



Episode 830: Should We Revere Academia, and Disparage Independent Scholars?

Guest: Steve Patterson

WOODS: I sent out an email the other day, and apparently you saw it. And again, I keep telling people you've got to get on my email list. The things you're missing out on, you just have no idea. Your life will be – I don't know; I'm not going to make crazy claims, but I would say at least 4.3% better if you're on my email list.

PATTERSON: I think that's fair.

WOODS: Yeah. So I wrote this email about a bunch of things, but it really converged on the question of academic publishing and self-publishing. And I quote a certain economist – who I think will just remain nameless, because I don't feel like launching a civil war – as saying this – and this is a statement that you of course have a real interest in discussing. And his statement was:

"It's simple, really. If you self-publish, that signals one of three things:

1. You are too lazy
 2. You are too arrogant
 3. You know your work sucks so much that you refused to subject it to the normal process of blind peer-review.
- or
4. You submitted it to that process, it got strongly rejected and you threw a temper tantrum and published it yourself."

And then continuing quoting this person: "In all cases, that's a strong signal about the quality of the work. In a world where my time is scarce, that signal is so strong that it's a perfectly rational reason for me to not bother with said book."

Now, Steve, I hope you'll permit me to just continue for one more minute –

PATTERSON: Certainly.

WOODS: – and give you my sort of response to this guy. I have a much more elaborate response, but I said:

"Now this is from someone" – namely this economist we've just quoted – "who has published several books the traditional, respectable, academic way. His most recent book retails at \$120.00, and its Amazon sales rank is 1,746,128.

"This is a person who wants to lecture other people about book publishing? Who is still publishing \$120 books with traditional publishers? Could it be someone who is...dare I say...lazy? Or just unoriginal? Or not bold enough to rely on the strength of his own name and reputation? If you want to write \$120 books no one ever reads, then by all means go the conventional route and disparage self-publishing.

"But as someone" — namely myself — "who's done both (I've self-published and also had my books published with Basic Books, Random House, and Columbia University Press), I say there's no shame in self-publishing. Yes, it *can* mean your book is crummy, though plenty of traditional publishers release crummy books, too. But it can also mean the author wants (1) higher royalties and (2) a retail price people might actually pay, and has enough marketing savvy not to get snookered into having his book's retail price set at \$120.00 by some creepazoid publisher. No shame in that."

So that was my commentary. Tell people, first of all, how this commentary might be related to something you're doing, and then I'd like to get your comments on what this person said.

PATTERSON: So I love the commentary, Tom, and it is a demonstration of how an entrepreneur thinks versus how an academic thinks. So when I read that email, it gave me a great deal of joy, because that particular economist was talking to me on my Facebook wall about a book that I self-published.

WOODS: Well, how about that? What an interesting coincidence, Steve, that I happened to come upon that passage? I'll just leave it there [laughing].

PATTERSON: Yes. And it's one of two things. It's either the case that he's telling the truth, that that's genuinely how he perceives — you know, it's one of three or four options — in which case I don't think that is a very — I think that reveals maybe more about his own entrepreneurial thinking than he intends. Or two, he's not telling the truth, in which case that also I think reveals a bit more than he intends.

When you are outside the academy, as you and I are, it is very, very clear the direction that the world of ideas is going. It's going online. It's going to independent intellectuals who can stand behind their work, who can stand behind their name, and say, look. I have written — so the book in question is a book on philosophy. It's called *Square One: The Foundations of Knowledge*. And it's a short book about logic: basically about the laws of logic, why there are no logical contradictions. I've been working on the ideas for about a decade, and I thought, okay, now's the time I'm going to get it published. I'm going to get 70% royalties if I publish it myself. I'm not going to have to go through any of the academic hoops I've got to jump through. It's going to be great.

Well, those in the academy find it impossible to conceive that anybody could publish something as highbrow as philosophy outside of their system. They think it must mean — As he said, it must mean that either the quality of the ideas is terrible or you're a — to give you a literal quote, one of these academics called me a "self-delusional crackpot." That's an actual quote. Because these people cannot conceive that you can actually meaningfully contribute to the world of ideas — you can do your own research, you can do your own publishing, you can do your own marketing, you can do

your own communication, you can do your own speaking, set your own prices outside of the academy.

WOODS: Yeah, so you are doing something very radical in a great sense, and it's something that I do. I mean, you and I are basically doing the same thing when you look at it from the grand scheme of things, in that we're setting our own rules, we're living our own lives, we're not following a set pattern. In a way we're living kind of differently from how anyone has ever lived – I don't want to make it sound too dramatic here, but we really are living a completely different kind of lifestyle, and this does come as surprising and shocking, and it can even seem offensive and bizarre to people who are in one of the most – I'm not even sure what the word is. Maybe we can have a contest to come up with the most appropriate word – kind of professions like academia, where you're supposed to sit there, you have your seven hours in the classroom, and then you can basically do whatever you want, and it is an extremely cushy job. And it's not the best salary in the world, but it's okay considering what it is you're doing. And to confront somebody like you, well, yeah, heads would explode.

Now, let me play devil's advocate here and say, It is true, as he says, there are a whole lot of books out there. And moreover, there are a lot of worthy books out there too that really would be a good use of my time. But it's hard to distinguish between what is and what isn't, and so I need to have some kind of filtering mechanism to help me decide what my valuable and scarce time is best spent on. And he's saying that if you have the imprimatur of an academic publisher coupled with the peer-review process, that at least tells him that somebody else thought it was worth his time. So I can at least sympathize with that point of view. What would you – I mean, we need some filtering mechanism, and so if it's not going to be an academic publisher, what's it going to be?

PATTERSON: Yeah, it's a great point, and it's self-evidently true that when the barriers to entry are reduced for publishing that you get a lot worse quality material published in addition to some really good quality material. That is true. However, as somebody who consumes philosophy that is approved by the gatekeepers in academia, I can say it really isn't that much of a quality control to say this book has passed the peer-review process; this book is worth picking up and reading. The professional academics, as somebody who's really interested in philosophy, I can say, well, their signaling mechanism isn't exactly as great as they make it out to be.

So how do you build a different signal? Well, you think like an entrepreneur. How is it that somebody like myself – I'm working the world of philosophy – how can I demonstrate to people my work is worth taking seriously? One way that I've answered this question is I have a podcast where I'm currently traveling the world with my wife, interviewing intellectuals from elite universities like Harvard, Oxford, Stanford, Berkeley, Columbia, Cambridge – almost all of the biggest name schools in the world, I'm having one-on-one interviews with top level professors about ideas.

So obviously these professors are accepting the interviews, who are somebody like a John Searle, one of the most well-known philosophers in the world; Timothy Williamson, at the top of the game, probably the best-known logician in the world. These people have sat down with me because they've listened to my other work, and I've demonstrated to them: look, I'm the real deal; I'm worth taking seriously. And

everybody can listen to my podcast and decide for themselves. So that's one potential signal that people can say, okay, this guy has actually got some interesting experience on philosophy.

And so far it's been a great success. I get emails all the time from people who are saying, "Yeah, I wasn't really that interested in philosophy. I always thought it was kind of this useless stuff, people talking about jargon I couldn't understand. I listened to *Patterson in Pursuit*. It's great." I just got an email the other day from a high school teacher, who introduced *Patterson in Pursuit*, which is the podcast, to some of his students, and the high school teacher is talking with his students about the interviews that I'm conducting. So that's a signal to people: hey look, yeah, it's true there's no barriers to entry, and if you've got to stand out from the crowd, this is one way to do it.

WOODS: All right, let's try and deal with the situation that you're in, because you've done exactly this. You're living exactly the way you're recommending, that you are evaluating ideas on their merits; you're an intelligent, informed guy; you're well read; you've thought a lot about these things; and therefore, you want to write about them. Now, I'll say that in my field of history, there is a tremendous superstition surrounding the alleged training historians get that makes historians better than other people at compiling data and events from the past. But I'll tell you something. I went through two very elite history programs, and I'll tell you I was not let in on any secret teachings. I wasn't let in on any secret methods that would make my work better than other people's. It's simply that I have a body of knowledge, but that's a body of knowledge that could be acquired by a reasonably intelligent person on his own.

So I don't look down on people who are amateur historians. Sometimes amateur historians write great stuff. They do excellent work. There's no reason to assume they're no good, and especially given that in academia so much crazy nonsense goes on, because these people can afford it. They have the salary that allows them to sit around and write nonsense all day, and they can't get fired. I don't know why we always give them the benefit of the doubt.

I don't think there was a question in there. I guess that was just a comment.

PATTERSON: Well, I'll definitely respond to that. So this is true in spades when you're talking about philosophy. I could see an argument that there's some measure of training that would go on maybe in the hard sciences. If you're interested in biology, you've got to learn how to pipette in person. Okay, you get the training; I get it. Less so in history, and it's nonexistent in philosophy.

So the fact of the matter is that with access to the Internet you can read more philosophy right now than anybody else could throughout history, and you can spend as much time researching whatever you want however you want to research it. You can reach out to different intellectuals whose work you admire. You can talk to them. You can have a correspondence with them even if they're on the other side of the planet. The tools available for an independent intellectual or an amateur – I don't think that's even really an appropriate word to use in this context, because – "amateur" only in the sense that they lack the formal credential. So you have as many tools as people 60 years could dream about to do independent research.

And that's what I've been doing. The amount of time that I'm able to commit to just pure research is insane, because I don't have classes to teach, I don't have papers to grade, I don't have bureaucracy to deal with, I don't have to worry about if my ideas are too radical. Pretty much it's like the dream job being someone who's interested in philosophy outside of academia. And the only thing that I don't have right now, the only thing is the formal credential. So as you and I both know, and people who are working the marketplace know, that formal credential is losing its value every day. It's losing its signal that – if you got your BA, it means virtually nothing. If you have your PhD, it means, okay, well, you have a little bit of patience to sit in class. Maybe you're good at writing papers. But in terms of producing for the marketplace that people want to consume, it really doesn't mean much.

So I honestly foresee a future where most of intellectual life is going to be taking place online, because it's superior in almost every way. And there's just so little that you get from going to the university system that can't be replicated even better online.

WOODS: Well, totally agreed. Totally agreed for quite a few reasons. Now, let's talk about some of the topics that you're exploring. And first of all, can you tell me – Is it okay if I tell people where you are right now?

PATTERSON: Yeah, of course. I'm in Auckland, New Zealand.

WOODS: Okay, so you're talking to me from New Zealand – which, by the way, itself is a miracle if you ask me. There's none of that awful lag that you used to have with these long international calls, the audio lag. We can just talk, and it's very comfortable.

PATTERSON: And free.

WOODS: And free. That's just a miracle. What exactly brings you there in particular? Who are you talking to there?

PATTERSON: So Julia and I – my wife – have had a very ambitious plan for a little bit more than a year. Our idea was: we don't have any kids yet, and I've got this podcast series, so why don't we take this small window of time to travel and see as much of the world as we can, interview as many people about as many big ideas as possible? And then once the journey is done, maybe we can settle down a bit. So that has taken us through I think seven countries – six countries in Europe, and now like I said, we're in New Zealand now, and then we're going to go to Australia and then Japan and hopefully South Korea. I might go to Thailand and India to talk with people about Buddhism.

Specifically what brings us to New Zealand is that it was pretty much the top of our list to actually visit, so of all the countries we've been to this is the one where we're like, Okay, we're going to enjoy this country [laughing]. It's not as much about who we're going to interview. So there's some people, for example, at the University of Auckland. I have an interview later today; I had some good interviews. Nobody in particular brings me to New Zealand, other than the beautiful countryside.

But there is actually a mathematician in Australia. He teaches at the University of New South Wales, and he's got some radical beliefs about mathematics, about the foundations of mathematics around the turn of the 20th century. I share many of those beliefs, and so I can't wait, because I am planning to get an interview with him. After New Zealand we're going to Sydney, where hopefully I'm going to get at least one, maybe more, interviews with — his name's Norman Wildberger, if anybody's curious — where I'm hoping to get down to some really interesting history and philosophy of mathematics with him.

WOODS: I know we've talked to you before, and we've talked about the podcast, but not everybody's listened to every — if you can believe it, not everybody's listened to every episode, so it might not be a bad idea to give us the 30-second overview of what the point of *Patterson in Pursuit* is, and do you expect ultimately to find what you're in pursuit of?

PATTERSON: That's a very good question. Okay, so the first part of the question, *Patterson in Pursuit* is my own personal Socratic journey with a microphone. So I have been obsessed with pursuing truth in a bunch of different disciplines for many years, and I graduated from college very unimpressed with the college experience. I went and worked in the nonprofit world for a few years, and now I'm very unimpressed with the nonprofit world. I thought that's where the world of ideas lived, was in academia. That died. I thought maybe it was in the nonprofit world. That died. So I figured all right, I've got to do this myself.

So a couple of years ago I decided to go full-time as an independent philosopher doing my own research, being funded almost entirely by my supportive wife, who had a job, because, believe it or not, when you quite your job and say, "I'm an independent philosopher," the paycheck doesn't immediately start rolling in. And so I decided a really awesome opportunity would be to couple these conversations that I'm having with people and record them. Like, let's get a microphone in there, because I've had really, really interesting conversations with people for years. It's just for my own benefit and it's in-person; I figure other people can benefit from this.

So far it's been very much a success. People like my own personal approach to talking with these intellectuals about everything from philosophy to math to science to religion — that's one of the big topics — to politics and economics. And I think what people really like about it is I don't come with this pre-planned script. Especially in philosophy but a lot of podcasts that are done in the world of ideas are very stale, and they're not personal. For me, the questions that I'm asking are literally the questions that pop up in my head in real-time as I'm talking with these intellectuals about ideas.

And what you also get with most podcasts or with most philosophy that's produced is they're only talking about other people's ideas. It's like, "Okay, let's talk about Descartes, and let's talk about Leibniz." It's never like, okay, here's my own beliefs on the topic. I think I've sorted some things out. Why do you think this is wrong? I ask that in private, so why not ask it in public? And it's fascinating to hear people talk about, for example, the subject of my book, like I said earlier, is about logic, why there are no logical contradictions. I've asked tons of professors this, and I keep getting different answers. And it's fascinating to listen to.

So I think – in fact, I know this is the case, because an academic just messaged me about this. He said, Steve, you should know that no serious philosopher is entertaining the idea that there are logical contradictions. I thought, Oh, well, I'm afraid you revealed your lack of communication with your peers, because I've spoken with a bunch of people who are in fact arguing for the existence of logical contradictions, and if you'd like I can give you timestamps of when I asked them these questions at these universities. So the academics themselves don't even see how much disagreement there are about foundational ideas.

So that is kind of what the project is, and in terms of whether or not I think I'm going to find it, I think I'm definitely in the process of what I would say is discovering truth. I've discovered what I consider to be foundational truth – that is, the laws of logic. That's what the book *Square One* is about. If anybody's interested in why I think that's the case, they can pick up a copy of the book. And it's a very limited set of truths, but I've found those truths can be applied to every area of thought because they're so foundational. So I think I'm arriving at some pretty strong conclusions in politics and economics about governments might be unnecessary and free markets work really well. I think I can back those up. But also in philosophy about what the nature of the mind is. I think I'm getting some actual conception about the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language. I think things are getting sorted out.

An interesting topic that gets overlooked in modern intellectual discourse is religion. Religion is disparaged as it's all just a bunch of crap; there's no truth to be found. I don't think that's true. I had an experience several years ago of a profound feeling of love from my wife, Julia, and I realized, Hang on a second. That simplistic worldview that I had, the non-religious worldview that didn't have an explanation, didn't include the concept of love, is wrong. I have to expand my worldview. I need an explanation for this experience of love. And that's what religions have been talking about for thousands of years. So a big part of the conversations I have in talking to people is help me sort this out. I want to discover truth in this area. I think there's some truth to be found in all the different religions. I'm trying to piece it together.

So I think it's the case that at the end of my journey, if that ever comes, I think I'm going to have a pretty robust worldview that I'm able to back up.

WOODS: And one last thing – because unfortunately I have to cut our episode today short just because of all kinds of crazy things going on in my house today – but I want to ask you: how do you respond to people who say you have an arrogant tone? You're arrogant. We have these professors, and look, the fact is they are learned. They're not stupid people. And you act as if – and I'm just playing devil's advocate. This what people say – you act as if you've – you've just started looking into this stuff, and you've found foundational errors at the root of it all that all these idiot professors haven't found. Man, that's an arrogant position to take, Steve Patterson. What do you say to that?

PATTERSON: I say I am totally open to being wrong, but I'm not going to act like just because a bunch of people say something is true that it's true. So if I'm wrong, show me where I'm wrong.

And in fact, if I can say one more thing, I think your audience will appreciate this. On the topic of arrogant academics, in the midst of all this controversy that was going on about peer-review, about the dangers of self-publishing, there was a particular academic who said, Look, in my professional opinion I think you are literally a self-delusional crackpot. That's the most reasonable conclusion. And I would have to have \$1,000 in order to read your book. That's what he said out of the blue. I didn't ask him. He just swooped in to let everybody know this guy really isn't worth my time. He'd have to pay me \$1,000. And then he kept insisting, and he said, But if you do pay me \$1,000, I'll write a 1,200-word review, and I'll try to get it published in an academic journal, and I'll publish it online.

And at the time, I thought this is just standard arrogance, standard virtue signaling, you're not worth my time, whatever, just kind of trying to mock me. But I got some wise counsel from my wife and from other people who said, Steve, this is an awesome opportunity. They said, Take him up on it. Make him actually review your book. Pay him the \$1,000, and see what happens. So first of all, I don't want to pay him the \$1,000, so what I did was I started a Kickstarter.

So right now there's a Kickstarter. It's called "Fund Jason Brennan's Review of Crackpot Philosophy," where I am putting my foot down and saying, Look, you mock those people outside of academia; you think they're not worth your time. Let's see what you actually have to say about my ideas, not about my character, not about my arrogance, not about the peer-review process. Put your money where your mouth is. That's what I've done. Let's see your analysis of the ideas. And so far in two days we've raised, like, \$300 to go towards getting him to review the book.

So there are people on two sides of the camp here. There are people who would like to see independent philosophy and independent thinkers crushed because they're outside the system, and there's a heck of a lot of people that would like to see those inside the academy get something stuck in their eye; say, Look, actually you can work in the world of ideas outside of academia. So if anybody's interested in that, you can go to my website, Steve-Patterson.com, and there's a link to an Indiegogo if you want to contribute to that campaign.

WOODS: All right, very good. Tell me again the website where people can find out more about you in general.

PATTERSON: Yeah, it's Steve-Patterson.com. I've got a bunch of my writing there, and I also have a YouTube channel, YouTube.com/StevePatterson.

WOODS: All right, so we'll link to your website, and we'll certainly link to the YouTube channel at TomWoods.com/830. We'll link to the book also, *Square One*. Just jotting all this down to make sure I remember. All right, so it's going to be a Steve Patterson smorgasbord at TomWoods.com/830. Well, enjoy your travels, Steve, and look forward to talking to you again soon.

PATTERSON: Thanks so much, Tom.