, wow, I'm going to miss my grandmother. And then I'm like, no, wait a minute. That means my mother's going to die. And after she gets old and that's even worse. After all, who's going to make me dinner and not bother me for a while? But then I'm looking at the stamps, all the dead American presidents.

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And I'm like, there's George Washington. He's dead. There's Thomas Jefferson, he's dead. My mom's going to be dead. Oh, I'm going to get old and be dead some day.

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And at eight years old, that was my first explicit existential crisis. I remember it being, you know, one of these blood curdling realizations that I tried my best to ignore for the most of the time. I was subsequently growing up. But fast forward back to Skidmore College, mid 20s, you know, reading Becker's book in the nineteen eighties, thinking to myself, wow, one of the reasons why I'm finding this so compelling is that it squares with my own personal experience and then to make a short story long and I'll shut up.

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But what what grabbed me about Bucker and this is in part because I read a lot of his other books. There's another book, The Birth and Death of Meaning, which is framed in from an evolutionary perspective. And then the denial of death is really more framed from an existential psychodynamic vantage point.

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And as a young academic, I was really taken by what I found to be a very potent juxtaposition that you really don't see that often yet.

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Usually evolutionary types are eager to dismiss the psychodynamic types and vice versa. And maybe only John Bowlby. You know, there's there's other folks, but the attachment theorist John Bowlby was really one of the first serious academics to say these these ways of thinking about things are quite compatible.

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And can you comment on what's what is psychodynamics view of the world is versus an evolutionary view of the world just in case people are not?

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Yeah, absolutely. That's that's a fine question.

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Well, for the evolutionary types in general are interested in how it is and why it is that we have adapted to our surroundings in the service of persisting over time and being represented in the gene pool thereafter. Used to be a fish.

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Yeah, we used to be a fish. And yeah, I'll end up talking on a podcast how we came to be that way, how we came to be that way.

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And so whereas the existential psychodynamic types I would say are more interested in development across a single lifespan and.

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But, but the evolutionary types dismiss the psychodynamic types as overly speculative and devoid of empirical support for their views. They you know, they'll just say these guys are talking shit, if you'll pardon the expression. And of course, you can turn right around and say the same about the evolutionary types that they are often and rightfully criticized the evolutionary psychologists for water called the just so stories. But where it's like, oh, this is probably why Fill in the blank is potentially adaptive.

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And my thought again early on was I didn't see any intrinsic antifascists between these viewpoints. So I just found them dialectically compatible and very. Powerful when combined, so one question I would ask is about a science being speculative, you know, we understand so little about the human mind. You said you picked up this book and, you know, it felt like he was onto something. That's the same thing I felt when I picked up Becker's book, probably also in my early 20s.

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You know, I read a lot of philosophy, but it felt like the question of the meaning of life kind of. You know, this seemed to be the most the closest to the truth. Somehow it was onto something.

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So I guess the question I want to ask also is like how speculative a psychology how like all of your life's work, how do you feel?

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How confident do you feel about the whole thing, about understanding our mind?

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I feel confident. We aren't confident to have it both ways.

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Like, what do we make of psychology want to make starting with Freud, you know, starting just just ah, or even just philosophy, even the aspects of the sciences, like, you know, my field of artificial intelligence, but also physics, you know, it often feels like and we don't really understand most of what's going on here. And certainly that's true with the human mind. Yeah.

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Well, to me, that's the proper epistemological stance. I don't know anything. Well, it's the Socratic. I know that. I don't know which is the first step on the path to wisdom. I would argue forcefully that we know a lot more. Then we used to, I would argue, equally forcefully, not that I have a Ph.D. in philosophy or science, but I believe that that Thomas Kunz of the world are right when they point out that change is not necessarily progress.

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And so on the one hand, I do think we know a lot more than we did back in the day when if you wanted to fly, you put on some wax wings and jumped off a mountain.

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On the other hand, I think it's quite arrogant when scientists all just speak about psychological scientists, when they have the audacity to mistake statistical precision for knowledge and insight, and when they make the mistake, in my estimation, that Einstein bemoaned. And that's this idea that the mere accumulation of data will necessarily result in conceptual breakthroughs.

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And so I like the what we're all hope appreciative of the people who trained us. But I remember my first day in graduate school at the University of Kansas. They brought us into a room. And on one side of the board was a quote by Kurt Lewin or within famous German social psychologist and was nothing. Then the quote is, there's nothing more useful than a good theory. And then on the other side was another quote by German physicist whose name eludes me.

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And it was All theories are wrong.

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And I'm like. Which is it and of course, the point is that it's both our theories are, I believe, powerful ways to direct our attention to aspects of human affairs that might render us better able to understand ourselves in the world around us.

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Now, I also, as an experimental psychologist, I adhere to the view that theories are essentially hypothesis generating devices and that at its best, science is a dialectical interplay where you have theoretical assertions that yield testable hypotheses and that either results in the corroboration of the theory, the rejection of it or the modification thereafter.

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If we look at the existentialists or even like modern philosophers, psychologists, types like Jordan Peerson, I'm not sure if you're familiar with I know Jordan pretty well.

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We go way back.

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Actually, if he were here with us today, we would he would be jumping in and I believe very interesting and important ways. But yeah, we go back 30 years ago, he was basically saying our work is nonsense.

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Let's get into this. I'll talk to Jordan eventually. And this thing got to some rough times right now.

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Oh, absolutely. And I and I wish him well.

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Jordan was working on his maps of meaning and we were publishing our work.

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And I think Jordan at the time was concerned about our vague claims to the effect that all meaning is arbitrary. He takes more youngin as well as evolutionary view that I don't think is wrong, by the way, which is that there are certain kinds of meanings that are more important, let's say, religious types, and that we didn't pay sufficient attention to that in our early days.

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So can you try to elucidate, like, what his worldview is because he's also a religious man. So what what was this was some of the interesting aspects of the disagreements that they went back in the day.

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I just said, you know, Jordan was a young punk. We were young punks. He was just kind of flailing in an animated way at some conferences saying that we still both kind of punks. Yeah, we kind of punks.

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I saw him three or four years ago. We spoke on I was an awesome day. We in Canada at the Ontario Shakespeare Festival, where we were asked to be on a Canadian broadcast system program. I think we were talking about Macbeth from a psychodynamic perspective, and I hadn't seen him and a ton of years and we spent two days together, had a great time. You know, we had just written our book, The Worm at the Core. And he's like, you know, you're you're missing a big opportunity.

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Every time you say something, you have to have your phone and you have to film yourself and then you have to put it on YouTube.

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Yeah, he was onto something that, you know, just as a small tangent. Yeah. It's it's almost sad to look at Jordan Peterson, somebody like yourself. After having done this podcast, I've realized that there is really brilliant people in this world and oftentimes, especially like when they're I mean, it would love a little bit like punks. That's right. They kind of do their own thing and the world doesn't know they exist as much as they should.

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And it's so interesting because most people are kind of. Boring. And then the interesting ones kind of go on their own and there's not a smartphone. That's so interesting. He was onto something that I mean, it's interesting that he I don't think he was thinking from a money perspective, but he was probably thinking of, like, connecting with people or sharing his knowledge. But people don't often think that way.

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That's right. So maybe we can try to get back to you both brilliant people. And I would love to get some interesting disagreements earlier and later about in your psychological work in your world is.

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Well, our disagreements today would be along two dimensions.

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One is he is then again, I wish he was here to correct me. Yes. When I say that he is more committed to the virtues of the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly Christianity, and in a sense is contemporary Kierkegaard of sorts, when he's saying there's only one way to leap into faith.

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And I would take issue with that claim on the grounds that that is one, but by no means, not the only way to find meaning and value in life.

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And so when I see his what's his warm at the core? What is it we're talking about? A little bit of a higher level of discovering meaning. Yeah. What's his what does he make of death?

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Oh, I don't know. And this is where it would be nice to have him here. He has, you know, from a distance criticized our work as misguided. Having said that, though, when we were together, he said something along the lines that there is no theoretical body of work in academic psychology right now for which there is more empirical evidence.

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And so I appreciated that. He's a great researcher. He's a good clinician. The other thing that we will agree to disagree about rather vociferously is ultimately political slash economics. So I remember being at dinner with him, telling him that the next book that I wanted to write was going to be called Why Left and Right are both beside the Point. And my argument was going to be and it is going to be that both liberal and political, not liberal and conservative political philosophy, are each intellectually and morally bankrupt because they're both framed in terms of assumptions about human nature that are demonstrably false.

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And Jordan didn't mind me knocking liberal political philosophy on those grounds. That would basically be like Steven Pinker's blank slate.

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But he took issue when I pointed out that actually it's conservative political philosophy, which starts with John Locke's assumption that in a state of nature, there are no societies, just autonomous individuals who are striving for survival.

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That's one of the most obviously patently wrong assertions in the history of intellectual thought. And Locke uses that to justify his claims about the individual right to acquire unlimited amounts of property, which is ultimately the justification for neo liberal economics.

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And Kielinger, a little bit. What's the. Can you describe his philosophy and his view of the world? Sure.

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And what neo liberal economics is?

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Yeah. Let me translate in English.

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So basically on all these days, anybody who says I'm a I'm a conservative free market type, you're following John Locke and Adam Smith, whether you're aware of it or not. So here's John Locke, who, by the way, all of these guys are great. So for me to appear to criticize any of these folks, it is with the highest regard. And also we need to understand, in my estimation, how important their ideas are. Locke is working in a time where all rule was top down by divine right.

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And he's trying desperately to come up with a philosophical justification to shift power and order. Autonomy to individuals, and he starts in his second treatise on government, 16, 90 or so he teaches. He says, OK, let's start with a state of nature. And he's like in a state of nature, there's no societies, there's just individuals. And in a perfect universe, there wouldn't be any societies. There would just be individuals who, by the law of nature, have a right to survive.

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And in the service of survival, they have the right to acquire and preserve the fruits of their own labor.

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But his point is and it's actually a good one, you know, he's following hobs here. He's like, well, the problem with that is that people are assholes. And if they would let each other alone, then we would still be living in a state of nature. Everybody just doing what they did to get by each day. But it's a whole lot easier, you know, if I see like an apple tree a mile away. Well, I can go over and pick an apple.

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But if you're 10 meters away with an apple in your hand, it's a lot easier if I pick up a rock and crack your head and take the apple.

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And his point was that the problem is that people can't be counted on to behave. They will they will take each other's property. Moreover. He argued, if someone takes your property, you have the right to you have the right to retribution in proportion to the degree of the magnitude of the transgression. English translation If I take your apple, you have the right to take an apple back. You don't have the right to kill my first born. But people being people, they're apt to escalate retaliatory behavior, thus creating what Locke called a state of war.

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So he said in order to avoid a state of war, people reluctantly give up their freedom in exchange for security. They agree to obey the law. And not the sole function of government is to keep domestic tranquility and to ward off foreign invasion in order to protect our right to property rights. So now here's the property thing.

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All right. So Locke says if you look in the Bible and in nature, there is no private property and. But WLOX says, well, surely if there's anything that you own, it's your body and surely you have a right by nature to stay alive and then by extension, anything that you do where you exert effort or labor that becomes your private property. So back to the apple tree. If I walk over to an apple tree, that's everybody's apples until I pick one.

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And the minute I do, that is my apple. And then he says, you can have as many apples as you want as long as you don't waste them and as long as you don't impinge on somebody else's right to get apples.

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All right. So far, so good. Yeah. And then he says, well, OK. In the early days. You could only eat so many apples or you could only trade so many apples with somebody else, so he was like, well, if you put a fence around a bunch of apple trees, those become your apples.

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That's your property. If somebody else wants to put a fence around Nebraska, that's their property.

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And everybody can have as much property as they want because the world is so big that there is no limit to what you can have if you pursue it by virtue of your own effort.

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But then he says money came into the picture. And this is important because it's a he noticed long before anybody before the Freud's of the world that money is funky because it has no intrinsic value.

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He's like, look at that shiny piece of metal that actually has if you're hungry and you have a choice between a carrot and a lump of gold in the desert, most people are going to go for the carrot. But his point is, is that the allure of money is that it's basically a concentrated symbol of wealth. But because it doesn't spoil, Locke said, you're entitled to have as much money as you're able to garner. Right. Then he says, well, the reality is, is that some people are more the word that he used was industrious, he said, some people more industrious than others.

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All right.

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Today we would say smarter, less lazy, more ambitious. He just said that's natural. It's also true.

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Therefore, he argued over time, some people are going to have a whole lot of property and other people, not much at all. Inequality for Locke is natural and beneficial for everyone. His argument was that, you know, the rising tide lifts all boats and that the truly creative and innovative are entitled to relatively unlimited worth because we're all better off as a result. So the point very simply is that, well, that's based. And then you have Adam Smith, you know, in the next century with the invisible hand where Adam Smith says everyone pursuing their own selfish, that's not necessarily pejorative.

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If everyone pursues their own selfish interests, we will all be better off as a result.

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And what do you think is the flaw in that way? Well, there's two flaws.

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One is, is that well, one flaw is, first of all, that that it is based on an erroneous assumption to begin with, which is that there never was a time in human history when we were in a social species.

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In a sense, you don't feel like that. There's this emphasis of individual autonomy is a flawed premise. Like there's a there's something fundamentally, deeply interconnected between us. I do.

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I think that Plato and Socrates, you know, in the Credo were closer to the truth when they started with the assumption that we were interdependent and they derived individual autonomy as a manifestation of a functional social system.

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That's fascinating.

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So when Margaret Thatcher you're too young, you know, in the 1980s, she said societies, there's no such thing as societies. There's just individuals pursuing their self-interest. So so that's one point where I would take issue respectfully with John Locke. Point number two is when Locke says in sixteen ninety while England's filled up. So if you want some land, just go to America, it's empty. Or maybe there's a few savages there, just kill them.

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So. And Melville does the same thing in Moby Dick where he he thinks about will there ever come a time where we run out of whales?

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And he says no, but we have run out of whales. And so Locke was right, maybe in 16, 90, that the world was large and had infinite resources. He's certainly wrong today. And in my opinion, also wrong is the claim that the unlimited pursuit of personal wealth does not harm those around us. There is no doubt. That radical inequality is tragic psychologically and physically, it's poverty is not that terrible, it's easy for me to say because I have a place to stay and something to eat, but as long as you're not starving and have a place to be.

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Poverty is not as challenging as being having the impoverished in close proximity to those who are obscenely wealthy.

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So it's not the absolute measure of your well-being as the inequality of that well being brought into painful.

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So maybe just linger on the Jordan Peterson thing in terms of your disagreement as well. As you see, he went through quite a bit. You know, there's been quite a bit of fire right in in his defense or maybe his opposition to the idea of equality of outcomes. So looking at the inequality that's in our world, looking at, you know, certain groups measurably having an outcome that's different than other groups and then drawing conclusions about fundamental unfairness, injustice, inequality in the system.

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So like systematic racism, systematic sexism, systematic, anything else that creates inequality. And he's been kind of saying pretty simple things to say that, you know, the system for the most part is not broken or flawed. Yeah. That the inequalities part, the the inequality of outcomes is part of our world. What we should strive for is the, you know, equality of opportunity. Yeah.

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And I do not dispute that as an abstraction.

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But again, to back up for a second, I do take issue with Jordan's fervent devotion to the free market and his cavalier dismissal of Marxist ideas, which he has, in my estimation, mischaracterized in his public depictions.

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Let's get into so he seems to really not like socialism, Marxism, communism, historically speaking. Sort of. I mean, how would I characterize it? I'm not exactly sure. I don't want to again, he will eventually be here to defend himself. John Locke, unfortunately not here to defend. Exactly.

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But what was your sense about Marxism and and the the way Jordan talks about the way you think about it from the economics, from the philosophical perspective?

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Yeah.

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If we were all here together, I'd say we need to start with Marxist economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844 before Marx became more of a polemicist. And I would argue that Marxist political philosophy, his crappy economist, I don't dispute that. But his arguments about human nature, his arguments about the inevitably catastrophic psychological and environmental and economic effects of capitalism, I would argue every one of those has proven quite right.

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Marx maybe did not have the answer, but he saw in the 18, whenever he was writing, that inevitably capitalism would lead to massive inequity, that it was ultimately based on the need to denigrate and dehumanize labor, to render them in his language, a fleshy cog in a giant machine.

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And it would create tension and conflict between those who own things and those who made things that over time would always you know, the Thomas, a guy who writes about capital and just makes the point the return on investment will always be greater than wages.

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That means the people with money are going to have a lot more. That means there's going to come a point where the economic house of cards falls apart. Now that Joseph Schumpeter's of the world, they're like, that's creative destruction. Bring it that. That's great. So I think it's Niall Ferguson. He was he's a historian. He may be at Stanford now. He was at Harvard. You know, he writes about the history of money and he's like, yeah, there's been 20 or whatever depressions and big recessions in the last several hundred years.

[00:45:06]

And when that happens, half of the pop. Asian or whatever is catastrophically inconvenienced, but that's the price that we pay for progress, other people would argue, and I would agree with them, that I will happily sacrifice the rate of progress in order to flatten the curve of economic destruction, to put that in plain English.

[00:45:40]

I would direct our attention to the social democracies that forgetting for the moment of whether it's possible to do this on a scale in a country as big as ours on all of the things that really matter, you know, gross domestic GDP or whatever, that's just an abstraction.

[00:46:04]

But when you look at whatever the United Nations says, how we measure quality of life, you know, life expectancy, education, you know, rates of alcoholism, suicide and so on, the countries that do better are the mixed economies, their market economies that have high tax rates in exchange for the provision of services.

[00:46:31]

The commas are right for citizens.

[00:46:35]

So, I mean, I guess the question is, you've kind of mentioned that, you know, as Marx described, capitalism with a slippery slope, eventually things go awry and some kind of way. So that's the question is when you have when you implement a system, how does it go wrong? Eventually, you know, you know, eventually we'll all be dead. That's exactly right.

[00:46:58]

No, no, no. That's right. So and then the criticism, I think these days, unfortunately, Marxism as like is a dirty word. I say, unfortunately, because even if you disagree with a philosophy, it should you should like calling somebody a Marxist. You should not be a thing that shuts down all conversation. No, that's right.

[00:47:22]

And the fact is, is I'm sympathetic with Jordan's dismissal of the folks and the talking heads these days who spew Marxist words. To me, it's like fashionable nonsense. Do you know that book that the physicist wrote mocking You're Too Young? So in the 20 or so years, we're all pretty young?

[00:47:46]

Well, yeah, that's right.

[00:47:47]

But I think the reason why you physicists, they wrote a paper just mocking the kind of literary postmodern types you.

[00:47:56]

Oh, yes. Oh, those kinds of. Yeah, yeah. That was just nonsense. And of course it was made the lead article. And you know, my point is Marx wouldn't be a Marxist.

[00:48:08]

So I have read and listened to some of the work of Richard Wolffe. He speaks pretty eloquently about Marxism. I like him.

[00:48:16]

He's one of the only, you know, one of the only people speaking about a lot about Marxism in the way we are now in a serious way in it. And it's sort of saying, you know, what are the flaws of capitalism? Not saying like, yeah, basically sounding very different. People should check out his work.

[00:48:35]

No, it's all this kind of work, this kind of outrage mob culture of sort of demanding equality, equality of outcome. That's not Marxism. It is not Marxism.

[00:48:49]

But he he didn't say that. You know, he literally said eat what it was like, each according to their needs and each according to their abilities or something like that.

[00:48:59]

So the question is the implementation like. Absolutely. Humans are messy.

[00:49:03]

So how does it go wrong? Like it is. There you go. I think brilliant.

[00:49:08]

It's messy. And this gets back to my rant about the book that I want to try. If I don't stroke out, why left and right are both beside the point. Yeah. You know, the people or the conservatives are right when they condemn liberals for being simple minded by assuming that a modification of external conditions will yield changes in human nature. You know you know, again, that's where Marx and Skinner are odd bedfellows. You know, here they are just saying, oh, let's change the surroundings and things will inevitably get better.

[00:49:51]

On the other hand, when conservatives say that people are innately selfish and they use that as the justification for glorifying the unbridled pursuit of wealth, well, they're only half right. Because it turns out that we can be innately selfish, but we are also innately generous and reciprocating creatures. There's remarkable studies. I think they've been done at Yale of, you know, babies, 14 month old babies.

[00:50:29]

If someone hands them a toy and then want something in return, babies before they can walk and talk will reciprocate. All right, fine. If someone if they want a toy, let's say, or a bottle of water, baby wants a bottle of water and I look like I'm trying to give it to the baby, but I drop the bottle so the baby doesn't get what she or he wanted when given a chance to reciprocate. Little babies will reciprocate because they're aware of and are responding to intention.

[00:51:11]

Similarly, if they see somebody behaving unfairly to to someone, they will not help that person in return. So so my point is, is, yeah, we are selfish creatures at times, but we are also simultaneously uba social creatures who are eager to reciprocate. And in fact, we're congenitally prepared to be reciprocating to the point where we will reciprocate on the basis of intentions above and beyond what actually have.

[00:51:49]

So, I mean, your work is on the fundamental role of the fear of mortality in ourselves.

[00:51:59]

How fundamental is this reciprocation, this human connection to others?

[00:52:04]

I think it's really in a yeah, I think because yeah, Batz reciprocate, not by intention, but you know this I'm going hear from Richard Dawkins The Selfish Gene, you know, to I love the early Dawkins.

[00:52:19]

I'm less enamored with the early Beatles. Yeah, no. And again, I say this with great respect. But, you know, Dawkins just points out that, you know, reciprocation is just fundamental. Cooperation is fundamental.

[00:52:38]

You know, it is it's a one sided view of evolutionary takes on things when we see it solely in terms of individual competition.

[00:52:49]

And it's almost from a game theoretic perspective to it's just easier to see the world that way. It's it's easier to I don't know. I mean, you see this in physics. There's a whole field of folks like complexity that kind of embrace the fact that it's all intricately connected mess and it's just very difficult to do anything with that kind of science. But it seems to be much closer to actually representing what the world is like.

[00:53:16]

So like you put it earlier works. It's messy.

[00:53:19]

So left and right, you mentioned you're thinking of maybe actually putting it down on paper or something.

[00:53:24]

Yeah, I would like to, because what I would what I would like to point out again and in admiration of all of the people that I will then try and have the gall to criticise is, look, these are all geniuses like genius Adam Smith, genius when he uses the notion that we're bartering creatures. So he uses that reciprocation idea as the basis of his way of thinking about things.

[00:53:52]

That's not at the core. The martyring is not at the core of human nature. It's not a well, he says it is.

[00:53:58]

He says we're fundamentally bartering creatures.

[00:54:01]

But that doesn't even make sense then, because then how how can we then be autonomous individuals?

[00:54:07]

Well, because we're going to barter with an eye on ourselves. For ourselves. Yeah, but all right. So but back to Adam Smith for a second.

[00:54:16]

Y-axis, like Adam Smith, he's got the invisible hand.

[00:54:20]

And my conservative friends like you need to read his books because he is a big fan of the free market. And this is my other gripe with folks who support just unbridled markets. Adam Smith understood that there was a role for government for two reasons. One is, is that just like lock people are not going to behave with integrity. And he understood that one role of government is to maintain a proverbial, you know, even playing field. And then the other thing Smith said was that there's some things that can't be done well for a profit.

[00:55:04]

And I believe he talked about education and public health and infrastructure as things that are best done by governments because you can't you can make a profit. But that doesn't mean that the institutions themselves will be maximally beneficial. Yes.

[00:55:25]

So I would I'm just eager to engage people by saying, let's start with our most contemporary understanding of human nature, which is that we are both selfish. And tend to cooperate, and we also can be heroically. Helpful to folks in our own tribe and of course, how you define one's tribe becomes critically important.

[00:56:05]

But what some people say is, look, we let what would then be what kind of political institutions and what kind of economic organization. Can we think about to kind of hit that sweet spot and that that would be, in my opinion, how do we maximize individual autonomy in a way that fosters creativity and innovation?

[00:56:33]

And the self-regard that comes from creative expression, while engaging, are more cooperative and reciprocal tendencies in order to come up with a system that is potentially stable over time. Because the other thing about all capital based systems stability is a fundamentally unstable.

[00:56:58]

Yeah, because it's based on infinite growth. And, you know, it's a positive feedback loop to basically infinite growth is only good for malignant cancer cells and compound interest. But otherwise, you know, we want to seek a steady state.

[00:57:14]

And that would be, you know, so when Steven Pinker writes, for example, again, great scholar, but I'm going to disagree when he says the world has never been better and all we need to do is keep making stuff and buying stuff.

[00:57:32]

So your sense is the world is sort of in disagreement with Steven Pinker that the world is.

[00:57:41]

Like facing a potential catastrophic collapse in multiple directions, yes, and the fact that they're certain, like the rate of violence in aggregate is decreasing the death, you know, the quality of life, all those kinds of measures you can plot across centuries, that it's improving. That doesn't capture the fact that our world may be we might destroy ourselves in very painful ways in the in the in the next century.

[00:58:09]

So I'm with Jared Diamond, you know, in the book Collapse, where he points out studying the collapse of major civilizations, that it often happens right after things appear to never have been better. Hmm.

[00:58:24]

And in that regard, I mean, there are more known voices that have taken issue with Dr. Pinker. I'm thinking of John Gray, who's a British philosopher. And here in the States, I don't know where he is these days, but Robert J. Lifton, the psycho historian.

[00:58:44]

Yeah, they're both of my view and which I hope is, by the way, wrong.

[00:58:51]

But me too. Yeah, no doubt. But, you know, between, you know, ongoing ethnic tensions, environmental degradation, economic instability and the fact that, you know, the world has become a petri dish of psychopathology, like what really worries me is the the quiet economic pain that people are going through, the businesses that are closed, dreams that are broken because you can no longer do the things that you've wanted to do.

[00:59:22]

And how I mentioned to you off camera that I've been reading the the rise and fall of the Third Reich and I mean the amount of anger and hatred.

[00:59:36]

And on the flipside of that sort of nationalist pride that can arise from deep economic pain, like what happens with the economic pain is you become bitter, yet you start to find the other, whether it's other European nations that mistreated you, whether it's other groups who mistreated you, it always ends up being the Jews that somehow, somehow or fault here.

[01:00:00]

Yeah, that's what worries me, is where this quiet anger and pain goes in twenty, twenty one, twenty, twenty to twenty thirty.

[01:00:12]

If you look. No, I'm sorry to see the parallel. No, no, no. Rise and fall of the Third Reich. But you know what happens 10, 15 years from now from what's because of the covid pandemic that's happening now.

[01:00:25]

Unless you make a I think it really profoundly important point, you know, back to our work for a better earn us back or rather, you know, his point is, is that the way that we manage existential terror is to embrace culturally constructed belief systems that. Give us a sense that life has meaning, we have value and in the form of self esteem, which we get from perceiving that we meet or exceed the expectations associated with the role that we play in society.

[01:01:01]

Well, here we are right now.

[01:01:03]

And in a world where, first of all, if you have nothing, you are nothing.

[01:01:07]

And secondly, as you were saying before we got started today, a lot of jobs.

[01:01:15]

Are gone and they're not coming back, and that's where the self-esteem that's where the self-esteem and identity come in people, it's not only that you don't have anything to eat, you don't even have a self anymore to speak of because we typically define ourselves.

[01:01:31]

You know, as Marx put it, you are what you do.

[01:01:34]

And now who are you when your way of life as well as your way of earning a living is no longer available.

[01:01:44]

And it feels like that yearning for self-esteem that we can talk a little bit more because you're you about defining self-esteem is quite interesting when the more aggressive form of the core and just in general your thinking, it made me realize I haven't thought enough about the idea of self-esteem. But the thing I want to say is it feels like when you lose your job. Then it's easy to find it's it's tempting to find that self-esteem in a tribe. That's not somehow often positive.

[01:02:21]

That's exactly it's like a tribe that defines itself on the hatred of somebody else.

[01:02:26]

So that's brilliant. And this is what John Gray, the philosopher in the 1990s, he predicted what's happening today. He wrote a book about globalism.

[01:02:37]

And actually Hannah Arendt in the 1950s said the same thing in her book about totalitarianism when she said that, you know, that economics has reached the point where most money is made not by actually making stuff. You know, you use money to make money.

[01:02:59]

And therefore, what happens is money chases money across national boundaries. Ultimately, governments become subordinate to the corporate entities whose sole function is to generate money.

[01:03:20]

And what John Gray said is that that will inevitably produce economic upheaval in local areas, which will not be attributed to the economic order. It will be misattributed to her, whoever the scapegoat de jure is, and the anger and the distress associated with that uncertainty will be picked up on by ideological demagogues who will transform that into rage. So both Hannah Arendt as well as John Gray, they they just said, watch out. We're going to have right wing populist movements where demagogues who are the alchemists of hate, what makes them brilliant is they don't they don't.

[01:04:19]

The hate is already there, but they take the fears and they expertly redirect them to who it is that I need to hate and kill in order to feel good about myself. So back to your point, Wex. That's right.

[01:04:36]

So the self-regard that used to come from having a job and doing it well and as a result of that, having adequate resources to provide a decent life for your family, well, those opportunities are gone and yeah, what's left. So Max Weber's German sociologist at the beginning of the 20th century, he said in times of historical upheaval, we are apt to embrace.

[01:05:08]

He was the one who coined the term charismatic leader, seemingly larger than life individuals who often believe or their followers believe are divinely ordained to rid the world of evil.

[01:05:22]

Yeah. All right.

[01:05:22]

Now, Ernest Becker, he used Weber's ideas in order to account for the rise of Hitler.

[01:05:31]

Hitler was elected and he was elected when Germans were in an extraordinary state of existential distress. And he said, I'm going to make Germany great again right now. What Becker adds to the equation is his claim that what underlies our affection for charismatic populist leaders, good and bad, is death anxiety. All right. Now here's where we come in, where egghead experimental researchers, you know, Becker wrote this book, The Denial of Death, and he couldn't get a job.

[01:06:11]

People just dismiss these ideas as fanciful speculation for which there's no evidence. And and you've done some good experiments. Yeah.

[01:06:21]

And here's where here's where I can be more cavalier and where what I would urge people like what you said, Lex, is ignore my histrionic polemic language, if possible, and step back, if you can, myself included.

[01:06:38]

And let's just consider the the research findings, because in September 11th, 2001, people that are old enough to remember that horrible day, two days before George W. Bush had the lowest approval rating in the history of presidential polling. All right.

[01:07:02]

Three weeks later, after he said we will rid the world of the evildoers and then a week or two after that, he said in a cover story on Time magazine that he believed that God had chosen him to lead the world during this. The lead the country. There, during this perilous time, he had the highest approval rating, and so we're like, what happened?

[01:07:25]

You know, what happened to Americans that their approval of President Bush got so high, so fast? Well, our view following backor is that 2001 was like a giant death reminder.

[01:07:41]

Yeah, the people dying, plus the symbols of American greatness, World Trade Center and and the Pentagon.

[01:07:49]

So we did a bunch of experiments and most of our experiments are disarmingly simple. We have one group of people and we just remind them that they're going to die. We say, hey, writes your thoughts and feelings about dying, or in other cases we stop them outside, either in front of a funeral home or a hundred meters to either side.

[01:08:09]

Our thought being that if we stop you in front of a funeral home, then death is on your mind even if you don't know it. And then there's other studies there, even more subtle, where we bring people into the lab and they read stuff on a computer. And while they're doing that, we flash the word death for twenty eight milliseconds. It's so fast you don't see anything. And then we just measure people's reactions or behavior thereafter.

[01:08:37]

So what we found in 2003 leading up to the election of 2004 was that Americans did not care for President Bush or his policies in Iraq in control conditions. But if we reminded them of their mortality first, they like Bush a lot more.

[01:08:59]

So in every study that we did, Americans like John Kerry, who was running against Bush, they like Kerry more than Bush policy wise in the control in a control condition.

[01:09:11]

Yeah. And but if if they were reminded of death first, then they like Bush a lot more.

[01:09:19]

So, by the way, just a small pause. He said disarmingly simple experiments. I think that's and people should read worm at the core for some other description. You have a lot of different experience of this nature. I think it's a brilliant experiment connected to the Stoics, perhaps, of how your world view on anything and how delicious that water tastes. Yes. After you're reminded of your own mortality, it's such a fascinating experiment that you could probably keep doing like millions of them to draw insight about the way we see the world.

[01:09:56]

No, that's right, Lex. And I appreciate the compliment, not because we did anything, but because what these studies, many of which are now done by other people around the world in labs that we're not connected with what I'm most proud about our work. I am proud of the experiments that we've done. But it's not science until somebody else can replicate your findings and independent researchers are interested in pursuing them.

[01:10:25]

It's such a fascinating idea. I don't have to think about a lot about the experiments you've done. And they you've inspired about the fact that death changes the way you see a bunch of different things.

[01:10:39]

I think the Stoics talked about the I mean, in general, just Memento Mori like just thinking about death and meditating on death is a really positive, not a positive. It's an enlightening way to live life.

[01:10:57]

So what do you think about that at the individual level? What is the role about being bringing that terror of death, fear of death to the surface and being cognizant of it? For us?

[01:11:10]

That's the that's the ballgame.

[01:11:14]

So what we write in our book and here we're just paying homage to the philosophers and theologians that come before us is to point out the literately since antiquity there has been a consensus that. To lead a full life requires Albert Camus and come to terms with death thereafter. Anything is possible. And so you've got the Stoics and you got the Epicureans, and then you got the Tibetan Book of the Dead. And then you got like the medieval monks that, you know, worked with like a skull on their desk.

[01:12:05]

And the whole idea, I should back up a bit because and just remind folks that our studies, you know, when we remind people that they're going to die and we find that, yeah, they drink more water, if a famous person is is, you know, advertising it, they eat more cookies, they want more fancy clothes. They sit closer to people that look like them. It changes who they vote for. But all of those things, those are very subtle death reminders.

[01:12:40]

You don't even know that death is on your mind.

[01:12:43]

And so our point is, is that and this is kind of counterintuitive and that is that the most problematic and unsavory human reactions to death anxiety are malignant manifestations of repressed death anxiety. You know, we try and bury it under the psychological bushes and then it comes back to bear bitter fruit. But what the theologians and the philosophers of the world are saying is it behooves each of us to spend considerable time. You don't have to be gothe death rocker, you know, wallowing in death imagery to spend enough time.

[01:13:30]

Entertaining the reality of the human condition, which is that you, too, will pass. To get to the point where there is a to lapse into a cliche, the capacity for personal transformation and growth, let's go personal for a second.

[01:13:56]

Are you yourself afraid of death? Yeah. I mean, how much do you meditate on that thought?

[01:14:04]

Like maybe your own study of it is a kind of escape from your own mortality?

[01:14:11]

Absolutely. So you've got it. And like, if you figure out death, somehow, you won't die.

[01:14:17]

So. No, no. So my my colleagues and good friends, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Leonski, you know, we met in graduate school in the 1970s. We've been doing this work for 40 years. And we cheerfully admit, even though it doesn't reflect well on us as humans, that I should just speak for myself. But I I feel like there's a real sense in which doing these studies and writing books and lecturing has been my way of avoiding directly confronting my anxieties by turning it into an intellectual exercise.

[01:14:57]

And and every once in a while there, for one, I think that I'm making some progress as a human.

[01:15:05]

I have to remind myself that that is probably not the case and that I have at times, like all humans, been more preoccupied with the implications of these ideas for my self-esteem.

[01:15:21]

I was like, oh, we're going to write a book and maybe we'll get to go on TV or something. Well, no, that's not the same as to actually think about it in a way that you feel it rather than just think it. Yeah. Did day when you were eight. I said, that's exactly right.

[01:15:44]

So when I first read The Denial of Death, I was so literally flabbergasted by it that I took a leave of absence for a year. And just like. Did what would be considered menial jobs.

[01:15:59]

I did construction work, I worked in a restaurant and I was just like, wait a minute, if if I if I understand what this guy is saying, then I'm just a culturally constructed meat puppet doing things for reasons that I know, not in order to assuage death anxiety.

[01:16:24]

And I say that that that's not acceptable.

[01:16:27]

Maybe another interesting person to talk about is Ernest Becker himself. Sure. So how did he faces death? Is there something interesting personal?

[01:16:42]

I think it's so interesting to me. Is Becker, also from a Jewish family, claimed to be atheistic, did not identify. Ultimately, as Jewish, I believe he converted to Christianity, but was himself a religious person, and he said he became religious when his first child was born, not religious.

[01:17:14]

What does that mean? What does he have a faith in? Well, let's talk. More importantly is the afterlife. He was his view on the afterlife.

[01:17:24]

He was agnostic on that, but he did. Now, the denial of death is there's a chapter devoted to Kierkegaard and he talks about. For Kierkegaard, if you want to become a mature individual, you know, if you want to learn something, you go to the university. If you want to become a more mature individual, according to Kierkegaard, you got to go to the you've got to go to the school of anxiety.

[01:17:57]

And what Kierkegaard said is that we have to let this vague dis ease put a hyphen between dis and ease about death. Kierkegaard point is, you have to really. Think about that, you have to think about it and feel it, you've got to let it sink in or seep into your mind, at which point, according to Kierkegaard, basically you realize that your present identity is fundamentally a cultural construction. You didn't choose the time and place of your birth.

[01:18:38]

You didn't choose your name. You know, you didn't choose necessarily even the social role that you occupy. You might have chosen from what's available in your culture, but not from the full palette of human opportunities.

[01:18:53]

And so what Kierkegaard said is that we need to realize that we've been living a lie of sorts. Becker calls it a necessary lie.

[01:19:06]

And and we have to momentarily dispose of that. And so now Kierkegaard says, well, here I am.

[01:19:14]

I have shrugged off all of the cultural accoutrements that I have used to define myself. And now what am I or who am I? This is like the ancient Greek tragedy where the worst thing was to be No. One or no thing.

[01:19:36]

All right. At this point, Kierkegaard said you're really dangling on the precipice of oblivion and some people tumble into that abyss and never come out. On the other hand, Kierkegaard said that what you can now do, metaphorically and literally, is to rebuild yourself from the ground up. And there's a in the New Testament, there's something you have to die in order to be reborn.

[01:20:02]

And Kierkegaard view, though, is that there's only one way to do that.

[01:20:07]

This is his proverbial leap into faith. And in Kierkegaard case, it was faith and Christianity that you can't have unbridled faith and cultural constructions. The only thing that you can have unequivocal faith in is some kind of transcendent power. All right. But of course, this raises the question of, well, is that just another death denying belief system? Right.

[01:20:39]

And at the end of the denial of death, Bakker admits that there's no way to tell while still advocating for what is ultimately a religious stance.

[01:20:53]

Now, one of the things that I don't understand and Becker has been the most singularly potent influence in my academic and personal life. But a year or two ago, I started reading Martin Heidegger. I'm reading Being in Time. And what I now wonder is why?

[01:21:16]

Why Becker, who refers to Heidegger from time to time in his work, why he didn't take Heidegger more seriously? Because Heidegger has this is like a secular Kierkegaard. He's he has the same thing, which is death anxiety on. I should have pointed out that what Kierkegaard says is that death anxiety. Most people don't go to the school of anxiety. They flee from death anxiety by embracing their cultural beliefs. Kierkegaard says they then tranquilise themselves with the trivial and I love that phrase, beautiful.

[01:21:56]

It's a beautiful phrase because at the end of the denial of death, Bakker's like, look, the average American is either drinking or shopping or watching television and they're all the same thing. All right. Heidegger says the same thing. He says, look, and he acknowledges Kierkegaard. He says, what makes us feel unsettled? Evidently, that's an English translation of angst that in that it's we don't feel at home in the world.

[01:22:25]

Heidegger says that's death anxiety. And One Direction is the Kierkegaard one. He Heidegger calls it a flight from death. You just unself reflexively clinging to your cultural constructions. And Heidegger borrows the term tranquillised.

[01:22:45]

But he points out that he doesn't care for that term because tranquillised sounds like you're subdued when in fact what most culturally constructed meat puppets do is to be frenetically engaged with their surroundings to ensure that they never sit still long enough to actually think about anything consequential.

[01:23:08]

Heidegger says. There's another way, though. He's like, Yo, what you can do is to come to terms with that anxiety in the following way thing. No one is to realize that not only are you going to die, but your death can happen. At any given moment, so for Heidegger, if you say, I know I'm going to die and some vaguely unspecified future moment, that's still death denial because you're saying, yeah, not me, not now.

[01:23:43]

Yeah.

[01:23:44]

Heidegger's point is you need to get to the point where you need to realize that, you know, I need to realize that I can walk outside and get smoked by a comet or I can stop for gas on the way home and catch the virus and be dead in two days or any number of potentially unanticipated and uncontrollable fatal outcomes.

[01:24:09]

But annealing, by the way, it's a way to bring into the now. Yeah, it is brilliant.

[01:24:17]

I agree. Waxen. And that's why I'm wondering why didn't backor notice this?

[01:24:21]

Because that's the being and time thing is it's got to be now and then he says so OK, so now I've dealt somewhat with the the death part and now he says now you've got to deal with what he calls existential guilt. And he says, well alright, what you have to you have to realize the like good or not, you have to make choices.

[01:24:51]

You know, this is Jean-Paul Sartre. We are condemned by virtue of consciousness to choosing. But Heidegger is a little bit more precise. He's like, look, as I was saying earlier, you're.

[01:25:06]

In reality, you're an insignificant speck of respiring, carbon based dust born into a time and place not of your choosing when you're here for a microscopic amount of time after which you are not, and for Heidegger.

[01:25:27]

You have to realize that, like I said, I didn't choose to be born a male or Jewish or in America, the offspring of working class people and Heidegger, what he says is, yeah, but you still have to make choices and accept responsibility for those choices, even though you didn't choose any of the parameters that ultimately limit what's available to you.

[01:25:59]

And moreover, you're going to not always make good choices. So now you're you're guilty for your choices. And then he uses the poet Rilke.

[01:26:17]

He has a phrase, Becker uses it in the denial of death, the guilt of unlived life.

[01:26:23]

I just love that you have to accept that you have already diminished and in many ways amputated your own possibilities by virtue of choices that you've made or just as often have declined to make. Because you are reluctant to accept responsibility for for the opportunities that you are now able to create by virtue of seeing the possibilities that lay before you.

[01:27:01]

So anyway, Heidegger then says, look, OK, so, you know, I'm a professor and I live in America in the 21st century. Well, if I was in the third century, living in a year in Mongolia, I'm not going to have an opportunity to be a professor.

[01:27:22]

But what he submits is that there is some aspects of whatever I am that are independent of my cultural and historical circumstances. In other words, there is a me of sorts. Heidegger would take vigorous issue. So what Heidegger scholars, because I'm not claiming to understand him. This is my classic comic book rendering.

[01:27:46]

But Heidegger's point is that you get to the point where you're able to say, OK. I am a contingent, historical and cultural artifact. But so what you know, if I was, you know, not if I was transported a thousand years in the past in Asia, I'd be in the same situation. I would still be conditioned by time and place. I would still have choices that I could make within the confines of what opportunities are afforded to me.

[01:28:24]

And then Heidegger says, if I can get that far in this is his language, he says that there is a transformation and he literally he calls it a turning.

[01:28:36]

You're turning away from a flight from death and you are allowed you therefore you see a horizon as his word of opportunity that makes you. In a state of anticipatory resoluteness with solicitous regard for others. That makes your life seem like an adventure, perfused with unshakable joy. All right, let me unpack. It is beautiful.

[01:29:10]

It is. I love that you're resonating to the time thing. So he's like, OK, we already talked about now anticipatory is is already hopeful because it's looking forward to be resolute. It means to be steadfast and and to just have confidence in what you're doing moving forward. All right. Solicitous.

[01:29:36]

I had to look up all these words, by the way, is it just means that you are concerned about your fellow human beings. And but I love the idea.

[01:29:48]

Even if it seems allegorical, I don't mind. Not at all. This idea you said love earlier. And I think that when Heidegger is talking about being solicitous, that's as close as he can get. There's an Italian.

[01:30:04]

Yes. Sight in trouble. So what was that line again with the solicitous of the whole thing of turning away from death? And then, yeah, he made all the words you said. It's just beautiful. I love those words. Yeah.

[01:30:14]

Anticipatory resoluteness that is accompanied with solicitous regard to our fellow humans, which makes life appear to us to be an ongoing adventure that is permeated by unshakable joy. Now, again, Heidegger's not Mary Poppins.

[01:30:36]

This guy's got a tattoo. No, I'm not great. I just love that exact quote.

[01:30:42]

No, I'm piecing together these are his exact words that I spent the last two years reading, almost everything that I can find because I want to I'm sick to death. You said it. So I want to second what you say, Lex. So it's not about death. It's the Sherwood Anderson guy. He's a novelist that I like about. He wrote a book called Winesburg, Ohio. And now I'm going to forget what he said on his tombstone.

[01:31:14]

But, you know, it was something to the effect. Oh, he said life, not death, is the great adventure.

[01:31:21]

The point being is that, you know, that to consider that we must die. And the existential implications of that, really the goal, the way I see it, is getting from hate to to love. Yeah. And I feel like Heidegger has.

[01:31:44]

A way of thinking about things that moves us more in that direction and so that's kind of my current preoccupation is to take what I just said to you and to talk about it with my colleagues and other academic psychologists, because the way we started with Ernest Becker, remember I said earlier I wasn't trained in any of these things.

[01:32:11]

I'm an egghead researcher that was doing experiments about biofeedback. And, you know, then we read these backor books. And I thought they were so interesting that for the first few years we didn't have any studies. I just would travel around and I'd be like, here's what this Becker guy says. I think this is cool.

[01:32:33]

Yeah, well, my my present view is I'm like, here's what this Heidegger guy says, I think. These ideas are consistent with what Becker is saying, because they are anchored in death anxiety. But I like that direction as an alternative to the Kierkegaard insistence that the only psychologically tenable way to extricate ourselves from maladaptive reactions to death anxiety is through faith in the traditional sense.

[01:33:13]

Yeah, I always kind of saw Kierkegaard unfairly, like you said, in a comic book sense of the word faith in a non-traditional sense. I kind of like the idea of leap of faith. Oh, I love that idea.

[01:33:26]

And so what I've been babbling about with, you know, Kierkegaard or Heidegger, I'm like, yeah, Kierkegaard is a leap of faith in God. Heidegger's a leap of faith in life. And I just yeah, I like it.

[01:33:42]

I found the leap of faith really interesting in so in the technological space. So I've I've talked to on this thing with Elon Musk, but I think he's also just in general for our culture, a really important figure. Oh, absolutely. That takes I mean, sometimes a little bit insane on on social media and just in life when I met him was kind of interesting. That, of course, there's. I mean, he's a legit engineer, so he's fun to talk to about the technical things.

[01:34:14]

Yeah, but he also just just the way the humor and the way he sees life, it just like refuses to be conventional. Yeah.

[01:34:25]

So it's a constant leap into the unknown. And one of the things that he does and this isn't even this isn't even like fake. A lot of people say because he's a CEO, that's a business owner. So he's trying to make money. No, I think as I looked him in his eyes, I mean, this is real is a lot of the things he believes that are going to be accomplished, that a lot of others are saying are impossible, like autonomous vehicles.

[01:34:55]

He truly believes that to me, that is the leap of faith of I'm was going like we're like the entirety of our experience is shrouded in mystery. Yeah. We don't know what the hell's going to happen. What you don't know what we're actually capable of as human beings. And he just takes the leap. He fully believes that we can you know, we can go to what we can colonize Mars. Yeah. I mean, how how crazy is it to just believe and dream and actually be taking steps towards it?

[01:35:25]

Yeah. To colonizing Mars when most people are like, that's the stupidest idea ever.

[01:35:30]

Yeah. Well, I'm I'm in agreement with you on, you know, two things.

[01:35:34]

You know, one is it reminds me of Ben Franklin, who in his autobiography, you know, has a similarly childish in the best sense of the word unbridled imagination for what might become, you know, Ben Franklin.

[01:35:50]

So I guess I got electricity. That's cool. But we'll be levitating soon, and I can't even begin to imagine what we are capable of. And of course, people are like, dude, that's crazy.

[01:36:05]

And there's a guy with it's FCF Schiller, some humanistic guy at the beginning of the 20th century. He's like, you know, lots of things that people think about may appear to be absurd to the point of obscene, but the reality is historically. Every fantastic innovation has generally been initiated by someone who was condemned for being a lunatic. And it's not that anything is possible, but surely things that we don't try will never manifest as possibilities.

[01:36:51]

Yeah, and that's that's that there's something beautiful to that that's there embracing the abyss. And again, it's like the it's the embracing, the fear of death, the reality of death and then turning into look at all the opportunities, I guess. That's right.

[01:37:12]

Let me ask you, whenever I bring up Ernest Barker's work, which I do and yours quite a bit, I find it surprising. How that it's not a lot more popular in the sense that, no, I don't mean just your book.

[01:37:31]

Know that's what written people should read it, you buy it, whatever I think has the same kind of qualities that are useful to think about as like Jordan Peterson's work and stuff like that.

[01:37:43]

But I just mean, like, why people are not don't think of that as a compelling description of the core of the human condition.

[01:37:58]

Like, I think what you mentioned about Heidegger was quite conclusively, quite well. So I ask on this podcast, I often ask people if they're afraid of death. That's like almost every single almost always get criticized for asking world class people, a scientist and technologist, and about fear of death and the meaning of life. And on the fear of death, they often. Like, don't say anything interesting, what I mean by that is they haven't thought deeply about it, like you kind of brought this up a few times of really letting it sink in.

[01:38:38]

They kind of say this thing about what exactly you said, which is like it's something that happens not today. Like I'm aware that it's something that happened. And I'm not the thing that usually says I'm not afraid of death. I just want to live a good life kind of thing.

[01:38:56]

And what I'm trying to express is like when I look in their eyes and the kind of the the core of the conversation, it looks like they haven't really become like they haven't really meditated on death. I guess the question is, what do I say to people that there's something to really think about here? Like. There's some demons, some realities that need to be faced by more people. Well, that's a tough one. You know, I could tell you what not to do, you know, so when we are young and annoying.

[01:39:31]

Yeah, a lot of famous people, mostly psychologists, because that's who we intersected with, that, you know, we would lay out these ideas and they would be well, I don't think about death like that.

[01:39:49]

So these ideas must be wrong and we would say, well, you don't think about death because you're lucky enough to be comfortably ensconced in a cultural world view from which you derive self-esteem, and that has spared you the existential, excruciating science that would otherwise arise. But that's like Freud, you know, you're repressing. Say you're either agree with me, in which case I'm right. Or you disagree with me, in which case you're repressing and I'm right.

[01:40:21]

Well, so that's the the nuclear thing. What I felt when I've been moment in my life, moments in my life when I really thought about death, I mean, there's not too many, like, really, really thought about it and feel a thing when you felt that eight maybe traumatizing or romanticizing it.

[01:40:39]

But I feel like it's the conservatives call it popularly like the movie Matrix. Call it the red pill moment.

[01:40:51]

I feel like it's a dangerous thought. Because I feel like I'm taking a step out of a society like there's a nice narrative that we've all constructed, you are. And I'm taking a step out and.

[01:41:05]

It feels this feeling like you're basically drowning. I mean, it's not a good feeling, it is not.

[01:41:14]

But this gets back to the Heidegger Kierkegaard School of Anxiety. You are stepping out.

[01:41:19]

Yeah. And you are momentarily shrugging off the, again, the culturally constructed psychological accoutrements that allow you to stand up in the morning.

[01:41:30]

And so, I mean that in that sense, it feels like. I mean. What do you how do you have that conversation, because I guess I'm dancing around a set of questions, which is like I guess I'm disappointed that people don't are not as willing to step outside, like even just even any kind of thought experiment. Forget Donald like. Others, there's now a community of people let's to take an easy one that I think is scientifically ridiculous, which is a community of people that believe that the earth is flat.

[01:42:16]

Yeah, or actually even better because the space is fake. Yeah.

[01:42:22]

Like, what I find surprising is that a lot of people I talked to are not willing. To be like, imagine if it is like, imagine the earth is flat, like think about it. A lot of people just like know the earth is round. They're like like scientists, too.

[01:42:42]

They're like, yes, well actually we have you actually like thought about it like imagine like it's a thought experiment that like basically step outside a little narrative that we are comfortable with.

[01:42:55]

Now that one in particular is has really strong evidence and scientific validation. So it's a pretty simple thing to show that at least is not flat, but just the willingness to take a step outside of the stories that bring us comfort. It's been disappointing that people are not willing to do that. And I think the philosophy that you've constructed and that respect is constructing, you've tested, I think is really compelling in the fact that people are often willing to take that step.

[01:43:33]

Yeah, that's the point.

[01:43:34]

Well, yes, but perhaps understandable.

[01:43:37]

I mean, this is an anecdote, of course. But when we were trying to get a publisher for our book, I had we had a meeting with the. A publisher who. Published some Malcolm Gladwell books. Yeah, and she said, I'm very interested in your book, but can you write it without mentioning death?

[01:44:03]

Because people don't like death and we're like now it's really kind of central.

[01:44:10]

And I think that's part of it.

[01:44:13]

I think, again, if these ideas have merit. And I actually like the way that you put it works, it's that to step away is to momentarily expose yourself to all of. The anxiety. Yeah, but our identity and our beliefs typically enable us to manage, I think it's as simple as that.

[01:44:41]

Yeah, I had this experience. In college with my best friend, who got really high and he forgot it was in the winter, it was really freezing, as memorable to me, I think it's an analogy is very useful.

[01:45:00]

So he went to get some pizza and of course and he so I and he left me outside and said, I'll be back in five minutes. And he forgot that he left me outside.

[01:45:15]

And I remember it was I was in like shorts. Yeah. It was freezing winter. Wow. And I remember standing outside the dorm and I'm looking from the outside in. It's a light is warm and I'm just standing there frozen and think for an hour or more. And that's how I think about it. Like, I just I don't give a damn about the stupid winter. I just want to I like it's like I'm drawn to be back to the warm.

[01:45:43]

Yes. And that's how I feel about thinking about like death is like, yeah. At a certain point it's like it's too much.

[01:45:50]

It's like that cold. Like I want to be back in one of the warm then getting back to hydrograph for a moment, I like the yeah.

[01:45:59]

He uses a lot the idea of feeling at home, not as like in your house but just feeling like you're comfortably situated.

[01:46:11]

Maybe you can talk about like I had a conversation about this with my dad a little bit. How does religion relate to this?

[01:46:21]

I see it as the the disease and the cure in in a sense. A few things. One is that. I think a case could be made that humans are innately religious, so now we're going to get into territory where there's going to be a lot of disputes.

[01:46:50]

And what do you mean by religious?

[01:46:52]

Religion is an evolutionary adaptation and religion is like a belief in something outside of yourself kind of thing. Not necessarily.

[01:47:02]

So here we got to be a little bit more careful. And again, I'm not a scholar. How about I'm a well-intentioned dilatant in in this regard?

[01:47:15]

Because what what I have read is that religion evolved. Very early on, long before our ancestors were conscious and the issue of death arose and the word religion evidently is from a Latin word rogatory, we can look it up, but and it means to bind.

[01:47:44]

And Emile Durkheim, the dead French sociologist, he said, you know, originally religion is a Darcel passing who's a dead novelist.

[01:47:56]

She calls it the substance of we feeling that it's literally that it erodes because we're uber social creatures who from time to time took comfort in just being in physical proximity with our fellow humans, and that there is this kind of sense of transcendent exuberance just back to the unshakable joy that Heidegger alludes to and that the original function of religion was to foster social cohesion and coordination and that it was only subsequently some claim that a burgeoning level of consciousness made it such that religious belief systems that included the hope of some kind of immortality were just naturally selected thereafter.

[01:49:04]

So there are some people.

[01:49:05]

So it's David Sloan. Wilson wrote a book called Darwin's Cathedral, and he said religion has nothing to do with death. It's evolved to make groups viable.

[01:49:21]

He's actually a group selection guy with group selection, the idea that it's the group that is selected for rather than the individual. So people have vigorous disagreements about that.

[01:49:33]

But I guess our point would be we see religion as being inextricably, inextricably connected ultimately to assuaging concerns about death.

[01:49:46]

I guess another question to ask around this, like, what is the world look like without religion? Will we if it's an extra bleak, inextricably connected to our fears of death, do you think it always returns to some kind of shape? Maybe it's not called religion, but whatever it is just keeps returning.

[01:50:09]

Yeah. You know, so that's that's a great question. So there's a woman named Karen Armstrong. She was a nun turned historian. And she's I can't remember the name of the book, but no matter, she we could look that up, but I can look it up and I can also get added.l

[01:50:31]

OK. Yeah, her point has gotten the title, of course.

[01:50:34]

But, you know, she's like, look, all religions.

[01:50:40]

Are generally fairly right-minded in that they advocate the golden rule. And all religions at their best do seem to foster prosocial behavior towards the ingroup, and that confers both psychological as well as physical benefits.

[01:51:03]

That's the good news, and the bad news is historically, all religions are. Subject to being hijacked by a lunatic fringe.

[01:51:15]

Who declares that, you know, they're the ones in sole possession of the liturgical practices or whatever they call them, and they're the ones that turn, you know, religion at its best in the year crusades and Holocaust's?

[01:51:38]

My view, not that it should matter for much, but I I'm.

[01:51:46]

I grew up just skeptical of religion because I'm like as a kid, I'm like, well, if we didn't have these beliefs, we wouldn't be killing each other because of them.

[01:52:00]

And I'd be like to my parents. Well, you're telling me that all people should be judged on the merits of their character, but don't come home if you don't marry a Jewish woman. Right. Which is implying that if you're not Jewish, you're an inferior form of life. Yeah, that's what tribes always do. And there's the tribal thing.

[01:52:21]

And so there's a guy name Amin Maluf, a Lebanese guy who writes in French in the 1990s, I think.

[01:52:29]

Wrote a book called In the Name of Identity, Violence and the Need to Belong, and that was his point, is that unless we can overcome this tribal mentality, this will not end well. But but you said earlier, something like that I think is profound and profoundly important.

[01:52:55]

And that is you did not recoil in horror when I mentioned Kierkegaard use of the term faith.

[01:53:04]

And so I'm a big fan of faith. And I'm not sure what that implies, I have and by the way, this is just the peripheral comment, but I find less resistance to Beckers ideas in our work when I'm in like Jesuit schools, you know, it's the Americans that, you know, the secular humanists who are most disinclined to accept these ideas.

[01:53:35]

It's an important side comment because I think it's mostly because they don't think philosophically that's I mean, I speak with a lot of scientists and I think that's my main criticism is you don't I mean, that's the problem with science. Exactly. Is it's so comforting to focus in on the details that you can escape. Thinking about the mystery of it all, the big picture things, the philosophical like the fact that you don't actually know shit at all like that, that that that they are so that in terms of jazzer, like, that's that's the beauty of the experience of faith and so on is like, well, how wherever that journey takes you is you actually explore the biggest questions of our world.

[01:54:21]

Yeah.

[01:54:22]

Yeah. So I don't see religion going away because I don't see humans. As capable of surviving without faith and hope and. Everyone from the pope to Elon Musk will acknowledge that it is a world that is unfathomably mysterious and like it or not, in the absence of belief serum, Charles Persse, the pragmatic philosopher, he just said beliefs are the basis of action.

[01:55:00]

If you don't have any beliefs, you're paralyzed within decision, whether we're aware of it or not, whether we like it or not, in order to stand up in the morning, you have to subscribe to beliefs that can never be unequivocally proven right or wrong. Well, then why do you maintain them? Well, ultimately, it's because of some form of faith. But also also faith shouldn't be a dogmatic thing that you should always be leaping.

[01:55:34]

Yeah, I guess the problem with science or with religion is you could sort of know all of a sudden take a step into a place where you're super confident that you know the absolute truth of things. There you go again. Back to Socrates, Plato, back in the cave, you know, at Skidmore, where I work, that's what I have the students read in their first week, you know, in Plato's, like, look at all those poor bastards.

[01:56:02]

You know, they're in the cave, but they don't know it, you know, and then they are freed from their chains. And I have to be dragged out of the cave, by the way, which is another interesting point. They don't run out, but that gets back to why people don't like to be divested of their comfortable illusions.

[01:56:21]

But anyway, they get dragged out of the cave into the sunlight, which she claims is a representation of truth and beauty.

[01:56:28]

And I say to the students, well, what's wrong with that? And they're like, nothing.

[01:56:35]

That's like, awesome. And then I'm like, Yo, dudes. You out of the cave, but how do you know that you're not in another cave? The illumination may be better, but the minute you think. You're at the end of the proverbial. Intellectual slash epistemological trail.

[01:57:02]

Then you have already succumbed to either laziness or dogmatism or both, that's really well put, that's both terrifying and exciting that we're always it's there's always a bigger cave, a little bit of an outer question.

[01:57:18]

But I think some of the interesting qualities of the human mind is the ideas of intelligence and consciousness. So what do you make of consciousness? Do you think death creates consciousness like the fear of death? The terror of death creates consciousness and.

[01:57:41]

Consciousness, in turn, magnifies the terror of death, I do, I think what is consciousness, you don't ask me that.

[01:57:51]

So now that if I could answer that, you know, I'd be chugging rum out of a coconut with my Nobel Prize that, you know, it's literally, you know, Steven Pinker, I do agree with his claim.

[01:58:05]

And I think how the mind works that it is the key question for. The psychological science is broadly defined in the 21st century, what is conscious, yeah, what is consciousness?

[01:58:21]

And I don't think it's an AP phenomenological afterthought. So a lot of people I think Dan Wegner at Harvard, a lot of folks consider it just the ass and of a process that by the time we are aware of what it is, it's just basically an integrated rendering of something that's already happened.

[01:58:51]

You know, evidently the there's a half second delay between when something happens, you know, those studies and our awareness of it.

[01:58:59]

Um, that and then that's where, like ideas of free will will step. And you can explain away a lot of stuff.

[01:59:05]

And I think those are all important and interesting questions am of the persuasion. I mean, even not even but Dawkins in The Selfish Gene. It is very thoughtful, actually, in a lot of it's actually more in notes than in the text of the book, but he's just like, it's hard for me to imagine that consciousness doesn't have some sort of important and highly adaptive function. And what Dawkins says is he thought about it in terms of just the way that we could do mental simulations, that one possibly extraordinary product of consciousness is to rather than find out.

[02:00:00]

Often by adverse consequences through trying something would be to run mental simulations. And so one possibility is that consciousness is highly adaptive. Another possibility is Nicholas Humphrey, a British dude who wrote a book about I think it's called Regaining Consciousness.

[02:00:22]

And he hypothesized, I think this 1980s, maybe even earlier, that consciousness arose as a way to better predict the behavior of others in social settings, that by knowing how I feel, makes me better able to know how you may be feeling this like the rudiments of a theory of mind.

[02:00:48]

And it really may not have had anything to do with intelligence so much as social intelligence.

[02:00:57]

So so in that sense, consciousness is a social construct. I guess it's just just a useful thing for interacting with the. Yeah. I don't know.

[02:01:07]

But there seems to be something about realizing your own mortality that somehow intricately connected to the idea of consciousness.

[02:01:17]

Well, I think so also. So this is where and nature he said a solitary creature would not need consciousness or what do you think?

[02:01:30]

Well, I don't know what I think about that, but what I do then then he goes on to say that consciousness is the most calamitous stupidity by which we shall someday perish. And wow, I was like, dude, relax.

[02:01:44]

Yeah, but so what if you say you are on an island alone and you saw a reflection of yourself in the water, like if you are alone your whole life.

[02:01:58]

Yeah, great question.

[02:02:00]

His view Nietzsche's view would be that your thoughts of yourself would never come to mind. I don't know how I feel about that.

[02:02:09]

In a sense, this sounds weird, but in a sense I feel like my mental conversations has always been with death.

[02:02:19]

It's almost like another, you know, another notion like, uh, you know, these visualizations of of a death in the clock, like I always felt like I am a living thing.

[02:02:34]

And then there's one other thing that is the end of me.

[02:02:39]

And I'm having a conversation with that in the sense that that's the way I construct my the fact that I am a thing is because there's somebody else that tells me, well, you won't be a thing eventually. Wow. This feels like a conversation, perhaps. But that's that might be kind of this mental stimulation kind of idea that you're you're kind of it's not really it's a conversation with yourself, essentially. Sure. Yeah. But yeah, I don't know how I feel about that, but I tend to be in agreement with you when we're talking about economics.

[02:03:19]

More so. That that we're deeply social beings like everything, the way it just feels like we're humans, I'm with Harari, with Slepian's, that we're kind of we seem to construct ideas on top of each other.

[02:03:38]

And that's a fundamentally a social. Absolutely.

[02:03:41]

I think that's a fine book. It overlaps considerably with our take on these matters.

[02:03:48]

And the fact that we get to these points drawing on different sources, I think makes me more confident that it's so fascinating, just like reading your book and so on a small tangent.

[02:04:02]

That sapience. Is like one of the most popular books in the world. Like, yeah, and it's reading your book is like all the sounds. Yeah, well, I mean, like, I don't know I don't know what makes a popular book.

[02:04:20]

Yes. Well, if you want me to be petty and stupid, I will tell you that from time to time. We also wonder why our book, you know, like all books, people can take issue with it. But we thought it would be a bigger hit that would be more widely read.

[02:04:41]

And it's funny because I. I have. I don't know if I have good examples, I forgot already, but I'm often saddened by like Franz Kafka. I think he wasn't known in his life. Yeah, but I always wonder, like, these.

[02:04:57]

Great. Yeah. Like, some of the greatest books ever written are completely unknown during the author's lifetime. And it's like, man, for some reason that it's against the identity thing. I think, man, this sucks.

[02:05:13]

Well, I'm comforted by that.

[02:05:14]

So Van Gogh sold one painting in his life and evidently Thoreau sold like 75 copies of Walden Nature's books did not sell well.

[02:05:30]

And how did Ernest Becker so he he is the his books are published by the Free Press and have sold more than any other books that they have published.

[02:05:43]

So so it's I mean, it's a lot I don't know if it's like Jordan Peterson millions, but it's hundreds of thousands you respected. I just don't see him. OK, yeah. I don't see him brought up as like in the top 10 philosophers of. No, not at all.

[02:06:02]

So. How far away is in the top hundred for people? I don't think so. No, he doesn't. He's not brought up that often because, again, like, your work is borne out more often. Yeah, I like terrible.

[02:06:14]

Like, because I think it got you. Yeah.

[02:06:18]

I mean, I think he's one of the great philosophers of the 20th century.

[02:06:20]

So what really works is that our goal certainly when we first started and now just as much actually. But what I say it all my talk is, look, if these ideas have interest you enough to go read Ernest Bakker, then this has been good. I consider him to be one of the most important voices of the 20th century who does not get the attention that he deserves. All right. Similarly. Our work, I believe, to be important because point by point, we provide empirical corroboration for all of the claims.

[02:07:02]

If you know when that so that's literally the students that read the denial of death and then escape from evil. They're like, yeah, wow. Every chapter of the book, you have studies. And I'm like, yeah, because for 40 years for Skidmore, students said, oh, that's got to be bullshit. I'm like, well, let's do a study, let's just study in.

[02:07:27]

My own dreams are in creating. Robots and artificial intelligence systems that a human can love, and I think there's something about mortality and fear of mortality that is essential for implementing in our systems. Yeah, and so maybe can you comment on that?

[02:07:49]

Like. Well. And so this is this is a different perspective, I know for sure. Which is like how do we engineer a human. Yeah.

[02:08:00]

So no, this is awesome.

[02:08:01]

Lack's I'm delighted that you said that first of all, and I may mention this to you and I don't I can't remember because I'm saying now when you first contacted me. Yeah.

[02:08:11]

I had just been told I have to learn more about your work because I'm working with some very talented people in New York, and they're they're writing a screenplay for a movie about an artificial intelligence.

[02:08:32]

It's a female A.I. set in like 30 years in the future. And basically, the little twist, this is how I had to read Heidegger. So these people call me and they're like, we're making a movie. It's based on Bekker and your work and Heidegger and this other philosopher, Levinas, and then another philosopher, Sylvia Danso, who's an Italian philosopher.

[02:09:04]

And the long short story is the movie is about supposedly the most advanced artificial intelligence entity, an embodied one, and who human form, human form, who finds out who is having.

[02:09:28]

Having essentially existential anxieties and the I think the project is called a dinner with her or something, and it doesn't really matter, but the punch line is that she finds out that her creator.

[02:09:45]

Has made her. Mortal and so the question is what happens phenomenologically and behaviourally? To on an artificial intelligence, who now knows that it's mortal and it's actually the same question that you're posing.

[02:10:12]

Yeah, and that is, is that necessary?

[02:10:16]

In order for an AI AI to approximate humanity, yeah, I think yeah, so the intuition, again, it's unknown, but I think it's absolutely I think it's absolutely necessary. A lot of people, the same kind of shallow thinking that people have about our own end of life, our own death is the same way people think. I think about artificial intelligence. It's like, well, OK, so, yeah. So within the system, there's a there's a terminal position where like there's a point at which it ends.

[02:10:55]

The program ends. There's a goal state. There's you reached an end point. But the thing is making that end a thing that's also within the program like like the making the thing like and there's also the mystery of it. The thing is, we don't know what the hell that thing is.

[02:11:20]

And it's not like it's not like we I mean, the program doesn't give us information about the meaning of it all, Zakho. And that's where the terror is. And it feels like I mean, in the language that you would think about, this is the terror of this death or the anticipation of it or thinking about it is the creative force that builds everything. Right. And that feels like, you know, that feels really important to implement.

[02:11:52]

Again, very difficult to know how to do technically currently. But it's important to think about what I find is you like Screenplay's and so on is sci fi. Folks and philosophers are the only ones thinking about it currently.

[02:12:08]

And that's what these folks have convinced me. Yeah, and engineers aren't, which is I get. Yeah, most most most of the things they talk about, I get kind of people roll their eyes from these books that they're like because again, I saw your name and I'm like women.

[02:12:29]

I've just seen that. They're like, here's someone you should check out. Yeah. So this was a delightful confluence.

[02:12:37]

Yeah.

[02:12:38]

There's a huge fan of your work and Ernest Becker, and it's funny that none of people are. I'm talking about it. I don't know what to do with that. I think that there is a possibility to create real deep, meaningful connections between A.I. systems and humans. Absolutely. And I think some of these things of immortality are essential, that are essential for the element of human experience. I don't I don't think it might be essential to create general intelligence like very intelligent machines, but to create a machine that connects to a human in some deep way.

[02:13:19]

What's your view? Not to make me the interviewer, but what's your view about machine ethics? Can you imagine an ethical a I without some semblance of.

[02:13:34]

Yeah, finitude like to say, well, I think ethics, it's a you know, there's a trolley problem that's often used in the work that I've done on my team.

[02:13:48]

Yeah. And with with autonomous vehicles in particular. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

[02:13:52]

That people. I think they offload, they ask, like, how would a machine deal with an ethical situation that they themselves humans don't know how to deal sacrifice. And so. I don't know if a machine is able to do a better job on difficult ethical questions, but I certainly think to behave properly and effectively in this world, it needs to be have a fear of mortality and be able to even dance, because I don't think you can solve ethical problems.

[02:14:27]

But you have to I think ethics is like a dance for you. You have to just you have to dance properly with the rest of the humans that give people the tango. You have to dance in the same kind of way.

[02:14:39]

And for that, you have to have with your own mortality, like I think of more practically speaking, as an autonomous vehicles, like the way you interact with pedestrians.

[02:14:51]

Fundamentally has to have a sense of mortality.

[02:14:55]

So when pedestrians cross the road and now I've watched most certainly one hundred plus hours of pedestrian videos. There's a kind of social contract where you walk in front of a car and you're putting your life in the hands of another.

[02:15:17]

Yes, that's right. And like, death is is is in the car in the game that's being played. Death is right there. It's part of the calculus. It's not. But it's not like a simple calculus, not a simple equation. It's it's an it's a I mean, I don't know what it is, but it's in it's in there. And it has to be part of the optimization problem. Like, it's not as simple as so from the computer vision, from the artificial intelligence perspective, it's detecting.

[02:15:47]

There's a human estimating. Right, estimating the trajectory like treating everything like it's billiard balls, as opposed to like being able to construct an effective model, the world model of what the person is thinking, what they're going to do. What are the different possibilities of how this scene might evolve, I think requires having some sense of. Yeah, fear of fear of mortality, of mortality. I don't see. The thing is, I think it's really important to think about.

[02:16:21]

I could be honest enough to say that it's I haven't been able to figure out how to engineer any of these things. Right. But I do think it's really, really important to have. So I have a bunch of numbers here. Shortly after that.

[02:16:39]

I've Roomba is a robot, that is. Vacuums the floor, and I've had them make different sounds like I had them scream in pain and it. It you O'Meally anthropomorphize, absolutely, and it creates a. I don't know, knowing that they can feel pain, see, I'm speaking like knowing that I immediately imagine that they can feel pain and it immediately draws me closer to them. Yes. The human experience and that there's something in that that should be engineered in our in our systems.

[02:17:21]

It feels like that, I believe person. I don't know what you think, but I believe it's possible for a robot and a human to fall in love, for example, in the in the future.

[02:17:32]

I think it's yeah, it's already there.

[02:17:35]

I know a certain kind of deep connection with technology in a real like you would choose to marry.

[02:17:43]

I mean, again, it sounds I'll find a book title and I'll send it to you. And it's a serious consideration of people who started out with these sex dolls, but it turned into a relationship of enduring significance that the woman who wrote the book is not willing to dismiss as a perversion.

[02:18:09]

Yeah, that's what you know, people kind of joke about sex robots, which is funny. Like, it's a it's a funny I mean, there's a lot of stuff about robots.

[02:18:18]

This is kind of fun to talk about that is that it's not necessarily connected to reality. People joke about sex robots.

[02:18:25]

But if you actually look how sex robots, which are pretty rare these days, are used, they're not used by people who want sex.

[02:18:35]

Precisely. They're actually their companions, their compared. They become companions. Yeah, it's yeah.

[02:18:43]

It's fascinating. They're just we're not even talking about any kind of intelligence. We're talking about just I mean, human beings see companionships. We're deeply lonely. I mean that's the other sense I have that I don't know if I can articulate clearly. You can probably do a better job, but I have a sense that there's a deep loneliness within all of us. Absolutely. In the face of death, it feels like we're all alone.

[02:19:05]

So, you know, the what drew me to the existential take on things, this was the.

[02:19:17]

Who is it, Rollo May and Erwin Yalom, right about existentialism, and they're like, look at what?

[02:19:27]

There's different flavors of existentialism, but they all have in common.

[02:19:33]

What is it for universal concerns?

[02:19:35]

The overriding one is about death, and that next is choice and responsibility. The next one is existential isolation. And they're like, that's one of the. Things about consciousness, that and the last one is meaninglessness, but the existential isolation point. As you know, we. Ah, by virtue of consciousness, able to apprehend the bin last year, a Siamese twin, you are fundamentally alone. And because it is claimed it's Eric from in a book called Escape from Freedom, he's like, look, you you're smart enough to know that the most direct way that we typically communicate with our fellow human beings is through language.

[02:20:35]

But you also know that language is a pale shadow of the totality of our interior. Phenomenological existence, therefore, there's always going to be times in our lives where even under the best of circumstances, you could be trying desperately to convey your thoughts and feelings and somebody listening could be like, yeah, I get it, I get it, I get it. And you're like, you have no fucking idea what I'm talking about. Yeah.

[02:21:08]

So you can be desperately lonely in a house where you live with 10 people in the middle of Tokyo where there's millions.

[02:21:20]

How is The Great Gatsby to be along party exactly? Maybe this is a small tangibility. Let me ask you on the topic of academia. You're kind of and we talked about Jordan Peterson.

[02:21:35]

There's a lot of sort of renegade type of thinkers, certainly in psychology, but it applies in all disciplines of what are your thoughts about academia being a place to harbor people like yourself, but, you know, people who think deeply about things who are not constrained by sort of the who.

[02:22:02]

I don't think you're quite controversial.

[02:22:05]

No, not really.

[02:22:06]

But you are a person who thinks deeply about things and it feels like academia can sometimes stifle that.

[02:22:15]

I think so. So my concern right now works for young scholars is that. The restrictions and. Expectations are such that it's highly unlikely that anybody will do anything of.

[02:22:38]

Great value or innovation? Except for and this is not a bad thing, but stepwise improvement of existing paradigm, so the you know, it's simple English. You know, I went to Princeton for a job interview 40 years ago and they're like, what are you going to do if we give you a job? And I'm like, I don't know. I want to think about it and read. And and I I saw that that interview was over the window of opportunity shut in my face.

[02:23:11]

And they actually called my mentors. And they're like, what? Are you doing tell this guy to buy some pants? I had hair down to my waist also also this guy looks like Charles Manson. Jesus.

[02:23:23]

But the expectation is that you come to a post, you know, you start publishing so that you can get grants. That's certainly true.

[02:23:38]

But there's also kind of a behavioral thing. You said like long hair. There's there's a certain style of the way you're supposed to behave, for example, like I'm wearing a suit. It sounds it sounds weird, but I feel comfortable in this.

[02:23:53]

You know, I wore it like when I was teaching at MIT. I weren't sure were to meetings and so on, different sometimes the blue and red tie.

[02:24:01]

But like, that was an outsider thing to do at MIT. So there was a strong pressure to not wear a suit. No, that's right. And there's a pressure to behave to have a hair thing.

[02:24:13]

No, that's right.

[02:24:14]

The way you wear your hair, the way you this isn't like a liberal or a loan or anything. It's just in tribes. That's right.

[02:24:22]

And academia to me or a place any place that dreams of having, like, renegade free thinkers, like really deep thinkers should in fact, like, glorify the outsider. Right.

[02:24:36]

You know, should welcome just should welcome, you know, people that don't fit in.

[02:24:42]

Yeah, I know that sounds weird, but I don't I could just imagine an interview with a Princeton.

[02:24:49]

You know, I imagine why aren't people why aren't you at Harvard, for example, at MIT and.

[02:24:57]

Yeah, well, so look, I would love to you know, I haven't lectured at MIT, but I've lectured at Harvard and I've gotten to lecture at almost every place that wouldn't consider me for a job. Yeah. And. I. Well, a few things I'm lucky because I you know, I go to Princeton, I'm like, I don't know what I want to do. And two days later I go to Skidmore and I'm like, I don't know what I want to do.

[02:25:27]

And they offer me a job later that day, which I declined for months because of the extraordinary pressure of my mentors, who right mindedly felt that I wouldn't get much done there. And but what they told me at Skidmore was, take your time, you know, show up for your classes and don't molest barnyard animals and you'll probably get tenure. And I'm like, I'll show up for my classes.

[02:25:53]

We'll talk about it was that was the negotiation I negotiated. I bargain.

[02:25:59]

But but honestly, that's how I feel.

[02:26:04]

I'm very committed to Skidmore because I was given tenure when our first term management paper wasn't published. It took eight years to publish. It was rejected at every journal. And I submitted it as like a purple ditto sheet thing. I'm like, here's what I've been doing. Here's the reviews. Here's why I think this is still a pretty good idea. And I don't know that this would happen even at Skidmore anymore, but I was very lucky to be given the latitude and to be encouraged.

[02:26:38]

I took classes at Skidmore. That's how I learned all this stuff. I graduate. I got a Ph.D. unscathed by knowledge. We were great statisticians and methodologies, but we didn't have any. Substance, you know, and I don't mean this cynically, but we were trained and a method in search of a question. So I appreciate having five years at Skidmore basically to read books. And I also appreciate that I look like this 40 years ago and.

[02:27:16]

My view is. That this is how I comported myself, other people, the guy I learned the most from at Skidmore is not dead, a history professor, Ted Karradah. He wore a bow tie. And there's another guy, Darnell Rocker, who taught me about philosophy. And he was very proper. And he had like his jacket with, like the leather patches.

[02:27:48]

But these guys weren't pompous at all. They were. This is the way I am. And I always felt that that's important, that. Somebody who looks at you and says, oh, what a stiff, he's probably an MBA. Yeah, well, they're wrong. Yeah. And someone who looks at me when I first got to Skidmore, other professors, what I ask when I come into their office to empty the garbage, they just assumed, you know, I was in my 20s, they assumed I was housekeeping.

[02:28:21]

I always thought that was important, that the students learn not to judge an idea by the appearance of the person who pervades it.

[02:28:30]

And, yeah, I mean, that's I guess this is such a high concern now because I personally still have faith that academia is where the great geniuses will come from. I do. To good ideas.

[02:28:44]

I love hearing you say that. I still and it's one of the reasons why I'm really apprehensive about the future of education right now in the context of the pandemic. Oh, yeah. Is that a lot of folks and a lot of these are Google type people who I don't you know, they're geniuses also. But I don't like this idea that all learning can be virtual and that much could happen. I'm big on embodied environments with actual humans interacting.

[02:29:21]

I mean, there's there's so much to the university education. But I think the key part that I this is the the mentorship that occurs somehow and at the human level, like I've gotten a lot of flack like this conversation where in personnel and. I've even with Edward Snowden, who done all interviews remote, I'm a stickler to in person, it has to be in person like and then a lot of people just don't get it. They're like, well, why can't this is so much easier.

[02:29:56]

Like, why go through the pain? Like, I've traveled I'm traveling in the next month to Paris for a single, stupid conversation nobody cares about just to be in person. Well, it's important to me.

[02:30:10]

I honestly, I was like this and thank you for coming down today.

[02:30:17]

It's my pleasure.

[02:30:18]

But again, it's very self-serving. I've enjoyed this. I knew I was going to, but it's not about our enjoyment per say. Again, at the risk of sounding cavalier, there are a host of factors beyond verbal. Yeah.

[02:30:38]

That I don't believe. Can be adequately captured.

[02:30:43]

I don't care how much the acuity is decent on a zoom conversation, I feel again, I felt within five minutes that this was going to be for me.

[02:31:00]

Easy in the sense that I could speak freely, I just don't see that happening so easily from a distance.

[02:31:07]

Yeah, I tend to. Well, I'm hopeful I agree with you on the current technology, but I am hopeful, unlike some others on the technology, eventually being able to create that kind of experience.

[02:31:18]

I think we're quite far away from that.

[02:31:21]

But yeah, might be able.

[02:31:22]

My hope is I'm you know, I'm I'm hopeful. I was at Microsoft in Seattle and I can't remember why.

[02:31:32]

And no, I can't I that's how I'm in my early Mr. Magoo phase and. And somebody there was showing us like a virtual wall where the entire wall. You know, when you're talking to somebody, so it's life size and they were beginning the. Get the appearance of motion and stuff. It look pretty. Yeah, with virtual reality. Chernof you ever been inside a virtual world? Yeah, it's to me it's I can just see the future.

[02:32:08]

It's it's it's quite real. Yeah. In terms of like a terror of death, I'm afraid of heights. Me too. And there's I don't know if you've ever tried to shoot. If you haven't, there's a virtual reality experience. You can walk a plank. Yeah. You can look down, man.

[02:32:27]

I was on the ground like I was like I was afraid. Deeply afraid. I was is it was it was as real as yo as anything else could be. And I mean these are very early days of the technology relatively speaking. So yeah.

[02:32:46]

I mean I don't know what to do with that scene with like crossing the street. We did these experiments. Across the street in front of a car, and, you know, it's being run over by a car. It's terrifying. Yeah, it's just that yeah.

[02:33:02]

So there is a rich experience to be created there.

[02:33:06]

We're not there yet, but. Yeah, and I've seen a lot of people try, like you said, the Google folks, Silicon Valley folks, try to create a virtual online education. I don't know. I think they've raised really important questions like what makes the education experience fulfilling? What makes it effective? Yeah, these are important questions. And I think what they highlight is we have no clue.

[02:33:36]

Like there's.

[02:33:39]

Tommaso wrote a book about a recent book on charter schools.

[02:33:48]

Yeah, I would like to talk to him. Yeah, he's an interesting guy.

[02:33:51]

We disagree about a lot. But respectfully, we are such a powerful mind.

[02:33:56]

Yeah, but he I need to read I've only heard him talk about the book, but he argues quite seemingly effectively that that.

[02:34:08]

That the public education system is broken. That we blame, he basically says that we kind of blame like the conditions or the the environment, but the upbringing of people like parenting, blah, blah, blah, like the the set of opportunities. But OK, putting that aside, it seems like charter schools, no matter who it is that attends them, does much better than in in public schools. And he puts a bunch of data behind it. And in his usual way, as you know, just is very eloquent in arguing his points.

[02:34:48]

Yeah. So that to me just highlights we don't. Education is like one of the most important, the it's probably the most important thing in our civilization.

[02:34:58]

And we're doing a shitty job of it in academia and in university education and, you know, younger education, the whole thing, the whole thing.

[02:35:11]

And yet we value. Just about anyone or anything more than educators, you know, part of it is just the. Relatively low regard. That Americans have for teachers, for teachers, also, similarly, like just people service, I think great teachers are the greatest thing in our society.

[02:35:44]

And I would say now on a controversial note, like Black Lives Matter, you know, great police officers is the greatest thing in our society.

[02:35:53]

Also, like all people that do service, we undervalue cops civil like this whole defund the police is missing the point.

[02:36:02]

And it's a stupid word. I'm with you on that. Blacks are neighbors to one side of our house or three generations of police. Our neighbors across the street are police. They know my.

[02:36:20]

You know, political predilections and we've gotten along fine for 30 years, and I go out and tell them every day, you know, when you go in today, you tell the people on the force. But I appreciate. What they're doing. I think it's really important to not tribal ize those concerns. I mean, we mentioned so many brilliant books and philosophers, but it would be nice, sort of in a focused way to try to see if we can get some recommendations from you.

[02:37:04]

So what three books, technical or fiction or philosophical, had A and B, the worst question?

[02:37:13]

Well, the big impact on your life and you will recommend spent four hours driving here, perseverating about that. I did everything else. You sat me as fine.

[02:37:23]

And I actually I skimmed it and I'm like, I don't want to look at it because I want I want to talk. Yeah. The ones in blue, I'm like, all right.

[02:37:32]

And, you know, I've already said that I've found Bakker's work and I put the denial of death out there is that is best.

[02:37:44]
Sorry, I don't want a small tangent. Is there other books of his. Yes.
[02:37:49]
If I could have this count as one the the birth and death of meaning the denial of death and escape from evil are three books of Ernest Bakker's that I believe to all be profound in a in a little sort of breve dance around topics I've only read now.
[02:38:10]
Death like what? How do those books connect in here.
[02:38:13]
Yeah, nice. Of the the birth and death. The meaning is where Bekker situates his thinking in more of an evolutionary foundation.
[02:38:23]
So I like that for that reason, escape from evil is where he applies the ideas in the denial of death more directly to economic matters and to inequality and also to our inability to peacefully coexist with other folks who don't share our beliefs. So I would put Ernest Becker out there as one of them. I also like novels a lot. And here I was like, God damn it, no matter what I say, I'm going to be like, yes, but.
[02:39:03]
But the existentialist you like all those folks come, oh, you like that literary exercise? I do.
[02:39:10]
But I mean, you know, I've read all those books. I will tell you the last line of the plague. We learn in times of pestilence that there's more to admire in men than to despise. And I love that. Yeah.
[02:39:25]
Plagues such. I don't know. I find the plague is a brilliant Mayta before before the plague has come to us in twenty twenty. It was just so book about love about.
[02:39:38]
But I'll toss a one that may be less known to folks I'm enamored with. A novel by a woman named Carson McCullers written in 1953 called Clock Without Hands. And I find it a brilliant literary depiction of many of the ideas that we have spoken about. Fiction. Fiction. Yeah.
[02:40:00]
What what kind of ideas are we talking about?
[02:40:03]
All of the existential ideas that we have encountered today. But in the context of a story of someone who finds out that he is terminally ill, it's set in the South in the heyday of like segregation.
[02:40:22]
So there's a lot of social issues, a lot of existential issues, but it's basically a fictional account of someone who finds out that they're terminally ill and who reacts originally. As you might expect, anyone becomes more hostile to people who are different, like

petty and stupid, denies that anything's happening. But as the book goes on and he comes more to terms with his own mortality, it ends lovingly. And I'm back to your idea of about, you know, love being incredibly potent.

[02:41:11]

That's the nice thing, as you mentioned before, with Heidegger. I really like that idea, and I've seen that in people who are terminally ill is they bring, you know, the idea of death becomes current. Yes, it becomes like a thing. You know, I could die. I really like that idea.

[02:41:34]

I can die not just tomorrow, but like now, now, now. Yeah. That's a really useful I don't even know.

[02:41:44]

I think I've been too afraid to even think about that. Like I have like like sit here and think like in five minutes it's over. Yeah, this is it. This is five minutes. It's over. Yeah.

[02:42:00]

So that would be my most recent addition as I really am struck by Heidegger or would you recommend.

[02:42:09]

Well, OK, well if you have a few you remember I tuned out being in time. I was like I try to read it.

[02:42:14]

Like I said, it's it took me forty years to read Ulysses. I could not get past the first five pages and it took me forty years to read being and time. It's a slog. Yeah. And I took a James Joyce course in college.

[02:42:30]

So have I even I guess read parts of Finnegans Wake. No way.

[02:42:38]

But like there's a difference between reading and like I don't think I understand anything. I like short stories. The dead. The dead. Yeah. Yeah.

[02:42:49]

And I like Faulkner. Absalom Absalom is a is a fine book.

[02:42:54]

But would you is there something Heidegger connected in a book you recommend or. No. No. So maybe I got to abandon him. I mean, I mean being a time is awesome.

[02:43:08]

But here's an interesting thing. And not to get all academic, but, you know, there's two parts to it. And most of the most philosophers are preoccupied with the first part. It's in the second part where he gets into all the flight from death stuff and this idea of, you know, a turning and philosophers don't like that.

[02:43:31]

And I'm like, this is where he's starting really to really shine for me. So, uh, yeah. Well, that's a beautiful set of books.

[02:43:40]

That what? Advice would you give to a young person today about their career, about life? About how to survive in this world for suffering. Yeah, great. Yeah, my advice is to get competent advice and I tell my students that if I don't listen to me, don't listen to me.

[02:44:06]

Well, you know, I think my my big piece of advice these days is, you know, again, it's at the risk of sounding like a simpleton, but it's to emphasize a few things.

[02:44:25]

One is.

[02:44:29]

You know, one of your questions, I think, was, you know, what's the meaning of life? And of course, the existentialists say life has no meaning, but it doesn't follow from that, that it's intrinsic, that it's meaningless. You know what? The existential point is not that life is meaningless so much as it doesn't have one.

[02:44:52]

Inevitable and intrinsic meaning, you know, which then?

[02:44:57]

It opens up, you know, I think it was Kirkegaard who said consciousness gives us the possibility of possibilities and but there's another lunatic, Oswald Spangler, who wrote a book called Decline of the West.

[02:45:12]

And he says that the philosopher, the German philosopher Gerta, he says the purpose of life is to live. And that's so that's one of my pieces of advice. So there's the possibility of possibilities. It's interesting. So what do you do with this kind of sea of possibilities? Well, this is one of the when when young folks talk to me, especially these days, is they're swimming in a sea of possibilities or so great.

[02:45:44]

And so that's another existential point, which is that we yearn for freedom. We react vigorously when we perceive that our choices have been curtailed and then we're paralyzed by indecision in the wake of seemingly unlimited possibilities because we're now choking on choice.

[02:46:06]

And and I'm not sure if this is helpful advice or not, but what I say to folks is that the fact of the matter is, is that, you know, for most people, choice is a first world problem.

[02:46:23]

And sometimes. The best option is to do something. As silly as it sounds, and then if that doesn't work, do something else, which just sounds like my mom torturing me when I was young. But, you know, part of the thing that I find myself singularly ill equipped. Is that where at that I may be at the tail end of the last generation of Americans where you I picked something and that's what you did.

[02:46:59]

Like, I've been at a job for 40 years where you can expect to do better than your parents because those days are gone and where you can make a comfortable inference that the world in a decade or two will have any remote similarity to the one that we now inhabit. And so but still you recommend just do.

[02:47:25]

Yeah. And to do so again, this is so back to the Heidegger guy because.

[02:47:34]

All right. I mean, you know, I consider myself a professor, but what happens if most of the schools go out of business? Somebody else may consider themselves a restaurant tour, but what happens if there's no more restaurants? So what I this is negative advice. But I tell folks, don't define yourself. As a social caricature, yeah, don't don't limit. How you feel about yourself by through ID.

[02:48:14]

With a host of variables that may be uncertain, maybe temporary and temporary, what not, but of course, that gets back to your point earlier, Lex, where you're like, yeah, but when you step out of that, it's extraordinarily discombobulating.

[02:48:35]

So what I think you're talking about an axe of chopping wood, yeah, and soul from Socrates. Yeah. What is your soul what is the, uh, the essence of Shalane? Wow, that is like awesome, like when God when you when you show up at the end of this thing, he kind of looks at you, he's like, oh yeah, yeah, I remember you. Yeah. Well, you know, to be honest, what I muse about.

[02:49:14]

Is. To me, the one. When people ask, I told you we have two kids of late 20s, early 30s and over the years.

[02:49:31]

When people when we meet people that know our kids and they're like, oh, your kids are kind and decent, and I'd be like, that's what I would like. Because I think intelligence is vastly overrated. You know, the Unabomber was a smart guy and I do admire intelligence and I do venerate education and I find that to be. Tremendously important. But if I had to pay the ultimate homage to myself, it would be to be known as somebody who takes himself too seriously to take myself too seriously.

[02:50:16]

Again, as corny as it sounds, I'd like to leave the world. A tad better than I found it, or at least do no harm. And I think I think you did all right.

[02:50:31]

And that so in that regard, I love that question, that least that's a good one.

[02:50:36]

I think everyone should be asked that.

[02:50:38]

What is your soul deserve?

[02:50:42]

Maybe just a few lingering questions around it.

[02:50:48]

So, I mean, on the point of the soul, you've talked about the meaning of life of. On a personal level, do you have an answer to the meaning of your life, of something that brought you meaning happiness?

[02:51:17]

Some. Some sense of sense. Yeah. No, I mean, yes, yes, sir, no, I mean, I you know, I'm 66, I'm in the kind of. Not ready to wrap it up literally or metaphorically, but you look I look back and just really with a sense of awe and wonder, gratitude.

[02:51:52]

And is there memories that stand out to you from childhood, from earlier that like it's like, you know, stand out as something you're really proud of or. I'm just happy to have been on this earth making stuff happy.

[02:52:08]

Yeah, that I mean, you know, my family also a chunk of my folks and my grandparents are from Eastern Europe, you know, Russia, Austria, as far as we know, some of them never made it out. I consider myself very fortunate to have. Then a so-called product of the American dream. You know, my grandparents are were basically peasants, my parents, my dad worked two full time jobs when I was growing up and I would see him on the weekends.

[02:52:52]

I'd be like, why are you working all the time? He'd be like, So you won't have to.

[02:52:56]

And he said, look, the world does not owe you a living. And so your first responsibility is to take care of yourself and then your next responsibility is to take care of other people.

[02:53:13]

And I think he did a pretty good job of that. I don't know. But I had.

[02:53:19]

So those are the things that I'm. Proud of. Well, it's funny, you've been you've talked about just yourself as a human being, but you've also contributed some really important ideas. For.

[02:53:39]

Your ideas and also kind of integrating and maybe even popularizing the work of Ernest Becker, of connecting it, of making it legitimate scientifically, I mean, you know, as a human, of course you want to be you want your report to be one that makes the world a better place, but also, I think in the span of time.

[02:54:06]

I think it's of great value well, you've contributed in terms of how we think about the human condition, how we think about ourselves as human, as finite beings in this world, and I hope also in our technology of engineering intelligence. I think, at least for me and I'm sure there's a lot of other people like me that your work has been a gift for, so.

[02:54:32]

Well, thank you. Oh, I like that. We have described ourselves as giant into neurons, unlike we have had no original ideas. And maybe that's the only thing that's original about our work, is we don't claim to be original.

[02:54:48]

What we claim to have done is to integrate and to connect these disparate and superficially unconnected discourses. You know, so existentialists, they'd be like evidence. What's that?

[02:55:05]

And yeah, there's now a branch of psychology, experimental existential psychology that I think we could take credit for having encouraged the formation of. And that, in turn has gotten these ideas in circulation and academic communities where they may not have otherwise gotten. So I think that's good.

[02:55:32]

Oshun is a huge honor. I can't believe you came down here. I've been a fan of your work. I hope we get to talk again, Hugi to talk to you. Thank you so much for talking today.

[02:55:44]

Thanks. We'll do it again soon, I hope. Thanks for listening to this conversation with Sheldon Solomon and thank you to our sponsors Blankest Express, Ruben and Kashyap click the links in the description to get a discount. It's the best way to support this podcast to enjoy this thing. Subscribe on YouTube. Review Dardanup podcast. Follow on Spotify, support on Patrón or connect with me on Twitter, Allex Friedman. And now let me leave you with some words from Vladimir Nabokov that Sheldon uses in his book, Warm at the Core.

[02:56:17]

The cradle rocks above an abyss and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Thanks for listening and hope to see you next time.

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