

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / What We're Listening To: Richard Dawkins on UnHerd

Hi guys, it's Barry with a really exciting announcement for you.

As listeners of the show will know, one of the reasons that this exists in the first place is to embody and promote honest, frank conversations and good faith debates, both of which feel increasingly rare in our polarized country.

That is why I'm so excited to announce that the Free Press, along with FIRE, the nation's leading defender of free speech rights, are hosting a live debate on a very sexy and contentious subject on Wednesday, September 13th at 7 p.m. at the historic Ace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles.

The proposition? The sexual revolution has failed.

Arguing for the proposition is co-host of the podcast Redscare, Anacachian, and author of the case against the sexual revolution, Louise Perry.

They're going to be facing off against musician and producer Grimes, and writer and co-host of the podcast A Special Place in Hell, Sarah Hader.

I'm going to be the moderator and I couldn't be more excited.

This is going to be an amazing night.

It's a chance to meet other people in the real world

who also like thinking for themselves and who listen to this show.

You can get your tickets now by going to [thefp.com backslash debates](https://thefp.com/backslash/debates).

Again, that's [thefp.com slash debates](https://thefp.com/slash/debates).

I can't wait to meet some of you guys in person.

And now, here's the show.

I'm Barry Weiss.

This is Honestly.

And today, we have a very special episode for you.

Our audio team has been working really hard over the past year, bringing you guys new episodes every single week.

And for the next few weeks, they're taking a well-deserved break.

So we thought, what better time to share some of our favorite episodes from other podcasts that we love to listen to, and that maybe you haven't heard of.

This week, we're featuring an episode from Unheard, with evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins.

If you've never heard of Unheard, we think you're going to be hooked.

Their mission is similar to ours.

It's to push back against the herd mentality

and to provide a platform for otherwise unheard ideas, people, and places.

Host Freddie Sayers gets right into it,

with some of the most interesting people in the world on some of the most contentious subjects.

And this conversation with Richard Dawkins is no exception.

From God to people's distrust in science and vaccines, to cancel culture, aliens, and romantic poetry,

Freddie and Richard leave everything on the table

in this beautiful conversation they published earlier this summer.

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Stay tuned. We'll be right back.

If my dogs could order what they want for dinner,
they'd choose pillows and my sneakers 10 times out of 10.
But their second choice, I'm sure, would be food from the farmer's dog.
The farmer's dog is fresh, healthy food with whole meat and veggies,
cooked in human-grade kitchens to preserve its nutritional value.
Say goodbye to those dry-stale pellets.
It's 2023.

If your dog isn't on a custom meal plan, you're doing it wrong.
The farmer's dog recipes are developed by vets and personalized to your pet.
Provide your dog's details, and for as little as \$2 a day,
they'll receive customized meals delivered right to your doorstep.
Meals arrived in pre-portioned, ready-to-serve packs,
and they're delivered on your schedule.

Now for the fun part.

My listeners get 50% off their first box of fresh, healthy food
at thefarmersdog.com slash berry.

Plus, you'll get free shipping.

Just go to thefarmersdog.com slash B-A-R-I to get 50% off.

That's thefarmersdog.com slash berry.

I'm Freddie Zayas, and this is Unheard.

You must see that it's quite a remarkable piece of illogic
to say that because science can't fill a particular gap,
therefore we have to turn to Christianity on a better science.

Read Leviticus. Read Deuteronomy.

I don't need to do any more than just quote.

Richard Dawkins is probably the most famous atheist in the world,
one of the so-called four horsemen that made up the new atheism movement
in the early 2000s.

Here we have a god.

He wants to forgive mankind's sins.

Why didn't he just forgive them?

Why was it necessary to have a human sacrifice?

You believe that? Yes.

You believe that Muhammad went to heaven on a winged horse?

Yes, I believe in God. I believe in miracles.

I believe in revelation.

I mean, the point here is that let's assume I'm wrong, Richard.

I'm wrong. Yeah, let's.

He's now into his 80s, but he's not stopping,
launching a new podcast, writing his 18th book.

He came into the Unheard studio for an amazingly wide-ranging conversation
on God, corruption in science, COVID, gender, even extraterrestrial life.

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For someone who has a reputation for vehemence, for fightiness, he is getting remarkably softly spoken in his later years.

I started by asking him if the title of his new podcast, called The Poetry of Reality, is part of a softening, a new Richard Dawkins rebrand?

You are in the midst of doing some interviews and discussions because not only have you written yet another book or are working on another book, you're starting a podcast.

That's right. Yeah.

It's called The Poetry of Reality.

Yes. Tell us about that.

Yes. Well, I've always felt that science deserves to be treated as a part of our culture.

And the proper appreciation of science is poetic.

It's one of the supreme poetries that we can enjoy is The Poetry of Reality, the magnificent fact that the universe has given rise to us, these supremely complicated beings capable of even understanding where we came from.

And that ought to be a topic of great literature.

And so, science is the poetry of reality.

In the choice of title there, am I wrong to detect a softening?

I noticed in recent interviews, you've talked about how you're sometimes unfairly cast as being overly vehement, overly combative, where you don't think of yourself as that.

And you've even talked about how the selfish gene you wish you had re-titled, the immortal gene, and that in some ways, I guess the question has to be, is this a rebranding?

I wouldn't call it a softening.

The thing about the selfish gene is that some people critics read it by title only and thought it was about selfishness or even an advocacy of selfishness, whereas it was actually the opposite, it's about altruism.

And so, that was regretting a fertile opportunity for misunderstanding.

So, I wouldn't call it a softening.

As for being miscast as vehement and aggressive and things,

I genuinely have been miscast.

I mean, I'm not a very aggressive person, except when unduly provoked.

But happy to state how you see things without compromise.

Exactly. I mean, I believe in truth and I believe in stating it in an uncompromising way.

But I don't go out of my way to be controversial.

So, the poetry of reality, though, it sort of deliberately seems to evoke the idea that you're more of a romantic spirit than people realize.

Is that fair?

Well, I don't know what people realize.

I think I've always been a romantic spirit,

and I think that's what science inspires or ought to inspire.

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As opposed to the sort of cold, hard, dispassionate image that science can be mistaken as projecting.

So, you don't feel then, if you look back then, let's say over the last three decades,

you don't feel you have evolved yourself into more of a conciliatory decision.

No, I think I've been the same all the time.

I'd like to talk about that period of time, however,

because if you may not have evolved, the world most certainly has changed.

The position of science, the political world, the fusion of the two,

it seems like we live in a very different world to, let's say, the early 2000s.

Starting with science, are you worried that scientific institutions,

universities, publications, scientific bodies,

are now becoming overly politicized, less reliable as a result, less scientific?

Yes, and I think that I have noticed that certainly some of the leading scientific journals

have capitulated to political pressure to become unscientific and to betray

what is an obvious, for example, obvious scientific dichotomy between male and female

seems to have been betrayed for political reasons by people who ought to know better

in editorial positions in leading scientific journals, and that I think is true.

I mean, even there was a different controversy around Nature magazine who has become a kind of leading proponent of trying to correct for racial injustices of the past

in a way that seems to almost depart from normal forensic science.

They seem to be animated by what would normally be a political agenda rather than a purely inquisitive one.

Well, I believe you are. That sounds plausible to me, yes.

Certainly, I think that there's a sort of analog of original sin in that white people

are expected to feel guilt for what? Maybe they're ancestors, or maybe not their ancestors, but just people of the same color, did to people of a different color.

And as as though we are supposed to inherit the guilt of people of the past just because we have the same color skin as they did. And that is, I think, racism. It is actual racism to confer guilt upon people because of the color of their skin.

So would you be in favor of a completely colorblind world as far as institutions are concerned then?

Because this is actually becoming controversial in the United States at the moment. I think the

Supreme Court is reconsidering questions of affirmative action. And science departments,

universities have, in recent years in America, explicitly considered race in their admissions

criteria. Where do you stand on that? Yes, I would. I mean, if I was in favor of any sort of

affirmative action, it might be in favor of people who have been disadvantaged in their own

past through poverty. And if they happen to be black, fair enough, but simply because they're

black, no, that's the wrong sort of affirmative action. That is racism. And even if that resulted

in fewer black people going to elite colleges and perhaps a much greater number of Asian origin

Americans going to college, you'd be fine with that because those are the people most

deserved places. Well, I think so. The people most get most able to benefit from it, perhaps, yes.

But I think that there is something to be said for bending over backwards to help people who,

because of their disadvantaged background, educationally speaking, culturally speaking,

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perhaps, and who perhaps have a genuine ability which hasn't had a chance to flourish. And if they were to get to Harvard, then that they might be able to blossom. And so I am in favor of, I wouldn't call it affirmative action necessarily, I would call it intelligent looking for talent, which is what we try to do at Oxford, or in my time we did anyway, we tried to sort of recognize that somebody might be not so well groomed for an entrance exam or for an interview, but who has showed signs of genuine talent and that should be picked out and given a chance to flourish. So would you extend that principle more universally, because this is really a hot topic at the moment, this concept of equity, which again is very popular, the current president of the US explicitly signs up to it, which, as I understand it, is engineering outcomes essentially by category. So rather than equality of opportunity, it is ensuring proportionality of outcome on grounds of race, gender, and so on. Would you be in opposition to that principle across that board? Yes, I would. I'm in favor of equality of opportunity.

So corporate boards, sort of insisting on there being a certain number of women on corporate boards, for example, which I believe is now commonplace.

I think that's ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. You might as well insist on a certain number of people with red hair, or yes. I think it puts you in the minority now. In terms of the establishment, certainly in the US and probably in Europe as well,

I think possibly that now puts you in the minority.

Well then I'm proud to be in the minority.

Let's talk about another example, which I know you've been very vocal on, which is this case in New Zealand where the educational authorities have tried to raise up indigenous ideas about the origin story of the world, sort of on a par with what you would consider to be proper science. What's the story of that?

Well, it seems that the New Zealand government, when Chris Hipkins was Minister of Education, he was pushing this idea of Mataranga Maori, and it means Maori folklore, myth, the origin of the universe under the influence of the Sky Father and the Earth Mother.

So the New Zealand students are being confused by, on the one hand, being taught the truth, which is what we know from science. They call it Western science, which is nonsense. It's just science. It belongs to all of humanity. It is the way we get to the truth. On grounds of racism, trying to engineer the Maori so-called ways of knowing a given equal status with science, they call it Western science, but science. And that is pernicious, and it's subverting the truth. It's confusing students. Of course, it's a good idea to learn mythologies. They're interesting. They're fascinating. They're poetic, but they should not be taught in science class.

If there were science... Is it category error? Yes. If there's something of scientific value in Maori folklore, which there could be, then it doesn't just belong in New Zealand. It should be taught worldwide because science is a worldwide enterprise. And equally well, there might be something in Hopi or Navajo folklore. It doesn't just belong in the loathes. Things aren't true in a certain part of the world and not in another part of the world. They're true universally.

I feel a slight sense of disagreeing with you. You said science is what's true.

Yes. And origin myths, such as the perhaps very beautiful Maori myths, belong in a different category. Do you not think that poetic myths and symbolic myths are true in a different way?

Well, in a different way, but what different way? And that's where I would like to be enlightened by you. There might be senses in which they are true in a different way, and I would want to know

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what those are. If you want to know what's actually true about the real world, the world of physics, the world of astronomy, the world of biology, then science is the way to go. Science has built into it methods for discovering objective truth, uncontaminated by subjective bias. And things like, at a more or less trivial level in medical research, we have the double-blind control trial where we bend over backwards. Medical scientists bend over backwards to avoid all possibility of bias. With the best will in the world, a scientist may desperately want his particular theory to be proved right. And so when you test a drug against a control, it's vitally important that the doctor, the nurse administering the drugs that the patient should not know whether they're getting the control or the drug or the putative drug. Because you cannot be sure you're not being biased, and you would need to demonstrate to the world that you're not being biased. Well, subjective truths, ways of knowing have subjective bias built into them. That's what they're about. It's entirely what they are. And so that goes entirely against the spirit of truth, of scientific truth, to admit of that kind of subjectivism coming into it. How should scientific rational people consider those things that they know they don't know? And is it not possible that sort of poetic ways of describing those get closer to some kind of truth for those areas that science can't cover, and that they should be allowed that at least? My favorite poet is W.B. Yeats, notorious mystic. Obviously, I have no sympathy whatever with his belief in fairies and things like that, but I resonate to his poetry. I think it's wonderful. What are you feeling there when you're reading a Yeats poem and you say you resonate? What is that? It's hard for me to explain. I suppose that's the point. I'm not trying to be a scientist when I do that. I'm resonating as a human being in the early poems, *The Wind Among the Reeds*, for example. I sort of empathize with this love-lorn young man struggling with his feelings of lost love. And I get that, but not as a scientist. And so as a scientist, I want to know what is actually true about the universe. But those feelings of being a love-lorn young man are true, are they not, in the universe? They are true for the subjective what's going on in his own mind, yes. Strangely, when I hear you talk about a Yeats poem, you don't sound that different to religious people. We had someone called Paul Kingsnorth, who's a wonderful writer who's actually converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church recently, talking about the experience he has in nature in a field of wheat or looking at the beauty of things, which is what has brought him to a religious mindset. And actually, it's not that different from some passages in your recent books when you're talking about the miracles of science, although you might not use the word miracle, the beauty of the natural world. And it feels like you're moved by that. So there's this odd sense in which it almost becomes a linguistic distinction. What's a mystic or a religious person might feel moved by in the natural world compared to what you feel moved by? I think there's something wrong with that. I think there's something confusing about that. Supernaturalism, which is what I take religious to mean. Supernaturalism says there is something beyond physics, beyond the material world, which I do not believe. I do not believe there's anything beyond the material world, no matter how poetic you feel, no matter how much you're in love, or no matter how deeply you feel emotionally about looking at nature, looking at fields of wheat, whatever you just said, looking at the stars. These are all human reactions, which I feel as strongly as anyone, but there is nothing supernatural about that. And that's where I dig my toes in.

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And that's where I would dispute what Paul King's North did you say? Yes, I would dispute that vigorously, while at the same time empathizing, I would hope maybe as deeply as he does, with the subjective feelings that you get as a human being when contemplating, in my case, it might be the Milky Way. I get a feeling in the pit of my stomach when that happens. It's nothing supernatural about that. It's something in the nervous system. It doesn't have to demean it. It feels real to me, but it's not truth in the scientific sense of that, which really is actually physically true about the material world. Some scientists and some, I believe, physicists who are focusing on sort of other potential dimensions on some of the more hard to grasp theoretical physics might allow for the possibility that there are whole ways of seeing the real world that we don't yet understand. I just wonder whether there's any chance in your mind that some of those feelings that you think are just sort of synthesized by our material selves might alternatively be perceiving physical realities that we don't yet have a way to have. As it happens, I'm going this evening to have a meeting in London with Lawrence Crouch, the theoretical physicist who's just written a book called *The Known Unknowns*, which is about that which we don't know. Physicists are proud to admit that there's a lot that they don't know, and they're working on it. It is entirely possible, probable, that there are beings in the universe who already do understand things that are beyond our understanding. Our brains simply aren't big enough to understand these profundities about the universe. But to somehow equate those with mystical feelings that you get when you're in love or when you contemplate a rose or something, that's... Or religious feelings. Yes, religious feelings, that's naive confusion. As I understand it, your theories of evolution and natural selection maintain that most things about human nature and the human body and our evolved selves are there for a purpose, because they have been selected into being. Okay, let me just start with that. I happen to be one of those who does rather believe that. I might even be in a minority of biologists there. Quite a lot of biologists feel that they call me an ultra Darwinian, and feel that there's a lot in life that is not actually Darwinian, in the sense that it's not actually designed by natural selection, but is there by chance. I just stopped you to put that in perspective. Well, I think that makes it even more true, but if you're an ultra Darwinian, that should make you even more respectful of those things that are perceivably there in human nature. That's right. The religious impulse, or mystical impulses, or those feelings that we've just been talking about, should we not view them as more likely to be more intelligent than purely a kind of mistake? Possibly by the logic of being an ultra Darwinian, one should respect the religious impulses, possibly being wiser and more purposeful than you have done so far. Why is it more purposeful? Possibly there for a reason. I readily agree that because it's a human universal, which I mean, if you look anthropologically speaking, some sort of religion is universal. Therefore, it's highly probable that it is indeed a Darwinian advantage, and that I get. Doesn't mean it's true, though. You could say the tendency to be religious, the tendency to believe in something supernatural, the tendency to think there's something higher than you, the tendency to think that people also can make a right list, could have been built in by natural selection. I often suggest that this could be because children have been naturally selected to

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be respectful of what their parents tell them, what their culture tells them, because they need that in order to survive. This is one of my main points that I often make, that religion flourishes because children who are vulnerable in a dangerous world need to be instantly obeying their parents'

advice, not to endanger themselves. You don't question what your parents say, you just believe what they say. That means that we have, the child mind is pre-programmed by Darwinian natural selection

to be credulous of what elders tell them, and that is fertile ground for falsehood, as well as truth. Falsehood, like it is necessary to sacrifice a goat to the god of the full moon, whatever it is. But if it's there by natural selection, through the pressures, it must be a net positive. A net positive in survival sense, yes, but it doesn't mean you can make it true. It's not true that if you sacrifice a goat at the time of the full moon, you will cause the crops to succeed. But it's a net positive in the sense that it's a byproduct of the impulse to obey authority, because the impulse to obey authority in general is a net positive. Perhaps sacrificing a goat at the full moon forces you to tune your attention in a different way to the universe. Maybe the ceremony of it calls other kind of faculties into being, and it puts the rational part of you into a smaller proportion for a while, and actually overall makes you wiser and closer to truth in the long run. Is that not possible? This is real special pleading. It doesn't make it true. It may be a net positive in the sense that, as I've just said, it's a byproduct of something that is a net positive. But not only is it not true, it's somehow demeaning to what really is true. I guess this will be a more concrete and perhaps useful line of inquiry, which is that looking across all of human history, only the most recent generation is something close to a secular generation. And you could say you had a part to play in that as a very famous and well-read atheist. So the question is, how is the secular experiment going? Observationally, if we are purely rational, do you think that it's going well?

Well, again, I haven't done the sociological research, and what I've seen of statistics suggests that it's going slowly getting better. The statistics showing in Britain that a number of people who profess some kind of religion is going down, it's now below 50%, which is the first time that a British census has shown that to be the case in America.

Should you celebrate or do you think it's good?

Yes, I do think it's good. And similarly in America, America is lagging behind in this respect, but it's still going in the right direction. Those are the only figures I've seen.

And apart from that, all I can do is offer you my intuition, which is worthless.

But then as you put yourself, things like the idea of a new original sin being discovered in the world of race fixing and all of that. There's this famous book by Tom Holland called *Dominion*, which has been very influential in suggesting that a lot of what we consider to be secular Western ways of thinking are morality is still drenched in Christian thinking.

So perhaps although people aren't describing themselves as religious in the census, they've just moved those religious intuitions into other realms such as all of these new fangled ideas. Yeah, I think that's very likely true. And if you look at the trans business, you can make a good religious case for that as well. I make an analogy with probably others have as well with the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation where the wine in the Aristotelian

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accidentals remains wine, but in its true substance becomes blood. Similarly, the trans person, he has a penis, but that's a mere accidental. And in true substance, he's a woman. I mean, that's a perfect analogy to transubstantiation. It even begins with the same trans prefix. So which is better then? I mean, we've gone through this whole process, we've had a whole generation who's been now brought up reading your books and Christopher Hitchens and the rest of it who are now ardent and proud atheists. And then they end up believing things like you just described. And that has all sorts of societal repercussions.

Should we now look back on the great new atheist moment with regret? Do you think?

No, I don't get that at all. It's just an interesting analogy to point out

that there is a strong religious element to a current political fad. So what?

The question is, is a purely empirically, practically in terms of the success of our societies, the peace and prosperity of the world, is conventional religion? Or what appears to be a successor, which are new, slightly strange ideologies that don't formally belong in the religious category. But as you say, have religious aspects, which one will be proven to be more successful for the flourishing of the species? I guess we still don't know, but early signs are that this new kind of religion, which thinks it's secular, has some quite major problems attached to it. Well, if you care about flourishing of the species, yes, but I care about truth.

You don't care about the flourishing of the species? Well, I do care about it as a human being, but more deeply I care about truth. So if your sense of truth would lead to the annihilation of the species, would you be content with that? I would not be content with that.

But I'm pretty sure it wouldn't happen. I think that the truth actually is a genuine value.

I believe that a true scientific outlook on the world would actually be best for the flourishing of humankind. More with Richard Dawkins and Freddie Sayers after the break. Stay with us.

You mentioned scientific truth. We have to talk about the most recent scientific controversy of the age, which is the COVID era. It feels like we're now just emerging from it. And finally, some sort of perspective is beginning to be put in place. It feels to me like the authority and trust in science was enormously damaged during the COVID years by what I would call overreach, overclaiming by scientific authorities and the concomitant backlash that came alongside it.

So there are now millions, many millions of people who intuitively distrust whatever they are told by scientific authorities. I suspect many more millions than were there just three years ago.

What's your overall sense of the COVID era? Before we delve into specific points around it, do you think it was a moment of scientific glory or do you think it was something that

was a little bit problematic? I think glory in that with unprecedented speed,

vaccines were developed and that was a tribute to molecular biology where the fact that it was possible almost instantly to sequence the genome of the virus and the genome was transmitted over the airwaves directly to labs all over the world and labs in America and Britain and elsewhere immediately set to work developing vaccines with, as I said, unprecedented speed. That is magnificent and is a tribute to science and was a glory of science. As for whether humans mistrust or trust science, that's their business and I haven't done the sociological research.

But the vaccines, since you mentioned them, were enormously over-promised in terms of what their effect would be. They were originally sold to the public as 95% effective in the sense, true sense of not getting infected with the virus if you take it. That was then endlessly revised downwards and in the end we were told they didn't stop transmission. They only improved outcomes

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for vulnerable patients, which was very different to what was said originally. Meanwhile, there was this enormously heavy-handed policing of whether people should take them, including in many places mandates or near mandates. That was very uncomfortable to watch. Do you think that's the speed with which things were happening means that it's very difficult for people entrusted with authority to give advice and normally there's much more time in order to examine all the evidence and give balanced, wise advice. When you're required to give advice almost instantly, there inevitably are going to be mistakes. I'm so surprised that you're not more critical of that era. As someone who champions robust debate and champions learning from errors admitting when things weren't exactly what you thought they were, it feels like it was a real classy example of just the politicization we're talking about where authorities were way over the top. Okay, well probably then what they should have done, and with hindsight they should have done, said, well actually we don't know. We're uncertain. Best advice we can give is so and so. But imagine what would have happened if it said that. We don't sound just don't know, right? It's a very difficult situation to be in. I'm lucky for me, I wasn't in that situation, but I sympathize with people who are expected to give unequivocal yes-no sort of advice. Politicians will say, give us the facts. Is it a yes or a no? And you're expected to answer that, and where if the true answer is we don't know, then that gives rise to yet more uncertainty and confusion. And so I sympathize with people if they're required to give a yes-no answer when they actually don't have the information at hand. It feels like the the damage to scientific authority would have been much less if they had been more modest in their claims and allowed people to make decisions for themselves instead of mandating things that last improved. Yes, but when you have to worry about whether the right policy is to do what Sweden did or to do what we did, it is a very difficult decision. It's a political decision. Politicians need advice from scientists. Scientists have to take a decision how to advise politicians. I think we need to be a bit more sympathetic. And I haven't noticed a great upwelling of mistrust in scientists as a result of it. For me, the triumph of the speed of the vaccination is what I take away from it. Let's put a couple of tweets that you did during the pandemic on the screen. You said, some faith heads have a ritual of handling snakes, believing faith will protect them. When they're bitten, they deserve it. They alone suffer. Vaccine refusal is different. Others are endangered. It's as though their faith told them to release rattlesnakes in supermarkets. This was April 6th, 2021. That kind of tone, which was very common among people of influence such as you, which is really vilifying people who were hesitant about taking the vaccine. In retrospect, seems too much, doesn't it? Because maybe they were more right than we realized. Do you take that back? Well, I've become aware that the conventional wisdom about vaccination, which is that it's a matter of altruism, because it's not simply a matter of saying it is my private business, whether I'm vaccinated or not. In the case of the measles vaccine, for example, it really is a matter of altruism, because if you don't get vaccinated, then you are part of the problem if there's a measles epidemic. I thought that that would be the case with COVID, and it's now not entirely clear that that was right. To that extent, I would take that back, yes. Do you now have a view on lockdowns since we've been doing a little tour of the COVID era? No, I don't have a view. I'm not well... I should say, as a half Swedish person,

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we've paid a lot of attention to it. You talk about double-blind trials and scientific process. The fact that Sweden has emerged from the longer period with the lowest excess death count of all of the European countries seems to be quite an important scientific point of evidence that possibly lockdowns were not necessary. That could be true. And as John Maynard Keynes has said, when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir? And so, yes, it is that there was a need for rapid decisions. The evidence was not yet in, and mistakes may have been made. Some people have said that the kind of corruption of those scientific institutions that became evident during COVID goes much beyond the COVID example. So I'd really like to see what you think about that. For example, the whole peer review system. There's a scientist called Jay Bhattacharya, who we've interviewed a number of times on this channel. He thinks the whole method for getting funding for scientific projects and for ascertaining scientific theories needs overhauling because it has rewarded timidity by being over-reliant on what the mainstream of your peers think. And the experience he had during COVID was that he was completely kind of demonised for taking a different view on lockdowns. And it's gradually, the mainstream is shifting towards his position over time. But do you share that idea that possibly there are actual structural problems now with possibly the peer review system and the way scientists get funding that needs serious attention? Yes, I do. I think no system is perfect, and there are obviously things wrong with the way peer review works in practice. There are things you can try to do, like to anonymise papers, just publishes author A and author B rather than giving them names. There are papers that get published because author A happens to be a very eminent Nobel Prize winner, and people don't believe you know. So peer review is not a perfect system, and it's hard to think what would be a perfect system. In this social media age, I think that was so clear during COVID that scientists and institutions like university are as vulnerable, if not more vulnerable, to this kind of peer pressure and fear of being cancelled, fear of being on the wrong side of where the mainstream is. And peer review seems possibly just to be playing to that. Yes, and I rather like those heroic scientists who go off on their own and don't need grants and just get on with their research. People like James Lovelock, sort of independent scientists who I've criticised on other grounds. And funding even, you know, it's all about how quoted you are, that the system seems to be now, that how many citations you have in journals, and that also seems to encourage the closer you are to the centre of the parabola, the more generally acceptable your views are, the more popular you're going to be, and the more funding you're going to get. It's awfully easy to be critical, though, and say, you've got to think of a better system, and it's quite hard to think of one. And I mean, I agree that the peer review is not perfect, and the way funding is done is not perfect, and it'd be nice to think of better ways of doing it. And we need to be constructive, rather than just say it's a terrible system, we need to try to think of a better system. It's quite hard to do so. The other aspect of protecting scientists is universities, and I don't know what your view

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is, but it feels like recently, universities have not been good at defending their own when they come under assault on social media and elsewhere, when basically one of their faculty takes an unpopular position. The trend, we saw it with American universities during COVID, but there are lots of other examples. And Kathleen Stock is another example. She's an unheard columnist, where universities have done a terrible job in protecting their own. Surely that's something where we can be constructively critical. I think we can, and I think Kathleen Stock is a very good example of somebody who's been appallingly treated. I think she's a real hero. I think JK Rowling is a real hero. It's not university, but another one.

Yes, I've been rather shocked at the way universities have not stood up to a rabble, a lynch mob, really, going after people like Kathleen Stock. So I agree with you on that. So that's something where we need to again accept that the authorities, the institutions have failed, have been letting, have made things worse rather than better.

I think so. And you have to sympathize with a university vice chancellor who's having a sort of baying mob of students after their blood. It's difficult, but I think in that case, they should hold the line. I'm not going to go into politics with a capital P, because I know that's not what you are here to talk about. But I'd like to end by thinking about how the world has changed over the past decade or so in terms of the atmosphere of politics. You've been very critical of Donald Trump. You were very upset about Brexit. It looks entirely plausible that Donald Trump might return in 2024. The mood that seemed to be there in the 2000s, particularly the earlier 2000s, where there was this end-of-history atmosphere that felt like petty nationalisms and tribalisms were behind us. And we were marching towards a glorious, global, rational future. That appears to be itself a moment of history now. And it's not even just in America and Europe, but across the world. They're obviously going on in Russia and Ukraine at the moment. But

in many other places, there does feel like there's a return to more of a multipolar world, more of a world where different groups are looking after their own interests and are happy to basically push against the rest of the world. Do you call that tribalism or nationalism? You say that's a terrible thing. Is it not just a facet of human nature? Is it not evolutionary? Well, maybe it is, yes. And that's a very pessimistic conclusion.

I'm not, and I constantly fight against being regarded as somebody who's an observer of the human scene. I'm really not much. I just read the paper like anybody else. But if you're asking me as a biologist whether tribalism and loyalty to a group to which one perceives one belongs is an important dominating human characteristic, maybe it is, and I fear it might be.

If one takes the whole world as the scene, there definitely was a move towards a more single global world, both globalised trade than there was these increasingly powerful global structures, World Health Organisation, the European Union, etc. All of those have taken a real beating of late, and there has been a move much more into what looks like groupings or different kind of poles of influence. And I just wonder, with your evolutionary biologist hat on, whether or not you might personally think it's regrettable because you were a liberal Democrat voter and would like people to vote differently, you've got to concede that it's the human norm. Oh, yes, I think it might be. That doesn't mean we're stuck with it, though. I mean, we can fight against a human norm. I mean, it's a human norm to go around naked. It's not an irrevocable thing. It's not a human norm anymore to be around.

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Oh, okay. But I mean, we don't have to say that because something is a human norm, it's a biological norm. Therefore, we have to be stuck with it.

Is it not potentially preferable to have a world of competing blocks, a more tribal world, essentially, where people belong to their group and feel in competition with other groups? Maybe that, I'm positing, really seems to kind of go along with your evolutionary view of the world. Maybe that is the way for greatest human flourishing. Maybe that's the way for that competition

sparks better ideas, people's loyalty to their tribe brings out the best in them.

And maybe that is the species finding its natural, successful mode. It's to return to a more competitive tribal... Well, maybe. I mean, that's your view. Or maybe it isn't your view where you're putting that forward. That may be. It isn't my view. But whether or not it were my view, it wouldn't be because I was a biologist. It wouldn't be because it was, quote, natural that I would be in favor of it or against it. That's, to me, irrelevant. I would think

I would take account of something being part of human nature, but I wouldn't be of the view that because it's part of human nature, therefore, we're stuck with it.

Do you think there is a reader cross there? Do you think it doesn't seem an outrageous leap to consider natural tribal groupings and loyalties of kinship and those kind of competitive intuitions in a political context? My politics don't go along with that.

And I tend not to favor that kind of group identity. But as a biologist, I might very well think it was an important part of human nature. But as I said, that doesn't mean we're stuck with it. And I'm prepared to spend a lot of my time, to the extent that I'm politically interested, fighting against human nature, as I've often said. We might be leaving human nature behind altogether in the future, either through some kind of AI future or through extraterrestrial life. I just want to touch on these because they're exotic concepts that people will be interested in.

Explain, first of all, with your materialist hat on, how you think AI could, in theory, supplant organic life. Well, the brain is a material object. And what it does is, although we don't understand it in full now, it must have a scientific explanation.

And it must be the case that whatever the brain can do in principle could be done by an assimilation. And so an artificial intelligence must be capable of doing what the human brain can do. And there's no obvious reason why it shouldn't be

greatly superior to it. And so it is conceivable that an artificial intelligence could greatly surpass what the human brain can do. And in many ways, that's a very frightening prospect.

Many people are very frightened of it. I haven't decided whether I'm frightened of it or not.

I think I could imagine it going both ways. But as a materialist, I can't deny that it's possible.

So one potential end of humanity, then, is being supplanted by artificial intelligence.

We've got to end with the prospect of other forms of life, because this is something you talk about that I think people might be surprised that you give so much credence to or so much are so ready to entertain the possibility of extraterrestrial life. So some people, it belongs in the kind of conspiracy corner, which you would be completely opposed to. So how likely do you think it is that extraterrestrial life exists? Oh, very likely. I mean, when you think of the sheer number of opportunities there are in the universe for it to exist,

I admit that the possibility of it arising anywhere is very low, but it has arisen here.

And that's what's surprising. That's what's a wonderful fact that, however improbable it is that

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life, a little own intelligent life, should spring into existence and evolve to the point where it can understand its own existence, which is what it has here. That was what's improbable, but given that that happened, to deny that it happened anywhere else would be to suggest that the origin of life on this planet was a ludicrously, ridiculously improbable event, which I don't think I want to do. So you think actually in the balance of probabilities, if we're talking Turkey here, more than 50% likely in your estimation that there would be other life forms outside our own planet? Yes. I would make a distinction between life existing elsewhere, which is far more probable, obviously, than intelligent life, because one's got to come up with the other. But we probably, we might well discover intelligent life through radio communication. We'll never be visited by it. I think that flying sources really is improbable in anything like physical visitation is very unlikely. But visitation by radio communication, electromagnetic wave communication is not totally unlikely. And I think that the search for extraterrestrial intelligence seti is a worthwhile enterprise, which I think should be pursued and funded. So you don't think interstellar travel is going to be possible through some new physics discovery? Well, that's very, very far in the future, because of the huge distances involved. I mean, so far we're into interplanetary travel within the solar system. But light years are very long distances for solid physical objects. So if Elon Musk is successful at getting human beings to Mars in your lifetime, would you volunteer? Oh, no. Mars is just backyard, by the way, of course, that's not interstellar. No, I wouldn't volunteer, but well, I might as you know, yes, perhaps the last thing I did, if I knew I was dying, yes. Well, I think that's a great note to end with. Elon, if you're watching, Richard Dawkins is potentially a volunteer for your first Mars trip. Professor Dawkins, thank you for your time. Thank you very much. Thanks for listening, and thanks again to our friends over at Unheard for letting us share this fabulous conversation. If you liked it, you can catch all of their episodes at Unheard, that's spelled U-N-H-E-R-D dot com. And if you want to support our podcast, again, you're listening to Honestly, but you already know that there's just one way to do that. If by going to the free press, V-F-P dot com, T-H-E-F-P dot com, and becoming a subscriber today. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time.