

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 87: Sam Harris, Part 2

Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: Hello, boys and girls. This is Tim Ferriss and welcome to another episode of The Tim Ferriss Show, where I interview and deconstruct world-class performers. This episode is a special episode. It is a Round 2 with Sam Harris – H-A-R-R-I-S – who is a neuroscience Ph.D. and the author of many bestselling books, including “The End of Faith,” “The Moral Landscape,” “Free Will,” “Waking Up,” and “Lying.” His work has been discussed in many different places, ranging from The New York Times to Scientific American, Nature, many journals, Rolling Stone, etc.

In the last episode together, we explored the science of lying, the uses and different types of meditation, psychedelic drug use, spiritual experiences, and much more. But it’s really broadly a discussion of the human experience. In this, Round 2, we dig even deeper into all sorts of fascinating topics, because you all submitted questions and voted nearly 19,000 times on almost 700 questions. And Sam is going to answer your top questions.

So before we get to that, just want to tell you where to find more on Sam. It’s samharris.org. He has some great guided meditations and other essays. He’s also @samharrisorg on Twitter, so please say hello and let him know what you thought of this episode. And without further ado, please enjoy Round 2 with Sam Harris.

Sam Harris: Hey, Tim and Tim’s many fans. Hi, this is Sam Harris. I’m very happy to be doing this Q&A for my buddy, Tim Ferriss; who, among other things, has inspired me to do my own podcast. So, thank you, brother. Tim has sent me to a Google doc file or actually, Google moderator, which ominously says that it will disappear on June 30th. I think entire piece of software is going to disappear. So I will answer your questions now. There have been almost 19,000 votes on almost 700 questions, from over 1,000 people, 1,168 people.

So that’s a nice response. I’ve looked this over a little bit. There are some good questions here. I think there’s probably a founders’ effect where the early questions to get voted up at the ones that everyone reads and seems to like and they get voted on. The questions that got added to the mix much later have far fewer eyes

on them, so it's a bit of an illusion, I think, so that these are the most popular. But I will start with the most popular and maybe dig around at the bottom of the list at some point.

“What are five books you think everyone should read?” This is from Matt in Houston. This is a hard question. I just went to my shelves to get some ideas, but there are just so many good books in all my areas of interest. I'll probably name more than five. One book I recommend on philosophy, just to get your bearings, is Bertrand Russell's “A History of Western Philosophy.” Bertrand Russell, as you surely know, is one of the great philosophers of his time and just a remarkably clear thinker and writer.

Just a great example of how English should be written and just a great voice to have in your head as a result. Being a philosopher himself, he was quite opinionated about the very schools and traditions in philosophy. It's a fun read, provided you care about the history of Western philosophy. I also recommend Derek Parfit's book, “Reasons and Persons,” which is just brilliant and written as though by an alien intelligence. It's a deeply strange book filled with thought experiments that bend your intuitions left and right.

It's just a truly strange and unique document and incredibly insightful about morality and questions of identity and well worth reading if you are of a philosophical cast of mind. I also am a big fan of Thomas Nagle's earlier work. Thomas Nagle is a philosopher of mind and a moral philosopher.

Of late, unfortunately, he's made some slightly crazy noises about evolution and some annoying defenses of religion. He wrote a review of my book, “The Moral Landscape” that I thought was fairly wrong-headed. But his earlier stuff is great and I actually align with him on questions related to consciousness and the philosophy of mind, in general, more than align with people like Dan Dennett, with whom I have more of a relationship. And Nagle is a very fine writer, a very clear. Just as a style of communication, I think he's worth going to school on.

I would recommend you read his little book, “The Last Word,” which champions rationality in a very compelling way. Also, he has a book called “Mortal Questions,” which is a collection of essays. There are some very good essays in there that were very influential in philosophy and should be more influential in the culture, generally. He introduces a concept of moral luck, for instance, which very few people think about it.

I think it's very important, ethically. It boils down to this: if you imagine someone texting while driving and killing some pedestrians. What should happen to that person? Well, this person is very likely doing something that you or your best friend or your sister will do later this afternoon. All right? This person is behaving not in an egregiously irresponsible way; although we may ultimately decide that about texting while driving. I think we probably should. I think it is egregiously irresponsible, but yet many, many millions of people are doing it. It's not viewed in the same way as drunk driving.

It should be but it isn't and this person is guilty of doing something that you and your friends very likely do from time to time, if not incessantly. And yet this person is so unlucky, that he is the guy or the gal who is going to run over a child in a crosswalk and spend the rest of his life in prison, perhaps or many years in person, having his life ruined by having caused so much suffering for others based on his negligence.

The concept of moral luck is this: managing to be moral, managing to function well in the world entails a certain amount of luck and there are people who get very unlucky and wind up doing things that have hugely negative consequences. It seems to me we should factor that in in how we punish people. In any case, it's a very interesting and useful concept and I think there should be a space in our conversation about morality that more or less fits this shape and I think Nagle is the first person to put a name to it. There is significant luck involved in living a moral life and that fact itself has moral significance. So moving on from philosophy, I think everyone should read the Holy Koran.

Very few of you have read the Koran. Many of you have heard me make unpleasant assertions about it. Read it. It's much shorter than the Bible. You can read it in a weekend and you will be informed about the central doctrines of Islam in a way that you may not be and it's good to be informed, given how much influence these ideas have currently in our world. Actually, there's another work of philosophy here. Sort of philosophy/science that I've been greatly influenced by of late.

The philosopher, Nick Bostrom, wrote a book called "Superintelligence," which has impressed many people for the thoroughness with which he has argued that we have a serious problem looming with respect to the birth of intelligent machines.

There have been many books on this topic and there are other good books: “Our Final Invention” by James Barrett is also good.

But “Superintelligence” is really the clearest book I’ve come across that makes the case that the so-called “control problem,” the problem of building human level and beyond artificial intelligence that we can control, that we can know in advance will converge with our interests, that’s truly a difficult and important task because we will wind up building this stuff by happenstance if we simply keep going in the direction we’re headed.

Unless we solve this problem in advance and have good reason to believe that the machines we are building are benign and their behavior predictable, even when they exceed us in intelligence, a thousand, a million or a billion-fold, this is going to be a catastrophic intrusion into our lives that we may not survive. A very interesting topic; I’ve been getting more and more into it. I’m actually in the middle of writing a short book myself with a collaborator on it. I’ll say more about that when that book is further along.

So yeah, read Bostrom’s book. It’s a little dense for the uninitiated, but it really repays study. There’s a writer – William Ian Miller – who I think is unfairly neglected. He writes some fascinating books. Several have been on negative emotions. One book is entitled “Humiliation,” which was a great read. Just on the phenomenon of being humiliated and differentiating it from embarrassment and other similar emotions. He also wrote a book on disgust called “The Anatomy of Disgust,” which is also fun. These are very interdisciplinary books.

He is a lawyer, I believe or a professor of law. But he goes deep into the relevant sociology and these are cool books. I suspect many of you want recommendations on books about meditation and spiritual experience. There’s no book out there that is free of the superstition and religiosity you tend to get with books about Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta, the Hindu teachings of non-duality.

I can’t really recommend those books without caveat. I wrote the book that I think needed to exist, “Waking Up,” which was my last book. I am reluctant to include my own book in a list of books everyone should read, however. But there was a reason why I wrote that book, because there’s really no book I could point rational people, students of science, critics of religious mumbo jumbo, with a clear conscience. There are certainly books written by wiser yogis and mediators and more experienced ones that I am

or am ever likely to be, but they are, as I said, mingled with a fair amount of woo.

So with that caveat in mind, I will recommend “In the Dzogchen Tradition,” which if you’ve read Waking Up, you know is the center of the bull’s eye as far as meditative wisdom. There’s one book called The Flight of the Garuda, which I think is especially beautiful and wise.

And among the Hindus who teach Advaita Vedanta, the non-dual teachings of yogic meditation that really just talks about pure consciousness and the illusion of the self – don’t be confused about the assertion of the existence of the big Self, capital S. They’re just talking about awareness in that case. But the book “I am That” by Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a guru in Bombay in the ‘60s, ‘70s. I think he died in the mid-‘80s, I believe, around ‘87. I never met him. I studied with one of his students.

He was an incredibly clear and amusingly irascible guru. He said a few crazy things, as many gurus do. But if you stick to what he was claiming about the nature of experience, I think you’re on firm ground and that book is very accessible and it’s in dialogue format.

So I’ve given you more than five books and I haven’t covered many other interesting areas like neuroscience or psychology or really any science. I guess Bostrom’s book is technically science, in addition to philosophy. But I’ve given you enough to chew on. Oh, I’m sorry, William Ian Miller is also treading on science there. Actually, another book comes to mind. Many of you probably know that I spend a fair amount of time thinking about people’s misbehavior – just how spectacularly wrong things can go in our world.

If you want to see what it’s like when things go about as wrong as they can go, read “Machete Season,” which is a short book about the Rwandan genocide that is, if I recall correctly, entirely borne of interviews with some of the main perpetrators of this genocide. So not merely the people who were swinging the machetes, but the people who were running those gangs and enforcing people’s membership therein.

So these were people who were ordering Hutus who wouldn’t kill their Tutsi neighbors to be killed. There was an immediate and ultimate penalty paid for not collaborating in these gangs. I believe they were called Interahamwe. Forgive me if that pronunciation is terrible. This is a fascinating and harrowing book because these

were, at least the people they chose to interview, rather disconcertingly smart, introspective guys who have totally clear consciences with respect to what they did. It is amazing to get into their heads.

They invite you in there and they give you the full tour. It is uncanny that circumstances can come together culturally, neurophysiologically and otherwise so as to produce this kind of behavior again with a clear conscience.

These guys were just unhappy to be have been caught and to have landed in jail, but you really get the sense that they would do this over and over again. Their behavior really survived Nietzsche's principle of eternal recurrence. They would be happy to live in a universe where they'd do this an endless number of times because it was clearly the right thing to do from their point of view. So it is a short book and a very sobering one worth reading, if you can stomach that sort of thing. Okay, on to the next question.

"In the End of Faith," you briefly discuss the ethics of having children and the evidence that parents are less happy and less productive than their child-free counterparts. Why did you decide to have children?" From Benjamin Lithgow in Beverly, Massachusetts. I guess there are two possible answers. One is it's just a failure to be emotionally moved by the data. There are certain things you may understand to be true, but you just can't make their being true emotionally relevant enough to have it guide your behavior.

That's one explanation. I don't think it's the most likely, in my case. I actually feel like it's more a matter of my feeling based on who I am and who I'm married to and what she wanted and what I wanted, that we were very likely to be exceptions to the rule. There's no doubt a certain amount of self-deception, if not delusion, on offer there when you begin looking at scientific data and imagining that it doesn't apply to you. But in our case, I think we stood a very good chance of being happy parents, having happy kids and being glad that we were parents and finding the alternative, at least retrospectively, unthinkable. And that's sort of where we are. I'm a very happy father. I love my daughters. The idea that I might not have had them does seem unthinkable now.

But I'm also aware that having them has created forms of suffering that we wouldn't otherwise know. We've certainly given hostages to Fortune, as someone, I think it was Francis Bacon, said. You worry about the future; you worry about all sorts of things that you

would be quite insouciant about if you were just on your own living out your adulthood productively. So it's not without its downsides, but even the downsides have a silver lining, or many of them do. I think being concerned about the future because you have kids is good ethically and it does lead to a kind of productivity that might not otherwise be available. In fact, I was just at this conference on artificial intelligence, where the main agenda was to try to get a handle on its dangers and the pressing issue of the control problem that I just mentioned.

One of the organizers, in fact, the main funder of the conference, Jaan Tallinn, one of the founders of Skype, said that when talks to people about this issue, he asks only two questions to sort of get an understanding of whether the person he's talking to is going to be able to grok just how pressing a concern artificial intelligence is. The first is, "Are you a programmer?" the relevance of which is obvious. And the second is, "Do you have children?" He claims to have found that if people don't have children, their concern about the future isn't sufficiently well-calibrated so as to get just how terrifying the prospect of building super-intelligent machines is in the absence of having figured out the control problem.

I think there's something to that. It's not limited, of course, to artificial intelligence. It spreads to every topic of concern. To worry about the fate of civilization in the abstract is harder than worrying about what sorts of experiences your children are going to have in the future. And in a future that hopefully extends beyond your own.

You can certainly tell a story about all the work you're not able to accomplish because you're busy changing diapers or pushing your kids on the swings, but there's other work that you do connect with in a way that you might not otherwise. I have certainly noticed that in myself. One of my great jobs, honestly at this point, is pushing my daughters on the swings. So there's a lot to be said for having kids and that really is not a rejoinder to the research that suggests that people are made, for a very long time, reliably less happy as parents. You can find this in Daniel Gilbert's work on effective forecasting, which he summarized in a book "Stumbling Upon Happiness," which is also a good book which I recommend.

So Question 3: "Why have you stopped doing public debates? Is there anyone you would like to debate?" Well, I haven't so much as stopped as I haven't been offered one that has made any sense of late.

And I also haven't been doing much public speaking. This goes back to all the work I'm not doing because I'm a father. I just don't like leaving my family at this point. So there has to be a good reason for me to get on a plane and go somewhere to stand at a lectern and argue with someone about God or anything else. So it really has to be a debate that is compelling where I'm not merely going to repeat myself with someone against whom I feel like I'm going to make points that make a difference. It really has to be worth it.

So I don't actually know who I would debate in the usual vein if you're talking about debating religion versus science or religion versus atheism. A little of those debates goes a long way at this point, so it just has to be worth it. I would debate people on other topics, and have tried to engineer debates that seemed worth it.

Those often fall through. Often I'm trying to do that in writing because it allows for more precision and doesn't require travel. And so I have a few of those on my blog and quite an ill-fated attempt with Noam Chomsky recently. But I am trying to have difficult conversations that I now don't tend to think of as debates. The debate format is not really a good context in which to make progress on these issues. It's a foregone conclusion that the participants in the debate are not going to have their mind changed and it really is not about even having a semblance of a conversation. You are colliding and deliberately not changing your mind. In many cases, deliberately not even noticing the other person's point if you're a dishonest debater in the presence of others who can be swayed one way or another. So it's all about the audience experience. It's not about having an honest conversation. At least most people approach it that way.

I've never really approached it that way. I've just known the kinds of things I've been debating are not the kinds of things I'm likely to be swayed on. So standing up there with William Lane Craig, what were the chances that he was going to say something that was going to convince me that I should fall on my knees and give myself over to Jesus Christ as my savior? It wasn't likely. So it's not that it's impossible, but it's setting the bar pretty high. On other topics where I've had a debate, I really have approached it as a circumstance where I may very well change my mind in real time in front of the audience and I would be thrilled to be able to do that.

To some degree, that did happen in this exchange I wrote with Maajid Nawaz, which is coming out under the title "Islam the

Future of Tolerance.” It’s a book coming out in the fall. That is a circumstance where yeah, it’s much more of a conversation, though many people will view it as something of a debate.

So I think debate is the wrong frame, but I am into having difficult conversations. But again, I try to have them more and more remotely. At some point that will change and it certainly change on any given weekend if I have the right interlocutor. As far as anyone I would like to debate, there are people who I have challenged to debate on these issues and they haven’t accepted the challenge or they’ve accepted it only to then disappear. Francis Collins, is someone who I’ve gone after before. He’s declined to debate me for understandable reasons.

There’s no percentage in it for him. He’s the head of the NIH. Why does he want to be on stage with me, having his totally illegitimate commitment to evangelical Christianity exposed as unscientific in all the ways that he wants to pretend it’s scientific? There’s no reason for him to do that. So I don’t take it personally.

I think there are many people who don’t want to be in that situation for understandable reasons. Many people have urged me to debate Robert Pape, who is a scholar or is often believed to be a scholar of terrorism. He’s looked at all the terrorist incidents in recent history and categorized them in various ways that has made it seem like terrorism has nothing to do with Islam or religion and has everything to do with politics and nationalism. Many people have thrown Pape’s work at me as a rejoinder to everything I’ve said about the link between Islamic extremism and Muslim violence, Muslim terrorism.

So I offered to debate Pape. He agreed. I announced it publicly. We were going to do this in writing and then he disappeared and disappeared in such a way that he – is he alive? I don’t know. I’m sorry if he’s dead and I’ve just castigated the man’s ghost, but I think he’s very much alive and he just disappeared.

And that happened with David Eagleman, the neuroscientist. He does very interesting work scientifically. He’s a very nice writer. He said some deeply silly things about religion and atheism. So many readers wanted the two of us to get together and debate those things. He agreed to debate and then at some point declined. So it’s not the easiest thing in the world to find the right people to debate, but I’m certainly open to it and I’m open to suggestions. The goal is to not bore myself and everyone else. So not every suggestion makes sense.

“Could you talk about one of your differences with Hitch?” That is, Christopher Hitchens. “Specifically his pro-life stance. Do you believe he was mistaken?” Now Hitch – it could be that I’m unaware of everything Hitch said about abortion, but from what I recall, I don’t think it’s fair to call him pro-life.

I think he said that he found abortion, depending on the stage at which it occurs in pregnancy, to be a serious ethical concern and not to be entered into lightly. I certainly agree with that. I would never call myself pro-life. I’m certainly pro-choice in the conventional sense, but I don’t think anyone should be eager to have a late-term abortion and I can’t imagine anyone is. Now where one draws the line between it being a trivial loss of a few dozen cells and something more akin to a murder of an infant, that’s not obvious. The convention of breaking a pregnancy into three trimesters and considering the first 12 weeks to be more or less a time in which one is free without any ethical concern to choose to terminate a pregnancy, I don’t know that there is a neurologically principled stand to take there.

I’m not close to this developmental literature at this point. I don’t know what we know about the possibility of suffering at each week past conception. Any line you draw is going to see arbitrary if you’re a day on either side of that line. There’s no way to escape the sense of these landmarks being arbitrary. But I’m certainly pro-choice and I think if a woman really wants to terminate her pregnancy, more often than not there’s a very good reason why she would and that’s not a child you want to bring into the world. A woman can’t be forced to have a child and put it up for adoption.

The ethical ballast is all on the side of the freedom for a woman to choose what to do with her body. But at a certain point, it is obvious it’s not merely her body. You’re talking about now a creature increasingly like a newborn infant who can feel pain and who has interests of some sort.

Where they become fully human interests, at the moment I don’t know a better line to draw than the viability of the fetus outside the body. So at 22 weeks or so, you’re talking about something that is, for all intents and purposes, just a premature infant that could be delivered at that point and survive. I know people who have had infants that premature who, after a few months in the NICU, are now wonderful children who are fully intact. A third trimester abortion is problematic, ethically. I don’t know how someone finds themselves in that situation.

I think that's kind of the salad of concerns I just served you is what Hitch was thinking about, if I'm not mistaken. I think I share his view. More book recommendations. If you haven't read Christopher Hitchens, you should. He was a brilliant writer and also a brilliant speaker. You should watch him on YouTube.

You can get the benefit of both his voice and his writing if you listen to his audiobooks, the ones he read himself. "God is Not Great," and "Hitch-22" are two of those. I don't know if he read any of the others. But it's great listening. That last question was from Gentry in Austin, Texas.

Next question: "What fact/event has made you change your mind about a topic recently?" That's from — forgive for this pronunciation — spelled H-R-O, Hro. Is that actually a name from Sweden? Hro. I don't know how to pronounce your name, but you've come from Sweden. What have I changed my mind about recently? Well, sorry to go back to this attractor, but artificial intelligence is something that I never thought much about.

When I did think about it, I had more or less bought the line that either hadn't panned out or wasn't likely to in any timeframe that should motivate us to think about its dangers. I have now gotten religion on that topic. I'm not a conventional fan of the singularity. I'm not somebody who's awaiting these changes with Kurzweilian glee. I'm referring to Ray Kurzweil, whose work most of you probably know. If we can do this well, obviously huge benefits will come from building artificial general intelligence. Everything that's good in our lives is more or less the result of human intelligence.

So intelligence is almost an intrinsic good. We want more of it if we can have it. But the question is how do you get there without inadvertently building an angry little god in a box that takes no more concern over your interests than we take over the interests of snails and cockroaches and ants?

It sounds like pure science fiction, but when you get into the details, you see that not only is this a plausible set of concerns, we are on collision course with this reality unless we destroy ourselves some other way. It's like we stand in front of two doors. Door No. 1, you open that and you find that we have destroyed ourselves for some reason and not invented artificial general intelligence. We had a global nuclear war; we had an incident of bioterrorism that created a global pandemic that set civilization back 300 years; or

we had an economic catastrophe that did the same thing and we just now no longer know how to build computers or improve their software.

But absent that, Door No. 2 is we continue to make progress on hardware and software. At a certain point, this progress gets into the end zone of super human level intelligence.

And then those intelligent systems themselves make the further progress. Then you get what's called an intelligence explosion, or the singularity. There's, again, a lot to say about this. But I was convinced until somewhere around New Year's of this year that all of that either may not happen or is likely some species of techno-religious bullshit that I didn't have to pay attention to. My mind has totally changed on that point.

Okay, next question. This is from Urban Nomad in Portugal: "I have never heard Sam Harris explain his morning ritual. Usually you ask this question, Tim. But on your podcast, you didn't ask Sam. I would especially love to know what his meditation ritual is. Is it daily? How long? At what time does he wake up?" Okay. Well, I think I'm going to have an embarrassingly sloppy response to this.

What I do is I get up in the morning and then I more or less break all of the wise and helpful rules that Tim has laid out for us. I check my email. I get, from time to time, perturbed and derailed by it. Which is to say I get handed something that is not on my to-do list, but is on someone else's to-do list. And then I do that thing for the better part of the morning. I break all the rules. But I think Tim's advice is good and I take it when I have my wits about me.

The piece of advice I now take more often than not is when I get to my desk to do the one thing that if done would make the day truly productive. So I'm often focused on the one most important thing when I hit my desk now. So that's part of the ritual. That often comes early and it often comes before I would meditate.

So I would get up at 6:00 or 7:00, or 8:00 is probably the latest, depending on how late I've gone to sleep the night before. I'm not a great sleeper. Then I sometimes will just make a cup of tea or coffee and just go straight to my desk. Sometimes I'll meditate first. But again, there's no ritual. What you should have in your mind is a picture of controlled chaos. These are not the smoothly oiled gears of a well-calibrated machine. This is somebody staggering out of his bedroom in search of caffeine and he may or

may not have checked his email before the whistle on the kettle blew. But I do meditate frequently and certainly try to make that every day. I've been in various modes. That's another influence of having kids, depending on how old your kids are and how many you have of them. It can be hard to hold to any real structure.

But I do sit for anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes, somewhat reliably every day. There have been periods of my life when I've dropped that. I think probably the longest has been a few months where I've stopped meditating in the last going on 30 years. But for the most part, I've been a daily meditator for 30 years. This has taken various forms. There were periods where I did a lot of retreat, so then I would come back into daily life and meditating for an hour or two or even more a day was just a very easy thing to do, having come from a context of weeks and months where I was meditating 12 to 18 hours a day and not having the same kinds of responsibilities that I have now.

I would say that meditating regularly every day is I think a very important thing to do. In my case, it didn't really become useful, which is to say it really didn't become true meditation, until I had sat my first one or two intensive retreats.

I remember the experience clearly. I don't remember if it came after the first – I think it came after the first 10-day Vipassana retreat. I think I'd been very disciplined and been sitting an hour every day in the morning for a year before I sat my first 10-day retreat. I remember looking back over that year at some point, somewhere around the middle of my first Vipassana retreat and realizing that I had just been more or less thinking with my legs crossed every hour that I had practiced that year. This is not to say that's true of all of you who are practicing meditation without ever having gone on a retreat, but it's very likely true of many of you.

It's hard to build enough concentration in your daily life to really connect with mindfulness or with whatever practice you're doing. Every silent retreat is a crucible where you can develop enough energy and attention to break through to another level where you see what the practice really is about and what you need to be noticing to be paying attention.

That experience of breaking through to deeper levels continues to happen. As I write about in my book, "Waking Up," the crucial level for me is the insight that the self, as we imagine it to be doesn't exist. The sense that there's an ego, a self in the center of consciousness. The one who is doing the meditating, the one who

is paying attention, the point behind your eyes from which you would pay attention to the breath or to a mantra or to any object of meditation, that point is a fiction. There is no point there behind your eyes. There's just a field of consciousness. And everything that you can notice is arising in it and arising as a perturbation of consciousness. It is being noticed effortlessly by consciousness itself without a center.

And so for me now, mindfulness is a matter of cutting through the illusion of a center, cutting through the illusion of the self. And when you have that insight, then daily practice does have a different character. It's not as dependent upon concentration, and therefore it's not as dependent upon building up enough concentration to have sustained attention so that you can feel that your mindfulness is really connecting with experience in a deep and sustained way. You're then able to – the moment you look – see the deepest and most profound thing you are ever going to see on a three-month retreat, say.

So then sitting for five minutes here and there throughout the day can be quite profound in a way that it might not be – almost certainly won't be – if you don't know what to look for and you're just trying to pay attention to the breath.

That's not to say that sitting for five minutes paying attention to the breath is a bad thing to do; it's a great thing to do. It's the preliminary practice for anything else I would recommend. It's just a way of saying that now the way I think the way I should practice would be to sit for some period during the day for 20 minutes or a half an hour. But to then sit for a minute or two every hour, I find myself essentially doing that without having a timer or any kind of mechanism that enforces it. But there are experiences I have where I am essentially enforcing a kind of meditative clarity. Whether I'm pushing my daughters on the swing or whatever it is.

There's no difficulty in doing that. So I view practice as not being very separate from life at this point. But it's also true to say that most of my life is too distracting. Most of my work is too distracting. Most of what I'm doing with my attention is too distracting for me to have any pretense of calling that meditation.

I am lost in thought most of the time. But an ability to cut through the illusion really is available and it punctuates my day, more or less no matter what I'm doing. So I hope that wasn't a totally confusing answer to this question. The picture you should get is of somebody who does not have quite as much structure in his

various enterprises as he should, but I'm still managing to get most of what I want to get done, done. I am not miserable. Other things that fall into the pattern of ritual might be exercise. I think that's probably of interest to Tim's audience, to an unusual degree. I try to do something more or less every day. Probably I do that at least five, maybe six days a week. Whether it's going to the gym and lifting weights or doing martial arts or climbing stairs. I have a few different things I do to keep fit.

Half of them also injure me, so let's say there are diminishing returns here. But usually sometime in the afternoon I work out. Often my meditation is in the afternoon as well. I often try to do it outside. If you know anything about Dzogchen, you know that Dzogchen yogis often use the sky as kind of a support for practice. You meditate with your eyes open looking at a clear sky or any place where you can see the horizon. I do like to practice that way. I don't always get a chance to do it, but I find that clears the head in a very useful way.

Also, sitting outside for me is good because I have tinnitus, so silence is not great for me now because it seems to tune up this ringing in my ears, or at least make it something that I can't help but focus on. It's not clear to me that focusing on it isn't actually turning up the gain on it, which is not something I want to have happen.

Many people have asked me, many people have written to me about questions about how to practice with tinnitus. I recommend having some ambient noise: sitting outside, hearing the wind or waves or traffic or whatever it is, makes it much easier to not be focused on what is, for many of us, an intrinsically unpleasant sound which you're worried about tuning up. So being out in the world is not bad. Otherwise, I would recommend background music if your tinnitus is really driving you crazy.

This is not to say that one can't have equanimity with this sound, I think it's rational to worry that focusing on it too much could make it louder in some real sense, which is to say actually increase the activity of those misfiring neurons. There are a bunch of questions on brain health and smart and smart drugs and related matters.

There's one question here: "If you had to recommend one thing for brain health and you couldn't say mediation or exercise, what would you recommend?" And that's from Ronin Filmer in Southern California. I haven't spent much time trying to separate the hype from the real science here. The one thing that I have heard

about and take with some regularity, not every day, but occasionally is concentrated turmeric or cumin I think is what it's called. And I take that rather often and that has been shown to have some protective effect against dementia.

But again, I spend very little time reading about any of this and have assumed that most of what people take in this area – ginkgo biloba and all the rest – is either no science behind it or the science has shown no effect. When I have looked, I have often found that's the case. And then we have these recent stories, where you can't even rely on the manufacturers to put the supposedly important agent in the pills.

So you're eating sawdust or some other crap that has been put in gelatin capsules. So these recent reports of testing what's on the shelves at GNC and elsewhere have been pretty alarming. It's something like 40 percent contained none of the ingredients advertised, something on that order. So you can't even know what you're taking in many cases. So I tend not to take supplements of any kind – cumin aside.

Sometimes I take Vitamin D3. But I've been convinced by the research that has shown that for the most part, multivitamin supplementation is a bad idea. It actually seems to raise mortality from a number of causes for reasons not specified, but suggest that no one is really running low on these vitamins in their diet and taking them in excesses is toxic in some ways.

So I'm certainly open – as you think know – I'm a big booster of science and I'm waiting for science to deliver all of the things we want to bathe our brains and bodies in so as to live the best possible lives. But I'm not aware of much in that area that has obvious benefits. I think probably getting enough sleep should be on the short list of good things to do for your brain. Again, there I also fail. On one level, wisdom is nothing more than the ability to take your own advice. It's actually very easy to give people good advice; it's very hard to follow the advice you know that is good.

If someone came to me with my list of problems, I would be able to sort that person out very easily. One recommendation would be, "Be a little more disciplined about how you protect your sleep." So I will struggle to follow that. Merely having to answer these questions I have a feeling is going to impose far greater wisdom and rigor on my life.

I think I will answer these questions very differently a year from now. I'll be scheduled down to five-minute increments and doing everything I think I should do up front. Now I'm going to go deeper into these pages, trying to get some questions that have been perhaps unfairly ignored.

Your first book, "The End of Faith," featured a blistering attack on religious moderates. Now, however, you strive to encourage religious moderation in the Islamic world. Have you therefore changed your mind about religious moderation?" This is from Jeff Bak in Toronto. Well, that's a good question. I can see a basis for confusion there. Religious moderation has always been better, in some sense, than religious fundamentalism. I've never denied that. It's just that I've argued that religious moderates, because they insist that we respect religious faith and respect the claim that certain books were inspired by omniscient deities, etc.

They provide shelter for religious fundamentalism and religious extremism. They provide a context in which we can't adequately criticize really dangerous religious dogmatism. It's the religious moderates who, because they are religious in this very elastic and noncommittal way, they are the ones who deny the link between real religious commitment and certain forms of terrible misbehavior. So it's the religious moderates who say, "Oh, that's not the *real* Islam. The real Islam is a religion of peace.

Al Queda and ISIS, this not Islam, this is a perversion of the faith. They've hijacked the faith." Well, that's not actually not an honest analysis of why jihadists do what they do. Jihadists are as religious as it gets and they are motivated explicitly by the Koran and the Hadith.

And so it is among religious demagogues in other contexts. The people who are behaving badly for religious reasons in most cases really believe what they say they believe. So the moderate respect for faith and the moderate confusion about what it's like to really believe in paradise just gives cover to fundamentalism. But if I could turn all fundamentalists into moderates, of course I would do that because moderation, by definition, is a lack of commitment to the most retrograde and repellant and divisive doctrines in any faith. It's the moderate who looks at the Bible and sees all the stuff in Leviticus and Deuteronomy that is more or less synonymous with the most extreme form of theocracy and intolerance.

And he or she says, I don't want to live that way; there's no reason to live that way. I'm just not going to pay attention to any of that.

I'm not worried that God is going to send me to Hell for not believing in it. I've got many other concerns beyond what this book says that I take as foundational. So I'm just going to pick and choose the wisdom in this book and I'm not going to spend any time worrying about whether I have to kill my neighbor for working on the Sabbath or stone his daughter to death if she turns out not to be a virgin on her wedding night.

But the religious moderate tends not to honestly acknowledge that those changes in his or her world view have come from outside the faith. This is what science and secular politics and a notion of human rights, just a larger conversation about what is good in life and how we should order our world. This what all that has done to religion. It has moderated it from the outside. And that's a good thing.

So I view moderation in the Muslim world as a traditional form of religious commitment as it has been in the west. We need moderation in some sense. But what we need even more than moderation is a commitment to secularism, which is a specific commitment. So I don't argue so much for Muslim moderation, I argue that we need a genuine and viable tradition of secularism in the Muslim world. And secularism is simply a commitment to keeping religion out of politics and public policy. So you contract be as crazy as you want in the privacy of your own mind or in the privacy of your own life with respect to religion.

To be secular, however, you have to be willing to keep that craziness within the walled garden of your own life and not impose it on anyone else. And so the moment you begin saying, well, my faith tells me that homosexuals shouldn't marry.

It's not merely that you're talking about yourself. You're talking about what your neighbor should and shouldn't be able to do based on your faith. Then you're not being secular. So you can hate homosexuals all you want. You can think homosexuality is an abomination. It's the disposition to force others to live by the lights of your religious worldview that really has to be opposed and has to be opposed especially in the Muslim world at this point, because the commitment to secularism there is almost nonexistent. That's not to say that everyone is a jihadist, but a majority of Muslims are far less secular than the world needs them to be at this point. Then again, if you want more on that topic, you can read my forthcoming book with Maajid Nawaz. He was a former Islamist and now he's someone who argues with really wonderful clarity about the need for a strong secular tradition in the Muslim world.

“Would you push the fat man in the trolley scenario. Do you think a society could occupy a peak on the moral landscape if its inhabitants would all push the fat man?” Well, that’s an interesting question. This question, unfortunately, requires some explanation if you are unaware of the fat man in question. So he’s referring to a series of thought experiments called trolley problems, which have been very influential in philosophy and increasingly influential in the psychological and neuroscientific study of morality.

Because these problems are given as moral puzzles that people need to think through and how they answer these questions says a lot about them and we study people’s brains while they think through problems of this sort. Trolley problems are the most used in this research. The situation is this: you have a trolley coming down a track and it’s on course to kill five workmen who are working down track from it.

But you stand at a switch and you can throw this switch, diverting the trolley onto another track where there’s only one workman and you can’t save everybody, but you can decide to throw the switch or decide not to. And the question is, do you throw the switch? When given this problem, something like 95% of people say, “You have to throw the switch. You’d be a monster not to throw the switch.” People tend not to say that it’s noble not to get your hands dirty there.” They don’t worry that you’re going to be a murderer of that one person for throwing the switch.

No, you have saved a net four lives. And we tend to order our society with that consequentialist view working in the background. We tend to make choices where if there’s a tradeoff between saving one live or five, we tend to want to save the five, all things being equal. And that makes perfect sense, but if you describe the trolley problem in another way, the response changes.

This other way classically is you imagine a footbridge over the tracks. And now there’s a fat man standing on the bridge directly over the track and you can push this man onto the track into the path of the oncoming trolley, killing him obviously, but saving the five workmen below. Now when people imagine this, they get a very different feeling about what is entailed and something like 95% of people say no, no, you can’t push this guy to his death. They consider it a monstrous act of evil to push this person to his death, even if the intention and the effect is to save five lives.

There are various explanations for this. Certain kinds of reasoning and intuition come online here. You actually imagine touching a person up close and personal as opposed to throwing a switch. And that seems to change things. The question is, what is morally normative here?

Should you want to be able to push the fat man without caring or with as clear a conscience as you would throw that switch? I happen to think there are certain artifacts here where people, if only unconsciously worry that the mechanism isn't the same here, so that there's maybe uncertainty about the physics and whether a fat man is, in fact, fat enough to stop a trolley. Even if you stipulate that oh, no, he will stop the trolley, our unintuitive physics don't track through it in the same way when we imagine diverting it onto another path. But even if you overcome that, I think there probably just is a difference between the idea of touching a person and physically initiating his death in that way and throwing a switch and initiating death at some distance. This, obviously opens to other problems we have to think about – the way we fight wars remotely with drones now is that making it much easier to kill people?

Or even dropping bombs from airplanes, I think the jury is probably not out on that any longer. It must be easier to kill people – it is, in fact, easier to kill people by dropping bombs than it is by stabbing them over and over again with a bayonet, but it's also morally easier to do it. You're less in touch with the details of the death and destruction you're causing. This is a very interesting area to think about, but the question is, the right answer is really the consequentialist one. We should be committed to saving the most number of lives, all things considered in each situation, so we should push the fat man if we would throw that switch.

And we should throw that switch. So that's the spirit of the question. Would you push the fat man in the trolley scenario and do you think a society could occupy a peak on the moral landscape? Which is to say, could a society be as good as it could possibly be if its inhabitants would all push the fat man? Which is to say, if its inhabitants were all able to overcome the emotional bias against causing this kind of death up close and personal? And that's a hard question to answer. The truth is, it may be good to feel differently about the two cases. I think those situations where you want to be callous for good reasons don't extend to all of life.

I'm not a surgeon, and I'm happy I'm not one, given my squeamishness in that area. But I can imagine that a surgeon has to

have a very different attitude toward pain and suffering and the prospect that the person on the table in front of him might die, then the attitude of family members or that even he would have to another person in the context of not performing his work as a surgeon.

A surgeon has to be a little bit of a psychopath in terms of having just a cold and calculating and purely instrumental view of the person in front of him. That's not to say that surgeons aren't committed to the wellbeing of their patients; they obviously are. But there's something that has to come offline and that something is too much empathy. I think that's incredibly useful for a surgeon to be able to do that, table the empathy and just get the job done as effectively as possible, but I don't think you want a surgeon's level of clarity and lack of empathy all the time in your relations to people.

So the situation isn't bounded in any principal way. We're often going to be in a situation where the difference between pushing the fat man and throwing the switch is the difference between the contexts we're in, in the world and to and to normalize all of them to the same ethical standard would, I think, create a fair amount of harm or at least close the door to kinds of experiences that we want to have.

So it goes to the question of the role of empathy in our relationships and in our life and where it needs to be reined in, in the governance of public institutions and society and in areas where we have to write laws and enforce them. It's a difficult question. I don't know that I can generalize apart from saying that we should be consequentialist across the board, but part of the consequences of actions of this sort is that there may, in fact, be a difference between pushing the fat man and throwing the switch in many circumstances, and that's not a difference we can get rid of.

So it just may cause more psychological suffering for the person involved. Even if you push the fat man for the best of reasons, knowing that it work, in that sense it's exactly like throwing a switch. The fact that you had the experience of running up to the guy and shoving him and seeing the look on his face, etc. and you didn't just have the experience of throwing a switch, that may haunt you for the rest of your life and there may be no way to correct for that. So it is, in fact, a different phenomenon, even though the body count at the end is the same.

I think there may be no way to correct for that and maybe there should be no way to correct for that, given all the other moving parts. So, therefore, your consequentialism has to be broader than just looking at body count. It has to account for the psychological consequences and the lack of analogy between cases which do have the same body count. So hopefully some of that made sense. Anytime, Tim, I think I will leave it there.

It's been a pleasure to be on your podcast yet again. I am your worst student, but thanks again for everything you're doing. I love your podcast. I listen to it a lot and it is an honor to be on it and until I next see you, be well.