

**Robert Wright and Joel Achenbach: Our Very Especial Thanksgiving Edition**

RW: Hi, Joel!

JA: Bob!

RW: How ya doin'?

JA: Never better.

RW: Really?

JA: Mmm, I guess I should think about it.

RW: But is that related to the fact that you're talking to me, the fact that you're doing relatively well?

JA: I'm trying to be cheerful, okay, and kind of upbeat, even though I'm annoyed with the technology. And let me ask you a question.

RW: Sure.

JA: This may be kind of an awkward moment to bring this up.

RW: I'm ready. I'm ready. Go ahead.

JA: How much are you paying me to do this?

RW: Uh, just a second, let me get out my pocket calculator, Joel. One moment--

JA: Yeah.

RW: Ummmm, that would be zero. That would be zero, Joel. Why do you ask?

JA: What a brilliant business model you have!

RW: (laughing) Thank you, thank you.

JA: You know, we spend a lot of time here at--do the people know who I am? I'm a newspaper reporter--we spend a lot of time thinking about business models.

RW: No, wait, you're more than that, let's give you a proper introduction. You're Joel gosh-darn Achenbach!

JA: Gosh darn it!

RW: And you write the Achenbach blog--the Achenblog--which is so famous that, did you know that if you go to the headquarters of Washington Post/Newsweek/Internet, whatever those letters stand for, in suburban Virginia, there's like a whole mural or something on the wall--

JA: A shrine?

RW: and you are one of the landmarks, because you were the first blog--

JA: A shrine.

RW: Did you know that?

JA: You made that up.

RW: No, I've got a picture, I took a picture with my, like, uh

JA: It's not true.

RW: ...cellphone

JA: It's not true.

RW: We will link to it if I can find it.

JA: Let me just say this: so we talk a lot about business models, and I realize this is not what we're talking about today--

RW: Not my favorite subject, no--

JA: ...but right now, I'm actually sitting in a radio studio here, at the Washington Post.

RW: Uh-huh.

JA: We're in the studio, with this nice gentleman here who is helping with the technology. And we've got all these dials, we've got these incredible dials--can we pan to see this? I mean, it's incredible.

RW: The technology is amazing.

JA: So we have all these dials: guest mic, guest mic two, three, these buttons, whatever...but it's not attached to anything, because the radio studio has gone belly-up. Okay? I'm in a defunct radio studio. Because this is an operation that just didn't quite work. And anyway, so we spend a lot of time thinking about business models, and I just want to say, I am thankful...I am thankful--

RW: You know this is our Thanksgiving edition so I'm glad you used that word. Now, go ahead.

JA: It came out of, just, thin air. I'm thankful that I came of age, to a certain degree, I guess--

RW: Did you come of age?

JA: No, I mean, not totally--around about 1982, when I graduated from your alma mater, and suddenly I was able to get a job as a newspaper reporter at a time when anyone who wanted to sell a bicycle thought, "Oh, I'll place a classified ad in a thing called a newspaper." Right?

RW: Right.

JA: And there was so much money coming in from these, from, you know, bicycles for sale, and for, you know, Montgomery Ward was going to have a sale, so they'd put a big display ad--all this money came in. They basically could afford to hire people like me to go basically do whatever we wanted to do.

RW: Joel, I fear that you are steering the conversation toward things that we are really not very thankful for about the contemporary world, and it is Thanksgiving, but go ahead--

JA: No, I am thankful that for twenty-five something years this business model has sustained me and allowed me to raise three or four, five kids, whatever--

RW: Are you thankful that the model is dying so fast that not all of them will finish college?

JA: See, that's a whole separate issue, the issue of regret. See, I think in addition to having Thanksgiving, we ought to have a day set aside for regrets.

RW: Regretgiving.

JA: And grievances.

RW: Grievegiving.

JA: You know, I mean, maybe the day after Thanksgiving--stuff that we're just really ticked off about--

RW: I can play that game.

JA: And, you know, books that we wrote that didn't sell as well as they should have--

RW: I didn't have any of those, Joel.

JA: Ha!

RW: You know, whatever I can do to ease your pain, I'm happy to do.

JA: Sorry, I, I almost guffawed, and I try not to do that when we talk, but, no, seriously, I like the idea of the Jewish thing, the day of atonement. I think there should be days set aside for different emotions, but Thanksgiving strikes me as a good idea, but just scratching the surface of how we really feel about things.

RW: And what you're thankful for is that the great bulk of your career, I mean, given your age, the great bulk of your career is in the past of course, and the great bulk of it was passed during a time when you could make a living as a journalist.

JA: The business model worked.

RW: Um-hm, I remember that.

JA: Because the paper was something people wanted to have around. Now they don't want to have paper around.

RW: I remember the glory days.

JA: Were you ever a newspaper reporter?

RW: Briefly, yeah, for two years, at the now-defunct *Daily Register* in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, yes.

JA: That sounds like a made-up place.

RW: You've unmasked me for what I am, Joel.

JA: You made that up. "The *Daily Register* of Shrewsbury, New Jersey" come on!

RW: No, no, you know people who were there with me.

JA: The people who watch this stuff are smart enough to know that you made that up. Anyway, so I'm thankful that it worked while it worked. But now I'm sitting in a defunct radio studio. I mean, we're not defunct as a newspaper by any means--

RW: No, no, because it's still 2008 and not yet 2009, you're right.

JA: But you know, I'm manipulating these dials here on this console, and...

RW: Nothing's happening!

JA: Nothing's happening.

RW: No, because it's dead. And the technology you actually are using has nothing to do with all those knobs and gears. It's microtechnology. It's portable. It's cheap.

JA: I'm trying to turn you down, but it's not working...

RW: In fact it cost me little more than you are costing me right now, Joel, and that's the beauty of the business model.

JA: Your business model: how is it different from, just theft? Or, you know, exploitation?

RW: The difference--I'm going to tell you. With theft, there is a revenue side to the model. That's pretty different!

JA: When you actually fence the...

RW: Exactly! That's the part we're developing. We have a fencing division, but it isn't yet up and running.

JA: But I'm thankful, I'm thankful for a lot of things. I'm very thankful about my kids, because...

RW: Yeah, you brag about your kids a lot. Do you really have five? How many do you have, really?

JA: Three.

RW: Three. So five was just a lie, when you said five.

JA: The point--I don't like to get too personal--

RW: Yeah, I can see why.

JA: Yeah, but the thing is--and I know you feel the same way--when we get old, they'll take care of us.

RW: (Laughing) Speak for yourself; I don't think you've met my kids. I mean, speaking of theft...When we're old, I'll start locking up my house. No, they're great, they're great. I love 'em.

JA: So did we have, you had some things you wanted to talk about, but before we do, can I bring up something sort of different?

RW: Yeah, for you I think life is one big preamble, so sure, go ahead.

JA: What do you think of that theory that the universe is a computer simulation, that like, mathematically, it's inevitable--not mathematically, but sort of technologically--it's inevitable that computers will advance to the point where they can program exact simulations of reality and sort of infinitely progress to the point that all conscious entities, like us--and I am, as you can tell, semi-conscious at the moment--

RW: I can't tell, actually. The thing about consciousness is you only know that about yourself. But anyway, go ahead.

JA: Well, okay. Do you want me to try to pass some kind of Turing test or something, to prove that I'm conscious? No, I have a little bit of a cold, and so I'm not really thinking totally straight compared to the usual linear self. But, the theory is that all conscious entities in the future, mathematically are most likely to exist in simulated computer programs. And I know you probably studied that for your big book--

RW: One of them, I'm sure.

JA: But, have you come across that theory?

RW: Well, I remember the theory. You know, there's actually a Thanksgiving segue to that theory, because that's a theory that ultimately involves the question of whether there was a creator of our experiential context--

JA: Yeah. Did you see what I blogged about this morning? Because I mentioned you.

RW: Yeah, whenever you mention me in your blog, I'm inclined to read what you--especially if you email it to me, that further increases the chances--

JA: Did you think it was exploitative of you, or cruel or in any way--Is it not a fact that I asked you a straightforward question, I said, these are my exact words: "Bob, is there a God?" and you came up with this sort of Clintonesque answer. You know, it depends on what the meaning of "God" is, or something like that.

RW: Well, don't you think it kind of does, Joel? I mean, for example, if you defined God as a laptop computer we could both just look around us and go, yeah, God exists. So it does depend on the definition.

JA: First of all, it's the entity that's accountable for everything. Okay? Has created everything, and, ideally, cares about us.

RW: No, wait, let me read exactly what you said on your little blog--I mean, your blog. You said: "We all know what we mean by God, which is someone who cares about us and has unlimited power." Now, I can tell you right away, that kind of God doesn't exist.

JA: How do you...

RW: Because if God cared about us and was omnipotent, could do anything, we wouldn't suffer as much as we do, Joel. So that one's easy: No, that kind of God doesn't exist.

JA: Okay. I'm glad we cleared that up.

RW: For crying out loud. But you know most gods that people have believed in for most of history have not been those kind. They have not been omnipotent. That's like this--this Judeo-Christian, this Abrahamic hangup.

JA: Wait, wait, wait--most people have believed in a god that had hangnails and occasionally got out of bed on the wrong side, and wasn't all-powerful?

RW: I misspoke; I said most people. Since almost everyone who has ever lived is alive right now, or a majority of them, I may have misspoken, but--

JA: No, no, most people who have ever lived are dead.

RW: Actually, no. I think it may be the case, depending on when you define the advent of humanity, when you call us a species, it may be that most of them are alive, that's an amazing fact.

JA: It's an amazing untrue fact. I mean, there have been about, if you go back say 100,000 years, to the appearance of anatomically modern human beings, there have been about, I think, 75 or 80 billion people. Of those people, only six and a half billion are alive today. So, I'm sorry, I believe, although it's a real "Wow, that's cool Bob! Neato! Gosh! It's fun hanging out with you because you know such interesting things!" -- But it's not true. Now of course, that said, this is now going to be on the internet, and if I'm wrong, I'll look like a monkey's uncle, won't I?

RW: Can I retreat from the claim that that's a fact, to the claim that it's a common misconception? Can I gracefully make that transition, is that okay with you?

JA: Sure, sure.

RW: It's a common misconception. Actually, I heard--I read it somewhere, and I think it was on the internet, so it must be true. It may have been your blog. So, where were we, wait, there was a train of thought--oh, we were talking about God.

JA: I could be wrong about this, but, go ahead. So, you're saying that most people have not believed in an omnipotent God.

RW: No, that was me misspeaking. A very large majority of the gods that people have ever believed in, that's what I should have said--like 99.99% or something--have been not omnipotent.

JA: Like the guy with the flute?

RW: Like Greek gods, yeah. Yeah, the flute. But when you think about it, the idea that God is infinitely good and omnipotent, that's just hard to swallow. Right? I mean, He couldn't be good in our sense of the word, because in our sense of the word, gratuitous suffering is bad. And if God were omnipotent, He could set up the world in such a way that what suffering there is, is, whatever, you know?

JA: How do you know God would not say--and I realize, I'm no theologian here--that suffering is essential to happiness and all other emotions? If we all just sort of zoned out in bliss all the time, what's the point of that?

RW: But if God were truly omnipotent, couldn't He or She have designed a universe in which that were not the case? In other words, if God is really good, in our sense of the word, then presumably He or She was working under some metaphysical constraints, having to do with the nature of consciousness, and motivational energy or something.

JA: Here's my question: You have a book coming out on this, correct?

RW: I always have a book coming out.

JA: Do you answer the question of, Is there a God?

RW: I argue that there is evidence of higher purpose. You're going to accuse me of weaseling again, right?

JA: No, no, no! Evidence of higher purpose. Okay. What did you think of my notion that God may not have any kind of preference for biology over geology? In other words, I mean, for the few people out there who did not read my blog item this morning, the way this came up, we might as well give the whole back story--we were out for a bike ride, right, we were riding our bikes with Old Man River, and, you know, at the end of it I was sort of babbling about--

RW: Speaking of which, speaking of Old Man River, you wrote a book about a river, right?

JA: I did.

RW: Weren't you kind of like treading on John McPhee territory when you did that? I mean, he writes about fish, he writes about geology. What is the intersection of fish and geology? It's rivers. And he's written about rivers. I mean, you kind of stole that theme from John McPhee, did you not?

JA: Also, writing well, I thought, was, you know, using all those good words, sentence structures, things like that--was also a real McPhee move on my part.

RW: Sorry, I interrupted you.

JA: No, actually, there is that sort of outdoorsy streak that somehow, you know, it was handed down from the master, I don't know...But, so, anyway, what were we talking about? Oh, yeah, the gas giants. I did this story recently, about the search for extrasolar planets. They've seen a few of them now, they actually physically can see these little dots that are probably planets. And in fact, there was a thing just the other day on the wire that they may have found another planet around Beta Pictoris. The thing about these planets is, they're huge. They're bigger than Jupiter, even. They're big gas giant planets. And so, the sensitivity of the technology is such that you can't see a little planet yet. We just don't have the tools to see an Earth-size planet. You know all this. But we can see these large mass objects--they would be, like, one to ten Jupiter masses. And, so the question I had is, why is God so inordinately fond of gas giant planets in the same way he apparently likes beetles.

RW: This is a famous quote from I think J.B.S. Haldane, the biologist. When they asked him what evolution had taught him about God, I think it's he who said, "that He has an inordinate fondness for beetles."

JA: Very good. And so, I guess the question I have is, when we think about the universe, we think about sort of the quest for life in the universe, do we sort of carry with us a belief that the point of the universe is life--that life is what gives meaning to the universe. And if you were God, would you view it the same way. For example, is God someone who has a preference for biology over geology? If you're God, does a Jupiter, which is just a bunch of gas, you know, hydrogen and various inorganic compounds, is a Jupiter any worse than an Earth? Does God prefer Earths to Jupiters? Or is it all just sort of beautiful?

RW: I can't believe you can't answer that question without my assistance, Joel, come on!

JA: That's why I'm talking to you, because I thought you'd help me out on that.

RW: I can wrap this up quickly and we can move on to the next subject.

JA: Okay.

RW: It seems to me the only source of meaning in the universe, and the only reason you can take morality seriously is that there are beings that are capable of having subjective experience, that are capable of having pleasure and pain, right? Here's the classic thought experiment: Suppose I told you there's a planet, you see these things walking around that look like they're human beings but actually they're just robots and they don't have any actual experience and there's nothing on that planet that has subjective experience. And then I tell you I walked up and punched one of them in the face. You'd go, well there's nothing wrong with that--it's a meaningless

planet anyway. It didn't feel anything. The robot didn't feel any pain, right? Wouldn't you respond like that?

JA: This strikes me as a very elaborate way to explain it--

RW: It's because I've written these very words! If you'd read my *oeuvre*, you wouldn't have to ask these questions.

JA: Is your question, do you believe it's okay to hit the robot?

RW: (Laughing) Yeah, that's my question.

JA: Um, why would you hit the robot?

RW: Okay, bad example.

JA: I don't understand wh--

RW: I withdraw the thought experiment. No, my bad, really! My bad, Joel, that was a really confusing example, and I'm sorry!

JA: Here's the other question, okay? Under your scenario, whether or not a planet suddenly exploded only matters if there are conscious entities on that planet that would suffer somehow in that explosion. But if it's just Venus, which we assume is lifeless, because it's too hot, ah, who cares.

RW: In your everyday life, don't you draw a distinction...

JA: I think Venus has innate beauty to it, and not just because I happen to perceive it low in the west in the evening or low in the east in the morning--

RW: Yeah, but who's perceiving anything in a world without subjective experience? Only God. And if God is good, God would want to share that potential, right?

JA: Right. So you're saying without someone or something to perceive things subjectively, there's no, what, meaning?

RW: No meaning. And you couldn't take morality seriously. That's right, that's my claim.

JA: Okay, well, certainly, morality is something that does not show up in the equations of physics or in the periodic table.

RW: No, that's why they pay us to talk about it.

JA: I grant you that I find morality, and things like love and beauty and all those things that are subjectively generated to be the most interesting things in the universe. And I certainly think that, for example, when we look through our telescopes at, like, the Andromeda galaxy, it is certainly something we want to know, who might live there? What kinds of civilizations might be there? Or even just bunny rabbits, or even interesting life forms that we might call scuzz or slime but still, what's their biology? What's their equivalent of DNA? Or do they use DNA? I think the biology of the universe is not only the most interesting thing, but it's something that

obviously is driving a lot of our curiosity about space. But I don't think that without that biology, it's meaningless, necessarily. I hate the thought of the idea of a meaningless galaxy, because it's too young to harbor life. I mean, it strikes me, if it is meaningless, then why is it there?

RW: If it has the potential to have life, then it's not meaningless. But let me ask you, in the course of your everyday life, do you draw a distinction between stepping on a rock and, say, stepping on one of your children? Or, no, take your kinship bias out of it, stepping on a dog?

JA: Probably not as big a distinction as I should make. But, yeah, I mean, we're biophilic. And we also--I mean, look, I eat meat, you know, and God forbid how those poor animals are treated at the slaughterhouse--

RW: Have you seen those films?

JA: But I make an implicit judgment that the life of the cow is not as valuable as the life of a human being, and I guess you could say--

RW: Actually, you have to assume more than that to be eating meat. I hate to tell you this--the human being could stay alive without eating the meat. You have to say that the life of the cow is less important than that fleeting satisfaction you get from tearing into a bacon cheeseburger.

JA: That also involves a pig.

RW: Yeah, once again, one of my thought experiments has been shown lacking.

JA: It's unwieldy. It's just unwieldy. You had it going, and then you introduced a second animal. But, you're right, that's selfishness. That's why we should have a day, after Thanksgiving--bringing it back, here--after we give thanks, we should also have a day of feeling smug or selfish or just sort of satisfied, a kind of like a "what about me" day.

RW: And then a guilt day, after that we could have a guilt day about the me day.

JA: The Jewish people already got that, don't they?

RW: Day of atonement?

JA: I think that's what that's about.

RW: Yeah, I think there may be multiple days of atonement. I'm not sure. The high holidays are heavily about atonement, I know.

JA: Yeah, but you're right. Just because it tastes good, is that a reason to do it? ...Sometimes, yes.

RW: Here's a question that wraps a lot of this up. Is the experience of Thanksgiving intricately connected, intimately connected, directly connected, to the question of God? In other words, can you give thanks if there is nothing to give thanks to? Can you say "thank you" without there being a

"you?" Maybe this is why they call it Thanksgiving instead of "Thank You Giving"

JA: Yes. You give thanks to the dad of the family, who sits at the end of the table. Everyone says, "Thanks, Dad."

RW: You know, it's funny, it has not worked that way in my family.

JA: Yeah, mine either.

RW: But it's a serious question: can you feel gratitude, because gratitude is an important, life-giving feeling...

JA: How about relief? Okay, how about this: How about gratitude that the impersonal and faceless and cold calculating equations of luck and fortune favored you?

RW: Okay, but...relief? Like "whew, dodged a bullet!" I mean, that would just be a different holiday--

JA: You could say, like, "Hot damn, this turned out great!" Okay? You could say that, and then there doesn't have to be someone to whom you're saying thanks. It's like when someone is sick, okay? Someone you care about, and they're dying. And you want to pray for their recovery, but you aren't sure if in fact there is an entity out there who listens to your prayers. What do you do? The answer is, you pray anyway. And maybe you call that wishing. You know? And is wishing vapid? Does wishing not count? I think the world is better when people hope for the best, pray, wish, think positive thoughts. I'm not sure that it fundamentally changes if in fact there is a monitor out there that's tabulating all this. Either way, you want to live in that world. Would you want to live in a world that was so nihilistic that it was like, "Thanksgiving, eh, what's the point of that? No one cares. There's no one listening. It's all gas giants, it's all geology."

RW: No, we would not call that Thanksgiving.

JA: No.

RW: But the question is whether there's an intermediate...Can Thanksgiving be equally gratifying for religious believers and atheists and agnostics? is my question. You're saying it can, I think. Are you? Or not?

JA: Well, it depends on the food, doesn't it?

RW: It depends on whether they overcook the turkey. You make a good point.

JA: I'm going to guess that someone who is deeply religious might answer that question differently than I would.

RW: But you're saying--you apparently not being deeply religious--you're saying you think Thanksgiving's every bit as good for you, dammit, as for a theist.

JA: I think so, but unlike someone who has absolute faith and certitude, I would roll that around in my head a little bit and sort of engage my doubts a little bit and try to figure out--Does the food taste better when, in addition to being thankful, in a secular way, you actually believe that it comes from a divine being?

RW: Not your wife--by "divine being" you mean, not your wife.

JA: Maybe your wife. But that's a good question; I mean, is life in general more rewarding if you are spiritual, and a real believer? Does someone who truly believes that God is watching my every step, God is taking care of me, whatever happens to me is somehow approved by or helped by God, does that person live a richer, fuller life than someone who kinda thinks we're on our own here?

RW: It depends on your specific conception of God, because belief can equally well leave you with this constant sense that you're coming up short and you're being judged and you're not doing quite the perfect thing. You know, I was brought up very religiously, and I never totally lost that sense, you know, that I'm screwing up. And I know what you're going to say, Joel, you're going to say there's a reason you've never lost the sense you're screwing up, Bob, right?

JA: No, I kept my silence, I held my own council on that.

RW: That was very respectful, if not reverent of you. Because that was a very personal moment I was having.

JA: I felt sorry for you there for a moment--

RW: And then it passed.

JA: Also, I thought of little Bob, you know, and what it must have been like. so you were brought up very religious.

RW: Very. I mean, my parents weren't nutcases, but they were believing Southern Baptists, my mother was pretty darned devout. We went to church--

JA: You were like my neighbors.

RW: You were in Jacksonville, Florida, right?

JA: Gainesville. I grew up in a Southern Baptist neighborhood, but my parents were Unitarians, and you know what Unitarians believe.

RW: There's no Unitarians in Gainesville, come on! You were not!

JA: You think I'm making this up? Unitarians believe that everyone has to bring their own beer to the Easter potluck. And actually, my grandfather was a minister, he was a Universalist minister.

RW: Really?

JA: Not Unitarian; Universalist.

RW: Well, now the two have merged, it's the Universalist Unitarian--

JA: I don't think he was very happy about that, because Unitarianism and Universalism are two different things.

RW: Well, the two have merged. But Universalism originally referred to the idea that no one goes to hell, in other words, there is universal salvation. Unitarian referred to the rejection of the trinitarian doctrine. And then they merged and now it's all one big beautiful thing.

JA: Can I repeat, my grandfather was a Universalist minister, so just so you know, I know this.

RW: It was not only for your benefit, Joel. We have some godless atheists in the audience, I was trying to give them a little pointer.

JA: Yeah, so, we went to church, sort of--the fellowship, the Unitarian fellowship--but also, a lot of my friends were Southern Baptists, and I went to the Good News meetings, where they would try to save my soul.

RW: That one worked with me, I got saved one day.

JA: They tried to save me but that was a difficult excavation. It was hard work.

RW: That's the spiritual equivalent of the Apollo Project.

JA: But you know, I'll say this--best people in the world, my neighbors, took care of me, loved me, you know, they were great folks, so I always have a very warm feeling towards the Southern Baptists. Like you, Bob.

RW: Thank you, and I've found Unitarians to be a very tolerant group of people. They will tolerate everything except intolerance, I've found.

JA: I think you're a great guy, Bob.

RW: Thank you, and I think you're like an okay guy, Joel. Now, on this gratitude thing.

JA: Were we on the gratitude thing? I thought we had abandoned it a while ago.

RW: I just want to say one thing: Here's my crowning Thanksgiving insight.

JA: Can I ask you a question, do you have an outline or a list of topics, because I hope so--

RW: I've got a teleprompter

JA: All I've got is these knobs and little dials

RW: Oh, they didn't set up the teleprompter for you?

JA: No.

RW: So this has been spontaneous on your part?

JA: Yeah.

RW: You are a genius.

JA: But this is just a trial run, right? I mean, you're not going to use this one.

RW: Uhhh, I've got some bad news for you.

JA: This, okay.

RW: This is it.

JA: Yikes. But you'll edit it, right?

RW: This is the Joel that they'll remember. Thanksgivings to come when they rerun this the way they used to rerun the Andy Williams Christmas Special, this is the one they're going to see.

JA: But this will only last for about a week and then it gets purged.

RW: It will be in the archives until the heat death of the universe, Joel.

JA: Yikes.

RW: Or, until we cannot pay our bills.

JA: Whichever comes first--

RW: So, it may not be the heat death of the universe. But, on this gratitude thing, my crowning Thanksgiving insight is this: Do you know why nature gave us gratitude? It was "designed" by natural selection, and I put "designed" in quotes--

JA: Did you put natural selection in quotes, too?

RW: No, I put "designed" in quotes when I talk about natural selection doing it so people won't think I mean that natural selection--

JA: Is natural selection upper case or lower case?

RW: I use lower.

JA: Okay. So it was "designed" by natural selection.

RW: Correct. Gratitude was "designed" by natural selection to draw human beings into mutually beneficial relationships. So like, right now, let's assume just hypothetically that you are benefitting from this conversation.

JA: That's extreme hypothetical.

RW: And let's go even more hypothetical and assume that I'm getting something out of it, okay, let's just go way out. Okay, so it's mutually beneficial, and gratitude is the impulse that draws us into these kinds of mutually beneficial relationships.

JA: Wait, no, no, no, stop, stop, stop. That's why they invented sex, isn't it? I mean that's what sex is, that's what makes people talk to each other.

RW: Sex at its best is a type of non-zero sum activity, yes. But, have you never said "thank you" after sex, Joel?

JA: So let me ask you this--

RW: Joel, if that question was too personal then of a question, then just pass by and don't answer it, but

JA: No, I'm a professional

RW: But, Joel, if it's not too personal, I'd like an answer.

JA: I prefer just to say, "You're welcome." So, gratitude, in this sort of "moral animal" theory is that the point of gratitude is that it's a networking tool. Like language, right? How is gratitude different from language in that sense, and which came first? I mean, was in fact "thank you" the first thing that the Neanderthals grunted?

RW: That's documented, yes.

JA: In other words, the first words or grunts or noises that we could make that were communicative--are you saying that gratitude--

RW: No, the first grunts were sex and then the grunt right after that was thank you. I think that's the standard scenario of Neanderthal living.

JA: So, do animals feel gratitude?

RW: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think we have good reason to believe--

JA: Like a dog, which is a social creature, a social animal, feels gratitude when you give the dog a bone.

RW: I'm not sure.

JA: Oh, come on!

RW: That's sort of a sore subject because I just had a run-in with my dog over a bone. But I think chimpanzees, which are very closely related to us, we have good reason to think that they feel gratitude, even though they're not smart enough to realize that they want to have these mutually beneficial relationships. See, that's gratitude came along before we were smart enough to figure out non-zero sum logic ourselves, and drew us into these mutually beneficial relationships.

JA: Okay. Does the non-zero sum equation, algorithm, model that you are talking about, does it reinforce what is otherwise a kind of spontaneous grateful behavior of human beings, i.e., those who are gracious and grateful proliferate, reproduce more easily than those who are just mean sons of bitches.

RW: In some sense, the--well, there's places where meanness sadly has paid off during evolution, and that's why we are the way we are, but total ingrates, incapable of mustering any gratitude at all have not fared well

during evolution, and I say that's why gratitude has become a fundamental feature of human beings.

JA: Why are there people who are narcissists, and totally selfish?

RW: Well, you can be both. I'm grateful, but I have my narcissistic moments.

JA: There are some people who are just all narcissism all the time.

RW: Well, there's also sociopaths, and that's an interesting question, as to whether that's a genotype that survived through natural selection because it had this niche value--

JA: Which is what, what would be the value of that?

RW: Of sociopathy? Look, in general in non-zero sum games like the Prisoner's Dilemma, if you can get by constantly exploiting people, it can be a good way to make a living. It's just that you're usually in an environment where that's not going to work, so you're better off evolving the set of equipment that allows you to work with people without always exploiting people, and harvesting these non-zero sum benefits that, you know, so that's the answer, I think.

JA: So, if you're really good at it, being horrible, you can survive, but for most people...Let me ask you this: why is it that we have things like anxiety? What's the point of that?

RW: Oh, come on, man! Look at what you worry about! You worry about your kids, you worry about, you get nervous before a date, when you're trying to impress a mate, you worry if it looks like you're not going to be able to make a living, and eat--you know, you worry about things that are conducive to survival--

JA: What about shame--that's obvious, it keeps you in line.

RW: Yes, it keeps you from doing things that would so lower public esteem for you as to harm your chances of thriving in a social environment.

JA: Well, so, all these different emotions we have, you're saying that they're evolved, right? They're adaptations.

RW: I would say that.

JA: You should write a book about that.

RW: You know, I'm thinking about it. But the whole business model of writing in general is now in question. But my crowning, the final thing I want to say is--

JA: Did you say, the crowning, isn't that a little pretentious?

RW: It's just the crown on this particular little riff I'm doing, okay? What we should be grateful for on Thanksgiving, among other things, is gratitude

itself. Because it's what draws us into these mutual things like we're enjoying right now.

JA: So just the invention of gratitude is its own reward.

RW: Gratitude is its own reward.

JA: We should be grateful that we're not robots, in essence. We should be grateful that we're not going through life with as much feeling as this sound board in front of me--I think it's called a sound board, right?

RW: Right. Seriously, we should be thankful for sentience.

JA: Yeah.

RW: We could live in a universe in which there were things as complex, with behaviors as complex as life has except it's not sentient. And in fact, it's a darn good question why that isn't the case. Because, according to the standard model of animal behavior and human behavior--well, certainly animal behavior--the sentience itself is superfluous.

JA: But wait, isn't sentience necessary for the complex behaviors that humans do? Because what we are is, we're a planning species, we're a modeling of life species, we figure out, okay, tomorrow we're going to go out on that hill overlooking this migratory path of the animals, etc. for our hunt. Isn't sentience essential for doing what humans do?

RW: Well, according to the way--

JA: We're never going to get by on just running fast, or swimming. We can't fly. There's not much we can do as well as other animals except we can build models of reality in our heads. But I don't know how you'd do that without sentience. You have to be able to say, the people who are going to go on the hunt tomorrow that's us, the same people as sitting here making the plan.

RW: See, but according to the way a lot of social--I would say most behavioral scientists, whether or not they even think about this question, implicitly are assuming a model in which actually all that subjective experience is superfluous. Because they're assuming that all those plans and so on you're talking about have a physiological correlate. So there's actually just this physiological program churning away inside the brain and all that subjective experience you mentioned is what it feels like to be the program or have the program. but in fact, even if you didn't have the feeling, in theory the program would still churn out the answer and get you to do the right thing.

JA: Okay, can we talk about football or something now? now--because, that last little burst, I'm sure that when we go back and look at the tape that it will be not only lucid but brilliant--but I lost it--

RW: It's a pet theory of mine. This goes back to *Three Scientists and Their Gods*.

JA: I know, E.O. Wilson--that put you on the map. I love that book. That's one of my favorites. It was E.O. Wilson, hang on, hang on. There were two others...but I forgot the other two, and I forgot who the gods were.

RW: Ed Fredkin, Kenneth Boulding.

JA: Yeah, okay.

RW: 1988 book; sadly, out of print.

JA: I've got one!

RW: Well, you can sell it for

JA: I have one in my basement if you need one.

RW: I've got a few in my basement, believe me.

JA: I have hundreds of copies of my river book.

RW: Your Potomac book

JA: Yeah, maybe I can get Old Man River to take one off my hands.

RW: I don't know, his study's pretty full, I think. I might buy one from you though, if you'd autograph it.

JA: I'll give you one, you know, don't worry about it.

RW: Maybe viewers will write in to [feedback@bloggingheads.tv](mailto:feedback@bloggingheads.tv) saying that they would pay thirty dollars for a copy signed by Joel Achenbach. Would it be worth your--

JA: Hey, admit it: you're thinking this is your new business model--exploit the free labor, then somehow you'll get a cut off of the books that we can sell with this little contraption of yours...

RW: It's like, it's QVC for intellectuals, and you are a product that I'm pointing to on our showroom floor.

JA: Yep, yep...So, let me ask you this: did we fully nail the whole gratitude issue, do you think?

RW: Wait, it seems like there was one more thing. We were grateful for gratitude, we were grateful for sentience. I mean, maybe we should seriously talk about anything else we have to be grateful for, because you know, the world seems to be heading toward financial Armageddon, and it seems like, even independent of that, you and I have spent our lives pursuing business models that seem to have about six months of viability left--

JA: Right. What if capitalism is another one of these business models that doesn't work over time? I think it probably does. I actually, I mean, the financial meltdown, can I just say this about gratitude--I think that we should be grateful that despite the fact that our economy has collapsed and that the government is busy shoveling billions of dollars to these huge

corporations that made stupid decisions, and these institutions that squandered all kinds of money--I think we should be grateful that, fundamentally, we live in what I still believe to be the greatest country on Earth. Now, I know that's me being patriotic and waving the flag and all that. But I get all teary-eyed when I think about our country; I'm kind of a--

RW: Are you a patriot?

JA: Kinda, yeah, I am, in fact, big-time patriot, and I think that over time, the U.S. will probably not only find its footing but I don't think that in twenty-five years we're going to suddenly feel like the former superpower of the United States. I think we will still be one of the absolute, we'll probably still be the dominant country on the planet. In twenty-five years, and probably in fifty years, too. People say, aw, you can't say that. What about China, what about Europe, united Europe? I don't think so. I think China's got problems with demographics and with its environment. I think Europe has all kinds of fundamental problems of being balkanized literally and figuratively and its kind of socialist streak where people don't really like to get up in the morning and go to work--I'm sorry if I just insulted an entire continent--but I think the U.S. probably will be the dominant country fifty years from now. And I'm grateful for that.

RW: Is it okay if we cut that little clip out and save it for our Fourth of July edition next year, Joel? That was very stirring. Thank you.

JA: You were stirred by that.

RW: I was stirred. Visibly. I mean people who are watching--you don't know because you can't see me--

JA: How much are you showing of yourself? Just the head, I hope.

RW: Just the head and shoulders, mostly.

JA: So, anyway, that's my little pitch on that. I actually wrote a piece on this, I don't know, a year and a half ago and got hugely abused on that. We may have even talked about it.

RW: We even talked about it on bloggingheads.

JA: Oh well then it's a retread.

RW: I did take a little nap during that last three minutes, yes, because I'd heard it all. I nodded off a little. But no, it was stirring and I was stirred.

JA: So, it's good to be an American. How about that.

RW: It is, compared to being some other things. I mean, especially after the last election, I'm feeling pretty good about the whole thing, yeah.

JA: So, it's good to be sentient,

RW: Sentient--

JA: American,

RW: American, since November 4--

JA: Yes.

RW: And I'm thinking, I'm working, I'm working--

JA: Should we actually put Obama's cabinet picks in there somewhere?

RW: Yeah, are you thankful for those?

JA: I am thankful that--how can I phrase this--I think that I was a little worried that Joe Biden, as vice president, would be our lead diplomat to the world but that's not going to be a problem now that Hillary will be--

RW: Why would it bother you for Biden to be--

JA: I think Biden's very entertaining, a great guy. But he shoots his mouth off and I just worried that he would start a war accidentally.

RW: Uh huh.

JA: You know what I mean?

RW: I don't know, I mean--

JA: Just a slip of the tongue and suddenly missiles are in the air--

RW: How much trouble can you get into calling people clean and articulate? You know? If he said to everybody what he said about Obama--I don't see the problem.

JA: I'd hate for him to have one of those *faux pas* that causes a massive nuclear strike somewhere.

RW: That is bad; we agree on that.

JA: Bad, bad, bad.

RW: Because it would reduce the amount of sentience.

JA: Yes--a major sentience reduction event. I do wonder how Biden feels about having all these heavy hitters around the president-elect. What's he going to do? What does a vice president do? The vice president's job is entirely dependent upon the president's whim. Essentially, will the president have lunch with me or not.

RW: And they can be important. Witness Cheney's near destruction of the universe.

JA: Yeah. There you go.

RW: They can be important but you're right, and I think it helps them if they don't have a whole lot of star power at places like secretary of state. And that's why you're saying Biden is just not going to be a major potentate here, right?

JA: I'm just saying among those not applauding Hillary as secretary of state might be Joe Biden. But I think, if you think about it, it's genius to have

Hillary as secretary of state because, first of all, if she stays in the Senate and becomes senate majority leader she essentially is Obama's, more like his rival for power in Washington than like part of his team. So, hey, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." Maybe that's cynical, but I think that's what that is. Look at who he's brought in, it's the people he was running against: Bill Richardson, Biden, Hillary--

RW: Richardson endorsed Obama early, so he's not the best example. What's troubling a lot of Obama supporters is that most of the people who supported Hillary and not Obama are being treated real nice and the people who have supported Obama and not Hillary are not being treated real nice.

JA: Well, the dilemma for Obama is that, because he's relatively new to this whole business he doesn't have a real big bench of supporters, when I say supporters, I mean people he's worked with who plausibly could be plunked into a major cabinet post. He is, it's not just that he's young and new--he just doesn't know that many people. It's also an asset, too. It means he doesn't have to turn to all his buddies and say, you've been with me now for twenty-five years, we're in power, this is your reward. So he can kind of pick who he wants. It's sort of liberating. But there is an issue there, which is, who does he know? Who can he turn to? And inevitably, he had to turn to the government in exile, which is the Clinton crowd.

RW: Well, I don't know. The argument of the Obama-ites...

JA: Now, how do you know this? Do you know these people?

RW: I take--like Joe Biden, I take Amtrak to Washington periodically, and I have coffee with people in the know. And here's what I learned. The feeling is, that, look, the thing about Hillary Clinton is, leave aside the stars. There are all these midlevel people with experience in government who are going to infiltrate the bureaucracy, not just midlevel but deputy secretary of state and so on. And there are plenty of those at think tanks who supported Obama. But the thing is, if you pick Hillary as secretary of state, you're not going to get them. You're going to get all the people who supported Hillary, whereas you could pick, like, who knows, Colin Powell--I think that would have been an interesting choice at State--who might well then reach down and pick a lot of people who actually supported Obama to staff the bureaucracy. That's the argument.

JA: Wait, Powell was approached for this job?

RW: No, no, I don't think he was approached. I don't know. I think he would have been interesting.

JA: What I think is fascinating is that if you look at how the Republicans said that Obama was too radical, too risky, kind of a terrorist type, hung out with Bill Ayers and the Reverend Wright and that sort of thing--and he's picked a very conventional looking, very mainstream looking cabinet. Even David

Brooks said, hey, he's off to a great start. So I am thankful that when Obama won, that he seems to be doing so well so far.

RW: And I am thankful that you worked the word thankful into that sentence, thus drawing us back to this Thanksgiving motif.

JA: Well, you told me this was about Thanksgiving, right, so I'm just trying to do what you want me to do, Bob. As always

RW: As always, you're nothing if not compliant.

JA: Yes.

RW: You know, I'll be thankful when you start doing some actual damn blogging on your blog, Joel. I was looking at your blog, and it's like, I mean, it's like you went to Seattle and you took pictures and put them up on your blog? And that's your blog? You know, if I want to look at pictures of Seattle, I'll go to Flickr.

JA: Okay, let me point something out to you.

RW: Yeah?

JA: As it clearly said, I was on vacation, okay? And believe it or not, when I'm on vacation, I don't blog. Why? Because blogging is something that I find to be work, okay? So, if I'm on vacation, I'll put some pictures up there, but be grateful for the pictures, okay? Give some thanks--

RW: I am thankful--

JA: ...that I put some pictures on the blog to amuse you slightly with my little captions.

RW: They had little witty captions, yes. I was guffawing. My wife had to dial 911. She didn't know what was going on.

JA: Exactly. But the point is, it is true that I'm not much of a blogger. I don't really blog. I mean, I write something and I post it and then I go off. Because, I have a real job; I'm a newspaper reporter.

RW: But here's the thing--

JA: A job. I know you tried to chance the topic, there, you do it every time. Job. It's when somebody actually pays you money to perform a service. You would not know about that but--So I have a job, I'm a newspaper reporter. I blog kind of like part of it on the side, but mostly I do it when no one's looking, because there's no one here who cares about it. But the point is, a real blogger is always, always blogging. And I, I don't know, once a day I post something, I mean, I don't know, is that pathetic?

RW: No, it's not pathetic, I mean, but it just so happens that when I checked in, that would be an exaggeration of your output. And then I scrolled below all the pictures, I thought, let's get back to the days when he's actually blogging, and I saw you'd posted this big piece written by your daughter?

JA: Well, I was proud of her.

RW: Yeah, I'd say...she wrote it for, what, her high school newspaper?

JA: Again. I was on vacation. A perfect time to post something written by my very intelligent daughter. I thought she did a nice job on that.

RW: Very nice. Her name is Paris.

JA: That's correct.

RW: ...and now, she's young enough that you could have named her after Paris Hilton, is that what happened?

JA: No, no, no, the other way around, probably. You know, she was mentioned in the *Wall Street Journal* soon after her birth because of that unusual name.

RW: Really?

JA: Absolutely.

RW: But in retrospect, now that the most famous Paris in the world is Paris Hilton, you wish you had chosen, like, Stockholm or Stalingrad, or something--

JA: Budapest, maybe. But no, I'm not much of a blogger. I read this thing that Andrew Sullivan wrote about blogging, and why he loves to blog, and all that--and he quotes, I think, Matt Drudge saying, remember, this isn't print, this is broadcast. Okay, a blog is like broadcast. And unless it's constantly live, it dies. And so I thought about that, and I thought, I don't want to be a blogger in that sense. I don't want to do broadcast journalism. As we've discussed in the past on this very forum, I am, unlike you, Bob, I am a writer. I am a writer. And I know that sounds pretentious

RW: It sounded hurtful. It was hurtful.

JA: You are a broadcaster. You're a talking head.

RW: I'm a narrowcaster.

JA: You're a broadcaster, and you're all about being now, being in the moment. You should try getting back to writing. Because you were really good at it. You really were. I mean that as a compliment.

RW: You're just saying that.

JA: No! *Three Scientists and Their Gods*, E.O. Wilson and two other guys--that was a great book. Your readers or listeners or viewers--I don't even know what you call them--should check out that book. Really good stuff.

RW: It's nice of you to say that. And I encourage them to check out the Potomac book in your basement.

JA: I'm thankful for that nice plug. They can actually come to my basement to check it out, that's true they can. If they dare. I have the sense--almost a premonition--it's like clairvoyance--that we're at the end of this.

RW: You know, I could go on all day. I love talking to you. I gotta say, I really do.

JA: Because I indulge your meanderings.

RW: Yeah, that, and also, like you give me shit, I give you shit and and then in the end, it's non-zero sum.

JA: As it always is.

RW: And you know, non-zero sum doesn't have to be positive.

JA: That's the big payoff for you, is the moment when you can say, it's non-zero sum.

RW: Yeah, which could be negative sum, but in any event, it doesn't add up to zero. We know that.

JA: I don't really know what you're talking about, but I'll pretend I do.

RW: But, no, but I actually do. There's this weird banter thing we get into. You don't get into this with that many people--you're going to hurt me if you tell me you get into this with just anybody off the street, do you?

JA: Well, Old Man River...

RW: Yeah, well Old Man River, he's more of a banter facilitator. Although he can handle banter--

JA: Yeah, he can, with the best of them.

RW: With the best of them.

JA: All right, I've gotta get back to work, buddy boy.

RW: Oh, so you're telling me it's over.

JA: Yep, I'm looking at the clock here--

RW: So you're doing a little power thing here. Ooh, Joel's got lunch. Joel's gotta do lunch with somebody important.

JA: Let me rephrase it: I'm leaving now. I'm done now, unless you have some other topic you want to very efficiently plow through.

RW: I think we about covered it. Well, I'm not giving thanks for the fact that you're leaving. But I do give thanks for the fact that you showed up in the first place. You're a great guy, a great writer. Everyone should check out Achenblog.

JA: Achenblog. You'll have links to that, right?

RW: We will link to it.

JA: And will you link to my story about the gas giants.

RW: We will link to your gaseous story.

JA: The gaseousness.

RW: And we will give you our most heartfelt thanks. And we will say that anything we forgot to say we're thankful for, like our children and our lovely spouses, our friends, our colleagues--

JA: We stipulate that--

RW: We stipulate that everything we forgot to say we're thankful for, we're thankful for.

JA: We're thankful for that, yes.

RW: And I'm thankful to you for your kind indulgence and we'll see you next time.

JA: Thanks, Bob.

RW: Okay, see ya.

JA: Bye.