The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts
Episode 14: Sam Harris
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Tim Ferriss: Gutentag,, Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Tim Ferriss and this is another edition of the Tim Ferriss Show. I'm going to start off with one of my favorite quotes, and I might do more of this if you like it, each episode leading with one of my favorite quotes. This quote is from Lucius Annaeus Seneca, often abbreviated to Seneca, and it is: "Anger is an asset that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured." Very, very true and very fortune cookie-like but Seneca was imminently quotable for that and very criticized by his contemporaries, in some cases, because of it.

My guest is Sam Harris. People often ask me, what blogs do I read regularly and what people do I admire as writers, and one of them is certainly Sam Harris. His blog is incredible. You can visit him online at SamHarris.org. He has a PhD in neuroscience and he is also a very well known writer.

He has authored several New York Times bestsellers, including *The End of Faith.* He has written shorter books like *Lying,* which is a short treatise on lying and the implications of lying; how to get around it which I was a proofreader for and am very honored to be a proofreader for. He is a very controversial fellow. I find many of his views not to be as controversial as they are when misunderstood.

But in this episode we talk about everything from psychedelics to drug use, to religion, to spirituality, everything in between; there are many topics that we would like to discuss in an episode 2, or a continuation of this. So please let me know, let Sam know @SamHarrisorg on Twitter if you like this and we will do more of it. Hope you enjoy. Thanks for listening.

Tim Ferriss: Sam Harris, my good man, thank you for coming on the show. I appreciate it.

Sam Harris: Thanks for having me and congratulations on the podcast.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you. Thank you very much. I was trying to turn back the clock and figure out how we first met or connected, and I couldn't

figure it out. I was actually hoping that you could tell me. Do you recall offhand how that came to be?

Sam Harris: I think we met in a bathroom at the Ted conference.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, my God, that's right!

Sam Harris: One of those awkward moments when you both leave the urinal and then have to introduce each other.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, my God, I had totally forgotten about that. Yes, that is a memory. How did I forget that? That makes me worry about my cognitive health.

Sam Harris: The decision whether you shake hands at that point.

Tim Ferriss: It was extremely awkward, yet at the same time exciting – which is not the appropriate emotion to have in the men's room – because I had been a fan of your work for so long.

I was at this extremely surreal, semi celeb dinner where I was clearly not the celebrity in the same restaurant. The desserts – I remember this is part of the reason I could have been off – were brownies that were loaded with all sorts of substances that were not supplied by the restaurant itself.

Tim Ferriss: I missed that dinner.

Sam Harris: It may have been the dinner you were meant to attend. Let's try to get this train back on the rails. For those people who may not be familiar with your work, and of course I will provide a lot in the show notes, but I'd love to know how you currently answer the question "what do you do?" If you get that question at a cocktail party or elsewhere, what do you say? Is it writer or is it something else?

Sam Harris: Mostly a writer. My background is in neuroscience and philosophy and I still have a toe in the water of doing research.

In neuroscience, I'm collaborating on an FMRI study with a friend at USC right now which is actually a follow up on work I did for my PhD on belief formation. Depending on the context, I'm a scientist but mostly I think of myself as a writer and my interest in neuroscience from the get-go was always philosophical and always purposed toward writing and thinking about the human mind. It

was never clear to me that I wanted to be a full time research scientist.

It was always just my motive to just be able to understand and interpret the work of 30,000-plus neuroscientists who are working at this moment and use that to change our thinking about the nature of human subjectivity and all of the ways in which those changes would affect public policy and how we conceive of a good life, and how we think we should be living and what sort of institutions we create, etc. So it's certainly author first in terms of how I show up most of the time.

Tim Ferriss: These are very big topics, of course, and very controversial in some cases. We're going to touch on a lot in this conversation. We've had some great dinners. We'll talk about free will, we'll talk about spiritual experience and what that means, especially in the context of science. We'll talk about guns; if you didn't have enough controversy already, just to add that to the mix. But let's talk about the FMRI. I've spent a little bit of time at the Sandler Neuroscience Lab in the last six months or so with the Adam Gazzaley team looking at FMRI. What are you looking at in this current or upcoming study? What's the subject?

Sam Harris: The first work I did with FMRI was part of my dissertation research.

Tim Ferriss: Maybe you can explain to people what an FMRI is, also. That might be helpful.

Sam Harris: It's the same scanner you go into to get an MRI, a structural scan of any part of your body. The scanner is the same but then there are pulse sequences that allow you to track blood flow in the brain with the same scanner. So you get an anatomical image of the sort you would get of your brain if they were looking for some evidence of brain injury or disease, but then you can get a statistical map of blood flow changes in more or less real time. Blood flow changes track to a first approximation of changes in neuronal firing so where neurons get more active, that real estate calls for more blood and there's a bit of a time lag.

But this method of observing changes in neuronal activity in the brains of healthy, thinking people is pretty well validated at this point. It gives you a clearer picture of what's going on in the brain than a similar method of functional tracking like Edison Energy Group that people are probably familiar with, where you're just getting electrical changes at the surface of the scalp. That's very

hard to use to localize what's actually going on inside the brain in various structures. So FMRI and PET are really the best ways to get a good local picture of changes in blood flow.

For my PhD work at UCLA, I studied belief and disbelief and uncertainty and looked at what was different about a brain that believed a proposition, like 2 plus 2 equals 4, versus a brain that disbelieved a proposition like 2 plus 2 equals 5 and then compared both of those states to just frank uncertainty; whether you give someone an equation they can't solve and they know they can't solve it and they just don't know whether it's true or false.

I did that across many different domains of thinking. It wasn't just math. It was ethics, it was a person's autobiography, it was geography and I think we had eight categories. Then we did a follow up study where we looked at where we had selected our subject pools to be atheists or devout Christians and we looked at religious belief versus ordinary beliefs. We found that religious belief was very much like any belief.

So to believe that you're sitting on a chair or that you're in San Francisco had something important in common with the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin, etc., which was really my hypothesis going in.

That we have this one mode of representing reality in our thoughts and we do truth testing on those linguistic propositions. It requires very different kinds of processing to judge whether a mathematical statement is true, versus an ethical statement like torturing kids is wrong. Obviously, 2 plus 2 equals 4; to parse that and to parse a statement about torture, those are very different operations upstream in the brain. But there is kind of a downstream area where they get accepted or rejected as true or false and we found this to be in the ventromedial, prefrontal cortex; midline in the front of the brain.

We're now doing a follow up study on belief where we try to change people's beliefs in real time, which is what it is to actually have our beliefs successfully changed and what it is to fight that evidence and argument and hold to your beliefs despite counter events.

So we're in process on that.

Tim Ferriss: So you're looking at the physiological markers of someone being persuaded or not persuaded and the resistance of both.

Sam Harris: Yes, and we're doing it with beliefs for which we would think they would have no real strong commitment and beliefs that we know they're going to hold to tenaciously. So just to look at both sides of that.

Tim Ferriss: I would imagine you might have but have you looked at the methods to beat polygraphs and traditional – if you want to look at it that way – lie detector tests?

Sam Harris: The problem with traditional lie detectors is they were just not valid science. They're not tracking deception; they're tracking anxiety in a sense and then physiological arousal in a very peripheral sense.

We're not talking about brain imaging; we're talking about whether somebody's palms are sweaty. There are many tricks to beating traditional polygraphs but the fundamental problem is they just were going to be beaten by happenstance anyway. You're going to have truth tellers who were found to be liars and liars who were found to be truth tellers just because the methodology isn't valid.

The National Science Foundation at some point, about ten years ago I think, came out and said this is phrenology; this is not science and no important decisions should turn on this. We are ultimately going to have lie detectors that we judge to be valid. There's no special problem in figuring that out.

If you had a belief detector which, to some extent we already do since we based them on the work I did for my PhD, you do have a defacto lie detector. Because if you can tell what somebody is believing, you can tell whether they're representing their beliefs honestly. But there are problems with neuro imaging based lie detection, and certainly FMRI is incredibly sensitive to motion. So if you didn't want to cooperate with the process, you'd just have to move a little too much and you'd screw up the data completely. So it's a work in progress.

Tim Ferriss: You and I have talked about lying quite a bit, given that you wrote a book called *Lying,* and I read an early draft of that. It's a fantastic short read and I'm wondering if you have any opinion on micro expressions or analysts who are paid very large sums of money to watch, for instance, earnings announcements of public companies to determine what is true, what is not, what might be and exaggeration or not.

Do you have any thoughts on that subject?

Sam Harris: It's interesting. I didn't know people were doing that. I didn't know analysts or VCs were subjected to that kind of scrutiny.

Tim Ferriss: Entire companies.

Sam Harris: That's based on Paul Ekman's work on micro expressions. It's very interesting. I don't know that anyone gets reliably good enough at it to be relied upon by others. I remember Paul Ekman was saying that the people who we think are good at detecting lies are viewed basically at 60 percent or whatever, and most people are just at chance. I think there are a few exceptions but in terms of what micro expressions can get you, I think we're going to do much better with technology and even just facial recognition technology; computers beat people now.

That's just a hunch; I haven't actually followed that work but if they're not beating people now, they're eventually going to beat people, I would expect. But what you really want more than the facial display of emotion is you want to understand the neuro physiology of deception and just positional knowledge as what someone knows and what they are representing, and when those tow diverge. And we have that to some degree.

There was a graduate student in the same lab I did my PhD work in who just grabbed my data a couple of years after I acquired it and did a more sophisticated analysis on it. It was called a machine learning analysis where they could look at the single trial level. What happens with FMRI work is you're looking at aggregated data; many, many trials over many, many people.

But if you have the right statistical tools, you can look at a single question and a single person and see whether you can differentiate belief from disbelief, for instance. This woman, Pamela Douglas, found that she, with something like 95 percent accuracy, could tell whether a subject believed or disbelieved a proposition in my paradigm, and my paradigm wasn't even set up to make that particularly easy to do.

But those machine learning techniques allow us to do that and I think that effect is only going to get stronger. And at a certain point, we'll all know that we have mind reading machines in some basic sense. There may be ways to foil them but if you're thinking about a blue house, I say blue house and you have to think about it.

You kind of helplessly think about it on some level. Just the mere understanding of the phrase “blue house” has gotten something into your head.

Despite your best effort, you can’t pretend you haven’t understood these words. That is reflected in areas of your brain that are reasonably easy to discriminate now. But at a certain point, I'm quite confident we’ll have a machine where you’ll be able to say what phrase did he just hear, and it’s going to kick out “blue house” and it’s going to kick it for you, and it’s going to kick it out for me. That’s mindreading.

Tim Ferriss: That’s amazing. As a language learning fanatic, that could have some incredible applications for communication, let alone thought detection. I want to take a step back. I love talking about this stuff but there are so many subject areas that the neuroscience touches on that the science or the scientific method touches upon.

But taking it down to a more fundamental level, because you and I both have the experience of being misquoted rampantly in the media, or having the game of telephone where someone quotes you out of context and then something takes on a life of its own; what are the beliefs that you do hold that are the most controversial in, let’s just say, the last several years? Just so people coming into this who may be familiar with reading about you secondhand or third hand can get a baseline on some of the things that you believe are very hotly debated?

Tim Ferriss: This is across the board in all my work. We’re not talking about neuroscience per se, right?

Tim Ferriss: No, this is across the board.

Sam Harris: I've touched many topics and even though there are connections, I see them more or less all of a piece that they can seem quite related.

Tim Ferriss: That’s totally fine.

Sam Harris: I've written about gun control. I've written a lot about the problem of organized religion and the conflict between religion and science.

So I'll just list the most controversial points. One that keeps coming up is my criticism of Islam, especially worried about Islam more so than other religions. I've given my reasons for this ad nauseum. The problem in the current environment is that any focus

on Islam is easily – not easily but it seems to be everywhere attacked as synonymous with bigotry, and bizarrely synonymous with racism, as though being Muslim were being a member of a race.

So the thing to tease out here, the reason that everyone's confused on this point is one, we have one word, religion, which covers this wide range of preoccupations. And it's not a very useful word. It's a word like sports. Sports covers Thai boxing, it covers shuffleboard or curling that has basically no implication of violence or physical fitness.

And not to disparage curlers everywhere but what do Thai boxers and curlers have in common apart from breathing? Not a whole hell of a lot; and yet they're both sports. So if you want to get at what people are actually doing and the kinds of risks they're running, and why they're running these risks and what sort of attributes you need to succeed at these various athletic tasks, you don't get very far just talking about sports.

And the same is true with religion. So we have the religion of Islam, and we have a religion like Jainism, which is an Indian religion that doesn't have that many subscribers. But there's almost nothing in common between these religions except the fact that they both rely on faith in a way that I would argue is totally unjustified to make claims about the nature of reality. But the claims they make are quite different.

The moral attitudes they form on the basis of these claims are completely different. So the Jains, for instance, are truly nonviolent. This is the prototypical religion of peace where the more extreme you get as a Jain, the less violent you become so you can't even kill insects. You worry about killing bacteria. The super extreme Jains wear cheesecloth over their mouths so they don't inhale a bug. They look at the ground continuously when they walk so they don't step on ants.

They're obviously vegetarian and they're just deranged by their commitment not to harm anything no matter what. Now those people are not going to become suicide bombers. No matter how we mistreat the Jains, they're not going to start flying planes into our buildings and they're not going to form a death cult that worships martyrs. It's just not going to happen. You can't make sense of it in light of their core belief.

Tim Ferriss: It's antithetical to the core doctorate.

Sam Harris: Yes. And with Islam by comparison, you have a doctrine of Jihad which really is a doctrine of holy war. You have a doctrine of martyrdom which says the only certain and swift way to get directly into paradise and be with Ala is to be martyred. And it's incumbent upon every Muslim to defend the faith with violence when the faith is attacked. And it's not an accident that people think that cartoonists and novelists should be murdered for blaspheming and that apostates should be killed because the penalty for apostasy under Islam really is death.

If I convert to Islam today, and tomorrow I say I just took another look at the Quran and it's just total bullshit, I'm de-converting right now; the penalty for that is death. And there's no one who can tell you that it isn't except for those who are ignorant or lying about the faith.

So it's totally irrational to be concerned about Islam at this moment in a way that one isn't concerned about Jainism or Buddhism or Mormonism or any other religion. Given the level of white guilt in this world and our understandable commitment to pluralism and multiculturalism, and our guilt over the crimes and errors we've made in our own foreign policy and the previous crimes of Colonialism, it's so easy for people to claim that a criticism of Islam is tantamount to bigotry and racism.

And they get away with it in every liberal newspaper on earth at the moment. They've almost successfully made it impossible to parse this issue and it's a huge problem. So that's the first thing that's hugely controversial in my bio. And then wrapped up in that are lies about positions I've taken.
So for instance in my first book, *The End of Faith,* I talk about essentially the game theoretic problem of nuclear proliferation and the possibility of nuclear war. And this is very brief. It's like two paragraphs I talk about how we have this doctrine of mutually assured destruction with the Soviet Union. And that worked because no significant number of people on either side were eager to die and get to paradise.

I said we're not going to be able to have a doctrine of mutually assured destruction with a regime that has long range nuclear weapons that can reach the major cities of the United States and Europe that is peopled by essentially the Taliban or Al Qaeda or the psychological equivalent of the 19 hijackers. If we're in the presence of people who we are sure are really ready to be martyred and they love death as much as we love life, and believe that's who

we're in the presence of and they have this technology, then the first use of nuclear weapons becomes a matter of life and death.

It's just an obscene situation for us to wander into and we have to anticipate it. That all got summarized by some very unscrupulous people as I call for an immediate first strike on the entire Muslim world and I'm eager to kill 500 million people. There are some people, like real journalists like Chris Hedges or people who used to be real journalists who have gone around telling people that I have called for a nuclear first strike on the Muslim world, which is absolutely untrue. I don't think there's a common thread on me anywhere that doesn't have somebody in it saying this guy wants to drop nuclear bombs on 100 countries.

Tim Ferriss: It's frustrating as someone who feels that they know you and at least has spent time with you.

I feel like one of your gifts is being able to, in many cases, dispassionately and rationally judge the facts or the circumstances and then come to conclusions that you might describe, whether or not they are popular. This makes you a target. And obviously, if it bleeds it leads type of journalism will lead to mischaracterization, which is really unfortunate. There are many things that are sort of artfully omitted.

This was something I heard in the Gerogan podcast episode that may be one of several that you've done, but your thoughts on Malala. I'd be curious to hear you elaborate on that because it's so often omitted. Correct me if I'm wrong, but she was your pick for the Nobel Peace Prize; am I right in saying that?

Sam Harris: Yes, she deserved it more than almost anyone I could think of. But I think it's also a very good thing she didn't get it because her security concerns would be even worse as a result.

It's amazing. These are the things people don't want to really reflect on. When she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, her popularity in Pakistan went way down and the Taliban has kept asserting they were going to kill her, and she would be even more of a target had she won it. I said she was the best thing to come out of the Muslim world in 1,000 years.

I think she is just an absolute hero and someone who deserves all the celebration she's received. This is the thing that reveals what's so crazy about this whole Islamophobia meme, this idea that criticism of Islam is tantamount to some kind of bigotry or an

animus against Muslims as people. Everything I say about Islam I'm saying about the doctrine of Islam and its consequences on the behavior of people and their thinking.

But this has nothing to do with being bigoted against Muslims as people, and certainly not bigoted against dark skinned people or Arab people. One of my main concerns about Islam is the amount of suffering visited upon Muslim women throughout the developing world. So people like Malala, she was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman for the crime of going to school.

What scares me about that situation so much is that in most circumstances you'd think any guy who can do that must be a psychopath; he must be some guy like James Holmes, or Adam Lanza or either one of these spree killers we have here who represents nothing other than his own psychopathology. But that's not true. I don't think anything specific about this Taliban gunman but what I know is that it's statistically impossible that all Jihadists are psychopaths.

And we know enough about the biographies of many of these men to know that these are not low functioning, depressed, suicidal people who have nothing to live for. These are functionally the quarterback of the football team has lots of opportunity in life, and he may have a degree as an engineer but then he also decides that dying in defense of the faith and getting to paradise is the best use of his life.

And oppressing women who essentially have no other purpose in life but to reflect well on the honor of their man, oppressing them is the totally rational thing to do and the necessary thing to do. So yes, I think Malala is a great symbol and deserves all the praise she's gotten.

The reason she is celebrated to the degree she is, however, apart from her obvious virtues as a speaker and a person is that she has not repudiated Islam. She is Muslim and a believer and still just a kid in many respects. But someone who is very much like her who is often vilified on the political left is my friend Dion Herste Alli, who is a Somali woman who emigrated to Holland, fleeing a forced marriage when she was 20, very quickly learned Dutch and got a degree in political science and became a member of the Dutch Parliament.

There in Parliament she fought for the rights of Muslim women living in Holland who were living with men who had imported all

these same practices of female genital mutilation and other forms of coercion.

[Inaudible] Ion's murder was pinned to his chest with a knife. She has ever since lived in essentially perpetual flight from theocrats who want to kill her. And also, under the perpetual shadow of criticism from liberals who attack her as a bigot because she says in very much the same terms I'm expressing here, there's a unique problem with Islam at this moment in history; that Islam is not just like every other religion. It is certainly not a religion of peace.

And all the oppression we see of women in the Muslim world is not an accident. It actually has a very strong scriptural foundation. For the crime of saying those things, as a woman who came from Somalia who suffered herself female genital mutilation and has been running from bearded men who want to kill her, she still doesn't have the right to say that.
You might have noticed that she was just invited and then disinvited by Brandeis University. She was offered an honorary degree and then there was a protest by a handful of Muslim organizations and they disinvited her and removed the honorary degree. Our liberal institutions are getting bullied by theocrats under the guise of political correctness and multiculturalism and it's depressing.

Tim Ferriss: I've observed this particularly, for lack of a better description, the people who are most worried of being labeled racists themselves, liberal white males, are the first to dog pile on people almost in a new form of McCarthyism to label others racist. This is sort of the ultimate copout in terms of character assassination in a lot of ways.

If we take that behavior, which is becoming very, very common, and it then becomes this horrible sort of self perpetuating phenomenon where people are more and more disinclined to speak out against things they think to be wrong for fear of being labeled a racist or whatnot; if this trend continues unabated, where does that take us? Where do you think that's going to end up? Where it's like alright, no cartoons, no this, no teddy bears. When you extrapolate this out, if there are people who intervene to try to correct this madness on some level, what happens? Where do we end up?

Sam Harris: To some degree we've slid halfway there, I think. And I've argued this at one point on my blog in a piece. I think the title was "The Freedom to Offend an Imaginary God," which got a fair amount of

play at some point when it came out. Something had happened in the news – now forget what – and I wrote about it there.

The point I made is we actually have already forfeited our free speech on this topic voluntarily. We've just given it away with both hands. We technically still have free speech. An example I gave in this piece is just think of the play, *The Book of Mormon,* and imagine trying to stage a similar play about Islam. What would have happened? So what happened with the Book of Mormon is the Mormon church wasn't happy with it and the way they protested is they took out ads in *Playbill* for the Mormon faith, which is a totally cute, good natured maneuver to try to trumpet the virtues of their religious bamboozlement in the context of its criticism in this play.

But no one can seriously argue that Trey Parker and Matt Stone could have staged a play about Islam when they put Mohammed on their cartoon, South Park, they put him in a bear suit. I don't know if you remember this but there was a bear who was supposed to be Mohammed in a bear suit. Even that had to get taken off the air because of the security concerns raised at Comedy Central. So we have been successfully bullied into self-censorship on this topic. It has a huge cost.

When those Danish cartoons were published, there was not a magazine in the United States who would publish them except for one, at *Free Inquiry* which is this tiny, atheist magazine. Even that was removed from the stands at every Borders in the country. Television stations wouldn't show these cartoons.

No one could see how benign these cartoons were because in all the controversy about them, we wouldn't show the cartoons to ourselves because we were so afraid of the consequences. And yet, they were genuinely newsworthy because the thing to have recognized about those cartoons is they were totally benign. These were the most boring cartoons anyone's ever seen, and yet people were being killed in dozens of countries over them; literally riots and embassy burnings. We had this crazy double standard where we have politicians saying no, this has nothing to do with Islam. Islam is really a religion of peace.

And yet, the same politicians at the same moment are beefing up security on their embassies, and closing embassies and taking heroic measures not to be the object of violence that they know was coming because of how fanatical millions about millions of Muslims are in dozens – scores, really – of countries. And this self

censorship is not just happening in the developing world or in Europe, that arguably has a more radicalized Muslim population.

It's happening in the States. I have security concerns. They're nothing like someone like my friend Dion's or Malala's but it's people see what a hassle it is to deal with the consequences of making sense on this issue. The hassle ranges from the real security concerns where you have to take steps not to get injured or killed, to just the hassle of being criticized as a racist by people who just haven't thought this through, or people who are just cynically using that angle to defame you

Tim Ferriss: Got it. That makes sense. I want to shift gears just a little bit because a lot of these are very interrelated. There's the anti religion canon of work that you have, which you're very well known for. And correct if this quote isn't correct but there is a quote here: "There's nothing irrational about seeking the states of mind that lie at the core of many religions: compassion, awe, devotion, feelings of oneness are surely among the most valuable experiences a person an have."

Assuming that's true, and you and I of course have talked about altered states and you've written about altered states, I'd love to just dig into that quote and look at the alternate approaches that you've perhaps explored or researched related to achieving some of these valuable states.

Sam Harris: In the beginning of my career, as you point out, I spent a lot of time criticizing religion and criticizing it for its obvious harms. but one of its harms that's not so obvious is that it keeps us talking about this positive end of human experience; the self transcendence and highly normative states of consciousness in 1st Century or 7th Century terms. Most people most of the time think the only way to capture "spiritual experience" and one's interest in it, and the ways in which one would explore it is to some degree indulge the myth intoxicated language of the Iron Age.

There's just no way to talk about it otherwise. Science hasn't given us the tools to talk about it. Secular culture doesn't give us the tools to talk about it. And so we're left talking about being Christians and Muslims and Jews and Buddhists and organize our lives around the incompatible truth claims and doctrines that you find in those religions.

And very smart people who are secular in every other way think there's no alternative to that. One of my main interests now is in articulating an alternative because clearly, there are extraordinary experiences that people have, and many of these experiences do lie at the core of many of our religions. And so to take Jesus ass an obvious example, who knows who Jesus actually was, and what is historically true in the New Testament.

But let's just say for argument's sake that there really was a guy who loved his neighbor as himself and had this extraordinarily charismatic effect on the people around him and bore witness to this possibility of a kind of radical self-transcendence. Clearly, whatever true there is deeper than Christianity and it's not reducible to Christianity.

In fact, Christianity has to be a distortion of that truth. And we know this because Jesus isn't the only person who's had that experience. There's the Buddha and countless contemplatives through the ages can attest to this experience of, for lack of a better phrase, unconditional love. And that has some relationship to what I would call self-transcendence, which I think is even more important.

So there's this phenomenon that's clearly deeper than any of our provincial ways of talking about it in the context of religion. There's a deeper truth of human psychology and the nature of consciousness and I think we need to explore it in terms that don't require that we lie to ourselves or our children about the nature of reality and that we don't indulge this divisive language of picking teams in the contest among religions.

My next book that's coming out in the fall is called *Waking Up; a Guide to Spirituality Without Religion.* It's about the phenomenon of self transcendence and the ways in which people can explore it without believing anything on insufficient evidence. One of the principle ways is through various techniques of meditation, with mindfulness being the most useful one to adopt first.

There's also the use of psychedelic drugs, which is not the same as meditation but if nothing else, it reveals that the human nervous system is plastic in a very important way, which means your experience in the world can be radically transformed. You are tending to be who you were yesterday by virtue of various habit patterns and physiological homeostasis and other things that are keeping you very recognizable to yourself.

But it's possible to have a very different experience and it's possible to do that through pharmacology, it's possible to do that through some kind of crisis or it's possible to do that through a deliberate form of training like meditation. I think it's crucial to do because we all want to be as happy and as fulfilled and as free of pointless suffering as we can possibly be. All of our suffering and all of our unhappiness is a product of how our minds are in every moment. So if there's a way to use the mind itself to improve one's capacity for moment-to-moment well being, which I'm convinced there is, then this should be potentially of interest to everybody.

Tim Ferriss: A couple quick questions on all of those subjects. The first I'd like to touch on, meditation – and we can probably touch on this briefly – is something we've discussed before. You, along with many other people who are high performers in their respective fields have recommended meditation. So I have been meditating, partially in thanks to your influence, for some time now. Is it safe to say that the meditation that you most frequently recommend to novices is Vipassana meditation?

Sam Harris: Yes.

Tim Ferriss: Why is that? I've experimented with a number of different types; transcendental meditation, Vipassana of course, and have taken a number of courses. Why that selection? Why that choice?

Sam Harris: It has a few obvious strengths that are actually not shared by any other technique I know of. The first is that it needn't presuppose any belief about anything.

You don't have to develop a fondness for the iconography of Buddhism. You don't have to care about the Buddha; you don't have to believe in rebirth or karma. None of the doctrine of Buddhism need be adopted in order to get the practice off the ground, and it never need be adopted if it never makes any senses, which much of it doesn't. You don't have to become a Buddhist to do this and you don't have to add anything strategically to your experience as a mechanism by which to meditate.

So you're not adding a mantra, you're not visualizing something that isn't there, you don't have to look at a candle flame or do anything to your environment by way of artifice to create the circumstance of meditation. All you're doing is paying exquisitely close and nonjudgmental attention to whatever you're experiencing anyway.

And the first technique you use to be able to train that capacity is to focus on your breath, which you always have with you and it's just an easy object to focus on. But it doesn't even have to be the breath. Mindfulness is just that quality of mind which allows you to pay attention to sights and sounds and sensations and even thoughts themselves without being lost in thought and without grasping at what is pleasant and pushing what is unpleasant away.

So just being wide open to the next sensory or emotional experience that comes careening into consciousness; that is mindfulness. So in some sense it's not even a practice. It is just the state of not being distracted and being aware. It feels like a practice in the beginning because it's hard to do. We're so deeply conditioned to be lost in thought and to be having this conversation with ourselves from the moment we fall asleep, there's just chatter in the mind.

And it's so captivating that we're not even aware of it. We're essentially in a dream state and it's through this veil of thought that we go about our day and perceive our environments. But we're just talking to ourselves non-stop. Until you can break that spell and begin to notice thoughts themselves as objects of consciousness just arising and passing away, you can't even pay attention to your breath or anything else with any kind of clarity. Initially you have to develop some kind of concentration and get mindfulness tuned up so you can pay attention.

But once you can pay attention, it doesn't matter what you pay attention to. There's nothing in principle that is outside the meditation practice. It's nothing that's in principle of distraction. You don't need a quiet environment. You can have loud construction noises going across the street and it's just as good a circumstance for meditation as anything else.

And so those are the main reasons why I think in terms of being designed for export outside of Buddhist culture or religious culture generally and becoming a tool for our intellectual lives in a secular, scientific context, I think there's nothing like it.

Tim Ferriss: What resources would you suggest for someone who wants to try to educate themselves or dive in as a novice in terms of books, resources, websites for mindfulness and meditation?

Sam Harris: I give a few on my blog. I wrote an article a couple of years ago entitled "How to Meditate." If people Google that, they'll see. I link to a few books and I tell people where they can go on retreats,

and I briefly describe the practice. I also have given a couple of guided mindful meditations I've put on sound cloud, which are on my website as well.

There are other guided meditations out there that people can use. In the beginning, people find that very helpful to have somebody's voice essentially reminding them to not be lost in thought every few seconds. What happens in the beginning for people, and this happened to me in my practice for at least a year before I went on intensive silent retreat, I was sitting for an hour a day or so just on my own. I was 20 or so. Essentially I was just sitting cross-legged and thinking. It's so hard to notice that you're lost in thought that by tendency you're just not going to notice it. And so in the beginning, people think they're meditating and they're really just lost in thought.

It wasn't until I did it at my first ten-day [inaudible] retreat where I broke through and connected with the practice in a way where I realized all of that that has preceded this was really my thinking I was meditating and not meditating. And there are other landmarks along my journey. There was a shift where I realized what I thought was happening really was not happening as I thought it was. It's a very common experience. In the beginning, using a guided meditation can help cut through the chatter in a way many people can't summon on their own.

Tim Ferriss: Let me take a sidestep, which is people ask me what blogs do you read. There really aren't many blogs that I read consistently, aside from a handful. I read your blog and the posts you put up because they're like feature magazine articles, in many cases. There's one you wrote in 2011 called "Drugs and the Meaning of Life," and you've written about this subject before.

I have found certain hallucinogens, in particular, to be very therapeutically valuable for cutting through the chatter and turning that off and bringing present state awareness to you in a very high definition way, when used responsibly. As you point out in this piece, it's not to say everyone should take psychedelics but one of the lines here that needs to be read in context, of course, but I have a daughter who will one day take drugs. Of course I'll do everything in my power to see that she chooses her drugs wisely but a life without drugs is neither foreseeable nor I think desirable."

Then you obviously go through how you might guide her to view these different subjects. One of the closing lines in this paragraph

is, “But is she does not try a psychedelic like psilocybin or LSD at least once in her adult life, I will worry that she may have missed one of the most important rites of passage a human being can experience.”

I agree with this. I'd be curious to hear what particular drugs or psychedelic drugs or substances you’ve found most therapeutically valuable in your own life and how you suggest people think about this. Obviously, you have to put the potential legal ramifications in perspective, also but what have you personally found most valuable and how so?

Sam Harris: Again you found another paragraph where I was happy to court controversy. That is saying I'll be disappointed if my daughter doesn’t drop acid. The caveat here, and it’s the caveat that comes out several times in that piece…

Tim Ferriss: Which everybody should read in full; I'm not trying to pull anything out of context. I just don’t want to read the whole thing to them now.

Sam Harris: I stand by every word but there are a lot of words in there. The caveat really is I have an increasingly healthy respect for what can go wrong on psychedelics.

And wrong in a way that I think has lasting consequences for people. There’s a lot that can go right with psychedelics, and to some degree I think they’re still indispensible for a lot of people. They certainly seem to be indispensable for me. I don't think I ever would have discovered meditation without having taken, in particular, MDMA. And MDMA and mushrooms and LSD all played a role for me in unveiling an inner landscape that was worth exploring.

But for that pharmacological advantage, my consciousness was such that I looked inside, I saw nothing of interest and that’s sort of the end of the conversation. You tell me that there’s something profound to witness about the nature of my own mind, I don’t see it.

I just want to get on with the next thing in the world that seems fun to do or seems likely to lead to my success. I just was a skin encapsulated ego who was just trying to get on with life and succeed, and thought he was very clever and didn’t have the contentalive tools to see much of anything when he paid attention.

That’s a situation that many people are in, and many smart people are in that position.

I'm constantly meeting scientists and philosophers and highly articulate people who spend a lot of time thinking about the nature of the human mind. When I talk to them about meditation or really any of these philosophical issues for which an ability to pay attention to the nature of your own consciousness is an advantage, so something like free will or the nature of the self, or the possibility of self transcendence.

I'm meeting people who have, as far as I can tell, no ability to notice their inner lives. Some of them seem simply not to have inner lives. These are people who are very much the way I was when I was 18 before I had had any experience with any of this. You’re lost in thought and you don’t know it, and that phrase “lost in thought” means nothing to you and you don’t have the tools by which to do anything with it even if it meant something to you.

You’re cognitively closed to the data. And the data are there to be found. The most important point of which is the self you think you are is an illusion. This sense of being a self riding around in your head, this feeling of “I,” this feeling that everyone calls I is an illusion that can be disconfirmed in a variety of ways.

Its boundaries can be transformed in ways or can be completely cut through and vanish for a moment or a minute or potentially for the rest of one’s life. So it’s vulnerable to inquiry. And that inquiry can take many forms. But the unique power of psychedelics; there’s a unique power and a unique liability. The unique power and liability is that they are guaranteed to work in some way. This is a point that Terence McKenna always made. Terence McKenna was a huge booster of psychedelics, a very articulate one, and he poo-pooed any other spiritual methodology; meditation and chanting and yoga, anything else that people brought to him saying can’t you get the same benefit without drugs?

His point was you teach someone to meditate, you teach them yoga, there’s no guarantee whatsoever that something's going to happen. They could spend a week doing it, they could spend a year doing it; who knows what’s going to happen. They may just get bored and they’re going to wander away from this thing not knowing that there was a “there” there. If I give you five grams of mushrooms or 300 micrograms of LSD and tell you to sit on that couch for an hour, you are guaranteed to have a radical transformation in your experience.

It doesn’t matter who you are. This freight train of significance is going to come bearing down on you, and we just have to watch the clock and know it’s going to happen. That’s a fact. That’s the advantage because you’re guaranteed to realize at the end of that episode that it is possible to have a radically different experience than you tend to have. And if you have a good experience, you’re going to realize that human life can be just unutterably sublime.

That it’s possible to feel at home in the universe in a way that you couldn’t have previously imagined. But if you have a bad experience and the bad experiences are every bit as bad as the good experiences are good, you will have this harrowing encounter with madness. It’s as pathological as any lunatic who’s wondering the streets raving to himself and completely cut off from others.

You can have that experience, and helpful it goes away and in virtually every case it does go away. It’s still rough and it still has consequences for people. Some of the consequences are good. I happen to think that it gives you a basis for compassion, in particular for people who are suffering mental illness that you couldn’t otherwise have.

It’s not an experience that I'd be eager to have again. My healthy respect for the power of psychedelics has led me to not take many for many years. It’s been years since I've taken anything and my use tapered off in my 20s when I got into meditation and was spending more time on retreat, and beginning to feel I was hitting the center of the bull’s eye in a way with meditation that I was certainly not guaranteed to with psychedelics.

I basically stopped using everything and just practiced meditation. But there’s no question I wouldn’t have become sufficiently interested in meditation but for the experiences I had on LSD and MDMA in particular.

Tim Ferriss: Have you had any experience with DMT or ayahuasca?

Sam Harris: I haven’t. DMT is the one thing now that would be tempting because I haven’t done it, and it has such a short half-life.
I think the whole trip is something like ten minutes long.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, if not shorter; five to ten minutes.

Sam Harris: It would be tempting but I haven’t done it. What about you? Have you done either?

Tim Ferriss: I have tried DMT, which I believe is dimethyltryptamine, which is sometimes, if I'm not mistaken, referred to as the spirit molecule. It's become an area of research although some of it might not qualify as what you would consider research. I'm very fascinated by DMT. My experience with it was unique and not terrifying. I'd like to actually come back to the fear component.

It was a very manageable experience, complete physical and psychological disassociation where there was just, for me at least, pure white. It was just pure white and extremely acute hearing. What element of that hearing was actually external stimuli and what was hallucination, I can't say.

It was a good experience. I don't feel compelled to repeat it, and I'm sure you've had those experiences. Ayahuasca in the more extended ceremonial context is something that I do have plans to experience. I'll report back when I have more to report but I've found that at least for me, the form factor of the substance of course has an impact on your experience. That can be related to the ritual or the process of consuming it. But it can also be pharmacological in so much as I drink yerba mate tea very often, and became a huge fan while I lived in Argentina.

But I don't typically consume the cold, ready to drink yerba mates or the pre-bagged yerba mate that you steep as you would a normal cup of tea.

I go through the process of putting the chippings, if you want to call them that, into the gourd with the sticks and everything and I sip it over a period of hours. I feel like the biochemical effect is very different from, say, mainlining it by chugging 16 ounces. I felt like the DMT was the kind of crack cocaine version of the ayahuasca experience.

And so I've noticed for myself, at least, that a slightly longer period of time using a higher dose, 5 to 9 grams – that's a very personal thing, obviously; I'm not a doctor and I don't play one on the internet – as a reset with psilocybin has a huge, persistent therapeutic effect for a period of months, in some cases. I'm hoping to get that from ayahuasca in a way that I did not with the five to ten minute DMT experience. So that's where I currently stand.

But I'd be curious to know if you have any opinions on how someone can decrease the likelihood of having a horrifying, negatively life impacting experience with hallucinogens. I've been

of the thought for awhile now that lucid dreaming could provide some degree of rehearsal and practice with separating reality from irreality or objective truth from that which you're creating in your own mind to give you a slightly greater degree of comfort when you go into a psychedelic state.

Whether or not that's true is, of course, up for debate. But do you have any thoughts on what characterizes the people, aside from some type of latent psychosis or split personality disorder, what can someone do or what should they do prior to a psychedelic experience to minimize the likelihood of having a hugely negative experience.

Sam Harris: It's something I really don't have an answer for that I'm confident in.

I would just be parroting the standard advice about set and setting and your mental set going in, your physical setting and your social setting obviously do a lot to set the trajectory of any experience. There's a lot of uncertainty in there. I've had experiences where my set and setting seemed perfect and I just got catapulted into hell for reasons I've never understood and there's no way to go back and understand them. I have had absolutely blissful experiences under conditions that were more or less identical.

What I did find, though, is once I started having negative experiences, I continued to have them. It's like the door to hell had been left ajar whereas previously it just hadn't existed.

I distinctly recall what it was like to hear about bad trips on LSD and to have no idea what that could possibly mean. I had done LSD maybe seven or ten times at that point, and this is again in my early 20s. I was a very committed, serious psychonaut, someone who's really doing this not recreationally but really doing it to discover something about the nature of my own mind and to get free of suffering that I couldn't really see otherwise getting free of.

At one point I was taking acid I think once a month. I was an undergraduate at Stanford and was on the side, basically, reinventing the '60s for myself. Reading about Eastern philosophy, and I had just started learning to meditate. I hadn't yet gone on my first extended retreat.

I used the isolation tank once. I had virtually no guidance apart from books and I was just trying to explore all of this. I would say for my first ten trips on LSD, there was not even the subtlest

intimation of the possibility of feeling bad on this drug. I just got launched into an experience of just the most diaphanous and gorgeous profundity where the world was just this shimmering reality bathed in energy and I was a part of that energy. All of the language of traditional mysticism made sense in a good way, without any of the dark night of the soul stuff coming in.

So you picture going into each subsequent trip, you would think now my set and setting have to be perfect. Because my expectation is that I'm going to just recapitulate this perfectly sublime and happy experience. I'm taking the same batch of LSD. I've now got this down to a science in terms of where I want to be and who I want to be with while I do this. I'm in beautiful nature. I'm in Meir Woods or I'm just alone in my apartment listening to good music or whatever it is but I'm safe and there's nothing sketchy that's going to set me off.

And I've never had a bad trip. But there was some first trip that went haywire and then, subsequently, no matter how good the highs were in my subsequent trips, there was always something where I saw wow, it could have just gone sideways there, or did go sideways for some period of time.

And then the cost began to seem potentially too high for me. I felt like I had already gotten the benefit of essentially having advertised to this possibility of being much wiser and happier than I tend to be. So then I just decided I would go at it through another door of meditation. Like you, I felt like the half life of the positive effect of these good experiences was on the order of weeks and months. But I also felt like the half life of the negative effects was just as long. I had one bad trip and three months later I was still dealing with the neurophysiological consequences of that, and the interpersonal consequences.

Tim Ferriss: Was that LSD or what was the substance?

Sam Harris: Yes, that was LSD. It really seemed like a crapshoot. It just seemed like you were going to spin the wheel and see whether you were going to be a saint or a madman for the next ten hours. Obviously, you had a preference for which it would be but not much control over which it would be. The other issue for me with psychedelics is that what now I consider to be the crucial insight that is the center of the bull's eye for what I would call a spirituality that is coincident with a 21st century psychology and secular science, the center of the comes to the nature of the self

and whether or not it's an illusion, and whether or not one can cut through that illusion at will.

If, when you look for yourself, you fail to find it in a way that is clear and compelling and frees you from the tyranny of your own thoughts and the suffering you were experiencing a moment ago, that's the center of the for me. The ability to do that is available through the practice of meditation. Psychedelics don't address that issue in a precise way. You can be hurled past any self problem on the right drug and can experience this glorious freedom from self.

But one thing that you get with that is you get this understanding which I think is a fallacious understanding that somehow freedom is dependent on altered states of consciousness. That unless you're seeing everything in Technicolor or it's the peak of the fireworks show, you're not going to be experiencing the most profound spiritual experience you can have.

And certainly you're not going to experience it once you come back down and everything is normal again. The insight into selflessness that you get through meditation is that ordinary waking consciousness, precisely the consciousness in which we're having this conversation and which I can seem my phone, and if you tell me to turn up the volume, I can do that. I can get my keys, and I can get in the car and I can drive safely. Ordinary consciousness is already completely free of self.

And that can be recognized. The place you want to be able to run that experiment is in ordinary waking consciousness. You don't need to be experiencing this synesthesia for the first time on ayahuasca and, as Terrence McKenna often described, seeing people's meaning visually beheld and have a complete transformation of your sensory apparatus in order to experience the relevant loss of self.

So that's the other reason why I'm more focused on meditation than psychedelics at the moment.

Tim Ferriss: That is a topic I would love to expand upon maybe in a round two. I always enjoy our conversations. I want to let you get back to everything you need to get back to. What I would encourage everyone to do is read Sam's material directly. Listen to some of the debates or watch some of the debates. Go to SamHarris.org. the post that I referenced earlier, "Drugs and the Meaning of Life," is one of many different articles that I would suggest checking out. Another one is *The Riddle of the Gun,* which maybe we'll get into

next time we chat. This is always fun for me. Sam, we need to hang out more.

Sam Harris: Yes, likewise.

Tim Ferriss: Let’s have a round two sometime. No huge rush but it would be fun to grab a glass of wine sometime in the near future, as well.

Sam Harris: That’d be great. I look forward to it.

Tim Ferriss: Alright, Sam. Thank you very much and I'll talk to you soon.

Sam Harris: Yeah, take care, bro.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, bye-bye.