



## Episode 1,027: Stefan Molyneux on the Art of the Argument

**Guest: Stefan Molyneux**

**WOODS:** I'm glad to have you here on Episode 1,027, because as we were saying just before we went on, by interesting coincidence that happens to be your favorite number. So how about that [laughing]? So 1,027 it is.

**MOLYNEUX:** It's these joyful coincidences that coalesce to know that you're going to be producing some quality thought content.

**WOODS:** [laughing] That's right; that's right. So you have a brand-new book, *The Art of the Argument*, and of course we want to talk about that and we're going to use that as a springboard to hit all kinds of topics. It seems to me that in the age of social media, we need some kind of a primer on the argument probably more than ever. So why don't you start off by explaining what in fact it is that you mean in this book when you use the term "the argument"?

**MOLYNEUX:** Well, the term just popped into my head while we were bringing this topic up, Tom, which is blindfolded butcher. And you know, being a butcher, whatever your culinary tastes or ethics, being a butcher is a precise and difficult job, something you wouldn't want to do blindfolded. And it seems to me, because of social media, because of the influx of people into higher education, we have a lot of people engaged in social discourse who don't really seem to know what they're doing, which is like a whole bunch of people swarming in, blindfolding themselves, picking up the butcher's chainsaw, and going to town.

And so public discourse is really degrading to the point where, as you know – like, you try and be a non-radical leftist, give a speech at a university, you might get a bike lock to the head, people might throw fake blood at you, and they might pull fire alarms, they might drive cars into people – all of which of course do not fall into the category of what we happily would call an argument.

And so I wanted to give the world a non-technical, engaging way to understand what an argument is, some of the various different flavors of arguments, and why it's so important. I mean, it's like those old shows or little commercials, like the PSAs where, "This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs." They're supposed to frighten you into not doing drugs. *Hey, kids, don't do drugs.* Or you would see some guy with no teeth, rooting around through the garbage, and your parents would say, Oh, that guy, he tried crystal meth only once – *only once*. And looking at the alternative is pretty

terrifying. Or, you know, the people who don't take care of their teeth or whatever or the people who gain too much weight.

And so I wanted to show how much fun and how enjoyable and what a great mental exercise a real argument is and also to give the heaven of argumentation and the hell of whatever argumentation isn't, which tends to be bullying, unjust ostracism. It tends to be escalating violence, and it tends to be basically a new Dark Age. So I wanted to give people the lamp to aim towards and the dark to flee in a pretty compact and hopefully entertaining package.

**WOODS:** I don't think it's an exaggeration when you emphasize the importance of what you call the argument to civilization itself, because of course in the absence of argument and rational discourse, what is there? If that's not how we're going to — if reason is not the tribunal, then what will be? Might makes right, physical force, as you say, unjust ostracism, whatever. So that really is very important.

Now, having said that, that argument is an alternative to violence — it's the alternative that civilized people prefer — what do you make of the argument we hear now on the left that, when let's say a controversial right-wing speaker comes to campus, well, that person's arguments really amount to violence — or in the less extreme versions, let's say they provoke violence or are intended to provoke violence — so really, by suppressing that speech, we're really acting preemptively in self-defense?

**MOLYNEUX:** It's a fascinating argument. [laughing] Morally horrifying and creepy as all get-out. It's like some chilblain millipede crawling up your spine marrow to even conceive of it. But you know, my sort of pushback on this would be sort of two major, major points. The first, of course — I mean, outside of the obvious free speech one, which have been done to death. But the first would be that the left continually insists that you not blame the victim. The blame continually insists that, let's say some guy beats up his wife. And then he says, Well, she was disrespecting me, or she didn't obey my order, or the steak wasn't the right temperature, or whatever, right? Or, She's going out dressed in too-revealing a set of clothes.

Well, then you would say, I don't care what she did. You can't blame the victim. You can't say this woman, that I grabbed her boob because she was wearing a low-cut top. You simply do not blame the victim for somebody who was violent. And then — I'd love the leftists to try and square this up — if you don't blame the victim of violence for whatever they did to provoke that violence because no provocation justifies violence, if a man can't beat up his wife and then claim some ex post facto justification for it, then how on earth do conservative speakers bring on their own violence? That's sort of the first point. Like, if you're not going to blame the victim, then don't blame the damn victim. And that's something I would sort of strongly urge them consider.

The second thing is this weird — it's like the whole leftist belief system is like this giant donut with blood in the middle. Or I guess a hole, right? Because on the one extreme, they say everything is relative, everything is subjective, we can never know the truth. This really post-modernist — I just did a debate with Dr. Thaddeus Russell about this, which people might want to check out. I found it very enjoyable and he was very frank and charming in his beliefs. And so, on the one hand, they say you can

never know anything for sure. Everything's relative. Everything's subjective. And then on the other hand, they say, I know the ideas of conservatives are so irredeemably evil and absolutely horrible that I have justified in beating them up. And I just – those two – like, I'm not certain enough to beat people up for their beliefs, even if I thought it was morally justified because you figure out the best belief system through the free marketplace of ideas in the same way you figure out the best product in the free marketplace of products.

And so this idea that everything's relative, everything's subjective, you can't know anything for certain, but Charles Murray is so irredeemably evil we have to drive him off campus with threats of force, these two make no sense at all. And if the leftists are going to start to look at those, I think they'll find a little bit more tolerance. And if they're not, well, they've rejected themselves from the category of the argument, which is very dangerous.

**WOODS:** Doesn't that make you think, though, that maybe for them relativism is really just a pose? They don't actually in their heart of hearts believe in relativism. They certainly don't think that somebody, for example, who believes in traditional gender roles has a view that's just as valid as theirs and who's to say which one should be chosen. So they're really full of it when they say they're relativists.

**MOLYNEUX:** Relativism on the left is the project of universal disarmament for the right. Relativism for the left, they project relativism out there, Tom, in order to get their enemies to lay down their certainties, to say, Well, you know, I guess you're right. I guess Einsteinian physics did supersede Newtonian physics, so I guess you can beat me up [laughing]. You know? Like, I mean, they don't actually have any goals of embracing relativism themselves. It's kind of this lure that is put out there in order to disarm their opponents and to cast out into the minds and hearts of their opponents.

**WOODS:** Let me bring up a phrase you've become well-known for. Now maybe you're afraid. *What phrase is this going to be?* But it's, "Not an argument." A lot of people started using "Not an argument" when somebody will say something to them that really does not constitute any form of an argument. They'll just say, *Not an argument. Go ahead and give me an argument.* I don't know when you started doing that, but it is associated with you. What do you mean when you say, "Not an argument"?

**MOLYNEUX:** Well, it's coaching. I mean, if you've ever played sports and ever been coached to a reasonably qualified level, what does your coach say most of all? "That's wrong. That's incorrect." I mean, I remember when I was learning how to give a good serve in tennis. I had a coach who was like, "Yeah, reach over the top," and if you go to try and improve – I don't play golf, but I know that from people who do, you try and improve your golf swing, you get all of this micro muscular management of the golf pro telling you, "Don't jump out of your shot. Lean into it. Shoulders back." Like 95% of what you receive when you're trying to become good at something is negative feedback. And that's good, because being right is very hard and being wrong is very easy, so of course whenever you try anything, you're going to be wrong a lot more than right.

So basically, what I want to do with that phrase is I want to point out when people aren't making arguments. And it's not meant to humiliate. It's not meant to – you

know, like if you show up to play tennis with a hockey stick, I'm going to say, "Not a tennis racket." I mean, sorry, you could play something. You could play sophistry if you want; you could play emotional regurgitation. But you can't play argument, you can't play thought, you can't play philosophy.

And so I just want to point out to make the people who are making the arguments – and in many ways, they're doing so in good faith because they've been so misinformed about how to have rational influence in the public sphere. They think that sophistry is philosophy and they think that philosophy is violence. And so I wanted to point out to those people that's not an argument, and of course I want to point out to the audience, to the people who are reading or who are listening or who are participating in a conversation, that's not an argument. And of course, at some point, after using that phrase for some time, I did get a lot of requests that say, *Okay, Mr. Negative, Mr. Naggy, perhaps you'd like to tell us not what an argument isn't, but what an argument is.* And that was of course the birth of the book.

**WOODS:** So give me an example of something somebody might say to you on Twitter, let's say, that would lead you to respond, "Not an argument." Just an example.

**MOLYNEUX:** Oh, let me ruffle through my mental Rolodex of infinity. But it would be something like, you know, "Stef, I love you, but you're totally wrong on this." You know, those. Or the control trolls, you know? "I'm concerned that if you broadcast this information, people might take it the wrong way and it might have bad results." Or, "Your argument, your perspective is so offensive." Or, "Well, you are a white male, so you're off the island." Or anything like that where people simply are substituting consequences or emotions or vague negative insinuations or anything like that in order to try and discredit what it is that you're saying without addressing either your data or your reasoning.

**WOODS:** Let's think about, again, given the – oh, I don't know, the overwhelming, just the tidal wave of inanity that one encounters on social media, the types of bad – I don't even know if they rise to the level of arguments – that we encounter.

Now, in your book, you identify one with the acronym – I don't know how to pronounce an acronym. I guess I think we can be agnostic on the pronunciation of acronyms. But I could see it being pronounced NAWALT, Not All Women Are Like That. So for example, you cite a study that says scientists find that, in general, women tend to do such and such more than men. And if it's something interesting or controversial-sounding, the response you get a lot is, *Pshht, I know women who don't act that way.* Or, *I'm a woman and I don't do that.* That is not – that does not refute this paper. And so it's even gotten to the point where it has its own acronym, NAWALT, for that so-called argument, Not All Women Are Like That.

So that's an example. What other things can we identify that we might want to sharpen our rhetorical knives against that we're going to come up against in social media? I mean, probably it's some of the ones you just mentioned.

**MOLYNEUX:** Yeah, this one is tragically common, and I mean, if I were to go the clichéd route, then I would say – look at me being very brave in this. But if I were to go the clichéd route, Tom, I would say, well, statistics can be a little bit challenging,

and Lord knows women have taken over the education and a lot more women tend to be math phobic than men, and I'm wondering if women taking over early education has had something to do with the fact that people seem to drop at no grasp of the bell curve or these statistics of any kind.

Like I put out a video recently talking about the correlation, which is of course not always explicitly causation and contains within its very definition lots of capacity for exceptions, that IQ and obesity tend to be inversely correlated. So the higher your IQ, the less likely you are to be obese. And this is true for a wide number of factors. Now, of course, I put this out, and I used to put out caveats – you know, like, well, there are exceptions – but then I realized it doesn't matter [laughing].

**WOODS:** Yeah, it makes no difference.

**MOLYNEUX:** Like if people are strongly determined to not understand you, then putting out caveats actually seems to increase it, because in their mind it makes you look weak and faltering and wavering and so on. And so of course a number of people wrote back and said, *Well, I have an IQ of 12 million, which is also the number of pounds I have in my middle.*

And you know, it's like, okay, but this is like the short Danish guy. You know, Danes tend to be the tallest people on the planet. And if you say that and then they say, *I know a guy from Denmark and he's short* – [laughing] so? What does that mean? It's the old phrase that I grew up with, which doesn't seem to be common anymore, "It's the exception that proves the rule." In other words, if you can really remember a short Danish guy as opposed to, say, a short guy from Japan, then you remember him because it's a deviation. It's the exception that proves the rule. Things are memorable because they're unusual, and so if you know a short Danish guy, it's not a thing.

And so this problem is really weird, because most of what we talk about when we're looking at empirical facts in society are generalizations. Of course they are. They have to be generalizations, because we're talking about a large group of people, and then any large group of people, any characteristic you talk about tends to be on a bell curve, which means there's a cluster around the middle and there's extremes at either end. Think of intelligence. Intelligence has a cluster around the middle, sort of 85 to 115 or 90 to 110, and that's where the majority of people are. And then there are exceptions on the low end and exceptions on the high end. Same thing with height. There's a middle and some really tall people and not so tall people and so on.

And whenever you want to talk about society, which is kind of where philosophy should be aimed at, is the improvement and edification of social ethics, well, you have to use generalizations based upon population aggregates, which always include exceptions. And the idea that you disprove the trend by citing an exception is a huge paralysis in any meaningful and rational conversations about how to improve society.

It's one of these – when I was a kid, we had skateboards when I was a kid, which, you know, a younger listener thinks that means like Flintstone's skateboard. And we used to do this game where we'd sit on the skateboards. We didn't do these kind of flips and tricks and, you know, let's put it through a Mobius strip patchwork of in and out of X dimension, which kids do with flipping skateboards. We kind of went down hills. And

we used to gather a handful of sticks, and we'd sit on our skateboards or the brave people would stand, and we'd go down a hill. And you try and throw your sticks in front of other kids' skateboards, because it was a race, but you were allowed to "cheat" and stall the other person through this. And if you threw it just right and the stick was just the right size, what would happen is the skateboard would just stop. That's why you sat, because it was easier to roll off it than it was to fly off it vertically.

And this, okay, here's where we're building the case for a general trend that explains a lot of differences in society and so on, which helps us understand that it's not injustice or prejudice or bigotry or sexism or racism necessarily that explains group differences. There may be other reasons. And so you're building this case. You're going down this hill. You're getting some good speed on your skateboard. And then someone comes along with this idiot exception thing. *I know a short Danish guy*. And then [screeching], it stops the whole thing. Like it's just the right size and at just the right angle. And too many people, of course, you go flying, because what you have to do is you have to go back and explain two and two make four to people, which interrupts the whole flow. And I kind of think that's the point.

**WOODS:** Well, I think in part, some of this has to do with the fact that you're dealing with people. If I were to make a generalization about laptop computers and say, you know, a lot of laptop computers tend to last only two or three years if you really use them heavily. Nobody would be outraged or offended by that or would feel it necessary to say, *Well, I heard of a guy who had a laptop that lasted 11 years*. But if they did say that, they'd say, *Now, that's highly unusual, I'll grant you, because you're right, it usually is two or three*. Nobody's offended. Nobody feels the need to rush to contradict you. In your whole life, the length of time it takes before an apple goes bad or something, or whatever, these are things that maybe vary ever so slightly from one particular case to the next, but we don't take offense at this.

So it's manufactured, because obviously there's no problem people have in making generalizations in other parts of their lives. Now, here's the thing, here's the thing. If —

**MOLYNEUX:** Well, sorry, just before we go on —

**WOODS:** Yeah, go ahead.

**MOLYNEUX:** I just wanted to point out very, very briefly, Tom, I'm sad to say it's not just people. I mean, there was a dog association that put out a manual on dogs and dog breeding —

**WOODS:** [laughing] Oh, no.

**MOLYNEUX:** Did you hear about this at all?

**WOODS:** No, but I can already see where it's going.

**MOLYNEUX:** Yeah, you know where this goes. So they put out this manual on dogs and dog breeding and the various characteristics of dogs. And don't you know, Tom? These evil doggists, they talked about varying degrees of intelligence within dogs. And people got so enraged and upset that they had to pull the whole manual, rewrite it from scratch, start all over again, and not include anything which talked about different levels of intelligence in dogs, which everybody knows about and it's perfectly clear, which is why certain dogs are chosen for more complex tasks and so on. But yeah, it's not just people. But in general, *Ooh, look at me quoting an exception to disprove your rule.* It is absolutely everywhere that a lot of this stuff comes up, where I guess this probably would cast a shadow on human society and people extrapolate it, but it's in a lot of places.

**WOODS:** I sure wish we had H.L. Mencken still around. I would love to hear his response to this world we live in. The thing is, if the argument – The argument really sums up what it is to be human as opposed to belonging to any other species, because we have the ability to reason and draw conclusions on the basis of evidence. And yet we're not that good at it as a species, oddly enough. I mean, yeah, look, we've made tremendous scientific progress, so there is evidence that some of us are decent at it. But in terms of, *Here's a controversial argument. Are you capable of assessing the evidence and coming to a conclusion rationally?* we're not as good at it as you'd think we'd be. We're more emotional or we're more inclined to dismiss a generalization on the basis of anecdotal evidence. And yet, given that this is the defining characteristic of human beings that they're capable of reason, it's a little discouraging how not good at it we are. This tends to make me somewhat misanthropic at times.

**MOLYNEUX:** Well, I know what you mean, Tom, and I go back and forth on this because I don't know whether our general incapacity to reason these days is environmental or innate or biological or genetic or whatever. I mean, I've seen studies. I've got this whole presentation called "The Death of Reason." There's a study which I'll just mention is people read a moral argument and justified it – there was a page in moral argument – and then they'd set up the page so that when you closed the book and then opened it again, it opened to a slightly different moral argument but with opposite conclusions. Slightly different reasoning but opposite conclusions.

And what happened was – so people perfectly, fluidly justified the argument, they closed the book, and they said, "Oh, could you just run through that justification once again?" They opened the book and they justified the opposite moral argument with no notice and no definition. You've seen this thing too where, if people go out into the street and they talk about Trump's tax plan to people but they say it's Bernie Sanders' tax plan, people love it. Like it's just become teams. No evaluation.

Now, as far as whether it's innate to be that irrational, I don't really think it is. If you have some club where everyone gets their heads forcibly shaved and you say, "Wow, these people are not very good at growing hair," it's like, well, maybe, but let's find out if we don't shave them. And so this really came home to me hard as a parent. Maybe you've had the same experience. You see kids – and Jeff Tucker talks about this in one of his books. You see kids negotiating their Halloween candy? I mean, it's incredible. It's like those livestock, the guys who call out the livestock stuff, incredibly rapid-fire discussion. The kids are trading back and forth, stuff flying all over the

place. Resources are being allocated in a free market or traded. And this they're doing at 6, 7, 8 years old. They're an innate trading capacity that we have.

I think when it comes to reason, as well, I think we're born rational, and I think it's chased out of us. I think it's scared out of us. I think it's bullied out of us. I think it's humiliated out of us. I think it's punished out of us. And I guess as the giant experiment as a father, you know, I have committed to only reasoning with my child. And man, she's like a mini Dershowitz on speed. I mean, she is just like really able to integrate. I was so proud of her when she was five and she said to me, "Daddy, that's not an argument."

**WOODS:** Oh [laughing]!

**MOLYNEUX:** Yeah, it's fantastic. So whether that is her genetics – I mean, I like reason. I mean, there could be genetic explanations for it as well, but I have found that by not putting her in environments and not subjecting her to environments wherein rationality is punished but rather rewarded – it's like, if you can make a good case for it, you can have it – I have found that she has not turned to sophistry, she's not turned to manipulation, and she's very rational. So that's not proof – I mean, that's a sample size of one. As we all know, the plural of anecdote is not data.

But it is still interesting to me, and I wonder if we were raised with respect for reason, with the trivium, with Socratic reasoning being taught all the way up in schools, if we were taught all of that and it enhanced our national capacity to bargain and to make arguments, and if instead, deviations were punished – like if you make a bad case. I don't mean you hit kids or anything, but if you didn't win the argument, if you made a bad argument, then because we all want to win, or at least most of us, then I wonder how much we could be rational if we were positively reinforced for rationality and negatively reinforced for sophistry.

**WOODS:** You know, sometimes when I'm joking around with the kids, I'll make an invalid argument and appeal to the crowd or whatever. And the trouble is my eldest daughter, Regina, who's 14 now, studied logic formally in her middle school years. She immediately identifies the fallacy I'm committing and it ruins all my fun. But at the same time, I'm glad to know that she knows that stuff.

Now I want to talk about another point that is in your book *The Art of the Argument*, and that is sometimes we find ourselves being accused of bad will, that instead of addressing the merits of the case – for example, you give the case of the single mother, and you're saying that there are cases in which – I mean, obviously we want to help these people, but you want to help them in ways that aren't going to undermine them. And this would be true of any person who's in a difficult situation. You don't want to do things that are going to increase the amount of time they're in this unfortunate situation or make it pay for them not to get their act together and that sort of thing. And the response that you get is, *You're a terrible person*. Or even if you believe in the free market economy, *Well, because everybody knows the free market economy makes people poor, you must be a terrible person*. Now, that's also not an argument, but it's a pretty darn common non-argument.

**MOLYNEUX:** Well, I did – and this is one I think to reinforce your point about sometimes despairing about humanity. One of the biggest videos I've ever done is a debate with a flat-earther.

**WOODS:** Yes, that's right. Didn't that get over – how many views did that get? Am I remembering that right?

**MOLYNEUX:** It was well north of a million and huge amounts of downloads.

**WOODS:** It was over a million. I thought so; yeah, I thought so.

**MOLYNEUX:** It's funny because you put all this work into making these arguments and then you – Anyway, and the funny thing is, in some of those comments, there is this rank psychologizing, this rank impugning of motives as a pretend argument. Like, they say, "You can see, as the debate goes along, the growing fear in Stef's eyes as he begins to realize that his entire paradigm is about to collapse." Like they're reading body language and eye ticks and so on, right? And, well, it is true that I did feel a certain amount of fear in that conversation, but it wasn't because I thought the world was flat; it's because I was realizing that some people really believe that the world is flat [laughing]. It was more a fear of my fellow carbon-based life forms and bipeds than it was of the actual conclusions.

And this psychologizing is easy and it's very lazy, and it is a form of ad hominem, which is to say, *Well, you have bad motives, you have bad intentions; therefore, I can dismiss your argument.* And it is really like the tiger gets closer and you close your eyes and go la, la, la, just allowing the tiger to find you quicker. But all it does – I really want people to see – This is what the "not an argument" thing is really about, Tom. I really want people to see when someone's not making an argument, because, you know, we all do it. We all do it from time to time. We put out something and say, *Oh yeah, I could have done that better or that wasn't my best work or whatever.* And so if somebody says, "Not an argument," and it's not an argument and you say, "You know what? I kind of slipped a little there. The chain came off the cart for a moment, but we'll put it back on. Let me try this again." Okay, that's fine. That's honorable and that's decent. We all make mistakes.

But if somebody just plows on regardless or ignores, I want them to be discredited in the realm of ideas. And again, it's not because I hate them, but you know, if you're trying to win a choir competition, you've got to take the guy who sounds like an orc being crucified out of the mix because he's going to make everyone sound bad and you just can't get beauty with discordant notes. And so the ostracism aspect is something I really talk about a lot in the book, and this is one of the problems of the state redistribution of resources, is we lose the capacity to ostracize people for bad decisions, which is how society was much more peacefully run in the past. And so yeah, I really do want people to see when other people aren't making an argument so that they can evaluate their future contributions accordingly.

**WOODS:** How about advice you have for debaters? It's one thing to teach people the structure of a good argument, but there's really no substitute for the content of the argument. You have to know your stuff if you're going to come out on top. You really do have to know your stuff. Now, depending on your opponent, you have to know more

or less stuff. There's no substitute for knowing your stuff. But let's assume I know my stuff. What's some advice that you as somebody who's been doing this for a long time can give me in terms of how I can be successful, not necessarily persuading my opponent that I'm right, but at least making onlookers sit up and take notice that, well, this guy at least knows what he's talking?

**MOLYNEUX:** I think for me, Tom – and it's an unusual perspective but I've found it to be very powerful – it's not about me and it's not about you. Let's say I have two friends, and they're both single, they're both lonely, want to get married and have kids, and I know they'd be really, really good for each other. And so I arrange a dinner party and I have them sit next to each other, I introduce and I point out a couple of interesting things about each other with the goal of starting the conversation. My particular goal there is not to evaluate whether they like me or whether they like the food or the decor or the music. My goal there is to evaluate whether they like each other. I'm introducing two people with the hopes that I can help my friends be happier. And my focus there is not about me. It's about those two and whether they are getting along.

And turning yourself invisible in that context can be really challenging, because a lot of people approach debates like they want to win. They approach debates like the goal is victory. Now, in a public debate – I'm not really talking private debates. That's a different category. But in a public debate, the goal is not to beat your opponent. The goal is to introduce truth to the audience. So think of it like two people at a dinner party. You want them to like each other. You think they will and you think they'll be happier if they do, so your focus is on them; it's not on yourself.

And so when it comes to a public debate, the goal is to introduce the truth to your audience through the mechanism of debate, which is a great way of doing it, because what happens is, if you just present an argument, people have objections in their head and it's really tough to keep interrupting your own argument to address to objections that they have in their head; whereas if you have a debate, those objections are vocalized and you can deal with them in the moment without having to interrupt everything. So it's a great way. So if your goal of course is to introduce the truth to your audience, forget about yourself.

And people focus on dominating the other person, which makes you kind of instantly unlikable. Because the thing is too, if you're really, really good at debating and your opponent is not, you don't want to be like the Mike Tyson beating up on the Girl Guide person, right? It's not really, like, *I really don't like that Mike Tyson guy. He beat up on that Girl Guide.* And so if you focus on, in a sense, making yourself invisible, making yourself a sort of clear pane of glass through which the audience can see the truth, then you take the ego out of it and you take the sort of simian desire to conquer out of it, and I think that is the best way to get the audience to focus on the truth rather than on you, which is the goal.

**WOODS:** This may sound like a juvenile question, but I still feel compelled to ask it. Do you yourself engage in debates on social media, particularly Twitter, or do you think that's a waste of time? Or once in a while, do you just lob a grenade over at the other camp and just let it go? How do you handle that? I mean, I feel like sometimes I do that because it just makes me feel better, but then I think about the opportunity

cost of what I could have accomplished during that time and I feel like a fool. So I'm curious about your opinion on that.

**MOLYNEUX:** For me at least it's tough to beat a couple hundred thousand views and downloads as a sort of bare minimum. I mean, I sort of have a base of like 100,000 views on YouTube, and it usually goes up from there, a couple hundred thousand downloads. And so for me, it's tough to compete with those kinds of numbers. And I'm also — you know, I have my strengths and my weaknesses. One of my strengths is an engaging and enjoyable capacity to discuss ideas with a curious ability to not offend people. And I think that's because I don't have an agenda for the most part, other than focusing on the truth, which is really the opposite of an agenda.

So for me, if I have sort of my personal charisma at play, my eye contact at play, my sense of humor at play, my positivity at play, my happiness at play, that's all something that I can communicate very easily in a video or even in the audio, which is what we're doing now. And so it's hard for me to sort of stack those two together and say I'm going to strip all of my strengths out and I'm going to start to go back and forth in a very constrained medium. And of course, as you know, 90% of communication is nonverbal, and written is even less. There's no capacity for irony. People don't know if you're joking. Like I can roll my eyes and use an exaggerated tone if I'm mocking someone. It's tough to replicate that in text.

And so for me, it's very tough to get the numbers and to get the clarity to get the engagement on social media compared to looking in a camera, either — and this could be in a debate, like a live debate I much prefer. So that's sort of the calculus that goes on in my head and that's where I try to guide that decision.

**WOODS:** I just clicked on your YouTube channel, and unfortunately your welcome video started right up, which I didn't realize would happen. But I do need to take just a minute to say something, if I may, about — or ask you about Stefan Molyneux, Inc., so to speak, because it really is quite something what you've built up here. I mean, your YouTube channel has in excess of 685,000 subscribers. That's a veritable miracle. But it's not a miracle in the sense that it happened at random, but that, even with a lot of hard work, a lot of people would be very lucky to get even a tiny fraction of that. And that's not to mention your podcast downloads and everything else.

So I guess I'm curious about — let's leave aside — you might say I put out quality content. No doubt about that. A lot of people put out quality content, so the question is: when you look back on this, what do you attribute this to? I remember first encountering you in the form of articles. I used to read your articles. And then — I don't know the last time I read an article by you, actually, because I think you do basically what I do, which is mostly podcasting and stuff like that now.

**MOLYNEUX:** I will script stuff on occasion, like movie reviews and so on, because in the heat of rhetoric, I often forget, oh, this character's name is this. And when I make those kinds of mistakes, it drives me crazy.

**WOODS:** Right, okay.

**MOLYNEUX:** So I will script a few things, yeah, but mostly it's extemporaneous.

**WOODS:** And most of my writing actually goes out to my mailing list. Those are the people who get to read my articles every day. I write stuff for them. But anyway, so I'm curious about what you attribute that to or any tips you might give to people who want to produce content, who want to make good arguments, let's say, but they feel like if nobody can hear them, what's the point of making them?

**MOLYNEUX:** Right, right. Well, it's funny because somebody just posted the — I think it was yesterday — posted on a video that I did in 2006. Oh, lordy. Oh, lordy. I think I was like user seven on YouTube or something. And somebody posted a video saying like, Wow, you've been doing this for a long time. And that's — when people want advice, my concern is they want shortcuts, and I'm not sure that there are any. I mean, I've had a very peculiar constellation or aligning of the planets with regards to skill set.

So I mean, I did a lot of debating in high school. I was on the debate team. I was on the debate team in college and came in I think top five or top six in Canada my first year, so I've had a lot of experience and a lot of process of doing that. I have written a whole bunch of stuff which has never seen the light of day, like all the way back to intellectual journals and books that have never been published and so on, so I've had sort of a lot of practice. I did of course in theater school, I learned how to control my voice. I learned how to sort of connect the mind and the heart, the brain the soul, so to speak. The sort of physical work, body work, movement classes, gymnastics and sword fighting and learning how to connect your intellectual capacity with your emotional capacity, which has particularly to do with Shakespeare, is very important because he's such an intellectual writer.

So it's a lot of things that have come together, plus of course a lifetime of just debating anyone I can get my little hands on. And so when something kind of clicks — and then of course a decision to abandon political agnosticism in the run up to the Trump election and starting to focus on current events much more so has helped. So I would say expect it to take a long time. If you're looking at somebody who's a really great ballerina and you say, "What are your tips?" — you know, it's like that old joke, a guy goes up to someone in New York and says, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" And the guy says, "Practice, practice, practice."

And there is a phenomenon to a lot of people, where somebody just erupts out of nowhere and it's the old cliché of the ten-year overnight success, you know? I remember when Huey Lewis popped on the scene and people were like, *Wow, where is this guy coming from?* It's like, well, ten years at the bar scene. And it's the same thing with like INXS. They had done their backwater tours of Australia for many, many years. Same thing with Queen. They sort of toiled in the trenches for ten years and then sort of hit it big.

So if you love it, then you should do it for the rainbow, not the pot of gold. Like if you love something, you should do it not because you want to be famous or you want to have — You should do it because you love it. And if you love it and if you're passionate about it and if you can unite that love and that passion with a higher calling, a higher cause, then there's really nothing that can stop you. And if you don't love it, then I

don't think whatever pot of gold you have at the end of that rainbow, I don't think that will be enough to sustain the journey.

**WOODS:** I still feel compelled to just ask a little bit more about this. I'm curious about, when you got started producing all this content, you did it presumably in your spare time. You had a full-time job. Did you envision it as always remaining that way, or was there a part of you that thought maybe someday I could do this full time? And by the way, what was the turning point where you said I can forget my regular job; I can do this?

**MOLYNEUX:** Oh, so we really want to lift the lid on this grandiosity. Sure, okay, fine [laughing]. So from a very young age, Tom, I always felt destined for great things. Took his own sweet time getting there, let me tell you. That's like a — it's my four-decade plan. I've really been working on it for quite some time. It's the business plan that stretches back to the dawn of time. But no, I always felt that I had something of importance to offer the world. I started writing short stories when I was six years old. I wrote my first science fiction novel when I was 11. So for me, in particular, language — and then when I discovered philosophy through a friend of mine, who loved the band Rush whose drummer was a big fan of objectivism, and that sort of got me started on my whole journey to philosophy, I've always felt or believed that I had something of great value to offer the world.

But what happens is — what happened for me, at least, is every avenue I've tried to pursue that in turned out to be a dead end for reasons I didn't understand at the time but which I understand a lot more about now. So I was going to go into the art world. I studied playwriting and I was going to do screenplays and be an actor and did some of that, but I couldn't stand the leftism. Talk about the art world, then try layering in Canada over that art world and everyone's dependent on the state. It was not good. And very, very lefty to the point of many of them were open communists. I couldn't sustain myself.

And then academia, I did very well in academia. One of the first essays I wrote was read out by the professor to the class of 200 people as an example of a near-perfect essay. And did very well and so on, and then found that it just kind of petered out. And again, the way that academia is set up — again more so in Canada than in America — there is this problem of leftism and this in-group preference that the left has. I mean, as you know and as I know, they have no interest in diversity whatsoever. They're interested in diversity for their enemies, because if you can get the enemy army to all end up speaking different languages, they're a lot easier to conquer. But you want a mono-language in your own culture, which is leftism in higher education.

And then I went into the business world and worked for many years. I founded a company, grew it, and sold it, and was an entrepreneur. But you know, there were problems in the business world as far as integrity goes. There is this short-term time preference of pump up your stock value in the quarter, which leads you I think to make some very compromised decisions, or at least there's a lot of pressure to make those very compromised decisions for the long-term health and happiness of the company.

And so yeah, I started writing, and then when the Internet and, in particular, podcasting, because then I get to leverage the accent, which in everyone's mind adds at least 20 unjustified IQ points to whatever it is that I'm saying, I began to work in that realm. And I had a long commute, so I recorded in my car, found that I — I mean, I knew I was going to really enjoy it, found that I enjoyed it. And I was good at it.

And to put this in a religious context, when you're young, you ask, "What should I do? What do I want?" And then when you're older, hopefully, and maybe when you're younger too, you say, "What does God want? What does the world want? What does the world need?" And when it came to looking at my career as a software entrepreneur, I was doing some good and doing some valuable stuff and some interesting stuff, and it was good money, but I sort of fundamentally thought to myself — and in conversation with friends and family, I sort of thought to myself, "What does the world need most? Does the world need a philosopher or somebody who's good at explaining philosophy? Or does the world need another software entrepreneur?"

And when you ask the right questions in life, the answers become obvious, which is why so many people cloud their questions. And so for me — and for the world. I mean, I enjoyed the software entrepreneurial life and stability and, you know, no public hatred, which was kind of a plus. But when you ask, "What does the world need?" and you subjugate yourself to what's best for the world or at least what you think is best for the world, those decisions in a sense are taken out of your hands, if that makes any sense.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I can definitely see that. Now, on the other hand, you do still need to support yourself, right? It's nice to do what you're doing, but you do need to support yourself. So what I find interesting is the model that you're using. You don't have ads. And at first — because you haven't had ads from the beginning. I don't think you've ever run an ad. Am I right about that?

**MOLYNEUX:** Never, no. Never run ads.

**WOODS:** Never, okay. Now, I sometimes run ads, but if they ended tomorrow it wouldn't even affect me in any way. It's just a nice little icing on the cake. But at first I thought — because I've seen a lot of people who say I don't run ads, and they act like that makes them purer than other people because they don't run ads. and I always felt like ads are part of capitalism. I'm not ashamed of them. I'm going to use them.

**MOLYNEUX:** Sure.

**WOODS:** But on the other hand, there is a wisdom to not running ads in that you don't ever have to feel like, Eh, how's the sponsor going to feel about this if we have this conversation, you know? And there have been legitimate times when I have said, you know, with this episode I'd better not run that ad. I'll run it on tomorrow's more innocuous episode. So I can definitely see the merits of that, so I wasn't suggesting that you were one of the snooty, I'm-against-ads people, but there really is an advantage to not doing it and simply to appealing directly to the audience. What helps is when you have an audience of your size, you only need the tiniest percentage of them to feel like your work is supporting for you to be comfortable.

**MOLYNEUX:** Yeah, and maybe this comes from my Christian upbringing, but there were no ads at the Church.

**WOODS:** [laughing] Yeah.

**MOLYNEUX:** There wasn't like the Troop of Satan didn't come up and say, "We've got an alternative perspective for you. Come this way to the orgy." And so the idea that a moral enterprise could be supported by those who believe in it, well, this is how the Church runs. And so that was not too shocking to me. And of course I knew the historical example of philosophers who were kept alive often by patrons, but sometimes, you know, Socrates would just say, *Buy me lunch. Let's share. You know, I've got to eat. I can give you food for thought in exchange.* So I knew that was going to work.

There were a couple of reasons – and I'll just touch on them briefly, but a couple of reasons why I resisted ads for so long and also why I ended up, at least until the new book, giving away my books, which are all still available at [FreeDomainRadio.com/free](http://FreeDomainRadio.com/free). All my existing books are available for free, audiobooks and PDFs and so on.

But first of all, there is the natural cynicism of people who've been burned by sophists. You know, the sort of holy roller preachers who preach the virtue of poverty and drive their Rolls Royces. So there is of course, when you present people with startling arguments, the natural defense is to attempt to wipe them off the blackboard of the mind. Like people just look for a magic spell. Like the demon of thought arises in their mind and like the first thing they want is an exorcism. So if you give people an excuse to dismiss your ideas without evaluating them, that is not I think in the service of virtue, thought, philosophy, and so on.

And so I really, really wanted to not give people that excuse. You know, engage with the ideas, challenge me on the arguments, push back on the evidence. Let's have a conversation. But if there were ads running, at least for me, that would give people an excuse to jump off the bus. *Oh, this is just clickbait. Oh, he's just doing this for ads. Oh, he's just being controversial because it gets views and he gets money and all this kind of stuff.* So that was sort of number one.

Number two was I also knew the economic relationship. When you run ads, to some degree, your business is not delivering truth to your audience but delivering your audience to advertisers. And this is again, not disrespect to ads. They're a fundamental part of the free market and they're fine, but it does change the relationship in subtle ways. And I always wanted the audience to know that I was doing what I was doing with the hope and the goal of improving their lives, improving their thought patterns, improving their relationships, improving their opportunities.

And for me, also, if you're talking about economics and an ad pops up for gold, that's kind of in line. But because I talk about everything – you know, we talk about economics and philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, dreams, ambitions, careers, personal relationships, love, marriage, sex, children – we talk about everything. And when somebody's talking about something really personal or I'm talking about something really personal, which I'm certainly fine doing, and an ad pops up for gold,

it's just a little bit more jarring and I kind of saw that as a problem. And again, that's not a problem with ads; it's just the sort of random or schizoid content of the show being all over the map. It's tough to find anything that would match and that would not feel like perhaps an intrusion into sometimes more personal moments.

And last but not least, of course, I knew that there was going to be a vulnerability down the road, either like something like YouTube – either it wasn't going to succeed, in which case ads wouldn't really matter, or it and I were going to succeed, in which case there would be a focus on demonetizing whatever I was doing. I mean, this is what the left does. And not just the left, but this what sophists do on the left and the right. They don't engage your ideas, they don't engage your arguments, they don't engage with your evidence; they smear you, they slander you, they try to destroy your reputation, and they go after your source of income.

And so I didn't like the vulnerability of having an external authority over my source of income, and so I'd rather do the slow-but-steady build of just doing the ask, which, you know – I mean – [laughing] asking for money is never, *Oh, yay, I get to do that today or I need to do that today or that's important to do today.* But again, it's just about subjugating yourself to a higher ideal. Missionaries don't want to necessarily go to the backwaters of Africa, but they have a higher ideal to pursue, so you take the discomfort in pursuit of that. So those are sort of some of the reasons that I try to avoid it.

**WOODS:** All right, let's pause a word from our sponsor. I'm only kidding.

**MOLYNEUX:** [laughing]

**WOODS:** [laughing] I don't have a sponsor.

**MOLYNEUX:** Buy some gold!

**WOODS:** How could I not put that in there [laughing]? All right, I'm going to link to basically everything Stefan Molyneux there is at [TomWoods.com/1027](http://TomWoods.com/1027), but for now – so that's going to include a link to your book *The Art of the Argument*, which we've talked about in this conversation, but also your website, your social media, YouTube channel included. But if you want to give somebody a website or two or a link or two right now who might be too lazy, let's say, to go to [TomWoods.com/1027](http://TomWoods.com/1027), then we are all ears.

**MOLYNEUX:** Sure, you can go to [FreeDomainRadio.com](http://FreeDomainRadio.com) for that. You can follow me on Twitter @StefanMolyneux, because nothing spells social media success like a silent X at the end of your name.

**WOODS:** [laughing]

**MOLYNEUX:** And [YouTube.com/FreeDomainRadio](http://YouTube.com/FreeDomainRadio). I guess those are the big ones.

**WOODS:** Okay, great. Well, I enjoyed reading the book and I enjoyed this conversation. And you know, I know you have enemies. I have enemies. It's hard to believe that a genial guy like me can actually have an enemy. Like even —

**MOLYNEUX:** I'm a nice guy, too. That's the surprising thing. But you know what Churchill said. He said to someone, "You have enemies? Good. That means you have stood up to something, somewhere, some time."

**WOODS:** Yeah, right, right. I mean, I was at the 35th anniversary of the Mises Institute, and I stood up and I said, "I know there are a lot of libertarians out there who, just because of their temperament, the cheekiest they can be is to tell people that price controls are bad and free trade is good. And if that's all you can contribute, that's fine."

But I wonder, these people who tend to be the ones who are the quickest to attack me out of the blue — I don't bother with them unless they start it. But these people I find in general have never in their lives held a view that they thought they would be reviled for. They have no idea what that's like. There's no financial benefit I get from holding extremely unfashionable views that I will be reviled for. All I get in return is being reviled by fashionable people who want to build up their own name by trashing me. That's what I get in return.

Now, I also get loyal listeners, I suppose. I don't want to discount that. But man, just to put it that way: have you guys ever actually held an opinion that *The New York Times* wouldn't just be slightly annoyed by, but would really, really want to punish you for? And if not, then I don't think you really understand what the fight against the state is all about. It's about a lot more than being against price controls.

**MOLYNEUX:** Well, you know, if you simply write abstract pieces saying that robbery is bad, then thieves don't really care? Why? Because you're not interfering with their immediate acquisition of property. But if you invent alarm systems and if you buy people dogs and if you get key codes and you build safes in people's houses, then you are immediately interfering with the unjust transfer of property sought by thieves.

And so abstract principle is wonderful, fantastic. We do need to guide ourselves by abstract principles. We need maps. We need compasses. We need GPSs. But we also need to get somewhere. And getting somewhere means — spreading virtue, spreading truth, spreading reasoning — means directly interfering with the material and political and personal profits of bad people. If bad people aren't annoyed by you, if bad people don't hate you, you're not doing any good. You're not actually achieving anything tangible, because the spread of virtue harms the profits of vice. And if you are merely talking about virtue without harming the profits of vice, you're not doing anything, fundamentally. And so when you harm the immediate profits of evil people, when you interfere with what they want, then they notice you. As the old saying goes, you only get flak when you're over the target and actually have bombs.

**WOODS:** Yeah, there you go. And it's times like that that you say, well, it doesn't matter if I have to deal with some think-tank president not liking me or some ridiculous thing like that, because I have an army of people who do like me. And in the age of the Internet, that's all that counts.

**MOLYNEUX:** Well, and it's funny to me – well, for Christians as well, Tom. I mean, how popular was Jesus in his day? And so the idea that we must seek popularity or that the hatred of evil people is somehow a smear against our virtue, it's incomprehensible to me at a fundamental moral level, but particularly for Christians. The mark of dissatisfaction cast upon you by evildoers or those who have unjust power and authority, those who wield the coercive power of the state, those who are unjustly exploiting personal or professional or media relationships and so on – the idea that somehow people disliking you makes you a bad person, you are actually serving evildoers by holding that perspective because you are empowering their desire to smear you. And this is something people really – this is not a neutral position. If you believe that people disliking someone makes that person bad, then you are the fuel that fires their attacks, because you're the reason they work.

**WOODS:** Yeah. Man, that's good stuff. Let's conclude on that note. And again, check out [FreeDomainRadio.com](http://FreeDomainRadio.com). And Stefan's YouTube channel, apparently the entire world subscribes to it, so it must be good, therefore. That's what I'm concluding from reading your book on the argument. If a lot of people do something, it must be right. I think that's what you were trying to say.

**MOLYNEUX:** [laughing]

**WOODS:** Anyway, thanks so much for your time and best of luck with the book.

**MOLYNEUX:** Thanks, Tom. My great pleasure.