

The following is a conversation with Sam Harris, his second time in the podcast.

As I said two years ago, when I first met and spoke with Sam, he's one of the most influential pioneering thinkers of our time. As the host of the Making Sense podcast, creator of the Waking Up app, and the author of many seminal books on human nature and the human mind, including The End of Faith, The More Landscape, Lying, Free Will, and Waking Up. In this conversation, besides our mutual fascination with AGI and Free Will, we do also go deep into controversial challenging topics of Donald Trump, Hunter Biden, January 6th, Vaccines, Lab Leak, Kanye West, and

several key figures at the Center of Public Discourse, including Joe Rogan and Elon Musk, both of whom have been friends of Sam and have become friends of mine. Somehow, an amazing life trajectory that I do not deserve in any way, and in fact believe is probably a figment of my imagination.

And if it's alright, please allow me to say a few words about this personal aspect of the conversation of discussing Joe, Elon, and others. What's been weighing heavy on my heart since the beginning of the pandemic, now three years ago, is that many people I look to for wisdom in public discourse stop talking to each other as often with respect, humility, and love when the world needed those kinds of conversations the most. My hope is that they start talking again. They start being friends again. They start noticing the humanity that connects them that is much deeper than the disagreements that divide them. So let me take this moment to say with humility and honesty why I look up to and am inspired by Joe, Elon, and Sam. I think Joe Rogan is important to the world as a voice of compassionate curiosity and open-mindedness to ideas both radical and mainstream

sometimes with humor, sometimes with brutal honesty, always pushing for more kindness in the world.

I think Elon Musk is important to the world as an engineer, leader, entrepreneur, and human being who takes on the hardest problems that face humanity and refuses to accept the constraints of conventional thinking that made the solutions to these problems seem impossible. I think Sam Harris is important to the world as a fearless voice who fights for the pursuit of truth against growing forces of echo chambers and audience capture, taking unpopular perspectives and defending them with rigor and resilience. I both celebrate and criticize all three privately and they criticize me, usually more effectively, from which I always learn a lot and always appreciate. Most importantly,

there is respect and love for each other as human beings, the very thing that I think the world needs most now in a time of division and chaos. I will continue to try to mend divisions, to try to understand, not to ride, to turn the other cheek if needed, to return hate with love. Sometimes people

criticize me for being naive, cheesy, simplistic, all that. I know, I agree, but I really am speaking from the heart and I'm trying. This world is too fucking beautiful not to try in whatever way I know how. I love you all. And now, a quick few second mention of each sponsor. Check them out in the description. It's the best way to support this podcast. We got Notion for AI-powered note taking and team collaboration, indeed for hiring great teams and the masterclass for online learning. Choose wisely, my friends. Also, if you want to work with our team, we're always hiring, go to [lexfreedman.com](https://lexfreedman.com) slash hiring. And now, onto the full ad reads. As always, no ads in the middle.

I try to make this interesting, but if you must skip them, please still check out our sponsors. I enjoy their stuff. Maybe you will too. This show is brought to you by Notion, a note taking and team collaboration tool. My favorite note taking and team collaboration tool. And they have a new feature, Notion AI, that I've been using and loving. And this thing is probably the best implementation of a system that uses a language model to generate text. Because it integrates across the entirety of your note taking process. And it adds just a giant number of small and big features that help you out, that save a lot of time, but also make everything more fun and creatively sort of inject ideas into your workflow. So just to list some features that can edit the voice and tone of the text you already wrote so they can rewrite it in a different tone. They can make the text which I love. They can make it shorter or longer. Also, they can simplify the text, which to me is at the core of the writing process, make things as simple as possible, but not simpler as Einstein said. And to have tools that give you ideas how to do that, not necessarily completely automate everything, but give you really powerful ideas of how to get 90% there. This is just brilliant. Also, if there's technical jargon that can rewrite the text and explain it more simply, what else? They can obviously summarize the text. If you start writing, they can continue your writing. If you're having trouble starting to write and there's a blank page glaring back at you, they can generate based on a topic, a bunch of text to get you going. I mean, there's so many just amazing features I love. I love it when great, powerful language models or any idea in AI is then injected into a tool that's actually usable and useful and powerful across a number of use cases to a huge number of people. I mean, this is really, really, really exciting. Notion AI helps you work faster, write better and think bigger, doing tasks that normally take you hours and just minutes. Try Notion AI for free when you go to [Notion.com slash Lex](https://www.notion.com/slash/Lex). That's all lowercase [Notion.com slash Lex](https://www.notion.com/slash/Lex) to try the power of Notion AI today. This show is also brought to you by indeed a hiring website. I've used it. I continue to use it to hire folks for the teams I've been on of lead. From engineering to creative, everything requires a rigorous, systematic, artistic, all many adjectives I want to use process to build up an amazing team because there's nothing more important to the success of an endeavor or the success of life or to just your contentment and happiness and joy and fulfillment and a source of meaning than the team that you take on the hard challenges of life with, of work with. So you should use the best tools for the job of hiring and you should take hiring very, very, very seriously. Don't overspend on hiring. Visit [indeed.com slash Lex](https://www.indeed.com/slash/Lex) to start hiring now. That's [indeed.com slash Lex](https://www.indeed.com/slash/Lex) terms and conditions apply. This show is also brought to you by masterclass \$180 a year gets you an all access pass to watch courses from the best people in the world and their respective disciplines. One of the people I just recently talked to is Chris Voss. He is a former FBI hostage negotiator, brilliant guy off the mic. I really enjoy talking to him. There is kindness, camaraderie, thoughtfulness, humor, wit, also certain sort of cultural density and complexity hailing from New York or whatever that rich, sexy accent is from. It's just really fun to listen to him, to listen to him discuss what he's really good at. That was true on the podcast and that is very much true in his master class where he really systematically breaks down his ideas of what it takes to negotiate with terrorists, negotiate with hostage takers, negotiate with bank robbers. But I think the most important thing is negotiate in everyday life to negotiate in business relationships, all of that. It's just a really brilliant, concise, clear, actionable advice that he gives.

And that's true for almost every single masterclass they have. And you get access to all of them, get unlimited access to every masterclass and get 15% off an annual membership at [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com)

slash lex. This is the Lex Friedman podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Sam Harris.

What is more effective at making a net positive impact on the world? Empathy or reason?

It depends on what you mean by empathy. There are at least two kinds of empathy. There's the cognitive form, which is, I would argue, even a species of reason. It's just understanding another person's point of view. You understand why they're suffering or why they're happy.

You have a theory of mind about another human being that is accurate. And so you can navigate in relationship to them more effectively. And then there's another layer entirely,

not incompatible with that, but just distinct, which is what people often mean by empathy, which is more a kind of emotional contagion. You feel depressed and I begin to feel depressed along with you because it's contagious. We're so close and I'm so concerned about you and your problems become my problems and it bleeds through right now. I think both of those capacities are very important, but the emotional contagion piece, and this is not really my thesis, this is something I have more or less learned from Paul Bloom, the psychologist who wrote a book on this topic titled, *Against Empathy*. The emotional social contagion piece is a bad guide rather often for ethical behavior and ethical intuitions.

So I'll give you the clear example of this, which is we find stories with a single identifiable protagonist who we can effortlessly empathize with far more compelling than data. So if I tell you, this is the classic case of the little girl who falls down a well, right? This is somebody's daughter, you see the parents distraught on television, you hear her cries from the bottom of the well, the whole country stops. There was an example of this 20, 25 years ago, I think, where it was just wall to wall on CNN. This is just the perfect use of CNN.

It was 72 hours or whatever it was of continuous coverage of just extracting this girl from a well. So we effortlessly pay attention to that. We care about it. We will donate money toward it. I mean, it's just, it marshals 100% of our compassion and altruistic impulse.

Whereas if you hear that there's a genocide raging in some country you've never been to and never attended to go to, and the numbers don't make a dent, and we find the story boring, right? And we'll change the channel in the face of a genocide, right? It doesn't matter.

And it literally, perversely, it could be 500,000 little girls have fallen down wells in that country, and we still don't care, right? So many of us have come to believe that this is a bug rather than a feature of our moral psychology. And so empathy plays an unhelpful role there. So ultimately, I think when we're making big decisions about what we should do and how to mitigate human suffering and what's worth valuing and how we should protect those values, I think reason is the better tool. But it's not that I would want to dispense with any part of empathy either. Well, there's a lot of changes to go on there. But briefly to mention, you've recently talked about effective altruism on your podcast. I think you mentioned some interesting statement. I'm going to horribly misquote you, but that you'd rather live in a world like it doesn't really make sense, but you'd rather live in a world where you care about maybe your daughter

and son, more than 100 people that live across the world, something like this, where the calculus

is not always perfect, but somehow it makes sense to live in a world where it's irrational in this way. And yet empathetic in the way you've been discussing. Right. I'm not sure what the right answer is there or even whether there is one right answer. There could be multiple peaks on this part of the moral landscape. But the opposition is between an ethic that's articulated by someone like the Dalai Lama or really any exponent of classic Buddhism would say that the ultimate enlightened ethic is true dispassion with respect to friends and strangers. The mind of the Buddha would be truly dispassionate. You would love and care about all people equally. And by that light, it seems some kind of ethical failing or at least a failure to fully actualize compassion in the limit or enlightened wisdom in the limit to care more or even much more about your kids than the kids of other people and to prioritize your energy in that way. So you spend all this time trying to figure out how to keep your kids healthy and happy and you'll attend to their minutest concerns and however superficial. And again, there's a genocide raging in Sudan or wherever and it takes up less than 1% of your bandwidth. I'm not sure it would be a better world if everyone was running the Dalai Lama program there. I think some prioritization of one's nearest and dearest ethically might be optimal because we'll all be doing that and we'll all be doing that in a circumstance where we have certain norms and laws and other structures that force us to be dispassionate where that matters. So when my daughter gets sick and I have to take her to a hospital, I really want her to get attention and I'm worried about her more than I'm worried about everyone else in the lobby. But the truth is, I actually don't want a totally corrupt hospital. I don't want a hospital that treats my daughter better than anyone else in the lobby because she's my daughter and I've bribed the guy at the door or the guy's a fan of my podcast or whatever the thing is. You don't want starkly corrupt, unfair situations. And when you get pressed down the hierarchy of Maslow's needs individually and societally, a bunch of those variables change and they change for the worse, understandably. But yeah, when everyone's corrupt and you're in a state of collective emergency, you've got a lifeboat problem. You're scrambling to get into the lifeboat, yeah, then fairness and norms and the other vestiges of civilization begin to get stripped off. We can't reason from those emergencies to normal life. I mean, in normal life, we want justice, we want fairness, we're all better off for it even when the spotlight of our concern is focused on the people we know, the people who are friends, the people who are family, people we have good reason to care about. We still, by default, want a system that protects the interests of strangers too. And we know that generally speaking in game theoretic terms, we're all going to tend to be better off in a fair system than a corrupt one. One of the failure modes of empathy is our susceptibility to anecdotal data. Just a good story will get us to not think clearly. But what about empathy in the context of just discussing ideas with other people? And then there's a large number of people like in this country, red and blue, half the population believes certain things on immigration or on the response to the pandemic or any kind of controversial issue, even if the election was fairly executed. Having an empathy for their worldview, trying to understand where they're coming from, not just an explicit statement of their idea, but the entirety of the roots from which their ideas stems. That kind of empathy, while you're discussing ideas, what is in your pursuit of truth, having empathy for the perspective of a large number of other people versus raw mathematical reason? I think it's important, but it only takes you so far. It doesn't get you to

truth. Truth is not decided by democratic principles. And certain people believe things for understandable reasons, but those reasons are nonetheless bad reasons. They don't scale, they don't generalize, they're not reasons anyone should adopt for themselves or respect epistemologically. And yet their circumstance is understandable and it's something you can care about. I think there's many examples of this that you might be thinking of. One that comes to mind is I've been super critical of Trump, obviously, and I've been super critical of certain people for endorsing him or not criticizing him when he really made it patently obvious who he was, if there had been any doubt initially. There was no doubt when we have a sitting president who's not agreeing to a peaceful transfer of power. So I'm critical of all of that, and yet the fact that many millions of Americans didn't see what was wrong with Trump didn't see through his con. They bought into the idea that he was a brilliant businessman who might just be able to change things because he's so unconventional and so his heart is in the right place. He's really a man of the people, even though he's a gold-plated everything in his life. They bought the myth somehow largely because they had seen him on television for almost a decade and a half pretending to be this genius businessman who could get things done. It's understandable to me that many very frustrated people who have not had their hopes and dreams actualized, who have been the victims of globalism and many other current trends, it's understandable that they would be confused and not see the liability of electing a grossly incompetent, morbidly narcissistic person into the presidency. Which is to say that I don't blame, there are many, many millions of people who I don't necessarily blame for the Trump phenomenon, but I can nonetheless bemoan the phenomenon as indicative of a very bad state of affairs in our society. There's two levels to it. One is, I think you have to call a spade a spade when you're talking about how things actually work and what things are likely to happen or not, but then you can recognize that people have very different life experiences. I think empathy and probably the better word for what I would hope to embody there is compassion. To really wish people well and to really wish strangers well effortlessly, wish them well. To realize that there is no opposition between, at bottom, there's no real opposition between selfishness and selflessness because why selfishness really takes into account other people's happiness? Do you want to live in a society where you have everything but most other people have nothing? Or do you want to live in a society where you're surrounded by happy, creative, self-actualized people who are having their hopes and dreams realized? I think it's obvious that the second society is much better, however much you can guard your good luck. But what about having empathy for certain principles that people believe? For example, the pushback, the other perspective on this, because you said bought the myth of Trump as the great businessman. There could be a lot of people that are supporters of Trump who could say that Sam Harris bought the myth that we have this government of the people, by the people that actually represents the people, as opposed to a bunch of elites who are running a giant bureaucracy that is corrupt, that is feeding themselves and they're actually not representing the people. Then here's this chaos agent, Trump, who speaks off the top of his head. Yeah, he's flawed in all this number of ways. He's more comedian than he is a presidential type of figure. He's actually creating the kind of chaos that's going to shake up this bureaucracy, shake up the elites that are so uncomfortable because they don't want the world to know about



the game that got running on everybody else. That's the kind of perspective that they would take and say, yeah, there's these flaws that Trump has, but this is necessary.

I agree with the first part. I haven't bought the myth that it's a truly representative democracy in the way that we might idealize. On some level, I mean, this is a different conversation, but on some level, I'm not even sure how much I think it should be. I'm not sure we want, in the end, everyone's opinion given equal weight about just what we should do about anything. I include myself in that. I mean, there are many topics around which I don't deserve to have a strong opinion because I don't know what I'm talking about or what I would be talking about if I had a strong opinion. I think we'll probably get to some of those topics because I've declined to have certain conversations on my podcast just because I think I'm the wrong person to have that conversation. I think it's important to see those bright lines in one's life and in the moment politically and ethically. I think we've aside the viability of democracy. I'm under no illusions that all of our institutions are worth preserving precisely as they have been up until the moment. This great orange wrecking ball came swinging through our lives, but it was a very bad bet to elect someone who was grossly incompetent and worse than incompetent, genuinely malevolent in his selfishness. This is something we know based on literally decades of him being in the public eye. He's not a public servant in any normal sense of that term, and he couldn't possibly give an honest or sane answer to the question you asked me about empathy and reason and what should guide us. I genuinely think he is missing some necessary moral and psychological tools. I can feel compassion for him as a human being because I think having those things is incredibly important and genuinely loving other people is incredibly important. Knowing what all that's about is really the good stuff in life. I think he's missing a lot of that, but I think we don't want to promote people to the highest positions of power in our society who are far outliers in pathological terms. We want them to be far outliers in the best case, in wisdom and compassion and some of the topics you've brought up. We want someone to be deeply informed. We want someone to be unusually curious, unusually alert to how they may be wrong or getting

things wrong consequentially. He's none of those things. Insofar as we're going to get normal mediocrities in that role, which I think is often the best we could expect, let's get normal mediocrities in that role, not once-in-a-generation narcissists and frauds. I just take honesty as a single variable. Yes, it's possible that most politicians lie at least some of the time. I don't think that's a good thing. I think people should be generally honest even to a fault. Yes, there are certain circumstances where lying I think is necessary. It's on a continuum of self-defense and violence. If the Nazis come to your door and ask you if you've got Anne Frank in the attic, I think it's okay to lie to them. Arguably, there's never been a person that anyone could name in human history who's lied with that kind of velocity. I mean, it was just a blizzard of lies, great and small, pointless and effective. It says something fairly alarming about our society that a person of that character got promoted. Yes, I have compassion and concern for half of the society who didn't see it that way, and that's going to sound elitist and smug or something for anyone who's on that side listening to me. But it's genuine. I understand that I'm one of the luckiest people in the world, and I barely have the bandwidth to pay attention to half the things I should pay attention to in order to have an opinion about half the things we're going to talk about. So how much less bandwidth is somebody who's working two jobs or a

single mom who's raising multiple kids, even a single kid, it's just unimaginable to me that people have the bandwidth to really track this stuff. And so then they jump on social media and they get inundated by misinformation and they see what their favorite influencer just said. And now they're worried about vaccines. We're living in an environment where the information space becomes so corrupted, and we've built machines to further corrupt it. We've built a business model for the internet that further corrupts it. So it's chaos in informational terms. And I don't fault people for being confused and impatient and at their wit's end. And yes, Trump was an enormous fuck you to the establishment. And that was understandable for many reasons. To me, Sam Harris, the great Sam Harris is somebody I've looked up to for a long time as a beacon of voice of reason. And there's this meme on the internet, and I would love you to steal me on the case for it and against, that Trump broke Sam Harris's brain. That there's something is disproportionately to the actual impact that Trump had on our society. He had an impact on the ability of balanced, calm, rational minds to see the world clearly, to think clearly. You being one of the beacons of that. Is there a degree to which he broke your brain? Otherwise known as Trump derangement syndrome, medical condition. Well, I think Trump derangement syndrome is a very clever meme because it just throws the problem back on the person who's criticizing Trump. But in truth, the true Trump derangement syndrome was not to have seen how dangerous and divisive it would be to promote someone like Trump to that position of power. And in the final moment, not to see how untenable it was to still support someone sitting president who was not committing to a peaceful transfer of power. If that wasn't a bright line for you, you have been deranged by something because that was one minute to midnight for our democracy, as far as I'm concerned. And I think it really was but for the integrity of a few people that we didn't suffer some real constitutional crisis and real emergency after January 6th. I mean, if Mike Pence had caved in and decided to not certify the election, right? Literally, you can count on two hands the number of people who held things together at that moment. And so it wasn't for want of trying on Trump's part that we didn't succumb to some real truly uncharted catastrophe with our democracy. So the fact that that didn't happen is not a sign that those of us who were worried that it was so close to happening were exaggerating the problem. I mean, it's like you almost got run over by a car, but you didn't. And so the fact that you're adrenalized and you're thinking, oh boy, that was dangerous, I probably shouldn't wander in the middle of the street with my eyes closed, you weren't wrong to feel that you really had a problem, right? And came very close to something truly terrible. So I think that's where we were. And I think we shouldn't do that again. So the fact that he's still, he's coming back around as potentially a viable candidate, I'm not spending much time thinking about it, frankly, because I'm waiting for the moment where it requires some thought. I mean, it took up, I don't know how many podcasts I devoted to the topic, it wasn't that many in the end against the number of podcasts I devoted other topics. But there are people who look at Trump and just find him funny, entertaining, not especially threatening. It's just good fun to see somebody who's just not taking anything seriously, and it's just putting a stick in the wheel of business as usual again and again and again. And they don't really see anything much at stake, right? It doesn't really matter if we don't support NATO, it doesn't really matter if he says he trusts Putin more than our intelligence

services. I mean, none of this, it doesn't matter if he's on the one hand saying that he loves the leader of North Korea and on the other, threatening to bomb them back to the Stone Age right on Twitter. It all can be taken in the spirit of kind of reality television. This is the part of the movie that's just fun to watch, right? And I understand that. I can even inhabit that space for a few minutes at a time. But there's a deeper concern that we're in the process of entertaining ourselves to death, right? That we're just not taking things seriously. And this is a problem I've had with several other people we might name who just appear to me to be goofing around at scale. And they lack a kind of moral seriousness. I mean, they're touching big problems where lives hang in the balance, but they're just fucking around. And I think they're really important problems that we have to get our heads straight around. And it's not to say that institutions don't become corrupt, I think they do. And I'm quite worried that both about the loss of trust in our institutions and the fact that trust has eroded for good reason, right? That they have become less trustworthy. They've become infected by political ideologies that are not truth tracking. I mean, I worry about all of that. But I just think we need institutions. We need to rebuild them. We need experts who are real experts. We need to value expertise over amateurish speculation and conspiracy thinking and just bullshit. The kind of amateur speculation we're doing on this very podcast. I'm usually alert to the moments where I'm just guessing or where I actually feel like I'm talking from within my wheelhouse. And I try to telegraph that a fair amount with people. But it's different. I mean, you can invite someone onto your podcast who's an expert about something that you're not an expert about. And then you, in the process of getting more informed yourself, your audience is getting more informed. So you're asking smart questions, and you might be pushing back at the margins. But you know that when push comes to shove, on that topic, you really don't have a basis to have a strong opinion. And if you were going to form a strong opinion that was this counter to the expert you have in front of you, it's going to be by deference to some other expert who you've brought in or who you've heard about or whose work you've read or whatever. But there's a paradox to how we value authority in science that most people don't understand. And I think we should, at some point, unravel that because it's the basis for a lot of public confusion. And frankly, it's the basis for a lot of criticism I've received on these topics where people think that I'm against free speech or I'm an establishment shill or I'm a credentialist. I just think people with PhDs from Ivy League universities should run everything. It's not true, but there's a lot to cut through to get to daylight there because people are very confused about how we value authority. In the service of rationality generally. You've talked about it, but it's just interesting, the intensity of feeling you have. You've had this famous phrase about Hunter Biden and children in the basement. Can you just revisit this case? Let me give another perspective on the situation of January 6th and Trump in general. It's possible that January 6th and things of that nature revealed that our democracy is actually pretty fragile. And then Trump is not a malevolent and ultra-competent malevolent figure, but is simply a jokester. And he just by creating the chaos revealed that it's all pretty fragile because you're a student in history and there's a lot of people like Vladimir Lenin, Hitler, who are exceptionally competent at controlling power, at being executives and taking that power, controlling the generals, controlling all the figures involved and certainly



not tweeting, but working in the shadows behind the scenes to gain power. And they did so extremely competently and that is how they were able to gain power. The pushback with Trump, he was doing none of that. He was creating what he's very good at, creating drama, sometimes for humor's sake, sometimes for drama's sake, and simply revealed that our democracy is fragile. And so he's not this once in a generation horrible figure.

Once in a generation narcissist. I don't think he's a truly scary, sinister Putin-like or much less Hitler-like figure, not at all. I mean, he's not ideological. He doesn't care about anything beyond himself. No, he's much less scary than any really scary totalitarian. He's more brave in your world than 1984.

This is what Eric Weinstein never stops badgering me about, but he's still wrong.

Eric, my analogy for Trump was that he's an evil Chauncey gardener. I don't know if you remember the book or the film Being There with Peter Sellers. But Peter Sellers is this gardener who really doesn't know anything, but he gets recognized as this wise man and he gets promoted to immense power in Washington because he's speaking in a semblance of wisdom.

He's got these very simple aphorisms or what seem to be aphorisms. All he cares about is gardening. He's just talking about his garden all the time. But he'll say something, but in the spring, the new shoots will bloom and people read into that some genius insight politically.

And so he gets promoted and says that's the joke of the film. For me, Trump has always been someone like an evil Chauncey gardener. It's not to say he's totally, yes, he has a certain kind of genius. He's got a genius for creating a spectacle around himself. He's got a genius for getting the eye of the media always coming back to him. But it's a kind of self-promotion that only works if you actually are truly shameless and don't care about having a reputation for anything that I or you would want to have a reputation for. It's like the pure pornography of attention, right? And he just wants more of it. I think the truly depressing and genuinely scary thing was that we have a country that at least half of the country, given how broken our society is in many ways, we have a country that didn't see anything wrong with that, bringing someone who obviously doesn't know what he should know to be president and who's obviously not a good person, right? He obviously doesn't care about people, can't even pretend to care about people really, right? In a credible way. And so, I mean, if there's a silver lining to this, it's along the lines you just sketched. It shows us how vulnerable our system is to a truly brilliant and sinister figure, right? I mean, I think we really dodged a bullet. Yes, someone far more competent and conniving and ideological could have exploited our system in a way that Trump didn't. And yeah, so if we plug those holes eventually, that would be a good thing and he would have done a good thing for our society, right?

I mean, one of the things we realized, and I think nobody knew, I mean, I certainly didn't know it and I didn't hear anyone talk about it, is how much our system relies on norms rather than laws. Yeah, civility almost. Yeah, it's just like it's quite possible that he never did anything illegal, truly illegal. I mean, I think he probably did a few illegal things, but like illegal such that he really should be thrown in jail for it. At least that remains to be seen. So, all of the chaos, all of the diminishment of our stature in the world, all of the opportunity costs of spending years focused on nonsense, all of that was just norm violations. All that was just, that was just all a matter of not saying the thing you should say, but that doesn't mean

they're insignificant, right? It's not that it's like, it's not illegal for a sitting president to say, no, I'm not going to commit to a peaceful transfer of power, right? We'll wait and see whether I win. If I win, the election was valid. If I lose, it was fraudulent, right? But aren't those humorous perturbations to our system of civility such that we know what the limits are and now we start to think that and have these kinds of discussions? That wasn't a humorous perturbation because he did everything he could, granted he wasn't very competent, but he did everything he could to try to steal the election. I mean, the irony is, he claimed to have an election stolen from him all the while doing everything he could to steal it, declaring it fraudulent in advance, trying to get the votes to not be counted as the evening war on, knowing that they were going to be disproportionately Democrat votes because of the position he took on mail-in ballots. I mean, all of it was fairly calculated. The whole circus of the clown car that crashed into four seasons landscaping, right? And you got Rudy Giuliani with his hair dye and you got Sidney Powell and all these grossly incompetent people lying as freely as they could breathe about election fraud, right? And all of these things are getting thrown out by largely Republican election officials and Republican judges. It wasn't for want of trying that he didn't maintain his power in this country. He really tried to steal the presidency. He just was not competent and the people around him weren't competent. So that's a good thing. And it's worth not letting that happen again. But he wasn't competent so he didn't do everything he could. Well, no, he did everything he could. He didn't do everything that could have been done by someone more competent. Right. But the tools you have as a president, you could do a lot of things. You can declare emergencies, especially during COVID, you could postpone the election. You can create military conflict that, you know, any kind of reason to postpone the election, there's a lot of... Well, he tried to do things and he would have to have done those things through other people and there are people who refused to do those things. There are people who said they would quit. They would quit publicly. I mean, you start... Again, there are multiple books written about the last hours of this presidency and the details are shocking in what he tried to do and try to get others to do. And it's awful. I mean, it's just awful that we were that close to something, to a true unraveling of our political process. I mean, it's the only time in our lifetime that anything like this has happened. And it's deeply embarrassing on the world stage. It's just like we looked like a banana republic there for a while and we're the lone superpower. It's not good. And so we shouldn't... There's no... The people who thought, well, we just need to shake things up and this is a great way to shake things up and having people, you know, storm our capital and smear shit on the walls, that's just more shaking things up, right? It's all just for the lulls. There's a nihilism and cynicism to all of that, which again, in certain people, it's understandable. Frankly, it's not understandable if you've got a billion dollars and you have a compound in Menlo Park or wherever. It's like there are people who were cheerleading this stuff, who shouldn't be cheerleading this stuff and who know that they can get on their Gulf Stream and fly to their compound in New Zealand if everything goes to shit, right? So there's a cynicism to all of that that I think we should be deeply critical of. What I'm trying to understand is not... And analyze is not the behavior of this particular human being, but the effect it had in part on the division between people. To me, the degree,

the meme of Sam Harris's brain being broken by Trump represents... You're like the person I would look to to bridge the division. Well, I don't think there is something profitably to be said to someone who's truly captivated by the personality cult of Trumpism, right? There's nothing that I'm going to say to... There's no conversation I'm going to have with Candace Owens, say, about Trump that's going to converge on something reasonable, right?

You don't think so? No, I haven't tried with Candace. I've tried with many people who are in that particular orbit. I mean, I've had conversations with people who won't admit that there's anything wrong with Trump, anything. So I'd like to push for the empathy versus reason, because when you operate in the space of reason, yes. But I think there's a lot of power in you showing, and you, Sam Harris, showing that you're willing to see the good qualities of Trump, publicly showing that. I think that's the way to win over the Candace Owens.

But he has so few of them. He has fewer good qualities than virtually anyone I can name, right? But... So he's funny. I'll grant you that he's funny. He's a good entertainer.

Does others look at just policies and actual impacts he had?

I've admitted that. No, no. So I've admitted that many of his policies I agree with.

With many, many of his policies. So probably more often than not, at least on balance, I agreed. I agreed with his policy that we should take China seriously as an adversary, right? And I think, I mean, again, there's a lot of fine print to a lot of this because the way he talks about these things and many of his motives that are obvious are things that I don't support. But we take immigration. I think it's obvious that we should have control of our borders. I don't see the argument for not having control of our borders. We should let in who we want to let in, and we should keep out who we want to keep out, and we should have a sane immigration policy. So I didn't necessarily think it was a priority to build the wall, but I never criticized the impulse to build the wall because if tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people are coming across the border and we are not in a position to know who's coming, that seems untenable to me. And I can recognize that many people in our society are on balance the victims of immigration. And there is, in many cases, a zero-sum contest between the interests of actual citizens and the interests of immigrants, right? So I think we should have control of our borders. We should have a sane and compassionate immigration policy. We should let in refugees. So Trump on refugees was terrible. But I would say 80% of the policy concerns people celebrated in him are concerns that I either share entirely or certainly sympathize with. So that's not the issue. The issue is largely what you said it was. It's not so much the person, it's the effect on everything he touches. He has this superpower of deranging and destabilizing almost everything he touches and compromising the integrity of almost anyone who comes into his orbit. I mean, so you looked at these people who served as chief of staff or in various cabinet positions, people who had real reputations for probity and levelheadedness, whether you shared their politics or not. I mean, these were real people. Some of them were goofballs.

But many people who just got totally trashed by proximity to him and then trashed by him when they finally parted company with him, yeah, I mean, it's just people bent over backwards to accommodate his norm violations and it was bad for them and it was bad for our system. But none of that discounts the fact that we have a system that really needs proper house cleaning. Yes, there are bad incentives and entrenched interests and I'm not a fan of the concept of

the deep state because it has been so propagandized. But yes, there's something like that that is not flexible enough to respond intelligently to the needs of the moment. So there's a lot of rethinking of government and of institutions in general that I think we should do, but we need smart, well-informed, well-intentioned people to do that job. And the well-intentioned part is hugely important. Just give me someone who is not the most selfish person anyone has ever heard about in their lifetime. And what we got with Trump was literally the one most selfish person I think anyone could name. And again, there's so much known about this man, that's the thing. It predates his presidency. We knew this guy 30 years ago and this is what, to come back to those inflammatory comments about Hunter Biden's laptop, the reason why I can say with confidence that I don't care what was on his laptop is that there is, and that includes any evidence of corruption on the part of his father. Now, there's been precious little of that that's actually emerged. So it's like there is no, as far as I can tell, there's not a big story associated with that laptop as much as people bang on about a few emails. But even if there were just obvious corruption, Joe Biden was at this meeting and he took this amount of money from this shady guy for bad reasons. Given how visible the lives of these two men have been, and given how much we know about Joe Biden and how much we know about Donald Trump and how they have lived

in public for almost as long as I've been alive, both of them, the scale of corruption can't possibly balance out between the two of them. If you show me that Joe Biden has this secret life where he's driving a Bugatti and he's living like Andrew Tate, and he's doing all these things I didn't know about, okay, then I'm going to start getting a sense that, all right, maybe this guy is way more corrupt than I realized. Maybe there is some deal in Ukraine or with China that is just like this guy is not who he seems, he's not the public servant he's been pretending to be, he's been on the take for decades and decades, and he's just, he's as dirty as can be, he's all mobbed up and it's a nightmare, and he can't be trusted, right? That's possible if you show me that his life is not at all what it seems, but on the assumption that I, having looked at this guy for literally decades, right, and knowing that every journalist has looked at him for decades, just how many affairs is he having, just how much, you know, how many drugs is he doing, how many houses does he have, where, you know, what is, what are the obvious conflicts of interest, you know, you hold that against what we know about Trump, right? And I mean, the litany of indiscretions you can put on Trump's side that testify to his personal corruption, to testify to the fact that he has no ethical compass, there's simply no comparison, right? So that's why I don't care about what's on the laptop when, now, if you tell me Trump is no longer running for president in 2024, and we can put Trumpism behind us, and now you're saying, listen, there's a lot of stuff on that laptop that makes Joe Biden look like a total asshole. Okay, I'm all ears, right? I mean, it was a force, in 2020, it was a force choice between a sitting president who wouldn't commit to a peaceful transfer of power, and a guy who's obviously too old to be president, who has a crack-addicted son, who, you know, who lost his laptop. And I just knew that I was going to take Biden in spite of whatever litany of horrors was going to come tumbling out of that laptop. And that might involve sort of, so the actual quote is, Hunter Biden literally could have had the corpses of children in the basement. There's a dark humor to it, right? Which is, I think you speak to, I would not have cared. There's nothing, it's Hunter Biden, it's not Joe Biden. Whatever the scope of Joe Biden's corruption is, it is infinitesimally compared to the corruption.

We know Trump was involved in, it's like a firefly to the sun, is what you're speaking to. But let me make the case that you're really focused on the surface stuff, that it's possible to have corruption that masquerades in the thing we mentioned, which is civility. You can spend hundreds of billions of dollars or trillions towards the war in the Middle East, for example, something that you've changed your mind on in terms of the negative impact it has on the world. And that, you know, the military industrial complex, everybody's very nice, everybody's very civil, it's very upfront. Here's how we're spending the money. Yeah, it's sometimes somehow disappears in different places, but that's the way war is complicated. And it's everyone is very polite. There's no Coke and strippers or whatever is on the laptop. It's very nice and polite. In the meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of civilians die. Hate, just an incredible amount of hate is created because people lose their family members, all that kind of stuff. But there's no strippers and Coke on a laptop. Yeah, but it's not just superficial. It is when someone only wants wealth and power and fame, that is their objective function, right? They're like a robot that is calibrated just to those variables, right? And they don't care about the risks we run on any other front. They don't care about environmental risk, pandemic risk, nuclear proliferation risk, none of it, right? They're just tracking fame and money and whatever can personally redound to their self-interest along those lines. And they're not informed about the other risks we're running, really. I mean, in Trump, you had a president who was repeatedly asking his generals, why couldn't we use our nuclear weapons? Why can't we have more of them? Why do I have fewer nuclear weapons than JFK, right? As though that were a sign of anything other than progress, right? And this is the guy who's got the button, right? I mean, somebody's following him around with a bag waiting to take his order to launch, right? Right. That is a risk we should never run. One thing Trump has going for him, I think, is that he doesn't drink or do drugs, right? People allege that he does speed, but let's take him in his word. He's not deranging himself with pharmaceuticals, at least, but apart from Diet Coke. There's nothing wrong. Just for the record, let me push back on that. There's nothing wrong with Diet Coke. Yeah. It gives me a very large amount. I occasionally have some myself. There's no medical, there's no scientific evidence that I observed the negatives of, you know, all those studies about aspartame and all of that is, no, I don't know. I hope you're right. I mean, everything you said about the military industrial complex is true, right? And we've been worrying about that on both sides of the aisle for a very long time. I mean, that phrase came from Eisenhower. I mean, so much of what ails us is a story of bad incentives, right? And bad incentives are so powerful that they corrupt even good people, right? How much more do they corrupt bad people, right? At minimum, you want reasonably good people, at least non-pathological people in the system trying to navigate against the grain of bad incentives. And better still, all of us can get together and try to diagnose those incentives and change them, right? And we will really succeed when we have a system of incentives where the good incentives are so strong that even bad people are effortlessly behaving as though they're good people because they're so successfully incentivized to behave that way, right? That's, you know, so it's almost the inversion of our current situation. So yes, and you say I changed my mind about the war, not quite. I mean, I was never a supporter of the war in Iraq. I was always worried that it was a distraction from the war in Afghanistan. I was



a supporter of the war in Afghanistan, and I will admit in hindsight, that looks like, you know, at best a highly ambiguous and painful exercise, you know, more likely a fool's errand, right? It's like that, you know, it did not turn out well. It wasn't for want of trying. I have not done a deep dive on all of the failures there, and maybe all of these failures are failures in principle. I mean, maybe that's not the kind of thing that can be done well by anybody, whatever our intentions. But yeah, the move to Iraq always seemed questionable to me. And when we knew the problem, the immediate problem at that moment, you know, al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan, and, you know, and then bouncing to Pakistan. Anyway, you know, so yes, but my sense of the possibility of nation building, my sense of, you know, in so far as the the neocon spirit of, you know, responsibility and idealism that, you know, America was the kind of nation that should be functioning in this way as the world's cop. And we have to get in there and untangle some of these knots by force rather often because, you know, if we don't do it over there, we're going to have to do it over here kind of thing. Yeah, some of that has definitely changed for me in my thinking. I mean, there are obviously cultural reasons why it failed in Afghanistan. And if you can't change the culture, it's you're not going to force a change at gun point in the culture, or it certainly seems that that's not going to happen. And it took us, you know, over 20 years to apparently to realize that. That's one of the things you realize with the wars. There's not going to be a strong signal that things are not working. If you just keep pouring money into a thing, a military effort. Well, also, there are signs of it working too. You have all the stories of girls now going to school, right? You know, the girls are getting battery acid thrown in their faces by religious maniacs. And then we come in there and we stop that. And now girls are getting educated. And that's all good. And our intentions are good there. And I mean, we're on the right side of history there. Girls should be going to school. You know, Malala Yosefzai should have the Nobel Prize and she shouldn't have been shot in the face by the Taliban, right? We know what the right answers are there. The question is, what do you do when there are enough in this particular case religious maniacs who are willing to die and let their children die in defense of crazy ideas and moral norms that belong in the seventh century? And it's a problem we couldn't solve. And we couldn't solve it even though we spent, you know, trillions of dollars to solve it. This reminded me of the thing that you and Jack Dorsey jokingly had for a while, the discussion about banning Donald Trump from Twitter. But does any of it bother you now that Twitter files came out? That, I mean, this has to do with sort of the Hunter laptop, Hunter Biden laptop story. Does it bother you that there could be a collection of people that make decisions about who to ban or not? And then that could be susceptible to bias and to ideological influence. Well, I think it always will be or in the absence of perfect AI, it always will be. And this becomes relevant with AI as well. Because there's some censorship on AI happening. And it's an interesting question there as well. I don't think Twitter is as important as people think it is. And I used to think it was more important when I was on it. And now that I'm off of it, I think it's, I mean, first let me say it's just an unambiguously good thing in my experience to delete your Twitter account. It's like it is just even the good parts of Twitter that I miss were bad in the aggregate, in the degree to which it was fragmenting my attention, the degree to which my life was getting doled out to me in periods between those moments where I checked Twitter and had my attention diverted. And I was not a crazy Twitter

addict. I was probably a pretty normal user. I mean, I was not someone who was tweeting multiple times a day or even every day. I think I probably averaged something like one tweet a day, I think I averaged. But in reality, it would be like four tweets one day and then I wouldn't tweet for the better part of a week. But I was looking a lot because it was my newsfeed. I was just following 200 very smart people and I just wanted to see what they were paying attention to and they would recommend articles and I would read those articles. And then when I would read an article, then I would thought I should signal boost, I would tweet. And so all of that seemed good and that's all separable from all of the odious bullshit that came back at me in response to this largely in response to this Hunter Biden thing. But even the good stuff has a downside and it comes at just this point of your phone is this perpetual stimulus of which is intrinsically fragmenting of time and attention. And now my phone is much less of a presence in my life. And it's not that I don't check Slack or check email. I use it to work. But my sense of just what the world is and my sense of my place in the world, the sense of where I exist as a person has changed a lot by deleting my Twitter account. And the things that I think, I mean, we all know this phenomenon. We say if someone, that person is too online, right? What does it mean to be too online? And where do you draw that boundary? How do you know what constitutes being too online? Well, in some sense, I think being on social media at all is to be too online. Given the kinds of information, it signal boosts. And given the impulse it kindles in each of us to reach out to our audience in specific moments and in specific ways. There are lots of moments now where I have an opinion about something, but there's nothing for me to do with that opinion. There's no Twitter. There are lots of things that I would have tweeted in the last months that are not the kind of thing I'm going to do a podcast about. I'm not going to roll out 10 minutes on that topic on my podcast. I'm not going to take the time to really think about it. But had I been on Twitter, I would have reacted to this thing in the news or this thing that somebody did, right? What do you do with that thought now? I just let go of it. Like chocolate ice cream is the most delicious thing ever. It's usually not that sort of thing, but it's just, but then you look at the kinds of problems people create for themselves. You look at the life deranging and reputation destroying things that people do. And I look at the things that have, the analogous things that have happened to me. I mean, the things that have really bent my life around professionally over the past decade. So much of it is Twitter. I mean, honestly, in my case, almost 100% of it was Twitter. The controversies I would get into, the things I would think I would have to respond to in a pot, like I would release a podcast on a certain topic, I would see some blowback on Twitter. It would give me the sense that there was some signal that I really had to respond to. Now that I'm off Twitter, I recognize that most of that was just totally specious, right? It was not something I had to respond to. But yet I would then do a cycle of podcasts responding to that thing that like taking my foot out of my mouth or taking someone else's foot out of my mouth. And it became this self-perpetuating cycle, which if you're having fun, great. I mean, if it's generative of useful information and engagement professionally and psychologically, great. There was some of that on Twitter. I mean, there were people who I connected with because I just, you know, one of us DMed the other on Twitter and it was hard to see how that was going to happen otherwise. But it was largely just a machine for manufacturing unnecessary controversy.

Do you think it's possible to avoid the drug of that? So now that you've achieved this zen state, is it possible for somebody like you to use it in a way that doesn't pull you into the whirlpool? And so anytime there's a tax, you just, I mean, that's how I tried to use it.

Yeah, but it's not the way I wanted to use it. It's not the way it promises itself as a-

You wanted to have debate.

I wanted to actually communicate with people. I wanted to hear from the person because, again, it's like being in Afghanistan, right? There are the potted cases where it's obviously good, right? It's like in Afghanistan, the girl who's getting an education, that is just here. That's why we're here. That's obviously good. I've had those moments on Twitter where I'm hearing from a smart person who's detected an error I made in my podcast or in a book or they've just got some great idea about something that I should spend time on. And I would never have heard from this person in any other format. And now I'm actually in dialogue with them. It's fantastic. That's the promise of it, to actually talk to people. And so I kept getting lured back into that. No, the same or sanity-preserving way of using it is just as a marketing channel. You just put your stuff out there and you don't look at what's coming back at you.

I'm on other social media platforms that I don't even touch. I mean, my team put post stuff on Facebook and on Instagram. I never even see what's on there.

So you don't think it's possible to see something and not let it affect your mind?

No, that's definitely possible. But the question is, and I did that for vast stretches of time, but then the promise of the platform is dialogue and feedback. So if I know, for whatever reason, I'm going to see 99 to 1 awful feedback, bad faith feedback, malicious feedback. Some of it's probably even bots, and I'm not even aware of who's a person and who's a bot. But I'm just going to stare into this funhouse mirror of acrimony and dishonesty. The reason why I got off is not because I couldn't recalibrate and find equanimity again with all the nastiness that was coming back at me, and not that I couldn't ignore it for vast stretches of time. But I could see that I kept coming back to it, hoping that it would be something that I could use, a real tool for communication. And I was noticing that it was insidiously changing the way I felt about people, both people I know and people I don't know. People I, you know, mutual friends of ours who are behaving in certain ways on Twitter, which just seemed insane to me. And then that became a signal I felt like I had to take into account somehow, right? You're seeing people at their worst, both friends and strangers. And I felt that it was as much as I could try to recalibrate for it, I felt that I was losing touch with what was real information, because people are performing, people are faking, people are not themselves, or you're seeing people at their worst. And so I felt like, all right, was being advertised to me here on a not just a daily basis, an hourly basis, or an increment sometimes, multiple times an hour. I mean, I probably checked

Twitter at minimum 10 times a day, and maybe I was checking it 100 times a day on some days, right, where things were really active and I was really engaged with something. What was being delivered into my brain there was suddenly false information about how dishonest and you know, just generally unethical,

totally normal people are capable of being, right? It is a funhouse mirror. I was seeing the most grotesque versions of people who I know, right? People who I know I could sit down at dinner with and they would never behave this way. And yet they were coming at me on Twitter. It was essentially

turning ordinary people into sociopaths, right? It's like people are just, and there are analogies that many of us have made. It's like one analogy is road rage, right? Like people behave in the confines of a car in ways that they never would if they didn't have this metal box around them, moving at speed. And all of that becomes quite hilarious and obviously dysfunctional when they actually have to stop at the light next to the person they just flipped off and they realized they didn't understand that the person coming out of that car next to them with cauliflower ear is someone who they never would have rolled their eyes at in public because they would have taken one look at this person and realized this is the last person you want to fight with. That's one of the heartbreaking things is to see people who I know, who I admire, who I know are friends, be everything from snarky to downright mean derisive towards each other. It doesn't make any sense. Like this is the only place where I've seen people I really admire who have had a calm head about most things, like really be shitty to other people. It's probably the only place I've seen that. And I don't, I tend, I choose to maybe believe that that's not really them. There's something about the system. Like if you go paintballing, if you Jordan Peterson and you're gonna shoot your friends. Yeah, you're gonna shoot your friends, but you kind of accept that that's kind of what you're doing in this little game that you're playing. But it's sometimes hard to remind yourself of that. Well, and I think I was guilty of that definitely. You know, I don't think there's nothing, I don't think I ever did anything that I really feel bad about. But yeah, it was always pushing me to the edge of snideness somehow. And it's just not healthy. So the reason why I deleted my Twitter account in the end was that it was obviously making me a worse person. And yeah, is there some way to be on there where he's not making you a worse person? I'm sure there is, but it's given the nature of the platform and given what was coming back at me on it, the way to do that is just to basically use it as a one-way channel of communication, just marketing. And I was like, here's what I'm paying attention to, look at it if you want to, and you just push it out and then you don't look at what's coming back at you. I put out a call for questions on Twitter. And then actually, quite surprising, there's a lot of good, I mean, they're like, even if they're critical, they're like being thoughtful, which is nice. I used it that way too. And that was what kept me hooked. But then there's also touch balls 69 wrote a question. Ask what I can't imagine. This is part of it. But one way to solve this is, you know, we've got to get rid of anonymity for this. Let me ask the question. Ask Sam, why he sucks was the question. Yeah, that's good. Well, one reason why I sucked was Twitter. That was, and I've since solved that problem. So I mean, touch, touch ball 69, should be happy that I suck a little bit less now that I'm off Twitter. I mean, the fact I don't have to hear from touch balls 69 on the regular. The fact that you have to see that it probably can have a negative effect, just even a moderation, just to see that there is, like for me, the negative effect is slightly losing faith in the underlying kindness of humanity. You can also just reason your way out of it saying that this is anonymity and this is kind of fun and this kind of just the shit show of Twitter, it's okay, but it does mentally affect you a little bit. Like I don't read too much into that kind of comment. It's just that's just trolling and it's, you know, I understand the fun the person is having on the other side of that. It's like- Do you though? Well, I do. I mean, I don't behave that way, but I do and for all I know, that person could be,

you know, 16 years old, right? So it's like-

It could be also an alter count for Elon, I don't know.

Well, yeah, I'm pretty sure Elon would just tweet that under his own name at this point.

You love each other. Okay, so do you think, so speaking of which, now that Elon has taken over Twitter, is there something that he could do to make this platform better? This Twitter and just social media in general, but because of the aggressive nature of his innovation that he's pushing, is there any way to make Twitter a pleasant place for Sam Harris?

Maybe. Like in the next five years.

I don't know. I think I'm agnostic as to whether or not he or anyone could make a social media platform that really was healthy.

So you were just observing yourself week by week, seeing the effect that's on your mind and on how much you're actually learning and growing as a person and it was negative.

Yeah, and I also seen the negativity in other people's lives. I mean, it's obvious.

I mean, he's not going to admit it, but I think it's obviously negative for Elon.

That was one of the things that, when I was looking into the Funhouse mirror,

I was also seeing that the Funhouse mirror on his side of Twitter and it was just even more exaggerated. It's like, when I was asking myself, why is he spending his time this way,

I then reflected on why was I spending my time this way to a lesser degree and at lesser scale and at lesser risk, frankly. And it's not just Twitter. I mean, this is in part an internet

phenomenon. It's like the whole Hunter Biden mess that you explored. That was based on, I mean, I was on somebody's podcast, but that was based on a clip taken from that podcast, which was highly misleading as to the general shape of my remarks on that podcast.

I had to then do my own podcast untangling all of that and admitting that even in the full context, I was not speaking especially well and didn't say exactly what I thought in a way that would have been recognizable to anyone, even someone with not functioning by a spirit of charity. But the clip was quite distinct from the podcast itself. The reality is, is that we're living in an environment now where people are so lazy and their attention is so fragmented that they only have time for clips. 99% of people will see a clip and will assume there's no relevant context I need to understand what happened in that clip. And obviously, the people who make those clips know that and they're doing it quite maliciously. And in this case, the person who made that clip and subsequent clips of other podcasts was quite maliciously trying to engineer some reputational emulation for me. And being signal boosted by Elon and other prominent people who can't take the time to watch anything other than a clip, even when it's their friend or someone who's ostensibly their friend in that clip. So it's a total failure, an understandable failure of ethics that everyone is so short on time and they're so fucking lazy that we now have these contexts in which we react so quickly to things. Twitter is inviting an instantaneous reaction to this clip that it's just too tempting to just say something and not know what you're even commenting

on. And most of the people who saw that clip don't understand what I actually think about any of these issues. And the irony is people are going to find clips from this conversation that are just as misleading and they're going to export those and then people are going to be dunking on those clips. And we're all living and dying by clips now and it's dysfunctional. See, I think it's possible to create a platform. I think we will keep living on clips. But when I



saw that clip of you talking about children and so on, just knowing that you have a sense of humor, we just went to a dark place in terms of humor. So I didn't even bother. And then I knew that the way clips work is that people use it for virality's sake. But giving a person a benefit of the doubt, that's not even the right term. It's not like I was really interpreting it in the context of the past. I even give Trump the benefit of the doubt when I see a clip of Trump. Because there are famous clips of Trump that are very misleading as to what he was saying in context. And I've been honest about that. There were good people on both sides scandal around his remarks after Charlottesville. The clip that got exported and got promoted by everyone left of center from Biden on down, the New York Times, CNN. There's nobody that I'm aware of

who has honestly apologized for what they did with that clip. He did not say what he seemed to be saying in that clip about the Nazis at Charlottesville. And I have always been very clear about that. Even people who I think should be marginalized and people who who should be defenestrated because they really are terrible people who are doing dangerous things and for bad reasons, I think we should be honest about what they actually meant in context. And this goes to anyone else we might talk about who's more where the case is much more confusing. I'm sure we're going to get to AI, but the prospect of being able to manufacture clips with AI and deep fakes where it's going to be hard for most people most of the time to even figure out whether they're in the presence of something real. Forget about being divorced from context. There was no context. That's a misinformation apocalypse that is we're right on the cusp of and it's terrifying. It could be just a new world like where Alice going to Wonderland or humor is the only thing we have and it will save us. Maybe in the end, Trump's approach to social media was the right one after all. Nothing is true and everything's absurd. We can't live that way. People function on the basis of what they assume is true. People have functioned. To do anything. You have to know what you think is going to happen you have to at least give a probabilistic waiting over the future. Otherwise, you're going to be incapacitated. People want certain things and they have to have a rational plan to get those desires gratified. They don't want their kids to die. You tell them that there's a comet hurtling toward earth and they should get outside and look up. They're going to do it and if it turns out it's misinformation, it's going to matter because it comes down to what medicines do you give your children? We're going to be manufacturing fake journal articles.

I'm sure someone's using chatGPT for this as we speak. If it's not persuasive now to most people, honestly, I'll be amazed if it's a year before we can actually create journal articles that would take a PhD to debunk that are completely fake. There are people who are celebrating this kind of coming cataclysm. There are the people who don't have anything to lose who are celebrating it or just are so confused that they just don't even know what's at stake. Then there are the few people who we could count on a few hands who have managed to insulate themselves or at least imagine they've insulated themselves from the downside here enough that they're not implicated in the great unraveling we are witnessing or could witness. Shaking up of what is true. Actually, that returns us to experts. Do you think experts can save us? Is there such thing as expertise and experts in something? How do you know if you achieved it? I think it's important to acknowledge up front that there's something paradoxical about how we relate to authority, especially within science. I don't think that paradox is going

away and it doesn't have to be confusing. It's not truly a paradox. It's just like there are different moments in time. It is true to say that within science or within rationality, generally, whenever you're having a fact-based discussion about anything, it is true to say that the truth or falsity of a statement does not even slightly depend on the credentials of the person making the statement. It doesn't matter if you're a Nobel laureate. You can be wrong. The last sentence you spoke could be total bullshit. It's also possible for someone who's deeply uninformed to be right about something or to be right for the wrong reasons or someone just gets lucky. There are middling cases where you have a backyard astronomer who's got no credentials, but he just loves astronomy and he's got a telescope and he's spent a lot of time looking at the nice guy and he discovers a comet that no one else has seen, you know, not even the professional expert astronomers. I mean, I gotta think that happens less and less now, but some version of that keeps happening and it may always keep happening in every area of expertise. So it's true that truth is orthogonal to the reputational concerns we have among apes who are talking about the truth, but it is also true that most of the time real experts are much more reliable than frauds or people who are not experts. And expertise really is a thing. And when you're flying an airplane in a storm, you don't want just randos come into the cockpit saying, listen, I've got a new idea about how we should tweak these controls. You want someone who's a trained pilot and that training gave them something. It gave them a set of competences and intuitions and they know what all those dials and switches do. And I don't. I shouldn't be flying that plane. So when things really matter and put in this at 30,000 feet in a storm sharpens this up, we want real experts to be in charge. And we are at 30,000 feet a lot of the time on a lot of issues. And whether they're public health issues, whether it's a geopolitical emergency like Ukraine, climate change, just pick your topic. There are real problems and the clock is rather often ticking and their solutions are non-obvious. And so expertise is a thing and deferring to experts much of the time makes a lot of sense. At minimum, it prevents spectacular errors of incompetence and just foolhardiness. But even in the case of some where you're talking about someone, I mean, people like ourselves who are like, we're well-educated. We're not the worst possible candidates for the Dunning-Kruger effect. When we're going into a new area where we're not experts, we're fairly alert to the possibility that it's not as simple as things seem at first and we don't know how our tools translate to this new area. We can be fairly circumspect. But we're also, because we're well-educated, we can work and we're pretty quick studies, we can learn a lot of things pretty fast and we can begin to play a language game that sounds fairly expert. And in that case, the invitation to do your own research is when times are good, I view as an invitation to waste your time pointlessly. When times are good. Now, the truth is, times are not all that good. And we have the ongoing public display of failures of expertise. We have experts who are obviously corrupted by bad incentives. We've got experts who perversely won't admit they were wrong when they, in fact, are demonstrated to be wrong. We've got institutions that have been captured by political ideology that's not truth-tracking and this whole woke encroachment into really every place, whether it's universities or science journals or government. That has been genuinely deranging. So there's a lot going on where experts, and the very concept of expertise, have seemed to discredit itself. But the reality is that there is a massive difference. When

anything matters, when there's anything to know about anything, there is a massive difference most of the time between someone who has really done the work to understand that domain and someone

who hasn't. And if I get sick or someone close to me gets sick, I have a PhD in neuroscience, so I can read a medical journal article and understand a lot of it. So I'm just fairly conversant with medical terminology. And I understand its methods. And I'm alert to the difference because in neuroscience, I've spent hours and hours in journal clubs diagnosing analyzing the difference between good and bad studies. I'm alert to the difference between good and bad studies in medical journals. And I understand that bad studies can get published, and etc. And experiments can be poorly designed. I'm alert to all of those things, but when I get sick or when someone close to me gets sick, I don't pretend to be a doctor. I've got no clinical experience. I don't go down the rabbit hole on Google for days at a stretch trying to become a doctor, much less a specialist in the domain of problem that has been visited upon

me or my family. So if someone close to me gets cancer, I don't pretend to be an oncologist. I don't go out and start reading in journals of oncology and try to really get up to speed as an oncologist because one is a bad and potentially and very likely misleading use of my time. And if I had a lot of runway, if I decide, okay, it's really important for me to know everything I can. At this point, I know someone's going to get cancer. I may not go back to school and become an oncologist, but what I want to do is I want to know everything I can know about cancer. So I'm going to take the next four years and spend most of my time on cancer. Okay, I could do that. I still think that's a waste of my time. I still think at the end of even at the end of those four years, I'm not going to be the best person to form intuitions about what to do in the face of the next cancer that I have to confront. I'm still going to want a better oncologist than I've become to tell me what he or she would do if they were in my shoes or in the shoes of my family member. I'm not advocating a blind trust and authority. If you get cancer and you're talking to one oncologist and they're recommending some course of treatment, by all means get a second opinion, get a third opinion. But it matters that those opinions are coming from real experts and not from Robert Kennedy Jr., who's telling you that you got it because you got a vaccine. We're swimming in a sea of misinformation where you've got people who are moving the opinions of millions of others who should not have an opinion on these topics. There is no scenario in which you should be getting your opinion about vaccine safety or climate change or the war in Ukraine or anything else that we might want to talk about from Candace Owens. She's not a relevant expert on any of those topics. What's more, she doesn't seem to care. She's living in a culture that has amplified that not carrying into an effective business model. There's something very Trumpian about all that. The problem is the culture. It's not these specific individuals. The paradox here is that expertise is a real thing. We defer to it a lot as a labor-saving device and just based on the reality that it's very hard to be a polymath and specialization is a thing. The people who specialize in a very narrow topic, they know more about that topic than the next guy, no matter how smart that guy or gal is, and that those differences matter. But it's also true that when you're talking about facts, sometimes the best experts are wrong. The scientific consensus is wrong. You get a sea change in the thinking of a whole field because one person

who's an outlier for whatever reason decides, okay, I'm going to prove this point and they prove it. Somebody like the doctor who believed that stomach ulcers were not due to stress, but were due to *H. pylori* infections. He just drank a vial of *H. pylori* bacteria and proved that he quickly got an ulcer and convinced the field that at minimum *H. pylori* was involved in that process. Okay, so yes, everyone was wrong. That doesn't disprove the reality of expertise. It doesn't disprove the utility of relying on experts most of the time, especially in an emergency, especially when the clock is ticking, especially when you're in this particular cockpit and you only have one chance to land this plane. You want the real pilot at the controls. But there's just a few things to say. So one, you mentioned this example with cancer and doing your own research. There are several things that are different about our particular time in history. One, doing your own research has become more and more effective because you can read, the internet made information a lot more accessible. So you can read a lot of different meta-analyses. You can read blog posts that describe to you exactly the flaws in the different papers they make up the meta-analyses. And you can read a lot of those blog posts that are conflicting with each other, and you can take that information in. And in a short amount of time, you can start to make good faith interpretations. For example, I don't want to overstate things, but if you suffer from depression, for example, then you could go to an expert and a doctor that prescribes you some medication. But you could also challenge some of those ideas and seeing what are the different medications, what are the different side effects, what are the different solutions to depression, all that kind of stuff. And I think depression is just a really difficult problem that's very, I don't want to again state incorrect things, but I think it's there's a lot of variability of what depression really means. So being introspective about the type of depression you have and the different possible solutions you have, just doing your own research as a first step before approaching a doctor or as you have multiple opinions could be very beneficial in that case. Now, that's depression. That's something that's been studied for a very long time with a new pandemic that's affecting everybody. With the airplane equated to like 9-11 or something, a new emergency just happened and everybody, every expert in the world is publishing on it and talking about it. So doing your own research there could be exceptionally effective in asking questions. And then there's a difference between experts, virologists, and that's actually a good question. Who is exactly the expert in a pandemic? But there's the actual experts doing the research and publishing stuff. And then there's the communicators of that expertise. And the question is if the communicators are flawed to a degree where doing your own research is actually the more effective way to figure out policies and solutions. Because you're not competing with experts. You're competing with the communicators of expertise. That could be WHO, CDC, in the case of the pandemic, or politicians, or political type of science figures like Anthony Fauci. There's a question there of the effectiveness of doing your own research in that context. And the competing forces there, incentives that you've mentioned, is you can become quite popular by being contrarian, by saying everybody's lying to you, all the authorities are lying to you, all the institutions are lying to you. So those are the waters you're swimming in. But I think doing your own research in that kind of context could be quite effective.

Let me be clear. I'm not saying you shouldn't do any research. I'm not saying that you shouldn't be informed about an issue. I'm not saying you shouldn't read articles on whatever the topic is. And yes, if I got cancer or someone close to me got cancer, I probably would read more about cancer than I've read thus far about cancer. And I've read some. So I'm not making a virtue of ignorance and a blind obedience to authority. And again, I recognize that authorities can discredit themselves or they can be wrong. They can be wrong even when there's no discredit. There's a lot we don't understand about the nature of the world. But still this vast gulf between truly informed opinion and bullshit exists, it always exists. And conspiracy thinking is rather often, most of the time, the species of bullshit, but it's not always wrong. There are real conspiracies. And there really are just awful corruptions born of bad incentives within our scientific processes, within institutions. And again, we've mentioned a lot of these things in passing, but what woke political ideology did to scientific communication during the pandemic was awful. And it was really corrosive of public trust, especially on the right. For understandable reasons. It was just, it was crazy, some of the things that were being said and still is. And these cases are all different. You take depression. We just don't know enough about depression for anyone to be that confident about anything. And there are many different modalities in which to interact with it as a problem. So there's pharmaceuticals, have whatever promise they have, but there's certainly reason to be concerned that they don't work well for everybody. And it's obvious they don't work well for everybody, but they do work for some people. But again, depression is a multifactorial problem, and there are different levels at which to influence it. And there are things like meditation, there are things like just life changes. And one of the first things about depression is that when you're depressed, all of the things that would be good for you to do are precisely the things you don't want to do. You don't have any energy to socialize. You don't want to get things done. You don't want to exercise. And all of those things, if you got those up and running, they do make you feel better in the aggregate. But the reality is that there are clinical level depressions that are so bad that we just don't have good tools for them. And it's not enough to tell you there's no life change someone's going to embrace that it's going to be an obvious remedy for that. I mean, pandemics are obviously a complicated problem, but I would consider it much simpler than depression in terms of what's on the menu to be chosen among the various choices. It's less multifactorial. The logic by which you would make those choices. So it's like, we have a virus. We have a new virus. It's some version of bad. It's human transmissible. We're still catching up. We're catching up to every aspect of it. We don't know how it spreads. We don't know how effective masks are. Well, at a certain point, we knew it was respiratory, but whether it's spread by fomites, all that, we were confused about a lot of things. And we're still confused. It's been a moving target this whole time, and it's been changing this whole time. And our responses to it have been, we ramped up the vaccines as quickly as we could, but too quick for some, not quick enough for others. We could have done human challenge trials and got them out more quickly with better data. And I think that's something we should probably look at in the future, because to my eye, that would make ethical sense to do challenge trials. And so much of my concern about COVID, many people are confused about my concern about COVID, my concern about COVID has for much of the time not been narrowly focused on COVID



itself,

and how dangerous I perceive COVID to be as a illness. It has been for the longest time even more a concern about our ability to respond to a truly scary pathogen next time. Outside those initial months, give me the first six months to be quite worried about COVID and the unraveling of society. And the supply of toilet paper. You want to secure a steady supply of toilet paper. But beyond that initial period, when we had a sense of what we were dealing with, and we had every hope that the vaccines are actually going to work, and we knew we were getting those vaccines

in short order. Beyond that, and we knew just how dangerous the illness was and how dangerous it wasn't. For years now, I've just been worrying about this as a failed dress rehearsal for something much worse. I think what we proved to ourselves at this moment in history is that we have built informational tools that we do not know how to use, and we have made ourselves, we've basically enrolled all of human society into a psychological experiment that is deranging us and making it virtually impossible to solve coordination problems that we absolutely have to solve next time when things are worse. Do you understand who's at fault for the way this unraveled? The way we didn't seem to have the distrust in institutions and the institution of science that grew seemingly exponentially or got revealed to this process. Who is at fault here? And what's the fix? So much blame to go around, but so much of it is not a matter of bad people conspiring to do bad things. It's a matter of incompetence and misaligned incentives and just ordinary plain vanilla dysfunction. My problem was that people like you, people like Brett Weinstein, people that I look to for reasonable, difficult conversations on difficult topics have a little bit lost their mind, became emotional and dogmatic in style of conversation, perhaps not in the depth of actual ideas. But I tweet something of that nature, and not about you, but just it feels like the pandemic made people really more emotional than before. And then Kimball Musk responded, I think something I think you probably would agree with, maybe not. I think it was the combo of Trump and the pandemic. Trump triggered the far left to be way more active than they could have been without him. And then the pandemic handed big government,

Nanny State left these a huge platform on a silver platter. I want to punch and here we are. Well, I would agree with some of that. I'm not sure how much to read into the Nanny State concept. But yet basically got people on the far left really activated and then gave control to, I don't know if you say Nanny State, but just control to government that when executed poorly has created a complete distrust in government. My fear is that there was going to be that complete distrust anyway, given the nature of the information space, given the level of conspiracy thinking, given the gaming of these tools by an anti-vax cult. I mean, there really is an anti-vax cult that just ramped up its energy during this moment.

But it's a small one.

It's not to say that everything, every concern about vaccines is a species of, it was born of misinformation or born of this cult, but there is a cult that is just, and the core of Trumpism is a cult. I mean, the QAnon is a cult. And so there's a lot of lying and there's a lot of confusion. It's almost impossible to exaggerate how confused some people are and how fully their lives are organized around that confusion. I mean, there are people who think that the world's being run by pedophile cannibals and that Tom

Hanks and Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama are among those cannibals. I mean, they're adjacent to the pure crazy, there's the semi-crazy, and adjacent to the semi-crazy, there's the grifting opportunist asshole. And the layers of bad faith are hard to fully diagnose. But the problem is, all of this is getting signal boosted by an outrage machine that is preferentially spreading misinformation. It has a business model that is guaranteeing that is preferentially sharing misinformation.

Can I actually just on a small tangent, how do you defend yourself against the claim that you're a pedophile cannibal? It's difficult.

Here's the case I would make, because I don't think you can use reason. I think you have to use empathy. You have to understand. But like part of it, I mean, I find it very difficult to believe that anyone believes these things. I'm sure there's some number of people who are just pretending to believe these things, because it's just, again, this is sort of like the four-chanification of everything. It's just Pepe the Frog. None of this is what it seems. They're not signaling an alliance with white supremacy or neo-Nazism, but they're not doing it. They just don't fucking care. It's just cynicism overflowing its banks. It's just fun to wind up the normies. Look at all the normies that don't understand that a green frog is just a green frog, even when it isn't just a green frog. It's just gumming up everyone's cognitive bandwidth with bullshit. I get that that's fun if you're a teenager and you just want to vandalize our new sphere. But at a certain point, we have to recognize that real questions of human welfare are in play. There's wars getting fought or not fought, and there's a pandemic raging, and there's medicine to take or not take. But to come back to this issue of COVID, I don't think I got so out of balance around COVID. I think people are quite confused about what I was concerned about. Yes, there was a period where I was crazy because anyone who was taking it seriously was crazy because they had no idea what was going on. It was like, yes, I was wiping down packages with alcohol wipes because people thought it was transmissible by touch. When we realized that was no longer the case, I stopped doing that. Again, it was a moving target, and a lot of things we did in hindsight around masking and school closures looked fairly dysfunctional, unnecessary. I think the criticism that people would say about you're talking about COVID, and maybe you can correct me, but you were skeptical or you were against skepticism of the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. People who get nervous about the vaccine but don't fall into the usual anti-vax camp, which I think there was a significant enough number. They're asking, they're getting nervous. I mean, especially after the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, I too was nervous about anything where a lot of money could be made. You just see how the people who are greedy come to the surface all of a sudden. A lot of them that run institutions are actually really good human beings. I know a lot of them, but it's hard to know how those two combine together when there's hundreds of billions, trillions of dollars to be made. I guess the sense was that you weren't open enough to the skepticism. I understand that people have that sense. I'll tell you how I thought about it and think about it.

One, again, it was a moving target. There was a point in the timeline where it was totally rational to expect that the vaccines were reasonably safe and that COVID was reasonably dangerous. The trade-off for basically everyone was it was rational to get vaccinated, given the level of testing and how many people had been vaccinated before you, given what we were

seeing

with COVID, that that was a forced choice. You're eventually going to get COVID and the question is, do you want to be vaccinated when you do? There was a period where that forced choice was just obviously reasonable to get vaccinated, especially because there was every reason to expect that while it wasn't a perfectly sterilizing vaccine, it was going to knock down transmission a lot and that matters. It wasn't just a personal choice. You were actually being a good citizen when you decided to run whatever risk you were going to run to get vaccinated because there are people in our society who actually can't get vaccinated. I know people who can't take any vaccines. They're so allergic to it. They in their own person seem to justify all of the fears of the anti-vax cult. They're the kind of person who Robert Kennedy Jr. can point to and say, see, vaccines will fucking kill you because of the experience. And I know people who have kids who fit that description. So we should all feel a civic responsibility to be vaccinated against egregiously awful and transmissible diseases for which we have relatively safe vaccines to keep those sorts of people safe.

And there was a period of time when it was thought that the vaccine could stop transmission.

Yes. And so again, all of this has begun to shift. I don't think it has shifted as much as Brett Weinstein thinks it's shifted. But yes, there are safety concerns around the mRNA vaccines, especially for young men. As far as I know, that's the purview of actual heightened concern.

But also, there's now a lot of natural immunity out there. Basically, everyone who was going to get vaccinated has gotten vaccinated. The virus has evolved to the point in this context where it seems less dangerous. Again, I'm going more on the seemings than on research that I've done at this point. But I'm certainly less worried about getting COVID. I've had it once. I've been vaccinated. So you ask me now, how do I feel about getting the next booster? I don't know that I'm going to get the next booster.

I was somebody who was waiting in line at four in the morning, hoping to get some overflow vaccine when it was first available. And at that point, given what I thought I knew, based on the best sources I could consult and based on anecdotes that were too vivid to ignore, both data and personal experience, it was totally rational for me to want to get that vaccine as soon as I could. And now, I think it's totally rational for me to do a different kind of cost benefit analysis and wonder, listen, do I really need to get a booster? How many of these boosters am I going to get for the rest of my life? Really? And how safe is the mRNA vaccine for a man of my age? And do I need to be worried about myocarditis? All of that is completely rational to talk about now. My concern is that at every point along the way, I was the wrong person and Brett Weinstein was the wrong person. And there's many other people I could add to this list to have strong opinions about any of this stuff.

I just disagree with that. I think, yes, in theory, I agree 100%, but I feel like experts failed at communicating. Not at doing... And I just feel like you and Brett Weinstein actually have the tools with the internet, given the engine you have in your brain of thinking for months at a time, deeply about the problems that face our world, that you actually have the tools to do pretty good thinking here. The problem I have with experts...

But there would be deference to experts and pseudo-experts behind all of that.

Well, the papers, you would stand on the shoulders of giants, but you can surf those shoulders better than the giants themselves. I knew we were going to disagree about that.

I saw his podcast where he brought on these experts who had... Many of them had the right credentials, but for a variety of reasons, they didn't pass the smell test for me.

One larger problem, and this goes back to the problem of how we rely on authority and science, is that you can always find a PhD or an MD to champion any crackpot idea. It is amazing, but you could find PhDs and MDs who would sit up there in front of Congress and say that they thought smoking was not addictive or that it was not harmful. There was no direct link between smoking and lung cancer. You could always find those people. Some of the people Brett found were people who had obvious tells to my point of view, and I saw them on some of the same people were on Rogan's podcast. It's hard because if a person does have the right credentials, and they're not saying something floridly mistaken, and we're talking about something where they're genuine unknowns, like how much do we know about the safety of these vaccines?

At that point, not a whole hell of a lot. We have no long-term data on mRNA vaccines, but to confidently say that millions of people are going to die because of these vaccines, and to confidently say that ivermectin is a panacea, ivermectin is the thing that prevents COVID, there was no good reason to say either of those things at that moment. Given that that's where Brett was, I felt like there was nothing to debate. We're both the wrong people that would be getting into the weeds on this. We're both going to defer to our chosen experts. His experts look like crackpots to me, or at least the ones who are most vociferous on those edgiest points. And your experts seem like, what is the term, mask hysteria? I forgot the term.

No, but it's like with climate science. It's received as a canard in half of our society now, but the claim that 97% of climate scientists agree that human-caused climate changes a thing, so do you go with the 97% most of the time, or do you go with the 3% most of the time?

It's obvious you go with the 97% most of the time for anything that matters. It's not to say that the 3% are always wrong. Again, things get overturned. And yes, as you say, I've spent much more time worrying about this on my podcast than I've spent worrying about COVID, our institutions

have lost trust for good reason. And it's an open question whether we can actually get things done with this level of transparency and pseudo transparency, given our information ecosystems.

Like, can we fight a war, really fight a war that we may have to fight like the next Nazis?

Can we fight that war when everyone with an iPhone is showing just how awful it is that little girls get blown up when we drop our bombs? Could we as a society do what we might have to do

to actually get necessary things done when we're living in this panopticon of just, you know, everyone's a journalist, right? Everyone's a scientist. Everyone's an expert. Everyone's got direct contact with the facts or some or semblance of the facts. I don't know.

I think yes. And I think voices like yours are exceptionally important. And I think there's certain signals you send in your ability to steal me on the other side in your empathy, essentially. So that's the fight. That's the mechanism by which you resist the dogmatism of this binary thinking. And then if you become a trusted person that's able to consider the other side, then people will listen to you as the aggregators, the communicator of expertise.

Because the virologists haven't been able to be good communicators. I still to this day don't really know what is the, what am I supposed to think about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines today? As it stands today, what are we supposed to think? What are we supposed to think

about testing? What are we supposed to think about the effectiveness of masks or lockdowns? Where's the great communicators on this topic that consider all the other conspiracy theories, all the other, all the communication that's out there, and actually aggregating it together and being able to say, this is actually what's most likely the truth. And also some of that has to do with humility, epistemic humility, knowing that you can't really know for sure, just like with depression, you can't really know for sure. I'm not seeing those communications being effectively done, even still today. Well, the jury is still out on some of it.

And again, it's a moving target. And some of it, it's complicated. Some of it's a self-fulfilling dynamic where like, so like lockdowns, in theory, lockdowns, a lockdown would work if we could only do it, but we can't really do it. And there's a lot of people who won't do it, because they're convinced that it's, this is the totalitarian boot, you know, on finally on the neck of the good people who are always having their interests, you know, traduced by the elites, right? So like this is, if you have enough people who think the lockdown for any reason in the face of any conceivable illness, right, is just code for the new world order coming to fuck you over and take your guns, right? Okay, you have a society that is now immune

to reason, right? Because there are absolutely certain pathogens that we should lock down for next time, right? And it was completely rational in the beginning of this thing to lock down given, to attempt to lock down, we never really locked down, to attempt some semblance of a lockdown, just to quote, bend the curve, to spare our healthcare system, given what we were seeing happening in Italy, right? Like that moment was not hard to navigate, at least in my view, it was obvious at the time, in retrospect, my views on that haven't changed, except for the fact that I recognize maybe it's just impossible, given the nature of people's response to that kind of demand, right? We live in a society that's just not going to lock down.

Unless the pandemic is much more deadly. Right. So that's a point I made, which was maliciously clipped out from some other podcast where someone's trying to make it look like I want to see children die, look, there's a pity more children didn't die from COVID, right? This is actually the same person who, and that's the other thing that got so poisoned here. It's like that person, this psychopath or effective psychopath who's creating these clips of me on podcasts, the second clip of me seeming to say that I wish more children died during COVID, but it was so clear in context what I was saying, that even the clip betrayed the context so it didn't actually work. This psycho, and again, I don't know whether he actually is a psychopath, but he's behaving like one because of the incentives

of Twitter, this is somebody who Brett Signal Boosted as a very reliable source of information, right? He kept retweeting this guy at me, against me, right? And this guy, at one glance, I knew how unreliable this guy was, right? But I think I'm not at all sad. One thing I think I did wrong, one thing that I do regret, one thing I have not sorted out for myself is how to navigate the professional and personal pressure that gets applied at this moment, where you have a friend or an acquaintance or someone you know who's behaving badly in public, behaving in a way that you think is bad in public. And they have a public platform where they're influencing a lot of people, and you have your own public platform where you're constantly getting asked to comment on what this friend or acquaintance or colleague is doing.



I haven't known what I think is ethically right about the choices that seem forced on us at moments like this. So I've criticized you in public about your interview with Kanye. Now, in that case, I reached out to you in private first and told you exactly what I thought. And then when I was going to get asked in public, or when I was touching that topic on my podcast, I more or less said the same thing that I said to you in private, right? Now, that was how I navigated that moment. I did the same thing with Elon, at least at the beginning.

I mean, we have maintained good vibes, which is not what I thought about Elon.

I don't think so. I had to disagree with you because good vibes in the moment, there's a deep core of good vibes that persists through time between you and Elon. And I would argue probably between some of the other folks you mentioned.

I think with Brett, I failed to reach out in private to the degree that I should have.

And we never really had... We had tried to set up a conversation in private that never happened, but there was some communication, but it would have been much better for me to have made more of

an effort in private than I did before it spilled out into public. And I would say that's true with other people as well. What kind of interaction in private do you think you should have with Brett? Because my case would be beforehand and now still. The case I would like in this part of the criticism

you sent my way, maybe it's useful to go to that direction. Actually, let's go to that direction because I think I disagree with your criticism as you stated publicly, but this is very...

You're talking about your...

The thing you criticized me for is actually the right thing to do with Brett.

Okay, you said Lex could have spoken with Kanye in such a way as to have produced a useful document.

He didn't do that because he has a fairly naive philosophy about the power of love.

Let's see if you can maintain that philosophy in the present.

Let's go.

No, it's beautiful. He seemed to think that if he just got through the minefield to the end of the conversation where the two of them still were feeling good about one another and they can hug it out, that would be by definition a success.

Let me make the case for this power of love philosophy. First of all, I love you, Sam.

You're still an inspiration and somebody I deeply admire. Okay.

Back at you.

To me, in the case of Kanye, it's not only that you get through the conversation and have hugs, it's that the display that you're willing to do that has power.

So even if it doesn't end in hugging, the actual turning the other cheek, the act of turning the other cheek itself communicates both to Kanye later and to the rest of the world

that we should have empathy and compassion towards each other. There is power to that.

Maybe that is naive, but I believe in the power of that.

So it's not that I'm trying to convince Kanye that some of his ideas are wrong, but I'm trying to illustrate that just the act of listening and truly trying to understand the human being, that opens people's minds to actually questioning their own beliefs more. It takes

them out of the dogmatism, de-escalates the kind of dogmatism that I've been seeing. So in that sense, I would say the power of love is the philosophy you might apply to Brett because the right conversation you have in private is not about, hey, listen, the experts you're talking to, they seem credentialed, but they're not actually as credentialed as they are illustrating, they're not grounding their findings in actual meta-analyses and papers and so on, like making a strong case, like, what are you doing? This is going to get a lot of people in trouble, but instead just saying, like, being a friend in the dumbest of ways, being, like, respectful, sending love their way and just having a conversation outside of all of this, outside, like, basically showing that, like, removing the emotional attachment to this debate, even though you are very emotionally attached because in the case of COVID, specifically, there is a very large number of lies at stake, but removing all of that and remembering that you have a friendship. Yeah, well, so I think these are highly non-analogous cases, right? So your conversation with Kanye misfired from my point of view for a very different reason. It was, it has to do with Kanye. I mean, so Kanye, I don't know, I've never met Kanye, so obviously I don't know him, but I think he's either obviously in the midst of a mental health crisis, or he's a colossal asshole, or both. I mean, actually, those aren't mutually exclusive. So one of three possibilities, he's either mentally ill, he's an asshole, or he's mentally ill and an asshole. I think all three of those possibilities are possible for the both of us as well. No, I would argue none of those are likely for either of us, but not to say we don't have our moments. So the reason not to talk to Kanye, so I think you should have had the conversation you had with him in private. That's great. And I've got no criticism of what you said had it been in private. In public, I just thought you're not doing him a favor. If he's mentally ill, if he's in the middle of a manic episode or I'm not a clinician, but I've heard it said of him that he is bipolar, you're not doing him a favor sticking a mic in front of him and letting him go off on the Jews or anything else. We know what he thought about the Jews. We know that there's not much illumination that's going to come from him on that topic. And if it is a symptom of his mental illness that he thinks these things will then, you're not doing him a favor making that even more public. If he's just an asshole and he's just an anti-semitic, an ordinary garden variety anti-semitic, well then there's also not much to say unless you're really going to dig in and kick the shit out of him in public. And I'm saying you can do that with love. That's the other thing here is that I don't agree that compassion and love always have this patient embracing acquiescent face. They don't always feel good to the recipient. There is a sort of wisdom that you can wield compassionately in moments like that where someone's full of shit and you just make it absolutely clear to them and to your audience that they're full of shit. And there's no hatred being communicated. In fact, you could just like, listen, I'm going to do everyone a favor right now and just take your foot out of your mouth. And the truth is I just wouldn't have aired the conversation. I just don't think it was a document that had to get out there. This is not a signal you're likely to get from your audience. I get that many people in your audience thought, oh my god, that's awesome. You're talking to Kanye and you're doing it in Lex style where it's just love and you're not treating him like a pariah. And you're holding this tension between he's this creative genius who is work we love and yet he's having this moment that's so painful and what a tightrope walk. And I get that maybe 90% of your audience saw it that way.

They're still wrong. And I still think that was unbalanced, not a good thing to put out into the world. You don't think it opens up the mind and heart of people that listen to that? Just have it. If it's opening it up in the wrong direction where just gale force nonsense is coming in, right? I think we should have an open mind and an open heart, but there's some clear things here that we have to keep in view. One is the mental illness component is its own thing. I don't pretend to understand what's going on with him. But insofar as that's the reason he's saying what he's saying, do not put this guy on camera and let no one see. So in that point, real quick, I had a bunch of conversations with him offline and I didn't get a sense of mental illness. That's why I chose to sit down. And I didn't get it. I mean, mental illness is such a... But when he shows up in a gimp put on Alex Jones' podcast, I mean, either that's more genius performance in his world or he's unraveling further. I wouldn't put that under mental illness. I think there's another conversation to be had about how we treat artists. Right. Because they're weirdos. They're very... I mean, taking words from Okaane as if he's like Christopher Hitchens or something like that, like very eloquent, researched, written many books on history and politics and geopolitics, on psychology. Kanye didn't do any of that. He's an artist just spouting off. And so, there's a different style of conversation and a different way to treat the words that are coming out of his mouth. Let's leave the mental illness aside. So if we're going to say that there's no reason to think he's mentally ill and this is just him being creative and brilliant and opinionated, well, then that falls into the asshole bucket for me. Then he's someone... And honestly, the most offensive thing about him in that interview from my point of view is not the anti-Semitism, which we can talk about because I think there are problems just letting him spread those memes as well. But the most offensive thing is just how delusionally egocentric he is or was coming off in that interview and in others. He has an estimation of himself as this omnibus genius to rival, not only to rival Shakespeare, to exceed Shakespeare. He is the greatest mind that has ever walked among us. And he's more or less explicit on that point. And yet, he manages to talk for hours without saying anything actually interesting or insightful or factually illuminating. So it's complete delusion of a very Trumpian sort. It's like when Trump says he's a genius who understands everything, but nobody takes him seriously and one wonders whether Trump takes himself seriously. Kanye seems to believe his own press. He actually thinks he's just a colossus and he may be a great musician. Certainly not my wheelhouse to compare him to any other musicians, but one thing that's patently obvious from your conversation is he's not who he thinks he is intellectually or ethically or in any other relevant way. And so when you couple that to the anti-Semitism he was spreading, which was genuinely noxious and ill-considered and has potential knock-on effects in the black community, I mean, there's an ambient level of anti-Semitism in the black community that it's worth worrying about and talking about anyway. There's a bunch of guys playing the knockout game in Brooklyn just punching Orthodox Jews in the face. And I think letting Kanye air his anti-Semitism, that publicly only raises the likelihood of that rather than diminishes it. I don't know. So let me say just a couple of things. So one, my belief at the time was it doesn't, it decreases it. Showing empathy while pushing back decreases likelihood of that. It does, it might on the surface look like it's increasing it,

but that's simply because the anti-Semitism or the hatred in general is brought to the surface and that people talk about it. But I should also say that you're one of the only people that wrote to me privately criticizing me. And like out of the people I really respect and admire, and that was really valuable that I had to, it's painful because I had to think through it for a while. And it still haunts me because the other kind of criticism I got a lot of, people basically said things towards me based on who I am that they hate me.

You mean anti-Semitic things?

Yeah, anti-Semitic things. I just hate the word anti-Semitic. It's like racist.

But here's the reality. So I'm Jewish, although obviously not religious. I have never taken, I've been a student of the Holocaust obviously. I know a lot about that and there's reason to be a student of the Holocaust. But in my lifetime and in my experience, I have never taken anti-Semitism very seriously. I have not worried about it. I have not made a thing of it. I've done exactly one podcast on it. I had Barry Weiss on my podcast when her book came out. But it really is a thing and it's something we have to keep an eye on societally because it's a unique kind of hatred. It's not just ordinary racism. It's knit together with lots of conspiracy theories that never seem to die out. It can by turns equally animate the left and the right politically. I mean, it was so perverse about anti-Semitism. Look in the American context. With the far right, with white supremacists, Jews aren't considered white. So they hate us in the same spirit in which they hate black people or brown people or anyone is not white. But on the left, Jews are considered extra white. I mean, we're the extra beneficiaries of white privilege. And in the black community, that is often the case. We're a minority that has thrived and it seems to stand as a counterpoint to all of the problems that other minorities suffer, in particular African-Americans in the American context. Asians are now getting a little bit of this, the model minority issue. But Jews have had this going on for centuries and millennia and it never seems to go away. Again, this is something that I've never focused on. But this has been at a slow boil for as long as we've been alive and there's no guarantee it can't suddenly become much, much uglier than we have any reason to expect it to become, even in our society. And so there's kind of a special concern at moments like that where you have an immensely influential person in a community who already has a checkered history with respect

to their own beliefs about the Jews and the conspiracies and all the rest. And he's just messaging, not especially fully opposed by you and anyone else who's given him the microphone at that moment to the world. And so that made my spidey sense tingle.

Yeah, it's complicated. The stakes are very high. And somebody who's been obviously family and also reading a lot about World War II and just this whole period is a very difficult conversation.

But I believe in the power, especially given who I am of not always but sometimes often turning the other cheek. Oh yeah. And again, things change

when they're for public consumption. The cut for me that has just the use case I keep stumbling upon is the kinds of things that I will say on a podcast like this or

if I'm given a public lecture versus the kinds of things I will say at dinner with strangers or with friends. If I'm in an elevator with strangers and I hear someone say something stupid, I don't feel an intellectual responsibility to turn around in the confines of that space with them and say, listen, that thing you just said about X, Y, or Z is completely false and here's

Y. But if somebody says it in front of me on some public dais where I'm actually talking about ideas, that's when there's a different responsibility that comes online.

The question is how you say it. How you say it.

Or even whether you say anything in those. There are definitely moments to privilege, civility, or just to pick your battles. Sometimes it's just not worth it to get into it with somebody out in real life. I just believe in the power of empathy both in the elevator and when a bunch of people are listening. When they see you willing to consider another human being's perspective, it just gives more power to your words after. Yeah, but until it doesn't. Because you can extend charity too far. It can be absolutely obvious what someone's motives really are and they're dissembling about that. And so then you're taking at face value their representations begins to look like you're just being duped and you're not actually doing the work of putting pressure on a bad actor. And again, the mental illness component here makes it very difficult to think about what you should or shouldn't have said to Kanye.

So I think the topic of platforming is pretty interesting. What's your view on platforming controversial people? Let's start with the old, would you interview Hitler on your podcast? And how would you talk to him? Oh, and follow up question. Would you interview him

in 1935, 41, and then like 45? Well, I think we have an uncanny valley problem with respect to this issue of whether or not to speak to bad people. So if a person's sufficiently bad, all the way out of the valley, then you can talk to them. And it's just totally unproblematic to talk to them because you don't have to spend any time signaling to your audience that you don't agree with them. And if you're interviewing Hitler, you don't have to say, listen, I just got to say before we start, I don't agree with the whole genocide thing. And I just think you're killing mental patients and vans and all that. That was all bad. It's a bad look. It can go without saying that you don't agree with this person and you're not platforming them to signal boost their views. If they're sufficiently evil, you can go into it very much as an anthropologist would just, you just want to understand the nature of evil. You just want to understand this phenomenon, like how is this person who they are? And that strikes me as a intellectually interesting and morally necessary thing to do. So yes, I think you always interview Hitler. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Well, once he's Hitler. But when do you know it? Once he's legitimately... But when do you know it? Is the genocide really happening? 42, 43? No, if you're on the cusp of it where it's just he's someone who's gaining power and you don't want to help facilitate that, then there's a question of whether you can undermine him while pushing back against him in that interview. So there are people I wouldn't talk to just because I don't want to give them oxygen and I don't think that in the context of my interviewing them, I'm going to be able to take the wind out of their sails at all. So it's like for whatever, either because an asymmetric advantage, because I just know that they can do something within the span of an hour that I can't correct for, is like they can light many small fires and it just takes too much time to put them out. That's more like on the topic of vaccines, for example, having a debate on the efficacy of vaccines.

Yeah. It's not that I don't think sunlight is usually the best disinfectant, I think it is.

Even these asymmetries aside, I mean, it is true that a person can always make a mess faster than



you can clean it up, right? But still, there are debates worth having even given that limitation and they're the right people to have those specific debates. And there's certain topics where I'll debate someone just because I'm the right person for the job and it doesn't matter how messy they're going to be. It's just worth it because I can make my points land, at least to the right part of the audience. So some of it is just your own skill and competence and also interest in preparing correctly?

Well, yeah, in the nature of the subject matter. But there are other people who just by default, I would say, well, there's no reason to give this guy a platform. And there are also people who are so confabulatory that they're making such a mess with every sentence that in so far as you're even trying to interact with what they're saying, you're by definition going to fail and you're going to seem to fail to an sufficiently large uninformed audience where it's going to be a net negative for the cause of truth, no matter how good you are. So for instance, I think talking to Alex Jones on any topic for any reason is probably a bad idea because I just think he's just neurologically wired under a string of sentences. He'll get 20 sentences out, each of which contains more lies than the last. And

there's not time enough in the world to run down and certainly not time enough in the span of a conversation to run down each of those leads to bedrock so as to falsify it. I mean, he'll just make shit up or make shit up and then weave it in with half truths and micro truths that give some semblance of credibility to somebody out there. I mean, apparently millions of people out there. And there's just no way to untangle that in real time with him.

I have noticed that you have an allergic reaction to confabularitization.

Yeah, confabulation.

Confabulation. That if somebody says something a little micro untruth, it really stops your brain. Here I'm not talking about micro untruth, I'm just talking about making up things out of whole cloth. If someone says something, well, what about, and then the thing they put at the end of that sentence is just a set of pseudo facts that you can't possibly authenticate or not in the span of that conversation. Whether it's about UFOs or anything else, they will seem to make you look like an agonormous when, in fact, everything they're saying is specious, whether they know it or not. I mean, there's some people who are just crazy. There's some people who are just bullshitting and they're not even tracking whether it's true. It just feels good. And then some people are consciously lying about things. But don't you think there's just a kind of jazz masterpiece of untruth that you should be able to just wave off by saying like, well, none of that is backed up by any evidence and just almost like take it to the humor place. But the thing is, the place I'm familiar with doing this and not doing this is on specific conspiracies like 9-11 truth. Because of what 9-11 did to my intellectual life, and it really just sent me down a path for the better part of a decade. I became a critic of religion. I don't know if I was ever going to be a critic of religion, but it happened to be in my wheelhouse because I spent so much time studying religion on my own. And I was also very interested in the underlying spiritual concerns of every religion. And so I devoted more than a full decade of my life to just what is real here? What is possible? What is the nature of subjective reality? And how does it relate to reality at large? And is there anything to... Who was someone like Jesus or Buddha? And are these people frauds? Are these just myths or is there really a continuum of

insight to be had here that is interesting? So I spent a lot of time on that question through the full decade of my 20s. And that was launched in part by 9-11 truth or... No, but then when 9-11 happened, I had spent all this time reading religious books, understanding, empathically understanding the motivations of religious people, knowing just how fully certain people believe what they say they believe. So I took religious convictions very seriously. And then people started flying planes into our buildings. And so I knew that there was something to be said about... Allegedly.

...the core doctrines of Islam, exactly. So that became my wheelhouse for a time, terrorism and jihadism and related topics. And so the 9-11 truth conspiracy thing kept getting aimed at me. And the question was, well, do I want to debate these people? Yeah. Alex Jones, perhaps.

Yeah. So Alex Jones, I think, was an early purveyor of it, although I don't think I knew who he was at that point. And privately, I had some very long debates with people who, one person in my family went way down that rabbit hole. And every six months or so, I'd literally write the two-hour email that would try to deprogram them, however ineffectually. And so I went back and forth for years on that topic in private with people. But I could see the structure of the conspiracy. I could see the nature of how impossible it was to play whack-a-mole sufficiently well so as to convince anyone of anything who was not seeing the problematic structure of that way of thinking. I mean, it's not actually a thesis. It's a proliferation of anomalies that you can't actually connect all the dots that are being pointed to. They don't connect in a coherent way. They're incompatible theses. And their incompatibility is not being acknowledged. But they're running this algorithm of things are never what they seem. There's always malicious conspirators doing things perfectly. We see evidence of human incompetence everywhere else. No one can tie their shoes expertly anywhere else. But over here, people are perfectly competent. They're perfectly concealing things. Thousands of people are collaborating inexplicably. I mean, incentivized by what? Who knows. They're collaborating to murder thousands of their neighbors and no one is breathing a peep about it. No one's getting caught on camera. No one's breathe the word of it to a journalist. And so I've dealt with that style of thinking and I know what it's like to be in the weeds of a conversation like that. And the person will say, okay, well, but what do you make of the fact that all those F-16s were flown 800 miles out to sea on the morning of 9-11 doing an exercise that hadn't even been scheduled for that day? But it was, and now all of these, I dimly recall some thesis of that kind, but I'm just making these things up now, right? So that detail hadn't even been scheduled for that day. It's inexplicably run that day. So how long would it take to track that down, right? The idea that this is anomalous, like there was an F-16 exercise run on it, and it wasn't even supposed to be run that day, right? Someone like Alex Jones, their speech pattern is to pack as much of that stuff in as possible at the highest velocity that a person can speak. And unless you're knocking down each one of those things, to that audience, you appear to just be uninformed. He didn't know about the F-16s. He doesn't know about Project Mockingbird. You haven't heard about Project Mockingbird? I just made up Project Mockingbird. I don't know what it is, but that's the kind of thing that comes tumbling out in a conversation like that. That's the

kind of thing, frankly, I was worried about in the COVID conversation, because not that someone like Brett would do it consciously, but someone like Brett is swimming in a sea of misinformation, living on Twitter, getting people sending the blog post and the study from the Philippines that showed that in this cohort, Ivermectin did X, right? To actually run anything to ground, right? You have to actually do the work journalistically and scientifically and run it to ground, right? So for some of these questions, you actually have to be a statistician to say, okay, they used the wrong statistics in this experiment, right? Now, yes, we could take all the time to do that, or we could at every stage along the way in a context where we have experts we can trust, go with what 97% of the experts are saying about X, about the safety of mRNA, about the transmissibility of COVID, about whether to wear masks or not wear masks. And I completely agree that that broke down unacceptably over the last few years. But I think that's largely social media and blogs and the efforts of podcasters and sub-stack writers were not just a response to that. I think it was a symptom of that and a cause of that, right? And I think we're living in an environment where we've basically trained ourselves not to be able to agree about facts on any topic, no matter how urgent, right? What's flying in our sky? What's happening in Ukraine? Is Putin just denazifying Ukraine? I mean, there are people who we respect who are spending time down that particular rabbit hole. This is, maybe there are a lot of Nazis in Ukraine and that's the real problem, right? Maybe Putin's not the bad actor here, right? How much time do I have to spend empathizing with Putin to the point of thinking, well, maybe Putin's got a point and it's like, what about the polonium and the nerve agents and the killing of journalists and the, you know, Navalny and like, does that count? Listen, I'm not paying so much attention to that because I'm following all these interesting people on Twitter and they're giving me some pro-Putin material here. And there are some Nazis in Ukraine. It's not like there are no Nazis in Ukraine. How am I going to wait these things? I think people are being driven crazy by Twitter. Yeah. But you're kind of speaking to conspiracy theories that pollute everything and then, but every example you gave is kind of a bad faith style of conversation. But it's not necessarily knowingly bad faith by, I mean, the people who are worried about Ukrainian Nazis, I mean, they're some of the same people. They're the same people who are worried about Ivermectin got suppressed. Like, Ivermectin is really the panacea, but it got suppressed for, because no one could make billions on it. It's literally, in many cases, the same people and the same efforts to unearth those. You're saying it's very difficult to have conversations with those kinds of people. What about a conversation with Trump himself? Would you do a podcast with Trump? No. I don't think so. I don't think I'd be learning anything about him. It's like with Hitler, and I'm not comparing Trump to Hitler, but... Clips guy, here's your chance. You got this one. With certain world historical figures, I would just feel like, okay, this is an opportunity to learn something that I'm not going to learn. I think Trump is among the most superficial people we have ever laid eyes on. He is in public view. I'm sure there's some distance between who he is in private and who he is in public, but it's not going to be the kind of distance that's going to blow my mind. For instance, I think Joe Rogan was very wise not to have Trump on his podcast. I think all he would have been doing is he would have put himself in a situation where he

couldn't adequately contain the damage Trump was doing, and he was just going to make Trump seem

cool to a whole new, potentially new cohort of his massive audience. They would have had a lot of laughs. Trump's funny. The entertainment value of things is so influential. There was that one debate where Trump got a massive laugh on his line, only Rosie O'Donnell. The truth is, we're living in a political system where if you can get a big laugh during a political debate, you win. It doesn't matter who you are. That's the level of, it doesn't matter how uninformed you are, it doesn't matter that half the debate was about what the hell we should do about a threat of nuclear war or anything else. We're monkeys, and we like to laugh.

Because he brought up Joe, he's somebody like you I look up to. I've learned a lot from him, because I think who he is privately as a human being. Also, he's kind of the voice of curiosity to me. He inspired me that, unending, open-minded curiosity, much like you are the voice of reason. They recently had a podcast, Joe had recently had a podcast with Jordan Peterson, and I brought you up saying they still have a hope for you. Any chance you talk to Joe again and reinvigorate your friendship? I reached out to him privately when I saw that.

Did you use the power of love? Joe knows. I love him and consider him a friend, right? There's no issue there. He also knows I'll be happy to do his podcast when we get that together. I've got no policy of not talking to Joe or not doing his podcast.

I think we got a little sideways along these same lines where we've talked about Brett and Elon and other people. It was never to that degree with Joe, because Joe's in a very different lane, right? He's unconsciously so. I mean, Joe is a stand-up comic who interviews, who just is interested in everything, interviews the widest conceivable variety of people and just lets his interests collide with their expertise or lack of expertise.

I mean, again, it's a super wide variety of people. He'll talk about anything and he can always pull the ripcord saying, I don't know what the fuck I'm saying. I'm a comic. I'm stoned. We just drank too much, right? It's very entertaining. It's all in, to my eye, it's all in good faith. I think Joe is an extraordinarily ethical, good person. Also doesn't use Twitter. Doesn't really use Twitter. The crucial difference though is that because he is an entertainer first. I mean, I'm not saying he's not smart and he doesn't understand things. What's potentially confusing is he's very smart and he's also very informed. His full-time job is taught when he's not doing stand-up or doing color commentary for the UFC. His full-time job is talking to lots of very smart people at great lengths. He's created the Joe Rogan University for himself and he's gotten a lot of information crammed into his head. It's not that he's uninformed, but when he feels that he's uninformed or when it turns out he was wrong about something, he can always pull the ripcord and say, I'm just a comic. We were stoned. It was fun. Don't take medical advice from me.

I don't play a doctor on the internet. I can't quite do that. You can't quite do that. We're in different lanes. I'm not saying you and I are in exactly the same lane, but for much of Joe's audience, I'm just this establishment shill, just banging on about the universities and medical journals. It's not true, but that would be the perception. As a counterpoint to a lot of what's being said on Joe's podcast or certainly Brett's podcast on these topics, I can see how they would form that opinion. But in reality, if you listen to me long enough, you hear that I've said as much against the woke nonsense as anyone, even any lunatic on the right who can only keep that bright shining object in view. So there's nothing that Candace Owens has said about

wokeness that I haven't said about wokeness as far in so far as she's speaking rationally about wokeness. But we have to be able to keep multiple things in view. If you could only look at the problem of wokeness and you couldn't acknowledge the problem of Trump and Trumpism and QAnon and

the explosion of irrationality that was happening on the right and bigotry that was happening on the right, you were just disregarding half of the landscape. And many people took half of the problem in recent years. The last five years is a story of many people taking half of the problem and monetizing that half of the problem and getting captured by an audience that only wanted that half of the problem talked about in that way. And this is the larger issue of audience capture, which I'm sure it's an ancient problem, but it's a very helpful phrase that I think comes to us courtesy of our mutual friend, Eric Weinstein. And audience capture is a thing. And I believe I've witnessed many casualties of it. And if there's anything I've been unguarded against in my life professionally, it's been that. And when I noticed that I had a lot of people in my audience who didn't like my criticizing Trump, I really leaned into it. And when I noticed that a lot of the other cohort of my audience didn't like me criticizing the far left and wokeness, they thought I was exaggerating that problem, I leaned into it because I thought those parts of my audience were absolutely wrong. And I didn't care about whether I was going to lose those parts of my audience. There are people who have created, knowingly or not, there are people who've created different incentives for themselves because of how they've monetized their podcast and because of the kind of signal they've responded to in their audience. And I worry about... Brett would consider this a totally invidious ad hominem thing to say, but I really do worry that that's happened to Brett. I cannot explain how you do 100 with all the things in the universe to be interested in. And of all the things he's competent to speak intelligently about, I don't know how you do 100 podcasts in a row on COVID. It makes no sense.

You think, in part, audience capture can explain that?

I absolutely think it can.

For example, do you feel pressure to not admit that you made a mistake on COVID or made a mistake on Trump? I'm not saying you feel that way, but do you feel this pressure? So you've attacked audience capture within the way you do stuff, so you don't feel as much pressure from the audience, but within your own ego? Again, the people who think I'm wrong about any of these topics are going to think, okay, you're just not admitting that you're wrong, but now we're having a dispute about specific facts. There are things that I believed about COVID or worried might be true about COVID two years ago that I no longer believe or I'm not so worried about now and vice versa. Things have flipped. Certain things have flipped upside down.

The question is, was I wrong? Here's a cartoon version of it, but this is something I said probably 18 months ago, and it's still true. When I saw what Brett was doing on COVID, let's call it two years ago, I said, even if he's right, even if he turns out that Ivermectin is a panacea and the mRNA vaccines kill millions of people, he's still wrong right now. His reasoning is still flawed right now. His facts still suck right now, and his confidence is unjustified, now. That was true then, that will always be true then. Not much has changed for me to revisit any of my time points along the way. Again, I will totally concede that if I had teenage boys and their schools were demanding that they be vaccinated with the mRNA vaccine, I would be powerfully annoyed. I wouldn't know what I was going to do, and I would be doing



more research about myocarditis, and I'd be badgering our doctors, and I would be worried that we have a medical system and a pharmaceutical system and a healthcare system and a public health system that's not incentivized to look at any of this in a fine-grain way, and they just want one blanket admonition to the entire population. Just take the shot, you idiots. I view that largely as a result, a panicked response to the misinformation explosion that happened and the populist resistance animated by misinformation that just made it impossible to get anyone to cooperate. Part of it is, again, a pendulum swing in the wrong direction. It's somewhat analogous to the woke response to Trump and the Trumpist response to woke. A lot of people have just gotten pushed around for bad reasons, but understandable reasons. But yes, there are caveats to things have changed about my view of COVID. But the question is, if you roll back the clock, 18 months, was I wrong to want to platform Eric Topol, a very well-respected cardiologist on this topic, or Nicholas Christakis to talk about the network effects of whether we should close schools. He's written a book on COVID. His network effects are his wheelhouse, both as an MD and as a sociologist. There was a lot that we believed we knew about the efficacy of closing schools during pandemics, during the Spanish flu pandemic and others. But there's a lot we didn't know about COVID. We didn't know how negligible the effects would be on kids compared to older people. I really enjoyed your conversation with Eric Topol, but also didn't. He's one of the great communicators in many ways on Twitter, distillation of the current data. I hope I'm not overstating it,

but there is a bit of an arrogance from him that I think could be explained by him being exhausted, by being constantly attacked by conspiracy theories like anti-vaxxers. To me, the same thing happens

with people that start drifting to being right-wing is to get attacked so much by the left. They become almost irrational and arrogant in their beliefs. I felt your conversation with Eric Topol did not sufficiently empathize with people that have skepticism, but also did not sufficiently communicate uncertainty we have. Many of the decisions you made, many of the things you were talking about were saying there's a lot of uncertainty, but this is the best thing we could do now. Well, it was a forced choice. You're going to get COVID. Do you want to be vaccinated when you get it? Right. That was always, in my view, an easy choice. Up until you start breaking apart the cohorts, and you start saying, okay, wait a minute, there is this myocarditis issue in young men. Let's talk about that. Before that story emerged, it was just clear that if it's not knocking down transmission as much as we had hoped, it is still mitigating severe illness and death. I still believe that it is the current view of most people competent to analyze the data that we lost something like 300,000 people unnecessarily in the US because of vaccine hesitancy. I think there's a way to communicate with humility about the uncertainty of things that would increase the vaccination rate. I do believe that it is rational and sometimes effective to signal impatience with certain bad ideas and certain conspiracy theories and certain forms of misinformation. You think so? I just think it makes you look like a douchebag most times. Certain people are persuadable. Certain people are not persuadable, but it's the opportunity cost. Not everything can be given a patient hearing. You can't have a physics conference and then let people in to just trumpet their pet theories about the grand unified vision of physics when they're obviously crazy or they're obviously half crazy. You begin to get a sense for this when it is your wheelhouse, but there are people who declare their

irrelevance to the conversation fairly quickly without knowing that they have done it. The truth is, I think I'm one of those people on the topic of COVID. It's never that I felt, listen, I know exactly what's going on here. I know these mRNA vaccines are safe. I know exactly how to run a lockdown. No, this is a situation where you want the actual pilots to fly the plane. We needed experts who we could trust. Insofar as our experts got captured by all manner of things, some of them got captured by Trump. Some of them were made to look ridiculous just standing next to Trump while he was bloviating about whatever that it's just going to go away. There's just 15 people in a cruise ship and it's just going to go away. There's going to be no problem. Many of these doctors think, I understand this better than them. They're just amazed at how I understand this. You've got doctors, real doctors, the heads of the CDC and NIH standing around just ashen-faced while he's talking. All of this was deeply corrupting of the public communication of science. Then again, I've banged on about the depredations of wokeness. The woke thing was a disaster. It still is a disaster, but it doesn't mean that... The thing is, there's a big difference between me and Brett in this case. I didn't do 100 podcasts on COVID. I did like two podcasts on COVID. The measure of my concern about COVID can be measured in how many podcasts I did on it. Once we had a sense of how to live with COVID, I was just living with COVID. Like, okay, if you get vaxed or don't get vaxed, wear a mask or don't wear a mask. Travel or don't travel. You've got a few things to decide, but my kids were stuck at home on iPads for too long. I didn't agree with that. It was obviously not functional. I criticized that on the margins, but there was not much to do about it. But the thing I didn't do is make this my life and just browbeat people with one message or another. We need a public health regime where we can trust what the competent people are saying to us about what medicines are safe to take. In the absence of that, craziness is going to... Even in the presence of that craziness is going to proliferate given the tools we've built. But in the absence of that, it's going to proliferate for understandable reasons. It's not going to be good next time when something orders of magnitude more dangerous hits us. Insofar as I think about this issue, I think much more about next time than this time. Before this COVID thing, you and Brett had some good conversations, I would say we're friends. What do you admire most about Brett outside of all the criticism we've had about this COVID topic? I think Brett is very smart and he's a very ethical person who wants good things for the world. I have no reason to doubt that. So, the fact that we're crosswise on this issue does not mean that I think he's a bad person. The thing that worried me about what he was doing, and this was true of Joe, and this was true of Elon, this was true of many other people, is that once you're messaging at scale to a vast audience, you incur a certain kind of responsibility not to get people killed. I did worry that people were making decisions on the basis of the information that was getting shared there. That's why I was, I think, fairly circumspect. I just said, okay, give me the center of the fairway expert opinion at this time point, and at this time point, and at this time point, and then I'm out. I don't have any more to say about this. I'm not an expert on COVID. I'm not an expert on the safety of mRNA vaccines. If something changes so as to become newsworthy, then maybe I'll do a podcast. I just did a podcast on the lab leak. I was never skeptical of the lab leak hypothesis. Brett was very early on saying this is a lab leak

at a point where my only position was, who cares if it's a lab leak? The thing we have to get straight is, what do we do given the nature of this pandemic? But also, we should say that you've actually stated that it is a possibility. We just said it doesn't quite matter.

The time to figure that out, now, I've actually, I have had my podcast guest on this topic changed my view of this because one of the guests, Alina Chan, made the point that, actually, that the best time to figure out the origin of this is immediately because in the avid, you lose touch with the evidence. I hadn't really been thinking about that. If you come back after a year, there are certain facts you might not be able to get in hand, but I've always felt that it didn't matter for two reasons. One is, we had the genome of the virus and we could design, we very quickly designed, immediately, designing vaccines against that genome, and that's what we had to do. Then we had to figure out how to vaccinate and to mitigate and to develop treatments and all of that. The origin story didn't matter. Generically speaking, either origin story was politically inflammatory and made the Chinese look bad. The Chinese response to this looked bad, whatever the origin story. They're stopping their domestic flights but letting their international flights go. They were bad actors and they should be treated as such regardless of the origin. I would argue that the wet market origin is even more politically invidious than the lab leak origin. To my eye, the lab leak could happen to anyone. All these advanced countries are running these dangerous labs. That's a practice that we should be worried about in general. We know lab leaks are a problem. There have been multiple lab leaks of even worse

things that haven't gotten out of hand in this way but worse pathogens. We're wise to be worried about this and on some level, it could happen to anyone. The wet market makes them look like barbarians live in another century. You've got to clean up those wet markets. What do you do in putting a bat on top of a pangolin, on top of a duck? Get your shit together. If anything, the wet market makes them look worse in my view. Now, I'm sure that what they actually did to conceal a lab leak, if it was a lab leak, all of that's going to look odious.

Do you think we'll ever get to the bottom of that? One of the big negative, I would say failures of Anthony Fauci and so on is to be transparent and clear and just a good communicator about gain and function research, the dangers of that. Why it's a useful way of research but it's also dangerous, just being transparent about that as opposed to just coming off really shady. Of course, the conspiracy theorists and the politicians are not helping them, but this just created a giant mess. Yeah, no, I would agree that that exchange with Fauci and Rand Paul went viral. Yeah, I would agree that Fauci looked like he was taking refuge in very lawyered language and not giving a straightforward account of what we do and why we do it. I think it looked shady, it played shady, and it probably was shady. I don't know how personally entangled he is with any of this, but yeah, the gain of function research is something that I think we're wise to be worried about. Insofar as I judge myself adequate to have an opinion on this, I think it should be banned. Probably a podcast I'll do if you or somebody else doesn't do it in the meantime, I would like a virologist to defend it against a virologist who would criticize it. Forget about just the gain of function research. I don't even understand virus hunting at this point. It's like, I don't even know why you need to go into a cave to find this next virus that could be circulating among bats that may jump zoonotically to us. Why do that when we can sequence in a day and

make vaccines in a weekend? What kind of head start do you think you're getting?

That's a surprising new thing, how quickly you can develop a vaccine.

Yeah, that's really interesting, but the shagging us around lab leak.

I think the point I didn't make about Brett's style of engaging in this issue is people are using the fact that he was early on lab leak to suggest that he was right about ivermectin and about mRNA vaccines and all the rest. None of that connects. It was possible to be falsely confident. You shouldn't have been confident about lab leak. No one should have been confident about lab leak early, even if it turns out to be lab leak. It was always plausible. It was never definite. It still isn't definite. Zoonotic is also quite plausible. It certainly was super plausible then. Both are politically uncomfortable. Both at the time were inflammatory to be banging on about when we were trying to secure some kind of cooperation from the Chinese.

There's a time for these things and it's possible to be right by accident.

The style of reasoning matters whether you're right or not because your style of reasoning is dictating what you're going to do on the next topic.

Sure, but this is a multi-various situation here. It's really difficult to know what's right on COVID given all the uncertainty, all the chaos, especially when you step outside the pure biology, virology of it and you start to get into policy.

It's just trade-offs. Like transmissibility of the virus. Just knowing if 65% of the population gets vaccinated, what effect would that have? Just even knowing those things, just modeling all those things. Given all the other incentives, I mean Pfizer, I don't know. You had the CEO of Pfizer on your podcast. Did you leave that conversation feeling like this is a person who is consciously reaping windfall profits on a dangerous vaccine and putting everyone at intolerable risk? Or did you think this person was making a good faith attempt to save lives and had no taint of bad incentives or something?

The thing I sensed and I felt in part, it was a failure on my part, but I sensed that I was talking to a politician. So it's not thinking of there was malevolence there or benevolence.

He just had a job to do. He put on a suit and I was talking to a suit, not a human being. Now, he said that his son was a big fan of the podcast, which is why he wanted to do it. So I thought I would be talking to a human being. And I asked challenging questions where I thought the internet thinks otherwise. Every single question in that interview was a challenging one, but it wasn't grilling, which is what people seem to want to do with pharmaceutical companies. There's a deep distrust of pharmaceutical companies.

What was the alternative? I totally get that windfall profits at a time of public health emergency looks bad. It is a bad look, but how do we reward and return capital to risk takers who will spend a billion dollars to design a new drug for a disease that maybe only harms a single-digit percentage of the population? What do we want to encourage?

Who do we want to get rich? The person who cures cancer, do we want that person to get rich or not? We want the person who gave us the iPhone to get rich, but we don't want the person who cures cancer to get rich. What are we trying to do?

I think it's a very gray area. What we want is the person who declares that they have a cure for cancer to have authenticity and transparency. I think we're good now as a population smelling bullshit. There is something about the Pfizer CEO, for example, just CEO of the pharmaceutical companies in general, just because they're so lured up, so much marketing PR people,

that you just smell bullshit. You're not talking a real human. It just feels like none of it is transparent to us as a public. This whole talking point that Pfizer is only interested in helping people just doesn't ring true, even though it very well could be true. It's the same thing with Bill Gates, who seems to be at scale helping a huge amount of people in the world. Yet, there's something about the way he delivers that message, where people are like, this seems suspicious. What's happening underneath this? There's certain kinds of communication styles that seem to be more serve as better catalysts for conspiracy theories. I'm not sure what that is, because I don't think there's an alternative for capitalism in delivering drugs that help people, but also at the same time, there seems to need to be a more transparency. Plus, regulation, that actually makes sense versus it seems like pharmaceutical companies are susceptible to corruption. Yeah, I worry about all that, but I also do think that most of the people go into those fields and most of the people go into government. Yeah, they want to do good. They're non-psycopaths trying to get good things done and trying to solve hard problems. They're not trying to get rich. Many of the people bad incentives or something. Again, I've uttered that phrase 30 times on this podcast, but it's just almost everywhere it explains normal people creating terrible harm. It's not that there are that many bad people. Yes, it makes the truly bad people that much more remarkable and worth paying attention to, but the bad incentives and the power of bad ideas do much more harm because that's what gets good people running in the wrong direction doing things that are clearly creating unnecessary suffering. You've had and I hope still have a friendship with Elon Musk, especially over the topic of AI. You have a lot of interesting ideas that you both share, concerns that you both share. Let me first ask, what do you admire most about Elon? I had a lot of fun with Elon. I like Elon a lot. Elon, I knew as a friend, I like a lot. It's not going to surprise anyone. He's done and he's continuing to do amazing things. Many of his aspirations are realized, the world will be a much better place. I think it's amazing to see what he's built and what he's attempted to build and what he may yet build. So with Tesla, with SpaceX? Yeah, I'm a fan of almost all of that. There are wrinkles to a lot of that or some of that. All humans are full of wrinkles. There's something very Trumpian about how he's acting on Twitter. I think Twitter is great. He bought the place because he thinks it's so great. I think Twitter is driving him crazy. I think he's needlessly complicating his life and harming his reputation and creating a lot of noise and harming a lot of other people. The thing that I objected to with him on Twitter is not that he bought it and made changes to it. Again, I remain agnostic as to whether or not he can improve the platform. It was how he was personally behaving on Twitter, not just toward me but toward the world. I think when you forward an article about Nancy Pelosi's husband being attacked not as he was by some lunatic but that it's just some gay trist gone awry. That's not what it seems. You link to a website that previously claimed that Hillary Clinton was dead and that a body double was campaigning in her place. That thing was exploding in Trumpistan as a conspiracy theory. It was having its effect. It matters that he was signal boosting it in front of 130 million people. It is with saying that your former



employee, Joel Roth, is a pedophile. That has real consequences. It appeared to be complete bullshit. Now this guy's getting inundated with death threats. Elon, that's all that's totally predictable. He's behaving quite recklessly. There's a long list of things like that that he's done on Twitter. It's not ethical. It's not good for him. It's not good for the world. It's not serious. It's a very adolescent relationship to real problems in our society. My problem with how he's behaved is that he's purported to touch real issues by turns like, okay, do I give the satellites to Ukraine or not? Do I minimize their use of them or not? Should I publicly worry about World War III or not? He's doing this shit on Twitter. At the same moment, he's doing these other very impulsive, ill-considered things. He's not showing any willingness to really clean up the mess he makes. He brings Kanye on knowing he's an anti-Semite who's got mental health problems and then kicks him off for a swastika, which I probably wouldn't have kicked him off for a swastika. Can you really kick people off for swastikas? Is that something that you get banned for? Are you a free speech absolutist if you can't let a swastika show up? I'm not even sure that's an enforceable terms of service. There are moments to use swastikas that are not conveying hate and not raising the risk of violence.

Clip that.

But so much of what he's doing, given that he's, again, scale matters. He's doing this in front of 130 million people. That's very different than a million people and that's very different than 100,000 people. When I went off the tracks with Elon, he was doing this about COVID.

But again, this was a situation where I tried to privately mitigate a friend's behavior and it didn't work out very well.

Did you try to correct him highlighting things he might be wrong on?

Yeah.

Or did you use the Lex Powell love method? I should write like a pamphlet for Sam Harris.

Well, no, but it was totally coming from a place of love because I was concerned about his reputation. I was concerned about what he, I mean, there was a two-fold concern.

I could see what was happening with the tweet. I mean, he had this original tweet that was, I think it was panic over COVID is dumb or something like that, right? This is, boy, this is in March, this is early March, 2020.

Oh, super early days.

Super early. When nobody knew anything, but we knew we saw what was happening in Italy, right? It was totally kicking off.

God, that was a wild time. That's when the toilet paper.

It was totally wild, but that became the most influential tweet on Twitter for that week.

I mean, it had more engagement than any other tweet,

more than any crazy thing Trump was tweeting. I mean, it went off,

again, it was just a nuclear bomb of information and I could see that people were responding to it like, wait a minute, okay, here's this genius technologist who must have inside information about everything, right? Surely he knows something that is not on the surface about this pandemic and they're reading, they were reading into it a lot of information that I knew wasn't there, right? And at the time, I didn't even, I didn't think he had any reason to be suggesting that. I think he was just firing off a tweet, right?

So I reached out to him in private and I mean, because it was a private

text conversation, I won't talk about the details, but I'm just saying that's a case, you know, among the many cases of friends who have public platforms and who did something that I thought was dangerous and ill-considered, this was a case where I reached out in private and tried to help, genuinely help because it was just, I thought it was harmful and in every sense, because it was being misinterpreted and it's like, okay, you can say that panic over anything is dumb, fine. But this was not how this was landing. This was like non-issue, conspiracy, there's going to be no COVID in the US, it's going to peter out, it's just going to become a cold. I mean, that's how this was getting received. Whereas at that moment, it was absolutely obvious how big a deal this was going to be or that it was going to add minimum going to be a big deal. I don't know if it was obvious, but it was obvious there was a significant probability that it could be a big deal. I remember it wasn't unclear how big, because there were still stories of it, like it's probably going to like the big concern, the hospitals might overfill, but it's going to die out in like two months or something. Yeah, we didn't know, but there was no way we weren't going to have tens of thousands of deaths at a minimum at that point. And it was every, it was totally rational to be worried about hundreds of thousands. And when Nicholas Christakis came on my podcast very early, he predicted quite confidently that we would have about a million people dead in the US. And that didn't seem, it was, I think, appropriately hedged, but it was still just like, okay, it's just going to, you just look at the, we were just kind of riding this exponential and we're, and it's going to be very surprising not to have that order of magnitude and not something much, much less. And so anyway, I mean, again, to close the story on Elon, I could see how this was being received. And I tried to get him to walk that back. And then we had a fairly long and detailed exchange on this issue. And that, so that intervention didn't work. And it was not done, I was not an asshole, I was not, I was just concerned for him, for the world, and then there are other relationships where I didn't take the, but again, that's an example where taking the time didn't work, right, privately. There are other relationships where I thought, okay, this is just going to be more trouble than it's worth. And I just ignored it. And there's a lot of that. And again, I'm not comfortable with how this is all netted out, because I don't know if, frankly, I'm not comfortable with how much time in this conversation we've spent talking about these specific people. Like what good is it for me to talk about Elon or bread or anything? I think there's a lot of good, because those friendships, listen, as a fan, these are the conversations that I loved, love as a fan. And it feels like COVID has robbed the world of these conversations, because you were exchanging back and forth on Twitter. But that's not what I mean by conversations, like long form discussions, like a debate about COVID, like a normal debate. But there's no, there is no, Elon and I shouldn't be debating COVID. You should be. Here's the thing with humility, like basically saying, we don't really know, like the Rogan method, we don't, we're just a bunch of idiots. Like one is an engineer, you're a neuroscientist, but like, it just kind of, okay, here's the evidence and be like normal people. That's what everybody was doing. The whole world was like trying to figure out what the hell, what? Yeah, but the issue was that at that, so at the moment I had this collision with Elon, certain things were not debatable. It was just, it was absolutely clear where this was going. It wasn't clear how far it was going to go or how quickly we would mitigate it, but

it was absolutely clear that it was going to be an issue. The train had come off the tracks in Italy. We knew we weren't going to seal our borders. There were already people, you know, there are already cases known to many of us personally in the US at that point.

And he was operating by a very different logic that I couldn't engage with.

Sure, but that logic represents a part of the population. And there's a lot of interesting topics that have a lot of uncertainty around them, like the effectiveness of masks.

Yeah, but no, but where things broke down was not at the point of, oh, there's a lot to talk about, a lot to debate. This is all very interesting. And who knows what's what. It broke down very early at this is, you know, there's nothing to talk about here. Like either there's a water bottle on the table or there isn't, right? Well, technically, there's only one fourth of a water bottle. So what defines a water bottle? Is it the water inside the water bottle? Is it the water bottle? Well, I'm giving you as an example of it's worth the conversation. This is difficult, because this is, we had an exchange in private and I want to honor not exposing the details of it, but the details convinced me that there was not a follow up conversation on that topic.

On this topic. That said, I hope, and I hope to be part of helping that happen, that the friendship was rekindled because one of the topics I care a lot about, artificial intelligence, you've had great public and private conversations about this topic.

Yeah. And Elon was very formative in my taking that issue seriously. I mean, he and I went to that initial conference in Puerto Rico together and it was only because he was going and I found out about it through him and I just wrote his coattails to it, you know, that I got to dropped in that side of the pool to hear about these concerns at that point.

It would be interesting to hear how is your concern evolved with the coming out of chat GPT and these new large language models that are fine tuned with reinforcement learning and seemingly to be able to do some incredible human like things. There's two questions. One, how is your concern in terms of AGI and superintelligence evolved and how impressed are you with chat GPT as a student of the human mind and mind in general?

Well, my concern about AGI is unchanged. I've spoken about it a bunch on my podcast, but I did a TED Talk in 2016, which was the kind of summary of what that conference and various conversations I had after that did to my brain on this topic. Basically, that once superintelligence is achieved, there's a takeoff, it becomes exponentially smarter and in a matter of time, there's just where ants and their gods. Well, yeah, unless we find some way of permanently tethering a superintelligent, self-improving AI to our value system, and I don't believe anyone has figured out how to do that or whether that's even possible in principle. I know people like Stuart Russell, who I just had on my podcast, are- Oh, really? Have you released it?

I haven't released it yet. Oh, great.

He's been on previous podcasts, but we just recorded this week.

Because you haven't done an AI podcast in a while, so it's great. He's a good person to talk about alignment with. Yeah, so Stuart has been probably more than anyone, my guru on this topic. I mean, like you're just reading his book and doing, I think I've done two podcasts with him at this point. I think it's called The Control Problem or something like that.

His book is Human Compatible.

Human Compatible.

Yeah, he talks about the control problem. Yeah, so I just think the idea that we can define a value function in advance that permanently tethers a self-improving super intelligent AI to our values as we continue to discover them, refine them, extrapolate them in an open-ended way, I think that's a tall order. I think there are many more ways. There must be many more ways of designing super intelligence that is not aligned in that way, and it's not ever approximating our values in that way. So I mean, Stuart's idea to put it in a very simple way is that he thinks you don't want to specify the value function up front. You don't want to imagine you could ever write the code in such a way as to admit of no loophole. You want to make the AI uncertain as to what human values are and perpetually uncertain and always trying to ameliorate that uncertainty by hewing more and more closely to what our professed values are. So it's always interested in saying, oh, no, no, that's not what we want. That's not what we intend. Stop doing that. No matter how smart it gets, all it wants to do is more perfectly approximate human values. I think there are a lot of problems with that. At a high level, I'm not a computer scientist, so I'm sure there are many problems at a low level that I don't understand. Like how to force a human into the loop always, no matter what. There's that and what humans get a vote and just what do humans value and what is the difference between what we say we value and our revealed preferences. If you were a super intelligent AI that could look at humanity now, I think you could be forgiven for concluding that what we value is driving ourselves crazy with Twitter and living perpetually on the brink of nuclear war and just watching hot girls and yoga pants on TikTok again and again and again. And you're saying that is not holding? This is all revealed preference, and what is an AI to make of that? And what should it optimize? This is also Stewart's observation that one of the insidious things about the YouTube algorithm is it's not that it just caters to our preferences. It actually begins to change us in ways so as to make us more predictable. It finds ways to make us a better reporter of our preferences and to trim our preferences down so that it can further train to that signal. So the main concern is that most of the people in the field seem not to be taking intelligence seriously. As they design more and more intelligent machines and as they profess to want to design true AGI, they're not spending the time that Stewart is spending trying to figure out how to do this safely above all. They're just assuming that these problems are going to solve themselves as we make that final stride into the end zone. Or they're saying very polyanish things like an AI would never form a motive to harm human. Why would it ever form a motive to be malicious toward humanity unless we put that motive in there? And that's not the concern. The concern is that in the presence of vast disparities and competence, and certainly in a condition where the machines are improving themselves, they're improving their own code, they could be developing instrumental goals that are antithetical to our well-being without any intent to harm us. It's analogous to what we do to every other species on Earth. I mean, you and I don't consciously form the intention to harm insects on a daily basis, but there are many things we could intend to do that would, in fact, harm insects because you decided to repave your driveway or whatever you're doing. You're just not taking the interest of insects into account because they're so far beneath you in terms of your cognitive horizons. So the real challenge here is that if you believe that intelligence scales up on a continuum toward heights that we can only dimly imagine, and I think there's

every reason to believe that. There's no reason to believe that we're near the summit of intelligence. Maybe there are some forms of intelligence for which this is not true, but for many relevant forms, like the top 100 things we care about cognitively, I think there's every reason to believe that many of those things, most of those things, are a lot like chess or Go, where once the machines get better than we are, they're going to stay better than we are, although they're, I don't know if you caught the recent thing with Go, where this guy actually came out of Stewart's lab. Yeah. Yeah. One time a human beta machine. Yeah, they found a hack for that. But anyway, ultimately, there's going to be no looking back. And then the question is, what do we do in relationship to these systems that are more competent than we are in every relevant respect? Because it will be a relationship. The people who think we're just going to figure this all out without thinking about it in advance, the solutions are just going to find themselves, seem not to be taking the prospect of really creating autonomous superintelligence seriously. Like, what does that mean? It's every bit as independent and ungovernable, ultimately, as us having created, I mean, just imagine if we created a race of people that were 10 times smarter than all of us. Like, how would we live with those people? They're 10 times smarter than us, right? Like, they begin to talk about things we don't understand. They begin to want things we don't understand. They begin to view us as obstacles to them, so they're solving those problems or gratifying those desires. We become the chickens or the monkeys in their presence. And I think that it's, but for some amazing solution of the sort that Stuart is imagining, that we could somehow anchor their reward function permanently, no matter how intelligent scales. I think it's really worth worrying about this. I do buy the sci-fi notion that this is an existential risk if we don't do it well.

I worry that we don't notice it. I'm deeply impressed with chatGPT and I'm worried that it will become superintelligent. These language models have become superintelligent because they're basically trained in the collective intelligence of the human species. And then it will start controlling our behavior if they're integrated into our algorithms, the recommender systems. And then we just won't notice that there's a superintelligent system that's controlling our behavior. Well, I think that's true even before, far before superintelligence, even before general intelligence. I mean, I think just the narrow intelligence of these algorithms and of what something like chatGPT can do, I mean, it's just far short of it developing its own goals that are at cross-purposes with ours. It's just the unintended consequences of using it in the ways we're going to be incentivized to use it and the money to be made from scaling this thing and what it does to our information space and our sense of just being able to get to ground truth on any facts. Yeah, it's super scary. Do you think it's a giant leap in terms of the development towards AGI, chatGPT, or is this just an impressive little toolbox? So when do you think the singularity is coming? I have no intuitions on that front apart from the fact that if we continue to make progress, it will come. You just have to assume we continue to make progress.

There's only two assumptions. You have to assume substrate independence. So there's no reason why this can't be done in silico. It's just we can build arbitrarily intelligent machines. There's nothing magical about having this done in the wetware of our own brains. I think that is true, and I think that's scientifically parsimonious to think that that's true. And then you just have to assume we're going to keep making progress. It doesn't



have to be any special rate of progress. It doesn't have to be Moore's law. It can just be, we just keep going. At a certain point, we're going to be in relationship to minds leaving consciousness aside. I don't have any reason to believe that they'll necessarily be conscious by virtue of being super intelligent, and that's its own interesting ethical question. But leaving consciousness aside, they're going to be more competent than we are. And then that's like the aliens have landed. That's an encounter with, again, leaving aside the possibility that something like Stewart's path is actually available to us. But it is hard to picture if what we mean by intelligence, all things considered, and it's truly general, if that scales and begins to build upon itself, how you maintain that perfect slavish devotion until the end of time in those systems.

The tether to humans? Yeah. I think my gut says that that tether is not, there's a lot of ways to do it. So it's not this increasingly impossible problem.

Right. So I have no, as you know, I'm not a computer scientist. I have no intuitions about just algorithmically how you would approach that and what's possible.

My main intuition is maybe deeply flawed, but the main intuition is based on the fact that most of the learning is currently happening on human knowledge. So even chat GPT is just trained on human data. Right. I don't see where the takeoff happens where you completely go above human wisdom. The current impressive aspect of chat GPT is that's using collective intelligence of all of us. Well, from what I glean, again, from people who know much more about this than I do, I think we have reason to be skeptical that these techniques of deep learning are actually going to be sufficient to push us into AGI. So they're not generalizing in the way they need to. They're not certainly not learning like human children. And so there's brittle and strange ways. It's not to say that the human path is the only path and maybe we might learn better lessons by ignoring the way brains work. But we know that they don't generalize and use abstraction the way we do. And so they have strange holes in their competence.

But the size of the holes is shrinking every time. So the intuition starts to slowly fall apart.

You know, the intuition is like surely can't be this simple to achieve intelligence. What is becoming simpler and simpler. So I don't know. The progress is quite incredible. I've been extremely impressed with chat GPT and the new models. And there's a lot of financial incentive to make progress in this regard. So we're going to be living through some very interesting times.

In raising a question that I'm going to be talking to you, a lot of people brought up this topic probably because Eric Weinstein talked to Joe Rogan recently and said that he and you were contacted by folks about UFOs. Can you clarify the nature of this contact? Can you that you were contacted by? I've got very little to say on this. He has much more to say. I think he went down this rabbit hole further than I did, which wouldn't surprise anyone. He's got much more of a taste for this sort of thing than I do. But I think we're contacted by the same person. It wasn't clear to me who this person was or how this person got that my cell phone number. It didn't seem like we were getting punked. I mean, the person seemed credible to me.

And then we're talking to you about the release of different videos on UFOs.

This was when there was a flurry of activity around this. There was a big New Yorker article on UFOs and there was rumors of congressional hearings, I think, come in and the videos that were being debunked or not. And so this person contacted both of us, I think, around the same time. And I think he might have contacted Rogan or other. Eric is just the only person

I've spoken to about it, I think, who I know was contacted. And what happened is the person kept writing a check that he didn't cash. He kept saying, okay, next week, I understand this is sounding spooky and you have no reason to really trust me. But next week, I'm going to push you on a Zoom call with people who you will recognize and they're going to be former heads of the CIA and people who just within five seconds of being on the Zoom call, you'll know this is not a hoax. I said, great, just send me the Zoom link. And that happened maybe three times. There was just one phone conversation and then it was just texts. There's just a bunch of texts. And I think Eric spent more time with this person. And I haven't spoken about it. I know he's spoken about it publicly. But it's not that my bullshit detector ever really went off in a big way. It's just the thing never happened. And so I lost interest. So you made a comment, which is interesting, which I really appreciate. You ran a thought experiment of saying, okay, maybe we do have alien spacecraft or just a thought experiment that aliens did visit. And then this very kind of nihilistic, sad thought that it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't affect your life. Can you explain that?

Well, no, I think many people noticed this. I mean, this was a sign of how crazy the news cycle was at that point, right? Like we had COVID and we had Trump. And I forget when this the UFO thing was really kicking off. But it just seemed like no one had the bandwidth to even be interested in this. It's like, I was amazed to notice in myself that I wasn't more interested in figuring out what was going on. And I considered, okay, wait a minute. If this is true, this is the biggest story in anyone's lifetime. I mean, contact with alien intelligence is by definition the biggest story in anyone's lifetime in human history. Why isn't this just totally captivating? And not only was it not totally captivating, it was just barely rising to the level of might being able to pay attention to it. And I view that, I mean, one as a, to some degree, an understandable defense mechanism against the bogus claims that have been made about this kind of thing in the past. You know, the general sense is probably bullshit or probably has some explanation that is, you know, purely terrestrial and not surprising. And there is somebody who, what's his name? Is it Mick West? I forget. Is it a YouTuber? Yeah, he debunked stuff.

Yeah. I mean, you know, I have since seen some of those videos. I mean, now this is going back still at least a year. But some of those videos seem like fairly credible debunkings of some of the optical evidence. And I'm surprised we haven't seen more of that. Like there was a fairly credulous 60 minutes piece that came out around that time looking at some of that video. And it was the very video that he was debunking on YouTube. And, you know, his, his video only had like 50,000 views on it or whatever. But again, it seemed like a fairly credible debunking. I haven't seen debunkings of his debunkings, but I think there is, but he's basically saying that there is, there is possible explanations for it. And usually in these kinds of contexts, if there's a possible explanation, even if it seems unlikely, is going to be more likely than an alien civilization visiting us. Yes. The extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence principle, which I think is generally true.

Well, with aliens, I think generally, I think there should be some humility about what they would look like when they show up. I tend to think they're already here.

The amazing thing about this AI conversation, though, is that we're talking about a circumstance

where we would be designing the aliens. Yeah. And they would, and there's every reason to believe that eventually this is going to happen. Like I said, I'm not at all skeptical about the, the coming reality of the aliens that we're going to build them.

Now, here's the thing. Does this apply to when superintelligence shows up? Will this be trending on Twitter for a day? And then we'll go on to complain about something Sam Harris once against that in his podcast next day. You tend to trend on Twitter, even though you're not on Twitter, which is great. Yeah. I don't, I haven't noticed. I mean, I did, I did notice when I was on, but... You have this concern about AGI, basically the same kind of thing that we would just look the other way. Is there something about this time where even like World War Three, which has been throwing it out very casually, concerningly so, even that the new cycle wipes that away? Yeah. Well, I think we have this,

this general problem that we can't make certain information, even, you know, unequivocally certain information emotionally salient. Like, we respond quite readily to certain things. And as we talked about, we respond to the little girl who fell down a well. I mean, that just, that gets a hundred percent of our emotional resources. But the abstract probability of nuclear war, right, even a high probability, even just even an intolerable probability, even if we put it at 30%, right? You know, like, it's just like that's, that's a Russian roulette with a, you know, a gun with three chambers. And, you know, it's aimed to the heads, not only your head, but your kid's head and everyone's kid's head. And it's just 24 hours a day. And I mean, I think people who, this pre-Ukraine, I think the people who have made it their business to, you know, professionally to think about the risk of nuclear war and to mitigate it, you know, people like Graham Allison or William Perry. I mean, I think they were putting, like, the ongoing risk, I mean, just the risk that we're going to have if a proper nuclear war, at some point in the, you know, the next generation, people were putting it at, you know, something like 50%, right? That we're living with this sort of Damocles over our heads. Now, you might wonder whether anyone can have reliable intuitions about the probability of that kind of thing. But the status quo is truly alarming. I mean, we've got, you know, we've got ICBMs on, I mean, the leaficide smaller exchanges and, you know, tactical nukes and how that could, how we could have a world war, you know, based on, you know, incremental changes. We've got the biggest bombs aimed at the biggest cities in both directions and its old technology, right? And it's, you know, and it's vulnerable to some lunatic deciding to launch or misreading, you know, bad data. And we know we've been saved from nuclear war, I think at least twice by, you know, Soviet submarine commanders deciding, I'm not going to pass this up the chain of command,

right? It's like, this is, this is almost certainly an error, and it turns out it was an error. It's like, and we need people to, I mean, in that particular case, like he saw, I think it was five, what seemed like five missiles launched from the US to Russia. And he reasoned, if America was going to engage in a first strike, they'd launch more than five missiles, right? So this has to be fictional. And then he waited long enough to decide that it was fictional. But the probability of a nuclear war happening by mistake or some other species of inadvertence, you know, misunderstanding, technical malfunction, that's intolerable. Forget about the intentional use of it by people who are, you know, driven crazy by some ideology.

And more and more technologies are enabled at a kind of scale of destruction.

And misinformation plays into this picture in a way that is especially scary. I mean, once you can get a deep fake of, you know, any current president of the United States claiming to have launched a first strike, you know, and just, you know, send that everywhere. But that can change the nature of truth. And then we, that might change the, the engine we have for skepticism, sharpen it, the more you have deep faith. And we might have AI and digital watermarks that help us. Maybe we'll not trust any information that hasn't come through specific channels, right? I mean, so in my world, it's like, I no longer feel the need to respond to anything other than what I put out in my channels of information. It's like, there's so much, there are so many people who have clipped stuff of me that shows the opposite of what I was actually saying in context. I mean, the people have like re-edited my podcast audio to make it seem like I said the opposite of what I was saying. It's like, unless I put it out, you know, you can't be sure that I actually said it, you know? I mean, it's just, but I don't know what it's like to live like that for all forms of information. And I mean, strangely, I think it may require a greater siloing of information in the end. You know, it's like, we're living through this sort of Wild West period where everyone's got a newsletter and everyone's got a blog and everyone's got an opinion, but once you can fake everything.

There might be a greater value for expertise for experts, but a more rigorous system for identifying who the experts are. Yeah, or just knowing that, you know, it's going to be an arms race to authenticate information. So it's like, if you can never trust a photograph, unless it has been vetted by Getty images, because only Getty images has the resources to authenticate the provenance of that photograph and a test that hasn't been meddled with by AI. And again, I don't even know if that's technically possible. And maybe whatever the tools available for this will be commodified and the cost will be driven to zero so quickly that everyone will be able to do it. It could be like encryption. And it will be proven and tested most effectively first, of course, as always in porn, which is where most of human innovation technology happens first. Well, I have to ask, because Ron Howard, the director asked us on Twitter, since we're talking about the threat of nuclear war and otherwise, he asked, I'd be interested in both your expectations for human society if when we move beyond Mars. Will those societies be industrial based? How will it be governed? How will criminal infractions be dealt with when you read or watch sci-fi what comes closest to sounding logical? Do you think about our society beyond Earth? If it colonized Mars, if it colonized space? Yeah. Well, I think I have a pretty humbling picture of that because we're still going to be the apes that we are. So when you imagine colonizing Mars, you have to imagine a first fistfight on Mars. You have to imagine a first murder on Mars.

Oh, also infidelity?

Yeah, extramarital affairs on Mars. So it's going to get really homely and boring really fast, I think. It's like only the space suits or the other exigencies of just living in that atmosphere or lack thereof will limit how badly we can behave on Mars.

But do you think most of the interaction will be still in meat space versus digital?

Do you think we're living through a transformation of a kind where we're going to be doing more and more interaction than digital space? Like everything we've been complaining about Twitter, is it possible that Twitter is just the early days of a broken system that's actually

giving birth to a better working system that's ultimately digital?

I think we're going to experience a pendulum swing back into the real world. I mean, I think many of us are experiencing that now anyway. I mean, just wanting to have face to face encounters and spend less time on our phones and less time online. I think maybe everyone isn't going in that direction, but I do notice it myself. And I notice, I mean, once I got off Twitter, then I noticed the people who were never on Twitter, right? And the people who were never basically, I mean, I know I have a lot of friends who are never on Twitter. And they actually never understood what I was doing on Twitter. It wasn't that they were seeing it and then reacting to it. It's like I'm not on Reddit either, but I don't spend any time thinking about not being on Reddit, right? I'm just not on Reddit. Do you think the pursuit of human happiness is better achieved and more effectively achieved outside of Twitter world?

Well, I think all we have is our attention in the end. And we just have to notice what these various tools are doing to it. And it's just, it became very clear to me that it was an unrewarding use of my attention. Now, it's not to say there isn't some digital platform that's conceivable that would be useful and rewarding. But yeah, I mean, we just have, you know, our life is doled out to us in moments. And we're continually solving this riddle of what is going to suffice to make this moment engaging and meaningful and aligned with who I want to be now and how I want the future to look, right? We have this tension between being in the present and becoming in the future. And it's a seeming paradox. Again, it's not really a paradox, but I do think the ground truth for personal well-being is defined a mode of being where you can pay attention to the present moment, and this is, you know, meditation by another name. You can pay attention to the present moment with sufficient, you know, gravity that you recognize that just consciousness itself in the present moment, no matter what's happening, is already a circumstance of freedom and contentment and tranquility. Like, you can be happy now before anything happens, like before this next desire gets gratified, before this next problem gets solved. There's this kind of ground truth that you're free, that consciousness is free and open and unencumbered by really any problem until you get lost in thought about all the problems that may yet be real for you. So the ability to catch and observe consciousness that in itself is a source of happiness. Without being lost in thought. And so this happens haphazardly for people who don't meditate because they find something in their life that's so captivating, it's so pleasurable, it's so thrilling. It can even be scary, but it can be even being scared is captivated. It gets their attention, right, whatever it is. You know, Sebastian Younger wrote a great book about people's experience in war here. Strangely, it can be the best experience anyone's ever had because everything, it's like only the moment matters, right? The bullet is whizzing by your head. You're not thinking about your 401k or that thing that you didn't say last week to the person you shouldn't have been talking about. You're not thinking about Twitter. It's like you're just fully immersed in the present moment. Meditation is the only way, I mean, that word can mean many things to many people. But what I mean by meditation is simply the discovery that there is a way to engage the present moment directly regardless of what's happened. And you don't need to be in a war, you don't need to be having sex, you don't need to be on drugs, you don't need to be surfing, you don't need nothing. It doesn't have to be a peak experience. It can be completely ordinary,



but you can recognize that in some basic sense, there's only this and everything else is something you're thinking. You're thinking about the past, you're thinking about the future, and thoughts themselves have no substance, right? It's fundamentally mysterious that any thought ever really commandeers your sense of who you are and makes you anxious or afraid or angry or whatever it is. And the more you discover that, the half-life of all these negative emotions that blow all of us around get much, much shorter, right? And you can literally just, the anger that would have kept you angry for hours or days lasts four seconds because the moment it arises, you recognize it and you can get off that. You can decide, at minimum, you can decide whether it's useful to stay angry at that moment. And obviously, it usually isn't.

And the illusion of free will is one of those thoughts.

Yeah, it's all just happening, right? Even the mindful and meditative response to this is just happening. It's just like even the moments where you recognize or not recognize it's just happening. This does open up a degree of freedom for a person, but it's not a freedom that gives any motivation to the notion of free will. It's just a new way of being in the world.

Is there a difference between intellectually knowing free will as an illusion and really experiencing it? What's the longest you've been able to experience the escape, the illusion of free will? Well, it's always obvious to me when I pay attention. Whenever I'm mindful, the term of jargon in the Buddhist and increasingly outside the Buddhist context is mindfulness, right? But there are different levels of mindfulness and there's different degrees of insight into this. But yes, what I'm calling evidence of lack of free will and lack of lack of the self, two sides of the same coin. There's a sense of being a subject in the middle of experience to whom all experience refers, the sense of I, the sense of me. That's almost everybody's starting point when they start to meditate and that's almost always the place people live most of their lives from. I do think that gets interrupted in ways that get unrecognized.

I think people are constantly losing the sense of I, they're losing the sense of subject-to-object distance, but they're not recognizing it. And meditation is the mode in which you can recognize, you can both consciously precipitate it, you can look for the self and fail to find it and then recognize its absence. And that's just the flip side of the coin of free will. The feeling of having free will is what it feels like to feel like a self who's thinking his thoughts and doing his actions and intending his intentions. And the man in the middle of the boat who's rowing,

that's the false starting point. When you find that there's no one in the middle of the boat, right? In fact, there's no boat, there's just the river, there's just the flow of experience and there's no center to it. And there's no place from which you would control it. Again, even when you're doing things, this does not negate the difference between voluntary and involuntary behavior. It's like, I can voluntarily reach for this, but when I'm paying attention, I'm aware that everything is just happening. The intention to move is just arising. And I'm in no position to know why it didn't arise a moment before or a moment later, or 50% stronger or weaker, or so as to be ineffective or to be doubly effective, where I lurched for it versus I moved slow. I can never run the counterfactuals. All of this opens the door to an even more disconcerting picture along the same lines, which subsumes this conversation about free will. And it's the question of whether anything is ever possible. This is a question I haven't thought a lot about it, but it's been a few years I've been kicking this question around. What if only

the actual is possible? Do we live with this feeling of possibility? We live with a sense that I have two daughters, I could have had a third child. What does it mean to say that I could have had a third child? You don't have kids, I don't think.

Not that I know of. The possibility might be there.

So what do we mean when we say you could have had a child, or you might have a child in the future?

What is the relationship between possibility and actuality and reality? Is there a reality in which non-actual things are nonetheless real? And so we have other categories of non-concrete things.

We have things that don't have spatial temporal dimension, but they nonetheless exist. So the integers, right? So numbers. There's a reality, there's an abstract reality to numbers.

And it's philosophically interesting to think about these things. In some sense,

they're not merely invented by us, they're discovered because they have structure that we can't impose upon them. They're not fictional characters like Hamlet and Superman also exist in some sense, but they exist at the level of our own fiction and abstraction. But it's like, they're true and false statements you can make about Hamlet. They're true and false statements you can make about Superman because our fiction, the fictional worlds we've created have a certain kind of structure. But again, this is all abstract. It's all

abstractible from any of its concrete instantiations. It's not just in the comic books and just in the movies. It's in our ongoing ideas about these characters. But natural numbers or the integers don't function quite that way. I mean, they're similar, but they also have a structure that's purely a matter of discovery. It's not, you can't just make up whether numbers are prime. If you give me two integers of a certain size, let's say you mentioned two enormous integers, if I were to say, okay, well, between those two integers, they're exactly 11 prime numbers. That's a very specific claim about which I can be right or wrong. Whether or not anyone knows I'm right or wrong. There's a domain of facts there, but it's an abstract reality that relates in some way that's philosophically interesting, metaphysically interesting to what we call real reality, the spatial temporal order, the physics of things.

But possibility, at least in my view, occupies a different space. And this is something, again, my thoughts on this are pretty in co-ed. And I think I need to talk to a philosopher of physics and or a physicist about how this may interact with things like the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics.

Yeah, that's an interesting right, exactly. So I wonder if discovers in physics like further proof or more concrete proof that many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics has some validity, if that completely starts to change things.

But even that's just more actuality. So if I took that seriously, that's a case of, and truth is that happens even if the many worlds interpretation isn't true, but we just imagine we have a physically infinite universe, the implication of infinity is such that things will begin to repeat themselves, the farther you go in space. So if you just head out in one direction, eventually, you're going to meet two people just like us having a conversation just like this. And you're going to meet them an infinite number of times in every infinite variety of permutations slightly different from this conversation. So I mean, infinity is just so big that our intuitions of probability completely break down. But what I'm suggesting is maybe probability isn't a thing, right? Maybe there's only actuality. Maybe there's only what

happens. And at every point along the way, our notion of what could have happened or what might have happened is just that it's just a thought about what could have happened or might have happened.

So it's a fundamentally different thing. If you can imagine a thing that doesn't make it real, because that's where that possibility exists, this in your imagination, right?

Yeah. And possibility itself is a kind of spooky idea because it too has a sort of structure, right? So if I'm going to say you could have had a daughter last year.

So we're saying that's possible, but not actual, right? That is a claim. There are things that are true and not true about that daughter, right? It has a kind of structure. It's like, I feel like there's a lot of fog around the possibility. It feels like almost like a useful narrative. But what does it mean? So if we say, I just did that, but it's conceivable that I wouldn't have done that. It's possible that I just threw this cap, but I might not have done that. So you're taking it very temporally close to the original, like what appears as a decision?

Whenever we're saying something's possible, but not actual, right? This thing just happened, but it's conceivable. It's possible that it wouldn't have happened or that it would have happened differently. In what does that possibility consist? Like where is that? For that to be real, for the possibility to be real, what claim are we making about the universe?

Well, isn't that an extension of the idea that free will is an illusion, that all we have is actuality, that the possibility is an illusion. Right. Yeah. I'm just extending it beyond human action. This goes to the physics of things. This is just everything. We're always telling ourselves a story that includes possibility. Possibility is really compelling for some reason.

Well, yeah, because it's, I mean, so this could sound just academic, but every backward-looking regret or disappointment and every forward-looking worry is completely dependent on this notion of possibility. Like every regret is based on the sense that something else, I could have done something else. Something else could have happened. Every disposition to worry about the future is based on the feeling that there's this range of possibilities. It could go either way.

And whether or not there's such a thing as possibility, I'm convinced that worry is almost never psychologically appropriate because the reality is that in any given moment, either you can do something to solve the problem you're worried about or not. So if you can do something, just do it. And if you can't, your worrying is just causing you to suffer twice over. You're going to get the medical procedure next week anyway. How much time between now and next week do you want to spend worrying about it? The worry doesn't accomplish anything. How much do physicists think about possibility?

Well, they think about it in terms of probability more often. But probability just describes, and again, this is a place where I might be out of my depth and need to talk to somebody to debunk this. Do therapy with a physicist.

Yeah. But probably it seems just describes a pattern of actuality that we've observed.

There are certain things we observe, and those are the actual things that have happened.

And we have this additional story about probability. We have the frequency with which things have happened in the past. I can flip a fair coin and I know in the abstract that I have a belief that in the limit, those tosses should converge on 50% heads and 50% tails. I know I have a story as to why it's not going to be exactly 50% within any arbitrary time frame. But in reality, all we ever have are the observed tosses. And then we have an additional

story that, oh, it came up heads, but it could have come up tails. Why do we think that about that last toss? And what are we claiming is true about the physics of things if we say it could have been otherwise? I think we're claiming that probability is true. That it allows us to have a nice model about the world, gives us hope about the world. Yeah. It seems that possibility has to be somewhere to be effective. It's a little bit like what's happening with the laws of nature. There's something metaphysically interesting about the laws of nature too, because the laws of nature, so the laws of nature impose their work on the world. We see their evidence, but they're not reducible to any specific set of instances. So there's some structure there, but the structure isn't just a matter of the actual things. We have the actual billiard balls that are banging into each other. All of that actuality can be explained by what actual things are actually doing. But then we have this notion that in addition to that, we have the laws of nature that are explaining this act. But how are the laws of nature an additional thing in addition to just the actual things that are actually affect causally? And if they are an additional thing, how are they effective? If they're not among the actual things, they're just actually banging around. And so to some degree- I see. Possibly it has to be hiding somewhere for the laws of nature to be possible. For anything to be possible, it has to be- It's a closet somewhere, I'm sure, where all the possibility goes. It has to be attached to something. You don't think many worlds is that? Because many worlds still exist. Well, because we're in this strand of that multiverse. So still you have just a local instance of what is actual. And then if it proliferates elsewhere where you can't be affected by it- Many worlds says you can't really connect with the other. Yeah. Yeah. So many worlds are just a statement of basically everything that can happen, happen somewhere. Maybe that's not an entirely kosher formulation of it, but it seems pretty close. But there's whatever happens. In fact, relativistically, the Einstein's original notion of a block universe seems to suggest this. And it's been a while since I've been in a conversation with a physicist where I've gotten a chance to ask about the standing of this concept in physics currently. I don't hear it discussed much, but the idea of a block universe is that space-time exists as a totality. In our sense that we are traveling through space-time, where there's a real difference between the past and the future, that that's an illusion of just our weird slice we're taking of this larger object. But on some level, it's like you're reading a novel. The last page of the novel exists just as much as the first page when you're in the middle of it. And if we're living in anything like that, then there's no such thing as possibility. It would seem there's just what is actual. So as a matter of our experience, moment to moment, I think it's totally compatible with that being true, that there is only what is actual. And that sounds to the naïve ear, that sounds like it would be depressing and disempowering and confining, but it's anything but. It's a circumstance of pure discovery. Like you have no idea what's going to happen next. You don't know who you're going to be tomorrow. You're only by tendency seeming to resemble yourself from yesterday. And there's way more freedom in all of that than it seems true to many people. And yet the basic insight is that the real freedom is the recognition that you're not in control of anything. Everything is just happening, including your thoughts and intentions and moves.

So life is a process of continuous discovery.

You're part of the universe. It's the miracle that the universe is illuminated to itself, as itself, where you sit. And you're continually discovering what your life is.

And then you have this layer at which you're telling yourself a story that you already know what your life is. And you know exactly who you should be and what's about to happen, where you're struggling to form a confident opinion about all of that.

And yet there is this fundamental mystery to everything, even the most familiar experience. We're all NPCs in a most marvelous video game.

Maybe, although my sense of gaming does not run as deep as to know what I'm committing to there. It's a non-playing character. You're more of a Mario Kart guy.

Yeah. I was an original video gamer, but it's been a long time since I was there for Pong.

I remember when I saw the first Pong in a restaurant in, I think it was like Benihana's or something. They had a Pong table. It was an amazing moment when you-

You Sam Harris might live from Pong to the invention and deployment of a super intelligent system. That happened fast if it happens anytime in my lifetime.

From Pong to AGI. What kind of things do you do purely for fun that others might consider a waste of time? Purely for fun. Because meditation doesn't count, because most people would say that's not a waste of time. Is there something like Pong that's a deeply embarrassing thing you would never admit? I don't think, well, I mean, once or twice a year, I will play a round of golf, which many people would find embarrassing. They might even find my play embarrassing, but it's fun. Do you find it embarrassing? No. I mean, golf just takes way too much time, so I can only squander a certain amount of time on it. I do love it. It's a lot of fun.

Well, you have no control over your actual performance. You're ever discovering.

I do have control over my mediocre performance, but I don't have enough control as to make it really good. But happily, I'm in the perfect spot because I don't invest enough time in it to care how I play, so I just have fun when I play.

Well, I hope there'll be a day where you play around golf with the former President Donald Trump, and I would love to be. I would bet on him if we play golf. I'm sure he's a better golfer.

I miss the chaos of human civilization in modern times, as we've talked about. What gives you hope about this world in the coming year, in the coming decade, in the coming hundred years, maybe a thousand years? What's the source of hope for you?

Well, it comes back to a few of the things we've talked about. I know that most people are good and are mostly converging on the same core values. It's like we're not surrounded by psychopaths. The thing that finally convinced me to get off Twitter was how different life was seeming through the lens of Twitter. It's like I just got the sense that there's way more psychopaths or effective psychopaths than I realized. Then I thought, okay, this isn't real. This is either a strange context in which actually decent people are behaving like psychopaths or it's a bot army or something that I don't have to take seriously. I just think most people, if we can get the incentives right, I think there's no reason why we can't really thrive collectively. There's enough wealth to go around. There's no effective limit within the limits of what's physically possible, but we're nowhere near the limit on abundance. Forget about going to Mars on this one rock. We could make this place incredibly beautiful and stable if we just did enough work to solve some rather long-standing



political problems. The problem of incentives. To you, the basic characteristics of human nature such that will be okay if the incentives are okay. We'll do pretty good.

But I'm worried about the asymmetries that it's easier to break things than to fix them. It's easier to light a fire than to put it out. I do worry that as technology gets more and more powerful, it becomes easier for the minority who wants to effectively screw things up for everybody. It's easier. A thousand years ago, it was simply impossible for one person to range the lives of millions, much less billions. Now that's getting to be possible. On the assumption that we're always going to have a sufficient number of crazy individuals or malevolent individuals, we have to figure out that asymmetry somehow. There's some cautious exploration of emergent technology that we need to get our heads screwed on straight about. So gain a function of research. Just how much do we want to democratize all the relevant technologies there? You really want to give everyone the ability to order nucleotides in the mail and give them the blueprints for viruses online because you're a free speech absolutist and you think all PDFs need to be exportable everywhere.

Many people are confused about my take on free speech because I've come down on the unpopular side of some of these questions, but my overriding concern is that in many cases, I'm worried about the free speech of individual businesses or individual platforms or individual media people to decide that they don't want to be associated with certain things. If you own Twitter, I think you should be able to kick off the Nazi you don't want to be associated with because it's your platform, you own it. That's your free speech. That's the side of my free speech concern for Twitter. It's not that every Nazi has the right to algorithmic speech on Twitter. I think if you own Twitter, whether it's just Elon or in the world where it wasn't Elon, just the people who own Twitter and the board and the shareholders and the employees, these people should be free to decide what they want to promote or not.

I view them as publishers more than as platforms in the end and that has other implications, but I do worry about this problem of misinformation and algorithmically and otherwise supercharged misinformation. I do think we're at a bottleneck now. I guess it could be the hubris of every present generation to think that their moment is especially important, but I do think with the emergence of these technologies, we're at some kind of bottleneck where we really have to figure out how to get this right. If we do get this right, if we figure out how to not drive ourselves crazy by giving people access to all possible information and misinformation at all times, I think, yeah, there's no limit to how happily we could collaborate with billions of creative, fulfilled people.

And trillions of robots, some of them sex robots, but that's another topic.

Robots that are running the right algorithm, whatever that algorithm is.

Whatever you need in your life to make you happy. The first time we talked is one of the huge honors in my life. I've been a fan of yours for a long time.

The few times you were respectful but critical to me means the world. And thank you so much for helping me and caring enough and caring enough about the world and for everything you do.

But I should say that the few of us that try to put love in the world on Twitter miss you on Twitter, but enjoy yourselves. Don't break anything, kids.

Have a good party without me. Thanks for watching.

Very happy to do this. Thanks for the invitation. Great to see you again.

**[Transcript] Lex Fridman Podcast / #365 - Sam Harris: Trump, Pandemic, Twitter, Elon, Bret, IDW, Kanye, AI & UFOs**

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