

Demetri Kofinas: 00:00:00 Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you listen to the show on your Apple Podcast app, remember, you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. With that, please enjoy this week's episode.

In the opening pages of what is considered the founding work of history in Western literature, Herodotus tells the story of King Croesus, the late ruler of Lydia, who governed the lands of Western Anatolia in the mid-6th century BC. At the height of his reign, he was visited by Solon, the lawgiver, who had just laid the foundations for Athenian democracy. "Stranger of Athens," inquired Croesus, "we have heard much of thy wisdom and of thy travels through many lands, from love of knowledge and a wish to see the world. I am curious, therefore, to inquire of thee whom of all the men that thou hast seen, thou deemest the most happy the most happy?"

Croesus, expecting to hear the sound of his own name sung from Solon's lips, was angered by the Athenian's reply as he proceeded to extol the happiness of lesser men, lacking the trappings of wealth and empire that Croesus himself so readily possessed. "What, stranger of Athens, is my happiness then so utterly said it not by thee, that thou dost not even put me on a level with private men?" In his reply, Solon uttered words that would not only haunt Croesus, but which would obsess the whole of Athenian society for centuries to come. «Μηδένα προ του τέλους μακάριζε». Only at the end can the weight of a life's worth be truly measured.

Not long after Solon's visit, Croesus' kingdom was invaded and conquered by Cyrus the Great, ruler of the Persian Empire. Condemned to death, it is said that Croesus yelled out from the flaming pyre, atop which his body burned, three times the name of the Athenian lawgiver. It was not until that moment that he understood the message that Solon had so dutifully delivered. By then there was nothing left of his life to salvage only tears, charred bones and ashes. This week on Hidden Forces, Rebecca Goldstein, philosophy, virtue, and what makes a human life worth living.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:03:07 Rebecca Goldstein, welcome to Hidden Forces.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:03:09 Hi, it's good to be here.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:03:10 I was just telling you before we began recording that I wrote the intro to this show uncharacteristically before the episode was done and I was thinking about the Ancient Greeks and how to capture this issue of ethics. You've commented on this before. The Greeks were haunted by the specter of death and by the capricious nature of life and the fact that fairness didn't exist as a concept for the Greeks. Justice existed, but this idea that "that's not fair," -- their relationship to their gods highlighted that.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:03:50 Their mythology is replete with stories of tragic misfortunes that befell humans who happened to attract the ire of a god, by no fault of their own. Actaeon, the hunter, who was torn to pieces by his own dogs after having been turned into a stag by Artemis who saw him naked totally by accident. There's no fairness to that.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:04:11 Yeah, especially, they're gods. You put your finger on it because the Greek gods -- they're dreadful. They're really dreadful.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:04:19 Dreadful.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:04:20 They're greedy, they're lusty. You walk through any--

Demetri Kofinas: 00:04:23 The worst type of person.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:04:24 They really are, except they're much more powerful and they never die, basically. So, their religion was very apotropaic, warding off evil. You didn't just try to keep ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:04:37 You didn't want to piss them off.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:04:38 You didn't want to piss them off. You didn't want to compete with them. That's always a huge mistake and nothing good ever came from that. You don't really want to attract too much of their attention. So, what's so interesting about them is because something big was going on in not just Greece during this time, but many parts of the globe, right? In China, in India, in Persia, and up in those Judean hills, what's called the Axial Age, that these normative paradigms were being forged, Hinduism and Taoism and Confucianism and the Abrahamic view and Greek philosophy. You wonder why ... I'm leaving out a bunch of other religions that I should be remembering.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:05:20 Oh, we're going to leave out so much here.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:05:20 Buddhism! Yeah. But all of the religions that speak enough to this existential question, which is what am I doing here? Do I have any purpose? Is there any meaning? Do I matter? What can I do to make myself matter? I think all of these normative paradigms are speaking to that existential need that we have to somehow justify the seriousness with which we can't help taking our lives, just to pursue our lives. We've got to take them seriously.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:05:48 But with these extra big brains that we have, we can step outside and say, "Really? Is it really worth it?" All of these paradigms were forged and the Greeks, they had their awful gods, but they don't try to answer this existential question in terms of their gods. Their gods are too unreliable. They're dicks.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:06:07 They are dicks.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:06:07 Yeah, they're dicks.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:06:07 That is the exact thing I thought about. I said, "They're dicks." They were just dicks.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:06:15 This is what they were. They were like Harvey Weinstein, bigger, and never dying, right? So, yeah. I think that this was kind of the preconditions for philosophy for this kind of secular reason way of trying to figure out how to make our lives worth something. Right? Socrates' statement that the unexamined life is not worth living, this is a normative statement. This is what you have to do in order to have a life worth living. The Judaic, or I should say Judaic, but the Abrahamic answer, "Well, you were made in the image of God. You've got to live in a way that will please God."

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:06:55 So, these very different approaches but what is so interesting about the Greeks is I think because their gods were such dicks that they just left that out of it and went about it in a different way, or at least some proper subset of them did. I don't want to say the Greeks were all philosophers. They weren't. They killed Socrates.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:07:15 They killed Socrates, which most people don't know. I think a lot of people have heard the name Socrates. I imagine most people don't even know who Socrates is. Certainly, the people in this audience do. But even of those who do know who he is, few, I think, know the story.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:07:29 Yeah. It's an incredible story that he was put on trial for just philosophizing in Athens, the most cultivated and intellectual of all of the city-states.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:07:42 For asking questions that pissed people off-

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:07:44 Exactly.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:07:46 ... for asking questions that made people uncomfortable, that challenged the existing notions that the Athenians held so dear, and their exceptionalism, he challenged their exceptionalism.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:07:55 Exactly. Exactly right. That is something they really ... I call them in my last book, it was the ethos of the extraordinary. To be is to be special. Otherwise, you're nothing.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:08:07 Which goes back to this question of mattering, what matters.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:08:10 Yes. So, I think that's the question, the driving question of the Axial Age, how we get all of these different normative paradigms, the Abrahamic, Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Greek philosophy. But the non-philosophical Greeks, the ones who put Socrates on trial and voted him to die, a brimming cup of hemlock he got for his efforts, you have to be extraordinary. The way to be extraordinary is to do something big to be remembered. Glory. Fame.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:08:45 If you can't do it yourself, you participate in a glorious city-state and that's what happens. Well, who knows? So, how dare you criticize? It's always dangerous to criticize the presumptions that make a person feel that his life is worth living. What did he say? He said the unexamined life is not worth living. You are not living in an examined life. You are not living a life worth living.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:09:11 I think Socrates, we know this through Plato or we assume it through Plato, he had a view of existence in the world that was much more compatible with modern Judeo-Christian ideas than his contemporaries did, the Greeks of the time. Their immortality was, Kleos was, through virtue.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:09:31 Exactly.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:09:32 I had this picture I showed you here of Odysseus where he was crying at the court of the Phaeacians when he heard the bard sing his name and he said, "I haven't been forgotten. My story has lived on-"

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:09:43 That's right.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:09:43 ... "even though they have thought I was dead."

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:09:45 That's right. Exactly. His son, Telemachus, said if he died in battle, that would be fine because his name would live on. But he's just gone, he disappeared. So, yeah. This is to be, yes, you, said Kleos. Fame, glory, to be worthy of being sung by the poets, to be replicated in many mouths ... We have it in our day. We're kind of post-Abrahamic religion now.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:10:11 There's so many commonalities.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:10:11 So many.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:10:12 Those are the things I want to talk about.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:10:13 Yeah, there's just have a large Twitter following or this or that. To be replicated in many mouths. I think to say that you matter, which is what everybody wants to be able to say, that they matter, as long as the basics-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:10:28 That it's not for nothing.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:10:29 It's not for nothing. It takes so much energy--

Demetri Kofinas: 00:10:31 --The suffering is not for nothing.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:10:32 ... and the longing and the fighting and the winning and the losing. It takes so much energy and concentration to pursue human life and it has to matter to you or it's a condition of your pursuing it. But you want to sort of be able to say, "Yeah, and it really does matter." So, when you say something matters, you're saying it's worthy of attention. When somebody says, "Look, that doesn't matter," it means don't pay attention to it. It's just not worth thinking about. So, there's a link, I think, between saying that something matters or someone matters and attention.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:11:08 So, a very natural way to validate that you matter is to be paid attention to. You see with children. I have a grandchild and when he was ...I went to visit him when he was a month old and he's just making this eye contact with me. He wants to know.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:11:31 The kids are the best when they do that. Oh, my god.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:11:31 Oh, man. That's amazing. He just wants to know that you can see and then that we actually, in terms of our neurophysiology, we have neurons that are dedicated to just being able to tell when somebody's looking directly at us a few centimeters to the side. Those neurons won't fire, other neurons will fire. So we are so attuned to who's paying attention to us.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:11:57 Well, I know you spend a lot of time with chimpanzees. That's how chimpanzees, if I'm not mistaken, convey their desire to mate, female chimpanzees, persistent staring, right?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:12:06 That persistent staring. Yeah. Yeah, you know about me and my chimps, I love those chimps.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:12:11 We could go down all these routes, but the thing I wanted to say is I just want to really kind of let this point sit a moment because I want to see if we can extract more out of it because to me it's so profound and maybe it's because there's so much literature that exists from the Athenians.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:12:27 Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:12:27 And from the Greeks generally but this, not just preoccupation, but obsession with the weight of life, the weight of suffering.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:12:37 Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:12:37 And that they worked through it in their theatrical productions and in their work and in their poetry and that someone like Socrates would challenge it so sort of brutally in that way and make a mockery of some of those things.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:12:52 Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:12:52 When I was younger, I didn't appreciate because I was coming from a Western Judeo-Christian perspective and I told you before in an email exchange that for me Socrates' approach was a godsend. It was like this is it, I found a way to make sense of the world to reason my way to immortality because I had so much and still do have death anxiety. Nothing crazy, not a Woody Allen situation, but just I think unacknowledged level of anxiety around death which we don't acknowledge in today's society. It's interesting to think about what impact the Christian ideas and conceptions of the afterlife because their approach is don't worry about it. Just believe and don't worry about it whereas the Greeks worried about it.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:13:36 Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:13:37 They dealt with it and it was a difficult burden that they carried around and just thinking of it that way and understanding that Socrates, his prodding's, his questions were *no joke*, they really struck at the heart of what these Athenians were dealing with inside.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:13:54 That's right. Yeah. Yeah. I know. It's interesting that they couldn't really find a way of consoling themselves, their afterlife sucks, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:14:06 Horrific.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:14:07 When Odysseus, speaking about Odysseus'-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:14:09 His mother.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:14:09 When he goes down and then when he sees Achilles and then he goes down to Hades, he has to get some instructions, how to get home from down there and he meets Achilles. Oh, Achilles. You were the most honored among all mortals up above. You must be having a grand old time in Hades. Achilles said, I would rather be a slave. I would rather be the slave of the most miserable taskmaster than to be dead.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:14:35 Yeah, I remember that.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:14:35 Yeah, so they don't think the universe is fair. They don't think the gods are fair. They don't think of the afterlife is fair and all we have is this human life and the only kind of immortality we can have that will show us that we were something rather than nothing is to be glorious and to have people know of us so it won't be as if we never lived at all.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:15:01 I thought you were going to say Agamemnon or his mother and you said Achilles and you know what? That just really highlights it because Achilles was the prototypical hero. He died young on his shield and when he was dead he regretted it.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:15:17 Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:15:17 And that is the conflict, it just highlights the fragility, how fragile the piece that the Greeks had with death was.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:15:24 That's right. And then there's this moment in the Iliad because Achilles, I mean even Socrates in the apology praises Achilles

and if you think about it, it's just a pouting and kicking. He gets his girl taken away, his booty so he pouts in his tent for, like a teenager who's had the car taken away from him and he lets all his comrades die. He's the greatest warrior but he doesn't come to save them and finally, he does. But the reason why does he pray so much? Why does Socrates even praise him? In here, you really get this, what I call this ethos of the exceptional. He says at one point, mother told me, his mother ... like all the great heroes Achilles comes from a metaphysically mixed parents and she's immortal, one parent is mortal and one is immortal. So his mother is a goddess.

- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:16:17 “So, my mother tells me,” -- Thetis was her name, “that two choices await me. If I can live a short but extraordinary life or a long but ordinary life,” -- and he chooses the short but extraordinary life. Because it's extraordinary, he sung, right? The Iliad, the alternative name for The Iliad is song of Achilles. I mean, it's all about Achilles. The first line, o sing, o muses, of Achilles, of the rage of Achilles, right? So there you have it. The reason he's the poster child, the best of all Achaeans they say is because he chose the short but extraordinary life. He was given the choice and therefore, his song were they we can sing of him.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:17:03 What Socrates says to them is, yeah, you do have to be extraordinary, but just getting lots of attention, that's not going to do it. In fact, that's not really important at all. You have to be extraordinary by pursuing wisdom and justice and even if people don't recognize you for this, even if they condemn you to death and serve you hemlock, that's a worthwhile life So it's the cultivation of not kleos, not this external glory, but arête, virtue, excellence, the real, the thing, which can be very private and unacknowledged and unapplauded. That's the lesson of Socrates.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:17:47 Well, interestingly enough. I told you also, again, to bring it back to the introduction which I wrote which literally I wrote after I finished this run down and it's not even part of my original questions, the men that Solon gives o Croesus were not famous men. They were men that had families, lived a long time and died valiantly in battle. They weren't heroes.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:18:07 That's true. Well, though, dying valiantly in battle carried ...
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:18:11 Carry some level of virtue.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:18:12 ... carried a lot of virtue really today.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:18:14 For sure, for sure, but they weren't kings or they weren't ...

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:18:17 That's right.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:18:18 ... mythologized.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:18:19 It's true but any kind of extraordinary will do. Even extreme beauty so, Helen, she's living a worthwhile life according to this pre-Socratic notion because everybody knows her story, right? She also inspires the Iliad. There would be no Iliad without Helen. So to be a great warrior, in any way that you can attract attention, now this I think there were such parallels with our society. I mean the great longing for celebrity that people have and that ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:18:52 Narcissism.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:18:53 Well, it's I would say, I'm more sympathetic towards it because we all want to matter and to attract attention for people to know you exist makes you feel like you matter. It's funny because I was never on any kind of social media at all. Then for the last --

Demetri Kofinas: 00:19:10 You have the mainstream media, Dr. Goldstein. You've been around. You've had ...

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:19:15 I've certainly been around for a long time.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:19:16 You have the mainstream media cover you.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:19:18 But for my last book my publicist, an agent, said you have to do something, Facebook Twitter, something. Then I was Twitter, I don't know, because ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:19:28 Plato at the Googleplex.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:19:29 So that's, yeah. Well, so then I said, "Okay, I'll tweet as Plato so it's Plato on book tour, that's my shtick there. For a while I watched like my followers mounting. I would get like an endorphin kind of ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:19:45 And you compared yourself to other people, obviously. You compared yourself to other prominent people in your field and said how many followers they have.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:19:52 I did or like my far more popular husband. It just wipes me out. I thought this is fascinating, like we are so wired and it was like a

biological reaction to it, which I just found it's data. It's interesting

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:20:12 How many does Steven have? When's the last time you checked. Your husband is Steven Pinker for those who don't know.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:20:18 I don't know. Steven Pinker, yeah. I don't know. There are people who have more. I don't know. I don't know. I don't compare anymore.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:20:24 You write so fascinating. We could spend even more time just talking about the Greeks and we hardly touched on philosophy and hopefully, we'll ...
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:20:32 This is ... in a way, it's ... Everything's philosophy, really.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:20:35 Yeah, yeah, yeah. What is philosophy?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:20:37 What is philosophy?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:20:38 What is philosophy? I've got you here. I've got you on the hot seat. What is philosophy?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:20:43 As you know, I mean, I'm very, very interested in math and in science. At first, I thought that's what I was going to go into and I still try to keep up with all of that. I think to be ...
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:20:55 Pure mathematics, you were studying then.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:20:56 Yes, and physics. For the kind of philosopher I want to be, it's just important for me to keep up with science. Anyway, I love it. But what I think of philosophy is a way of trying to get the biggest picture of everything and that's why I think it's very important to know science because science is part of the picture. Our view of the world and of ourselves in the world, which is basically what we want, where are we and what are we and what are we supposed to be doing with what we are for the short period of time that we have.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:21:32 Science is part of the answer to that, where are we? What is this world like and what are we? Are we part of this physical nature? I mean, we have to know the science to be able to answer that but then, what do we make out of all of these other questions that we have trying to reconcile all of the information that we have. Which intuitions can we keep? Which have to go? The question then first started me, this question of what kind of

universe am I living in? Is it a universe in which morality makes sense if there's a God who allows innocent children to be killed? Can that be a universe that makes moral sense?

- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:22:12 That original question that bothered me so much as a child, it's a prototypical, that's already philosophical reasoning. Here's some information I have. Bad people do terrible things to innocent children, the most defenseless people in the world, and what kind of universe am I living in given that that's the case. What has to go because I can't reconcile everything that I think? I think that's a typical kind of philosophical move. I mean that's what Socrates was doing. He was drawing people out. Here you believe A, B, C. Look, I can derive a contradiction. One of those things has to go. That's the work of philosophy.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:22:52 Well, let me take a quote from a philosopher who you know very well. Her name is Rebecca Goldstein. This is from Plato at the Googleplex.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:22:59 Very unreliable source.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:23:01 I mentioned to you I read the book top to bottom. I actually heard it on audiobook. I loved it. What a great job you did. You must have paid out of the nose for that narrator. He was excellent.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:23:10 Oh no. Audiobooks just does that but I got to choose. I listened to ... He's a very-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:23:14 He was excellent.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:23:15 Yeah, I thought so too.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:23:16 Because he did voices. Let me take this quote. It's a bit long but I think it's valuable because it expresses, I think, what you're trying to say there. "Philosophers asking and asking without ever possessing the means of answering sometimes ask questions that are, so to speak, proto-scientific posed before the science yet exists that can pursue them effectively, which is to say empirically. But even though it's the philosophers who ask the questions, it's always the scientists who answer them. Philosophy's role in the whole matter is to send up a signal reading signs desperately needed here or changing the metaphor philosophy is a cold storage room in which questions are shelved until the sciences get around to handling them or to change the metaphor yet again. Philosophers are premature

ejaculators who pose questions too embarrassingly soon, spilling their seminal genius to no effect."

- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:24:08 Oh boy.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:24:08 An endorsement for your book. It's funny. It's not just scientific or philosophical but I love that and you've used that before, this idea that philosophy is almost like the mind shining its light onto the world and then the tools of the world are what science is. But philosophy is before that, it's proto-scientific as you say.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:24:27 It is but it also, even when science gives us the answers about certain things, there's still this work for philosophers that I don't think that when science gets through, never gets through, with all of its ... what it asks and we get the answers to them. There won't be room left for philosophers to do their work that some of the questions that philosophers ask are proto-scientific.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:24:54 There's this other job that philosophy does which is to try to reconcile. We're very compartmentalized creatures, which makes us very self-contradictory creatures and that we're able to hold inconsistent thoughts in our head, especially morally inconsistent thoughts in our head, and it's philosophy's task to destroy that happiness of our living with our inconsistency.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:25:19 That's another great point you've made before, which is to upset the applecart.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:25:22 Exactly.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:25:22 Which is exactly what Socrates did of course, right?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:25:23 Yeah, exactly, exactly.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:25:25 But are there questions that science will never be able to answer because ultimately, the empirical universe comes before us or we come before it. The deeply existential questions, how can they be answered when we're the ones viewing the world? We can't experience our existence from an objective place where subjective experience is.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:25:49 I think that that's very, very important. I think that certain of the answers that philosophers can establish is to take certain presumptions that we have to have just in order to pursue our lives. For example, that I matter, that at least I matter to myself, right, that you can't pursue your life. You wouldn't get up in the morning.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:26:13 It's so depressing. Have you ever entertained the possibility that your life is irrelevant and you don't matter?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:26:17 Of course, I mean, how could you not? That the worst thing, I think the thing that hurts the most is I look, other people have managed to matter but not me.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:26:27 Yeah, that's what makes it worse.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:26:28 That's kind of clinical depression -- is what that is and its website for the prevention of suicide is called You Matter. I mean, that's how fundamental it is to your mental health to just feel as if we matter at least as much as other people and okay. So if that's a presumption for just leading a healthy life, what other things follow from that?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:26:54 Now, I think that the whole force of moral philosophy starting with the Greeks and going through Spinoza and Hume and Kant and Tom Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism* and John Rawls, that the whole court and none of these people brought in the Abrahamic god. It was all this process of trying to reason it out. A whole course of moral philosophy has left us with ... has demonstrated the truth of this. I have to presume my own mattering and I do, I mean just to get on with my life. I can't presume I matter anymore than any other person in the world, that there's no way that I matter more than anybody. Wherever there's human life, there's mattering.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:27:43 That's kind of the basis of ethics, isn't it? I mean all of the moral progress we've made has been recognizing, yeah, it doesn't matter that I'm this race rather than that race or I was born into this nationality rather than that one or that I'm male or female or ... That's what moral progress has been, to realize to the extent that we're going to claim mattering for ourselves. We're just going to have to universalize it to at least all humans. I would say even beyond.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:28:14 What you're saying is that in order to build this foundation of moral philosophy, of morality, we have to presume that we matter. But is it possible to have the experience to know that you matter? Have you ever had a subjective experience where religion would call it revelation? I think Spinoza, again, I've never read Spinoza directly but indirectly, I've gotten hints of this that for him, it seemed that God played a limited role in so far as he wasn't part of all the complicated ... He didn't make, like you said, didn't make decisions to intervene but at a fundamental level he believed in this idea of revelation, this idea that truth can be revealed to you?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:28:55 Mm-hmm (negative), no, through reason, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:28:57 Everything is through reason.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:28:58 It's everything and he uses the Euclidean methodology, start with definitions and axioms.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:29:04 Including mattering?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:29:06 Well, he doesn't use that language, mattering. That's my only ... But yes, including ethics. I mean his magnum opus is called The Ethics and it's derived from, in some sense, what I would call, mattering. It's this notion he has of conatus, what's in proposition 7 of part 3 of The Ethics, that the essence of each thing is a striving to persist and to flourish. That's what makes me ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:29:30 That's Darwinism, basically, right?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:29:32 It kind of is, it's proto-Darwinism. I think it's just incredibly prescient also in the light of the second law of thermodynamics, which is entropy is increasing. Everything goes towards chaos, towards randomness. So an individual thing, including a complicated thing like us, just in order to resist entropy has got to be striving. So many things are trying to unravel us, undo us and entropy will get us in the end.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:29:58 For sure.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:29:58 We will die. We will disintegrate.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:30:01 Well, Woody Allen.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:30:02 Woody Allen.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:30:02 The universe is expanding.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:30:03 He hovers over all these conversations. Yeah. So yeah, a thing just in order to persist in its own being and to flourish, it's got to matter to itself.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:30:15 I mentioned to you before in email exchanges about my encounter with death and in that situation, for those in the audience who don't know that I had a brain tumor and I went through a surgery and radiation, and before the surgery, before a certain point, in particular that the radiation was for me sort of revelatory. That was a period where I experienced much

more than just a subjective sense of mattering. I experienced certain things. I could only just say things that I all of a sudden knew that I'd never learned and it was a unique experience unlike anything that I'd ever experienced before.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:30:53 There wasn't someone whispering in my ear. It wasn't in any way literal but I didn't need to convince myself that I matter. All of a sudden, I knew I mattered but I knew other things that went beyond that. That to me was also revelatory in so far as how I viewed the role of science. I think I have a more instrumentalist view of science. Bringing it back to that point, I don't know and you mentioned Sam Harris before, I think before we started the microphones. Sam seems to feel that science can answer all the questions of existence and I feel like that is presumptuous in a sense because it assumes that it takes away the fact that ultimately, all of science comes from this subjective experience. We don't know where we are, when we are or anything.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:31:42 I mean, we can't say anything definitively at the core, right, about the nature of our existence?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:31:48 I am scientific realist. I think that science tells us about the nature of matter and energy and space-time and general theory of relativity. I almost said general theory of revelation. To me it is like a revelation. It's just such a beautiful theory and so surprising and it's kind of amazing that we evolved. Apes could so overturn our folk physics and come up with something like this. So I do feel like goes some way towards telling us what the world is like and where we are but it doesn't go the whole way. Certainly, it doesn't go the whole way with this source of existential questions that you're concerned with, I'm concerned with and that inspired all of these great normative paradigms. Well, some greater than others.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:32:35 But the allegory of the cave, right, or the Truman Show or the Matrix. How do we know if we're not in the cave or if we're in the cave or not? Can we fundamentally know that?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:32:44 There's always at doubt and so, I mean, for me the wonderful thing about science that we landed on this thing and there's no such thing as a scientific method, I mean. There's no like paint-by-numbers thing and there's so many different kinds of scientists, but it's a kind of show of humility, of the kind of humility that you're referencing right now, which is that it has to be tested which is a way of saying listen, reality, tell us if we're right or wrong. It seems so obvious to us that simultaneity is absolute.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:33:18 But what relativity theory did was say, okay, tell us, reality, are we right or wrong about this intuition? And reality said, you were wrong, the world is stranger than you think it is. Quantum mechanics does this with causality and with identity. The fact that it sort of brings reality into it and says, give us a kick if we're wrong, this is a good thing. This isn't the way ... We've made some progress. Can it answer everything? No.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:33:50 But what I mean is if you're Neo in The Matrix. If you're in The Matrix, if you're in the simulation, the science works. It works impeccably and it will tell you if you're right or wrong along the rules of the simulation, the rules of the computer, the rules of the system. You don't fundamentally know if you're in a simulation or not. That's just one metaphor, but you could erect many metaphors.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:34:10 It could very well be but we sort of look for the simplest story here and the simplest story seems to be ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:34:17 Occam's razor.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:34:18 Yeah. That's right. I mean, you're absolutely right. There all of these auxiliary presuppositions that we have to use here. We have to, in order for science to work at all, we have to presume that nature is fundamentally law-like, that it works according to law so that when there's an anomaly, when there's the blackbody radiation or the photoelectric effect or all these things that cause revolutions, quantum mechanic revolution in the early 20th century, we don't say, "Oh well, maybe it was a miracle. Maybe God just entered in and he's just messing with us." We say, "Oh no, back to the drawing board. Let's find the law of nature that will cover this."

Demetri Kofinas: 00:34:59 I feel like those explanations where they bring God into the equation, again, I think the problem there is that God becomes this material. He enters into this material world and that doesn't make sense. I guess my larger, my point is that I had what you could call a mystical experience. Now that could be a complete just hallucination but when you have something like that, it becomes difficult.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:35:28 Well, I understand, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:35:29 I've had similar conversations with people that have done psychedelics. It's just one of those things where you realize that you really don't know anything for certain. That the things you thought you knew for sure you don't actually know they're

contingent upon and I had from my experience dementia where I couldn't tell you who the president was, I couldn't tell you my birthday, I couldn't remember someone after five seconds. I had anterograde amnesia. It challenged a lot of my notions of what was real or not and that's why I bring that up.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:35:57 But you mentioned something where you're talking about the theory of relativity and you danced around it. And which is this ... pulled a quote from Eugene Wigner's paper, The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in Natural Sciences, this relationship between mathematics which can tell us things a priori about the world. That then when we test them empirically they turn out to be true, and the theory of relativity is a great example of that.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:36:21 It's an amazing thing that mathematics is ... which is so beautiful.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:36:25 How does that work?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:36:28 We're lucky. I don't know.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:36:32 A lot of people and we'll take Bertrand Russell was taken by.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:36:34 Yeah, no, it's an interesting thing and it's really was the intuition that got modern physics off the ground because the Aristotelian view of trying to explain things in a very natural way, a kind of narrative way. Well, the way we explain human actions, that they're goal-oriented, teleological and that's how Aristotle explained physical motions and that was physics for a very long time and it got nowhere. Just got nowhere, right?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:37:01 Then Galileo who I think he should get tons of credit. We concentrate so much on Newton who's magnificent but Galileo because he comes up with this methodology of wedding together these two unlikely partners. Observation, prediction, the empirical stuff, and mathematics. The nature is written in the language of mathematics. He who wishes to peruse this great book must learn the language. That's from Galileo and interestingly enough, so I have this whole view about Plato.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:37:32 I only became interested in Plato late in my life, really.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:37:35 Really?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:37:35 Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean I didn't do any of that because ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:37:37 That's interesting because you have such a deep affection for him.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:37:40 Interesting. I mean I do and I don't.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:37:44 You wrote a bunch of dialogues where you ...

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:37:47 I did. I tried to bring out the best. I tried to-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:37:48 Your best one, by the way. I'm sorry, let me just tell this to the audience. You had two that I liked a lot. One was I told you with the one with the Austrian child sort of therapist, obnoxious person. But my favorite one was the first one with the sort of ditzy book agent. And I just love that things, you're like, I don't know. I was in Greece but we didn't have, it wasn't like this.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:38:08 Anyway, but you really get into it.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:38:11 Yeah. So one of the things I was trying to do is like, one, go back and try to answer the question, why did the Greeks invent philosophy? Why was that their response or at least the response of some of them to the great existential question of the Axial Age? But then, as a way of trying to show that these questions are still so much with us and that the kind of reasoning that Plato employed, not his answers because we've made progress. I mean philosophy would be a poor field if Plato got everything right then what's the good of the rest of us philosophers? That would be a shoddy show for philosophy.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:38:48 He got a lot of stuff wrong, but this kind of reasoning which is self-critical reasoning so it can be turned against itself can be turned against Plato. I want to show that it was still very relevant to the kind of questions that interest us. The first place I take him to is the Googleplex, the headquarters of Google.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:39:04 Fantastic.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:39:05 He gets into this dialogue with a software engineer as to whether you could make a crowdsourcing search engine that would be able to answer all ethical questions.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:39:15 And what is true, what is true?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:39:18 What is true and what is knowledge? What is it to have a justified belief? What does it take to be justified? Then one of the ways of trying to show that we've made progress is that this media escort who's not the most cultured person in the world.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:39:32 I know I know women like that. You wrote her perfectly.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:39:37 I know women and men.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:39:37 You wrote her perfectly.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:39:38 But she says things that blow Plato away because the kind of progress that philosophers by way of arguing have tortuous, with hard labor have made filter into the culture and so when people like some of my best scientific friends say to me, "Oh, what have philosophers ever done?"

Demetri Kofinas: 00:40:03 Lawrence Krauss.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:40:05 Him and others, yes. What have philosophers ... It's so seeped into our both epistemology and our ethics and our politics too. I mean, the founders of this country they studied Plato. They were all ... In their day, to be educated was to study the classics and one of the things they were trying to do was to me Plato's very stiff criticisms against democracy and so many of the safeguards that they thought they were putting in like the electoral college and all of these things were because they had read Plato's arguments against mob rule.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:40:43 It's remarkable.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:40:44 Yeah, so it's kind of interesting.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:40:45 And they lived through the French Revolution that scared the shit out of the founders.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:40:49 Yeah. Actually, they didn't because well ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:40:52 Well, it was right afterwards but ...

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:40:53 Yea, 1789 was the French Revolution.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:40:56 Sure. Sure.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:40:57 But yeah, but Burke, for example, the political philosopher, Edmund Burke, had witnessed the French Revolution. He's the founder of sort of modern conservative thinking having witnessed that. That question that's fundamental in Plato, how do we create a society that's really just, that's going to do justice to all given that people have very different talents and not ... He had a quite low opinion of most people's capacity for

reason and he worried about the tyrant and the demagogue who can sway the people by emotions.

- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:41:38 Once again, there are a lot of parallels to our society it can drive you nuts.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:41:44 So many. Also ... He lived through that. The Peloponnesian War destroyed Athens. It destroyed Athens and it brought in the tyrants. It brought in the oligarchs. It brought in the 13.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:41:52 Right and one of whom was Plato's uncle, Critias, and then restored democracy are the ones who put Socrates on trial. So, yeah, it was a living problem before him. How do we make sure that the people who rule deserve to rule and they won't exploit their power? This is a problem we're still dealing with.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:42:16 You have in the appendix the two speeches of Pericles. You have the first one that he orates I think right before the start of the Peloponnesian War.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:42:25 Yeah, or is that the ... No, I can't remember. Was that the ... I know I have the funeral oration.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:42:30 I don't know.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:42:31 After the first-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:42:32 You may also have the funeral oration but what I believe you had actually was -- Pericles died, what, a little bit more than a year into the war?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:42:39 That's exactly right. Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:42:40 I believe what you had was his speech right before the beginning of the war, right at the beginning when all was glorious and they were all congratulating themselves and patting themselves on the back in how amazing and exceptional they were, and that came easily. Then the second speech was him a little further into the war when the plague had struck. He'd gotten sick or maybe he had already become a little sick and he was basically scolding the Athenians and then you could see how he transformed his language to go from scolding to basically finding a way to capture that greatness for himself and for the city and then try to elevate oratory.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:43:15 He was a great orator.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:43:15 He was, he was a great orator.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:43:18 That made me think, not that George Bush was a great warrior, but it made me think the arguments that he put forward for the war at the time. I think there were more parallels for that particular aspect of the Peloponnesian War in that period in the Athenian history. I think there were many more parallels for the United States in the early 2000s. I think that would be the beginning of the Peloponnesian War for us if I were to draw a parallel. I think we're sort of in it if historians were going to look back.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:43:51 Yeah. Well, let's see. We certainly don't have a Pericles.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:43:55 No, we certainly don't have a Pericles.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:43:56 Yeah, we will see. I mean one of the things that he warns against his oratory, the demagogue with the silver tongue and the other thing that he warns against is money in politics. He also, interesting, when he's ... in the republic when he's talking about first, he lays out what he thinks is the perfectly just ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:14 You're talking about Plato.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:44:15 Plato, yeah, the perfectly just city and then how it will deteriorate and how it will go from what he calls a true aristocracy. It's from the word *arête* from excellence, from virtue with the people who ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:30 Ruled by the good.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:44:31 Ruled by the good.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:31 By the best.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:44:32 By the best, right, philosopher kings and queens.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:35 Not in Athens.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:44:36 Not in Athens.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:37 You're barking at the wrong tree.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:44:38 But he did accept some women to his academy and it would take us many millennia more before women were once again accepted to higher institutions.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:49 Revolutionary for the time.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:44:50 Yes, he was.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:50 The Greeks were scared shitless of women. I mean it came across in so much of their work. I mean, Lysistrata is a great example as a comedy but the famous scene of Clytemnestra killing Agamemnon in the tub and that scene of her coming out full of blood, soaking in blood. I mean that was terrifying. It must have been terrifying for those Athenians to see that.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:45:12 And Medea. I mean what's interesting and scholars ponder this is they have such powerful female figures in their drama and in fact in their society the women were kept, especially if you were upper class, you were kept in the back of the house and you couldn't go out and they did not partake in the great civilization at all.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:45:33 The two saddest days for a mother are the day her daughter dies or the day she's married because if she got married off and if she didn't live right next door, they would move her somewhere, she'll never see her again because they couldn't talk about Saudi Arabia.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:45:43 Yeah, so it's interesting. I don't know what the answer is but maybe what you're saying is like a kind of fear of the ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:45:51 Female empowerment. There was clearly a fear of that.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:45:54 Yeah, but interesting, Plato, I guess, really sees sort of the power of rethinking all the assumptions upon society. He argues for the equality of women. He says that there are differences in strength, upper body strength, but that he doesn't see it as differences in intelligence. For Plato, the only thing that really matters is intelligence. He did repeatedly, I like to believe it's true, accept two women into his academy. I like to think that's true and there are reports of that.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:46:30 I think we even know their names, I can't recall now what it is.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:46:34 Well, you do seem to like him in the way you depict him.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:46:36 I was going to say something about that. When I was creating him for these dialogues, so it's really audacity, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:46:43 That's what I was thinking. I was like wow. I was like she's got a lot of guts.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:46:46 Like, how do you? It's just like whoa. When he got the idea, I thought, where do you get off, Rebecca? Like where do you get out doing this? I thought a lot about how I wanted him to be and so, the way I created him as a character was I gave him what I take to be the best qualities of philosophy I don't say he had these. I think he was an elitist and a prick and a puritan and all these things. He was, right. You mean ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:47:07 Slave owner.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:47:08 Yeah, yeah, yeah. The Greeks never, never question slavery. I mean so much for the Greeks knowing everything. They never question slavery. Yeah, so I sort of make him like really open-minded, like willing to learn from the media escort, right, like that he could have his mind blown. Playful but with an air of tragedy about him too because life is tragic. I mean you have to take it seriously, right? This is our one chance. I mean, you have to take it seriously. You have to take suffering seriously.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:47:36 And endlessly curious, he gets a computer and he's registering for MOOCs, and he learns neuroscience and everything because I think that's this philosophical spirit. You want to know everything.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:47:49 You want to know, you want to learn.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:47:50 You want to know, you want to learn. Then you want to put it all together. That's what you're trying to do in philosophy and it's an endless and the more scientists tell you the more there is to try to put it together with other things. And so it's an endless, endless task and that he was also really capable of love. Maybe not ... He really loved Socrates.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48:08 Loved Socrates.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:48:09 He loved. I think that's one thing we know about Plato. He loved Socrates.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48:12 It's moving when you realize that he dedicated his life's work to his teacher. It's moving.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:48:21 It is moving. It really is and you see him making progress in his philosophical thinking. He tries out ideas. He criticizes them. I think he even gets rid of the theory of forms post Parmenides. The dialogue of Parmenides where he severely criticizes his own theory of forms.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:48:39 Then in the later ones, it's more math that takes the place rather than forms. That's my interpretation. But he takes Socrates along on his long philosophical journey. He lived to about 81 or 82 and he was philosophizing till the end. He didn't finish the laws, his last book. Plato, this is, as if he wants Socrates to be part of this and he gives Socrates always the best lines. That's love. That's love.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:49:07 How much you think of that was born not just out of the whole experience of Socrates but those final days, the way he met his death, his willingness to drink the hemlock rather than recant his ideas?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:49:22 Yeah, no, I do. I think it's almost like the crucifixion, the secular version of the crucifixion.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:49:28 Very much so. Very much so.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:49:30 A good person dying for something beyond himself, for something that if you've got some project that gives your life meaning and makes your life worth pursuing it can be that that project demands you end your life, right, as contradictory as that seems. We find that very moving.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:49:53 That's interesting and I wonder why that is because it says that there's something more important than your physical existence, which she speaks again to mattering.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:50:02 Exactly.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:50:02 If I'm to really matter then it's got to be more than just this, this life.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:50:07 Yeah, wasn't it ... Martin Luther King said something like a man who doesn't know what he would die for doesn't know what he's living for or something. He probably said it better. He's a wonderful orator himself.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:50:17 He was a wonderful orator. He was something else. He has of course that speech where he talks about he's seen the Promised Land. He doesn't know if he'll get there.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:50:25 That's right.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:50:27 But the fact that he had said that, he was basically saying I know that I'm or I may very well die, I may be assassinated but I know that you will get there and that has meaning that matters.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:50:37 Yeah, exactly, exactly. I guess that one of the ways that we try to make ourselves matter, I mean at the most expansive way that we can, is that we're not just thinking about our own lives, but we're thinking about the lives of others and the lives of others who will come in some way to make it easier. But it all comes from the -- to really know deep in your heart that with that same passion you can't help feeling that you matter. Everybody feels that, everybody does and so whatever it is that makes you matter, they've all got it too.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:14 I want to ask you about, I'm going to throw it out there so I don't forget, I want to ask about this idea. We talked about it earlier, depression and meaning and how undiagnosed perhaps this is as a cause for depression, cause for things like the opioid crisis, but you mentioned something and I don't want to forget this. You mentioned that scene, the very first dialogue in Plato at the Googleplex where he's at the Googleplex and the engineer sort of hubristically says that well, we don't need philosophy. We don't need to put in all this hard work to learn the truth. We can do it with ease. We have this search engine and we have all these.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:55 One of the things I thought about our audience that ... We've done a lot of shows on finance, financial engineering takes shitty assets and it transforms them into AAA, right? That's what happened around created so much of the risk in the mortgage market. What your engineer said was effectively that, we're going to crowdsource all these answers of people who may know nothing and all of a sudden now, we have the truth and Plato's response was, how can that be? How can the truth emerge from truthless answers. Something like that.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:52:26 That's right. Yeah, and just how you're going to weight these different things. You're going to have to feed in some normative propositions just to know how to weight this, whose opinion to give more weight to. What if somebody has a certain view but they're living a really bad life. Everybody thinks they're living a really bad life. Should we wait them as strongly as somebody who everybody admires? Just in knowing in the same way that the Google search engine weights certain ... It's not everything is equal, that you're right. There's some algorithm, some complicated algorithm for weighting these different things.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:53:00 One would have to do a-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:53:02 Someone who guards the guardians.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:53:03 Exactly.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:53:04 Somewhere there needs to be a philosopher. That would be Plato's argument.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:53:11 That would be his argument.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:53:11 Someone needs to be in that position.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:53:12 Yeah, and to do that, we're not going to get that out of the search engine because in order to program the search engine we first have to have the answers, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:53:20 Exactly.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:53:20 So this circularity that you run into. One of the things that science can't answer for ourselves, I mean talking about things that science, is what does science do? Does it discover reality or is it an instrument for predictions? Right, and scientists disagree about that and they can all agree on the science.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:53:38 I mean, wow, I spent a lot of time among physicists arguing about what does quantum mechanics mean. They all use quantum mechanics, it's the best theory we have at the moment for making these predictions, but they have radically different views as to what it's telling us about reality. There's many worlds interpretation. There's the no world at all until we make a measurement interpretation. There's the Bohmian-spokey action at a distance, anyway.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:54:07 The scientific theory can't interpret itself. That's a philosophical question. That's where philosophy is always coming in which is why I think it's important for philosophers to know science, not all philosophers. I mean, there are all sorts of philosophical questions, but in general, I think it's good.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:54:24 This also leads to something else. It illuminates something that was also on my mind and we've done a show with this very specifically with Jonathan Haidt on his book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:54:36 I haven't read it yet.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:54:38 It's good. It's very good. And you may be familiar with some of those stories like the Christakis' in Yale or Brett Weinstein.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:54:45 The Christakis' are good friends of ours. And yes, we've lived through that with them.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:54:50 Yes, I mean remarkable and this idea that somehow there is this moral code and that we all must know it and that if you transgress it, in other words, that it assaults the idea that we should be able to vet ideas in the public sphere regardless of how bad they are that ideas are dangerous. I think this is dangerous.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:55:11 If there were ever an idea that was dangerous it is the idea that there are certain type of speech, and we're not talking about don't yell fire in a crowded theater, but that ideas can be dangerous. I mean what a notion?

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:55:23 Yeah. Well, there are some ideas that are dangerous but it's important to discuss that. I mean if they're ideas that people have and people act on ideas-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:55:33 The Nazis had a lot of dangerous ideas.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:55:36 They had ideas and they were really dangerous ideas.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:55:36 Really dangerous and they turned out to be implemented.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:55:40 Exactly. But the way we attack dangerous ideas is to have people who believe them, defend them and then people who don't go after them and argue it out. I mean, that's the ...

Demetri Kofinas: 00:55:51 That's philosophy.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:55:53 That is the purpose of the university, right? That is really the purpose of the university. The idea that certain ideas just can't be put on the table, it is very dangerous and it's just ... I guess my religious past had a huge effect on me. I mean both positively and negatively, but one of the things when I was ... See, I did not want to rebel against my religion. I really didn't because I love my family. I knew it was going to hurt them. They had suffered from the evil of the world. I didn't want to cause anymore suffering but one of the things that convinced me oh man, this is just not worth trying to get my head around, wrap my head around is I wasn't allowed to question in my school.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:56:37 Just don't go there. You can't go there. It's taboo. I thought if it's a good idea, tell me. Tell me why it's a good idea. Go after my criticism.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:56:47 Intuitively, you had that sense.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:56:48 Yeah, and I just ... That was like the final straw. It's like oh, this must be so fragile that we're not even allowed to question it. That's just been my attitude about ideas ever since. Either they are bad ideas or good ideas. All of them should be on the table.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:57:05 I want to ask you one more question in regards to how this relates to today. We just talked about this one thing, which I think touches on these ideas of political correctness and philosophy and debate and it's really a question of how do we discover the good. What is good? What is moral? But there's also the question of what is true. What is true?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:57:27 We're not even going to try to go down to figure out what is truth but there's actually this great quote. I don't know that it was in your book or maybe I just remembered it and I pulled it up. It's Demosthenes, and he says in a political system based on speeches, how can it be safely administered if the speeches are not true? Now that is if something is not relevant to today, this world where there is indeed an assault on truth, but in some sense, I think what it does is it exposes that so many of our truth have been arbitrarily. That most people don't know why they believe something.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:57:59 Yeah, I think that's really true. So many of our so-called truths, right? I think the thing that's happened is really interesting that something that's become so important, I think, in many parts of the world, but certainly, in American politics. You're on a team, you're on a certain team. You're a conservative or you're a progressive. You're right or you're left. You're republican or you're democrat. You believe everything that your team believes.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:58:28 So disgusting. I can't deal with that.

Rebecca Goldstein: 00:58:31 Your team and sometimes, so here's the interesting thing. If there's a lot of empirical evidence for something but your team doesn't believe in it, that shows how loyal you are to your team. It's like believing Jesus walked on water. It's in the face of all the evidence. That just shows you how strong and how loyal you are and that's taken the place of trying to actually examine the evidence and look at it. We can't examine the evidence for everything. Sometimes we have to depend on experts but this is taking the place on both the right and on the left.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:59:07 Definitely, the left. Today, it's more prevalent on the left. I find it much more prevalent. I was thinking about this recently. Under the Bush Administration you had that with the lapel pins and patriotism. I mean if you didn't say like I support the troops,

I support the war, you weren't Republican, you weren't a patriot. Today, you have these in the moral sphere, this idea of you have to be on the bandwagon with this idea of white male privilege and that as a white man, I have no place in the conversation of social issues because I'm totally biased by the fact that I'm white and my privilege and everything else.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:59:38 If you have to take issue with some of these ideas, well, then, you're not a real progressive. You're not a real liberal. But it's interesting that today it's okay to be pro war as a progressive. It wasn't 10 years ago or 15 years ago, so these values change.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:59:52 Yeah, and climate change, manmade climate change on the other-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:59:57 Yeah, it's another good example. It's a political issue.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 00:59:58 And that used to be actually a conservative issue, actually, and some people said that Al Gore did more harm to the environmental issue by making An Inconvenient Truth because he then made it a progressive lefty issue and so now it's that team.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:00:16 Was it first the Nixon-Ford administrations that put forward any kind of ... I think it was ...
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:00:21 Yeah. I mean, I-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:00:22 I think it was Nixon that created the EPA.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:00:23 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:00:23 Right?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:00:23 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:00:23 I mean, what an act of big government, the Environmental Protection Agency.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:00:32 Yeah, anyway, so it's such a laziness.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:00:35 Lazy.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:00:35 Instead of thinking out each issue for itself and looking what the evidence is, see what your team is doing. I would say, it's both sides.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:00:46 And there are major problems. Just for listeners, there are major problems with the EPA and with government regulations. Governments overregulate but then they also regulate in ways that are beneficial to companies. There's problems with regulation, but I don't believe in just taking a just sort of like sledgehammer approach or whatever, like a machete approach.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:01:05 I actually said this was the last thing, the truth thing, but I mentioned depression. I wanted to ask you about that before we leave. How much of a role does this play in your view, this existential need to matter?

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:01:20 Yeah, I think, absolutely. I just saw today in front page. I think was The Times or The Washington Post, can't remember which, or maybe The Wall Street Journal, that opioid use and suicide are really on the incline and what ...

Demetri Kofinas: 01:01:34 Suicide.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:01:35 Suicide.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:01:35 Wow.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:01:35 What is that about and there is ... Look, I'm an atheist. I'm sort of involved with free thinking and all of that but there's one thing that religion really did. I mean it made you feel like you mattered in the universe. You were created by the big one, right? I mean, and he was watching you, which is terrifying, but it also makes you feel like you mattered, right?

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:02:00 With the decline of that, I mean, what have we replaced it with? The love of money, the love of fame? That's not open to most people. What's left of them? Disintegration of family.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:02:11 Disintegration of country.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:02:11 And community and you don't feel a part of much of anything, really, and so this is a social justice issue. This is something that we really ought to because there are people who are really suffering and I think especially for people like me who think oh, well, religion is false and people shouldn't be duped by this. Well, we bloody hell ought to give them something else to make them feel like they matter.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:02:39 I never thought of it this way. You made me think about this in terms of exclusion versus inclusion.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:02:45 Oh man.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:02:45 I never thought of it that way before.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:02:48 It's the biggest ... I mean remember what it was like in junior high. There were the [inaudible 01:02:50].

Demetri Kofinas: 01:02:52 I hated that. I was the guy that was out of that whole ... I sat outside of it as I continue to.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:02:57 But just in general, when you look at the-

Demetri Kofinas: 01:03:01 Chimpanzee troops.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:03:01 Yeah, absolutely. You've got to be part of the ... Or the one-month-old baby desperately looking at you, pay attention to me, we're a gregarious species. We came from the chimps who are gregarious species and we are gregarious and we need to feel like we matter in some way. One of the things that is ... First, when I finally came out as an atheist, it was so much fun to be part of ... like to be able to say it out loud.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:03:30 You're a good liberal too if you're an atheist. You're a progressive liberal.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:03:32 It was just wonderful to be able to say it, I don't believe in God, but I really said most of the people who are leaders of this movement, they never doubted that they matter a moment in their lives. They are intellectual leaders. They are respected. They have fanboys galore, right? I mean, they don't ...

Demetri Kofinas: 01:03:53 Who? Religious leaders?

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:03:54 No, no. The leaders of sort of the new atheist movement.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:03:55 The new atheist movement.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:03:58 I'm not criticizing them but we have to understand ...

Demetri Kofinas: 01:04:01 There's so much ego wrapped in there too.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:04:03 ... most people don't have this way of feeling how important they are in this world. Deprive them of religion, we've got to provide something else.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:04:14 Dr. Goldstein, I cannot thank you enough for this conversation. I want to say I think this conversation with you is going to be the

first one that set the questions or set the table for a series of conversations that I want to have with people on the show where we discussed this particular issue because I think this idea of mattering and what matters is of the essence. I think that the extent to which our conceptions of our place in the world have been shattered, have dissolved over time I think is something that we're not aware of.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:04:52 I mean even talking to you, this idea of exclusion versus inclusion, I didn't appreciate it as much and maybe that's because my life is a lot easier than most people's lives. I'm not part of that excluded sort of group and even though, I've never been really a churchgoer or never really was taken into that community and I've been sort of a child of immigrants and moved around my whole life and I was always in some sense feeling excluded. I still am able to feel an inclusion in the larger society. This idea to me is just as powerful.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:05:25 Yeah, I mean ... Well, yeah, I mean, of course, I mean your voice is heard. Yeah, you're living a life of mattering, you are, but it's because you have talent and a lot of people don't and what? Do they matter less? Of course, they don't.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:05:40 Of all the kinds of biases that we name, racism and sexism and classism, I think talentism is a bias. You matter more if you have talent. Why? No. I mean every human matters and I don't say that I'm not guilty of it myself. I admire the talented very, very much but I don't say that they ought not to be admired, but it doesn't make them matter more. Not in that ethical sense and that sense that everybody has a right to, has a right to feel.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:06:14 If there's one thing I believe, it's that.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:06:17 Ego too plays such a negative role in our society.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:06:21 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:06:21 Makes it difficult to get to the place that we need to do to accept people who might under the rubric of an ego matter less.
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:06:30 That's right.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 01:06:30 Right?
- Rebecca Goldstein:** 01:06:31 That's right. Yeah. It's something we humans do and the only way that we can make it better is to look at, it study it, acknowledge it, take it seriously, change it.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:06:44 Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Rebecca Goldstein: 01:06:46 Yeah, it was my pleasure.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:06:48 And that was my episode with Rebecca Goldstein. I want to thank Dr. Goldstein for being on my program. Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded at Edge Studio in New York City.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:06:59 For more information about this week's episode or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you're a regular listener to the show, take a moment to review us on Apple podcasts. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:07:22 Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Stylianos Nicolaou. For more episodes, you can check out our website at hiddenforces.io. Join the conversation at Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at hiddenforcespod or send me an email.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:07:42 As always, thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.