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Conspiracy Theory and Autodidact Brain (with Susannah Roberts and Derek Rishmawy)

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Alastair Roberts

The journalist and writer Naomi Wolf recently posted on Twitter about her reading of a New Testament interlinear:

<https://twitter.com/naomirwolf/status/1780385997416497153>. Susannah thought it provided a good occasion for a discussion of conspiracy theories and 'autodidact brain' and invited Derek Rishmawy to have a conversation with us.

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Transcript

Okay, so I'm going to do a little bit of a reading to kick us off. And this is a reading from Twitter. And I will sort of bring us to a pointed question after this reading, but I think the reading is important.

This is Naomi Wolf's Twitter from yesterday at 8.01 PM. Um, hi, all. So Naomi Wolf, sort of feminist scholar, recent, sort of, look, she, I think we'll probably just have to get into who she is in the course of the episode.

But yeah, historian, scholar, noted sort of feminist from the 90s. Hi, all. So I skipped ahead to the New Testament with a Koine Greek-English side-by-side literal translation.

And what am I to do? So much of the New Testament has been mistranslated, or shall I say creatively translated, in addition to the Old Testament having often been mistranslated. Is it offensive if I analyze this fact when we get to the New Testament? The creative translations or outright mistranslations of the New Testament often write out what was familiar language of a radical or Jewish teacher slash redeemer of Israel, and heighten or present other language that introduces or showcases the idea of the establishment of a new Hellenistic-oriented religion. As in later translations of the Old Testament, there's often distance introduced in later translations of the New Testament between, quote, the sons of God, that is humans, and God that is not there in the original.

I think this set of insights is important, but I do fear offending people. Two. In the original, there is also less distance between humans and Jesus than there is in later translations.

For instance, the same term, son of God, sons of God, is used for Jesus and for, well, people. Three. At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was not approached by his, quote-unquote, disciples.

He was approached by, quote-unquote, learners. Four. Also, in the original Koine the kingdom of heavens is here or nearing now.

People who are good or peacemakers participate in it now. It's not blessed are thee, but happy are thee. That is to say, now.

Five. I think it's odd that I've been doing a long video series on the Geneva Bible showing changes from the Hebrew Old Testament to the various later English translations, and no one objects. Indeed, it's warmly received, but some have the idea that translations can alter meanings as drawing fire in Read the New Testament.

This is in reference to people quoting the earlier tweets on that thread. If translations did not alter meanings, there would not be a perceived need for the Wycliffe, Geneva, KJV, RSV, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. How is this idea even controversial? I was so happy when I read this.

I was like, we don't deserve to live in this moment. This is such a gift. You picture her with a GMO-free, extremely high-caffeine energy drink, sitting down and opening biblehub.com backslash interlinear and being like, let's get to the bottom of this.

I am so happy for all of us. Obviously, it's extremely funny. On the one hand, I think it's beautiful that she's agnostic Jewish in background.

It's wonderful that she's getting into reading God's word. This is an incredibly beautiful thing. On the other hand, I do think that her approach highlights an issue which has plagued her for her entire career, but plagues many in our world, which is to say that she

has autodidact brain.

Autodidact brain is a real problem. It's a social problem. It's like syphilis, different, but similar.

The thing is, though, she got her doctorate from Oxford. She went to Yale. She has no excuse for having autodidact brain.

Her father was Leonard Wolf. Yet, she somehow received autodidact brain, and that has colored her entire career. I was thinking through earlier how- If you are afflicted by autodidact brain, please consider calling your doctor.

Susannah, please, now that we've kind of said, just briefly explain for me. I think I grasp what autodidact brain is, but please give me a concise definition. Autodidact brain is what happens when you have not been- You've not sort of- It can happen to- There can be generalized autodidact brain and specific autodidact brain.

It happens when you are getting into a topic or subject that you don't have formal academic training in. It can particularly happen if you don't have formal academic training in anything, especially in any humanities subject, and you're getting into humanities subject for the first time. It can be wonderful.

Being an autodidact is a wonderful thing. Not all autodidacts have autodidact brain. Most sort of amateurs of everything are- Most of the best sort of literary scholars and thinkers and historians have been, in some sense, amateurs, especially before the past couple of hundred years.

However, she- There is this kind of phenomenon of essentially a conspiratorial approach to the genre that you're- or the question that you're getting into, and there's a kind of sense of- Because you are discovering the beginnings of the complexity of an issue and realizing that it has- There's more to it than perhaps the Wikipedia or sub-Wikipedia understanding that you've had. You feel as though these things have been hidden from you and from the world. Why has nobody talked about this? Why has nobody talked about this? You see this usually people who were raised Christian didn't really stick with it and now are sort of trying to learn more about Christianity, and they're like, oh, wow, my understanding of this as I had it at age seven is not- It's more complicated.

There's a lot more here. This was kept from me. And it's like, no, you were seven.

And there's a certain similarity between Naomi Wolf's approach and those then people who sort of fall into that temptation. But the problem here is that she is a full-on adult semi-academic. She's a trained academic.

She's not been working as an academic. She's been working as a kind of popular polemicist and historian since the 90s. But she should know better.

And it's kind of fascinating to me that she doesn't. And looking back on the previous sort of arc of her career, starting from *The Beauty Myth*, which was the first book that I'd known her for, which was really big in the 90s and 2000s, I kind of started to realize that there are aspects of this kind of autodidact brain conspiracy theorizing that have plagued her and actually plagued, I guess, the culture around the questions that she has addressed, which has included feminism, the patriarchy, fascism in America. Those are kind of the two big ones.

For as long as I can remember. And I don't just want to dunk on her, although there were some really, really funny responses to this. I think the point that you made about some degree of continuity between the way that she thought about more respectable issues back in the 90s and early 2000s and some of her more recent stuff that's a lot more crankish and conspiratorial, and obviously within the structures of the discourse, that I think is an important point.

Because for instance, you mentioned fascism in America. If you read most of the commentary upon right-wing thought within Christian circles, and you know anything about those circles, you see this is produced by cranks. They don't really know what they're talking about.

They've picked up some details, and they've gone wild with them. Now, there are definitely problems with right-wing thought within Christian circles. It's not as if it's not there.

But when you actually look at much of what is written, it has a conspiratorial flavor. It's this big picture account where everyone's invested somehow in some great movement that you realize is there, but it's a very small thing. Most people have never heard of it.

Most people, to the extent that they have heard about it, disagree with it or see it as fringe and weird. It's only something that would appeal to someone who doesn't really know the situation on the ground well, someone who's approaching the issue from a very ideological perspective or conspiratorial vantage point. What you can recognize in contexts, for instance, in a discussion of Koine Greek and the reading of the New Testament, or in discussions of vaccines, or whatever it is, some area where conspiratorial thinking is very much recognized and highlighted, you can then start to see the commonalities with these more respectable forms of thought that have the same patterns, but they're just not called out as such.

So the issue that I'm wrestling with is, I don't have any really experience with reading about the history of fascism or feminism in Naomi Wolf's work. Actually, I only know her from Twitter, and there's been some classics. But it's just that the question I think you raised before the show was the prerogative of doing your own research and being well-informed.

So there's a lot of interesting things where that phrase now is often identified with people who are doing right-wing-ish, hey, do your own research, and this is why I opted out of X, Y, and Z. But it's structurally parallel to a lot of left-wing progressive stuff that gets a pass. I saw a study cited where conservatives are obviously authoritarian in their personality ties because they were unloved by their mothers or some stuff. Some crowd like that got picked up by the Washington Post.

I don't think it's actually just a right-wing, left-wing thing. No, it's certainly not. It's structurally baked into a lot of the way we think about, hey, I'm learning about this new thing.

I have not been told about this before. They're putting their—and oftentimes, you're putting your finger on something real. So it's interesting.

Wolfe's interlinear approach towards the Bible in New Testament reading, the funny thing about that—everybody was kind of joking online, like, this is first-year seminarian, took Greek for a few weeks energy. Like, oh, my goodness, when you first read this, wow. And the joke about the happy is, you know, she's putting—there are whole monographs on the translation of that Greek term makarios, blessed, happy.

Like, that's actually a legit one of the scholarly—but what's funny is it's the, wow, why is nobody saying this to it? Because I'm curious how you guys—because I've had experiences where I, for myself, in the medical field, I've had really bad health experiences, long history of health stuff. And, you know, the two and a half years of my worst health decline were when I was only going to guys with—guys or girls with MD, right behind their name, who were giving me very clear, consistent, board-approved methodologies and all that kind of stuff. And then I started to feel better when I, you know, when I finally went to some guy who, you know, chiropractor license, all that kind of stuff, but had me take a whole bunch of supplements and, you know, lifted my arm in a weird way.

And it was like, what is happening here? And then two weeks later, like, well, I'm sleeping and I don't feel like trash all the time. And this is nothing that my MD talked to me about, right? You know, 10 years ago, you have an issue with your gut and they're like, well, you're probably just going to have to take medicines and here's more antacid and, yeah, just keep taking the Advil. It'll feel great on your joints.

And then 10 years later, all of a sudden, we know about the gut microbiome and, oh, gosh, that Advil was frying your gut lining and all the antibiotics we gave you actually, you know, I still take them, but whatever. That whole thing, people—it's not that there's no hook in reality, right? And so there's— this is me, I guess, sticking up for Dr. Wolfe and the people who do their own research a bit because there's times where official trusted authorities are not always even up to date on their own—on the literature in their own field. And so that's where, you know, just the appeal to the degree, you have it and

that's cool, but that doesn't actually shut down discussion and that doesn't actually—shouldn't actually stop somebody from being an autodidact.

So I guess, like, what's the good process on, like, proper autodidacticism and proper kind of not merely handing over? Yes, I think that way that you express the problem, Derek, is very helpful. There are clearly ways that experts, people who have degrees and letters after their name can let us down. The challenge is, I think, to move from that understanding that we can't just run by credentialism to avoid that on one hand, but also avoiding, on the other hand, this idea that we are just to distrust expertise and go straight into our own research without recognizing that the experts have given a lot of thought to these subjects.

They may have mistaken opinions, but they have those mistaken opinions generally for reasons and those reasons are worth engaging with, even if we find ourselves disagreeing sharply. And this can be the case even for the people with whom we disagree most sharply. And in these sorts of cases, it's at the very least important to understand the limitations of our knowledge, the limitations of our knowledge of other people's knowledge and beliefs and where they're coming to their positions from.

We may be able to see some limitations, but we may not be able to understand what are the persuasive factors for them, what are parts of the picture that they're seeing that we're missing. And I've seen a lot of this within the field of theology, because a lot of people who are thinking about theology on a regular basis are not experts. And they're thinking about it as people in the pews of their churches who should be thinking about theology.

And the sort of credentialism that would say that they have no warrant to be thinking about theology because they've not had however many years of seminary education or education in some theology department, that seems to me completely unwarranted. Christians of all kinds, of all ages and of all academic and other backgrounds should be thinking about theology. But part of the challenge is moving beyond this idea that you either completely trust or distrust the experts, you need to be doing these things on your own, doing your own research.

That does not work. And you can see again and again, that leads people to very weird and unbalanced places. Likewise, when people distrust the experts, often they're not distrusting the experts altogether, they end up with unfounded faith in a few controversial people outside of the field, people who often crankish because they're dismissing everyone else, rather than actually engaging with other people and their arguments.

I think that's one of the key things that if we're going to be doing good research, we will be engaging with people who disagree with us in a way that recognizes the force of their arguments. We want to realize why they come to the positions that they've come to,

even if we find ourselves disagreeing. We want to understand how someone who has thought deeply about this subject might have arrived at these conclusions.

And we'll also want to present our positions in a way that is grounded in very intense and deep thought. Now, this is something that we do not do by ourselves. And the autodidact is not someone who needs to think about these things by themselves.

To think about something for yourself does not mean that you need to think about it by yourself, as if there's no one else that you can learn from and with. And so, ideally, what you want are a multitude of counselors that you're reading people from various perspectives, engaging with their thoughts and not just jumping into one camp or another, and trying to understand the strength of the arguments on different sides. And what that generally leads to is an autodidact who has thought about these things for themselves, but not by themselves, who respects expertise, who recognizes that the experts have actually given a lot of thought to these subjects, even when they're wrong, even when they're profoundly wrong.

And they are able to communicate some sort of respect for expertise. When you read someone like Naomi Wolf in her treatment, you can see that this is someone who, because of her trying to think about these things by herself, and her lack of regard for experts, even though, of course, she's using an interlinear, depending upon the expertise of many people behind the scenes. And when that respect for expertise is lost, what you have is Dunning-Kruger syndrome, this not knowing what you don't know, and having an incredible confidence that is misplaced, because you're the person that's coming into this, seeing some limitations in popular presentations, and you're not able to realize just that the experts have been thinking about these things for quite some time, there are lots of debates going on.

You may disagree with some of them, for good reason, but it's worth engaging with them and respecting what they've done. Yeah, I do think the key thing is to avoid the bad kind of autodidacticism. Understand that you're joining a conversation that's been going on for a long time.

It is not you barging into the conversation and picking up the materials and trying to figure it out. You should listen for a little bit to see what's been going on in the conversation. You should offer cautious remarks initially.

You should get to know the people, and the references, and the in-jokes, and the basic assumptions. That's how you learn. You learn by, yes, dealing with primary sources, or if you're in the sciences, yes, dealing with experimentation, but primarily also, by, or largely also, by entering into the conversation well.

The reason that Naomi Wolf's tweets were so funny is that this is one of the longest and most well-populated conversations that has ever happened. She's jumping into it as

though she's not aware of that. There's also just this conspiratorial bent, which is a slightly different thing than the autodidacticism brain, which is it's not just that I'm picking this up.

I'm not going to regard the conversation that's been going on before me. It's that if I understand something, she's clearly running into Jesus in some sense in her reading of the New Testament, interlinear using, I think, the Geneva Bible and whatever, Strong's. She's running into Jesus, and she's running into the idea of a God who is present and who loves her in a way that she has not before done.

She hasn't encountered this text before, but because she has, as well as autodidact brain, conspiracy brain, she thinks that because she hasn't encountered this before, it has been kept from her by experts. That's what makes it unsurprising that if you scroll through the rest of her feed, it's a lot of stuff about chemtrails. Another area in which I have not done much research, that element of if I haven't thought the thought before, if I haven't heard somebody mention this before, it's been kept from me and nobody must have noticed it either.

That is, I think, an interesting feature that goes broadly. I've encountered a new argument that has upended prior ways of thinking that I've had. It's an argument, you know, this happens in theology and biblical studies.

I've talked to some students who they'll hear an argument about the Bible that, you know, again, first, second year seminarian pastor, we know about it. Like you've heard about it, you whatever, and there's arguments around it, and it's a fairly settled, but you encounter it for the first time and you think, why was this never told to me? Are you scared of it? Are you hiding it from me? I'm not saying I don't have students do this regularly, but this happens, this thought. The thing that's interesting is that I think that it's not that people just generate this, it's that people are taught to think that way.

I mean, there's actually a whole strain in scholarship that that's part of how you sell certain kinds of books. Part of how you sell your thesis is I've rediscovered this thing that's been suppressed. I have, you know, nobody's read the things in light of the first century before that sort of, you know, we've got the parallel texts now that, you know, it turns out that the sons of God thing is the funniest thing.

And certainly when we think about the narratives of suspicion that are so dominant within many fields of scholarship, those narratives of suspicion just teach you to see through things, to distrust established lines. Now those have become the established lines in many circles, but they are fundamentally conspiratorial. Well, the fascinating thing here, there's so many, like once you start to see this, you're just like, oh wait, this is kind of everywhere.

So I, you know, I'm not going to like, I just finished listening to the rest of this history of

podcasts on series on Luther. And there is a certain, the thing is like, it's not really there in Luther exactly, but it is there in popular readings of Luther. And certainly, so I found Ben Crosby quote tweeted Naomi's original tweet with, you know, so hi, hi all.

So I skipped ahead to the New Testament, the Koine Greek English side by side, literal translation. And he quote tweeted that and said, John Nelson Darby, mid 1800s. Like this is a very Protestant approach and it's a very, not, you know, not necessarily Lutheran approach, but it is, um, you know, it is a kind of like low church product.

Like this is where you get dispensationalism from. And it's very weird to realize that like, actually that's. Although we should talk to Crawford Gribbon on Nelson Darby and dispensationalism.

He has some very important and new historical research on the question, but. But you do, you do realize that it's actually the same attitude as the hermeneutic of suspicion. That is the kind of like key sort of Foucauldian literary approach to a lot of texts now where there are powerful people who are, who are twisting reality to suit their class interests or their, or their, you know, whatever their special interests.

There might not even be a reality to twist. It might all be, you know, a question of, you know, of, of will and, and, and power. Um, but that, that whole hermeneutic of suspicion approach is a fundamentally conspiratorial one.

And it's really weird looking back on Naomi Wolf's original, um, sort of topics and the, the one that I ran into, you know, with her first was feminism. And the, I remember learning about this, like, so, you know, back in the day, um, there was this kind of belief that was like widely circulated that everyone kind of, everyone who was bien pensant believed that like 150,000 adolescent girls per year were dying of anorexia. And that belief was, uh, you know, invented essentially, or like popularized by Naomi Wolf in the beauty myth.

And it turns out that the real number is something like 50 or 60. Um, not, you know, and I can remember like learning, wait, this like totally commonly circulated statistic, which if you think about it for five minutes is obviously wrong, because that would mean like the entire, you know, like every girl in every, like, or half the girls in like every, um, class at Groton would be dying, like, would be like dropping like flies every semester. And that didn't, you know, that's not real.

Um, but she was very into this. And then you start to realize, okay, if you actually look at the structure and conspiratorial flavor of these ideas, you realize that patriarchy is a conspiracy theory. Like, at least the way that it's discussed in, or at least the way that it was discussed in like the two, the nineties and two thousands, it's very much a, you know, this was hidden in plain sight, um, like reinterpretation of your own experience, uh, according to a sort of hermeneutic of suspicion and a sense of like, there being

people who are trying to keep something from you.

It's, and that, that really blew my mind. Um, and then every, every structure, every society, every society everywhere. Yeah.

Yeah. Every society everywhere for thousands and thousands and thousands of years came up with a completely arbitrary structure to society that has no absolute, absolutely no basis in biological capacities to oppress women and to gaslight them into like agreeing to this, you know, this thing, which is fundamentally like an arbitrary, um, you know, uh, class-based power grab where men are they like oppressor class. And you're just like, Oh wait, I think that kind of sounds very familiar.

And I mean, then she obviously the, the second sort of batch of things that she was really into was, um, American fascism. And I can remember like her, her making all the, its arguments post 911 about how, you know, um, we're America's in its Weimar era and, you know, we're about to undergo a fascist takeover by George H.W. Bush. And in retrospect, that sounds so goofy, but at the time people were a hundred percent behind this.

Like my dad, my personal father had this little sort of moment where he's, he thought that 911 was the Reichstag fire. And like, that was what people on the Upper West Side thought for a while. And Naomi Wolf wrote a book about it.

And it's just, it's this kind of ongoing conspiracy mindset, um, or conspiracy approach to, you know, what, whatever's going through her head that, that is like, that is the consistent thread. She's gone, she's gone politically sort of from left to right. If she's on the right now, it's kind of not really clear.

She's attached, she's like approached many different topics, but it's the conspiracy mindset and the total lack of sort of precision or regard for accuracy that has been like the real, um, persistent thread here. And it's really like, okay, I think, I think there's a warning here. Like, don't be like that.

And, you know, God bless her. I hope she continues to read the Bible. Um, but I hope she reads some other people who read the Bible also.

She probably mentioned she's just been on Tucker. Oh, has she? She was. I mean, she was on Alex Jones.

She's been on Alex Jones. Wow. Yeah.

Um, I think that point is really key that this is a sort of thinking that is continuous across Naomi Wolf's history of thought. And it's something that in that respect can join together a way of thinking on the left and on the right, a way of thinking that is respectable, the sort of mainline feminist thought or the mainline progressive thought about right-wing

politics. And also something can be very much on the right in unrespected forms of discourse.

I mean, Naomi Wolf has just appeared on Tucker Carlson. She's been on Alex Jones. She's been very much within this right-wing space for a while, particularly after COVID.

And so it seems to me that what we're dealing with here is helpfully in the case of Naomi Wolf highlighted as not just a partisan reality. This is a broader way of thinking as a way of thinking that is not merely playing out within political discourse. It's something as we've noted in the case of this particular issue that can play out in the reading of scripture too.

And so when we're having these sorts of conversations, it's very easy as we're speaking to areas that are not necessarily our area of expertise. We may have some sort of academic background. All of us here have an academic background, but this is something that maybe can be a danger for academics who feel that since we have some sort of academic credentials that we are justified in speaking with authority to areas where we do not have any sort of background.

But yet at the same time, there is an academic way of approaching things. And I think that's one of the things that you mentioned earlier on, Susanna, about the surprise that Naomi Wolf has had academic training. And although she may not be speaking into areas of her expertise when she's writing about the Bible, there are certain academic instincts, there are academic norms that shape people's way of writing and thinking about issues that are new to them.

And to do so in a way that is responsible is possible. And so it will be interesting as we bring things towards a conclusion to talk about some of those instincts and practices and habits that enable you to talk about something that is new to you in a way that is responsible and academic, even if you're not a credentialed academic, but an autodidact. Well, so one of the things that what you highlighted there was important was that air of a lot of academics will say like, I've got a PhD in X, therefore, I am an expert, which means that I'm very smart, which means I can know a lot about almost anything.

There's just illegitimate authority transfer from one discipline to another. Or like, hey, rich guys do this. Rich people do this all the time.

Like, hey, I'm really good at making money. Therefore, I can, I don't know, help you run your church or I can do... Wealth does that, academic expertise does that. Different kinds of expertise can confer unwarranted confidence in other areas.

I think what it should do, if you do have some academic training, it should... Your first instinct when you're starting to look in a new area is like, hey, let me go find a good literature review. Or like, let me... A really well-qualified explainer that explains kind of

the breadth of the field and the ranges of opinions in that area. Like, assume that you're walking into an area where there are disputes and there are contested ideas.

If you've been in academia long enough, you know that while there may be a dominant consensus opinion for reasons, like you got to get to know why, why that's there beyond I don't know, big AAR or big SBL has determined that's the... Maybe, but also you should know what's the big dominant, what are the arguments, and then also what are... What's the main major minority views? Because there's almost always minority views within at least something like the humanities, right? That kind of thing. And so just like acquainting yourself with the disputes before you start taking a major side and opining and teaching, because that's the thing. That's the other thing.

There's teaching, there's trying to influence the conversation publicly when you have no understanding of it. And then there's just, hey, I want to learn a little bit, right? There's a... I think that even that's a vast difference between saying like, hey, I'm noticing something really cool for the first time. And like, I wonder if somebody's written on this.

Like, this looks like this word should be happy. I wonder if somebody talked about this in the 2,000 years of people reading the New Testament, if there's reasons that the translators had for translating it that way, other than just incompetence. So I wonder, and maybe you'll be happy to find that actually you notice something that a lot of people have noticed and you're right, but you're not the first person who's right.

In the humanities, that kind of slowing down just makes a lot more sense. I think the sciences is probably a little different just because the hard sciences and chemistry, biology, all those sorts of things, there's some things that are unchanged, but there's some things that research does develop, right? Medicine and the science underlying medicine, that is actually always constantly in development. There are new... A doctor who's an expert in a field who's extremely competent and you should listen to generally might still be unaware of a new study that is Google-able, right? Because it's not replicated.

So there's non-nefarious gaps, even when you're looking at expert knowledge. But in the humanities, that kind of slowing down, assuming if I'm dealing with something that's been looked at forever, it's almost entirely unlikely that I'm the first person having the thought that I'm currently having reading this text, right? Somebody somewhere has had this reading. So that's one thing.

And also just asking lots of questions before you come out with strong statements and just finding out why people believe what they believe. What are some of the positions out there? What is the literature and what issues have been discussed? What issues have not really been discussed much? What issues are the main issues on the table at the moment, the framing questions for the discipline and what issues have really passed in that respect? And then beyond that, facing a lot of questions from other people who

maybe recognize some of the blind spots in your angle of approach. And when you blunder into a conversation with such confidence, that is usually a sign that you've not either faced those sorts of questions or engaged in that sort of questioning.

And that, in my experience, is the best way to start, to ask genuine questions and to face genuine questions. I think that there's a real distinction to be drawn here between autodidact brain and amateur brain. And I think amateur brain is a beautiful thing.

And I think, and I'll go into what I mean by that in a second, but I think the other sort of thing to think about here is that there is a kind of like, we're talking about a humanistic approach or a kind of like renaissance humanist approach to these questions where, you know, for obviously for certain aspects of, for example, Christian doctrine or biblical interpretation, there is, you know, in different traditions, a magisterial authority, which you should, which must be consulted. Like we are, you know, we say the creeds, we're not going to like reopen the can of worms necessarily of Trinitarian theology. Although obviously, you know, you can think about this and work through the ways that it has been worked through before.

But within, so there is a kind of like authoritative, there is an authority to the church and to the tradition, but obviously, especially within Protestantism, but also within sort of, for example, Erasmus's approach to Christian humanism, which was a Catholic approach. There is this kind of like, it's a humanist approach to literary and philosophical and theological questions, which has to do with joining in a very long conversation. And, you know, that's what Luther was trying to do with the church fathers.

That's what, you know, and what a lot of the Catholic reformers were also trying to do with the church fathers. But this kind of like approach of joining in a conversation, like not thinking that it's just you and the text as those, as though the text is like this objective scientific datum outside of you, which you can interpret and you must interpret by yourself, but recognizing both the primary source, the primary text, you know, the Bible or the fathers or whatever, and then secondary texts as in commentaries and people's theological sort of musings and all the sort of ways that interpretation has gone forward over the past couple of thousand years. Like this is a conversational thing and that is amateur brain.

And it's not autodidact brain because it's not about you alone with the text as though it were a scientific object that you personally have to uncover through a kind of capitalistic, you know, parsing. That, that element, I was just thinking about, you know, the lone wizard in his study, like piercing the veil of reality that everybody else. Don't be that.

Don't be that guy. But that, but that is basic, basic humility with respect to others. I think in terms of just knowing that, Hey, I've, I've, I've come on the scene late, uh, just in, in human history.

Um, and I, I'm not discovering everything for the first time, right. Uh, that, I mean, it sounds so dumb to boil this down to, um, be humble. And like the suspicion thing is the thing that might be interesting.

It might be more difficult to manage because, and I know we got to close in a minute here, but I'm curious if somebody has a closing thought on this, because at the same time, you know, the whole critical instinct, the whole critical impulse, if you have a sufficiently robust doctrine of sin, um, like we do think, you know, like the Bible gives us impulses towards thinking that there is, you know, uh, there are sinful, um, schemes, uh, that the enemy has worked up lies that, uh, have the whole world in darkness and that sort of thing. Like, like Christianity itself gives that Protestant impulse to like, go back to the truth of God is the one truth that unveils all truth and all lies and all that sort of thing. And so I guess managing both of those things at the same time is that humility as well as critical awareness of the, that pure deference in a world with sin is actually unwise that's sifting.

And so that's, I guess that's what I'm, I, there's a fine line between looking at, you know, Satan schemes and then thinking that, you know, you're the first person on the scene who's ever read the Bible. So yeah, that, that's, that's part of the tension that we're kind of wrestling with. And you really need to do that sifting to recognize that these ideas that are out there are not produced by, um, pure moral creatures, creatures without, um, sinful instincts, creatures without moral blindness, creatures without ulterior motives and the ability to use and twist truth or create error in order to get their way or to secure some sort of advancement or, um, some status for themselves.

But besides that, there's also a sense that these narratives of suspicion that can drive a certain type of autodidact brain are driven by fear and distrust of other persons. And I think you see this in certain areas, for instance, of Christian thought in apologetics or in those sorts of areas where people feel themselves engaging with opponents, with those who do not have their best interests, with people they do not want to give any quarter to. If there's any recognition of the validity of the sciences, um, that are criticizing Christianity, any validity to the expertise of people who are raising tough questions, it feels that the person who's in the apologetic position is granting a very dangerous warrant to something that can threaten them and can threaten their faith and can threaten their community in the church.

And so that sense of fear and anxiety, I think, is often behind these narratives of suspicion. And the ability to do something beyond purely trust people and radically distrust them, I think, is one of the challenges that we face. Are we able to take alternative perspectives and view them with something less than complete trust and something more than complete distrust to regulate the ways that we place trust upon them, where we place trust on upon them, how we understand their positions, recognizing there are ways in which these people will be presenting self-interested

positions, but people are seldom acting in a purely cynical and self-interested fashion.

People do care about truth on some level. They will generally try and avoid certain subjects rather than just directly lie about them. And once you have a bit more of a sense of that area in between and how you can distribute trust, you're able to engage with experts who disagree with you.

You're able to engage with authorities who may not have your best interests at heart and still be able to do something more than engage in radical suspicion or complete credulity. And that, I think, is one of the struggles that someone like Naomi Wolfe has, where this inability to engage well with research that is presented by people you do not believe have your best interests. Once that context of personal trust and relationship has broken down, then the conspiratorial thinking, I think, really kicks in.

And so the alternative is to have well-regulated trust and a measure of realism, distrust, suspicion that is not absolute. And that, I think, enables us to engage in things where we're thinking for ourselves, but not just by ourselves. We're engaging with critics and people who disagree with us.

And we're engaging with our eyes open. We're not naive. We recognize that they have interests.

We recognize that they have prejudices. We recognize that they have blind spots. But we also appreciate we have the same things and that they will be able to observe aspects of reality that we miss.

They are not purely self-interested. They will generally have, even in their self-interest, perspectives that countervail some of the things that we're seeing. And we need to engage with those in good faith.

And once we do that, I think we'll escape the worst of autodidact brain without ruling out the possibility that as amateurs, we may enter into an area where people who are experts dominate and yet still be able to find truth and be able to disagree with the experts without being disrespectful to their expertise and the work that they put in. Thank you very much for listening. At some point, we may come back with a conversation between the three of us on, I don't know, Dune 2 or something like that.

Dune! Dune 2! Oh, we gotta do it. We have to do that! Okay, yeah. But for now, thank you for listening and hopefully see you all again soon.

God bless.