The Philosophical Silk Road - Part 1

A new series of written dialogues; John Vervaeke, Christopher Mastropietro, with Andrew Sweeny

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Note: This is the first in a new Parallax series of written dialogues, which have been signifigantly edited from the origional podcast—a sort of 'best of' or most salient interviews. This one felt vital enough to save from the digital abyss. It was recorded on April 11th, 2024

Andrew : Perhaps the Silk Road and pilgrimage can be our jumping-off point. Is that okay with you guys? I mean the inner Silk Road in terms of the journeys we all take with books, etcetera. And then you're actually going on a journey and a real pilgrimage.

John: I'm very happy to talk about that. Maybe I'll discuss the pivot from a "religion that's not a religion" into the pilgrimage of The Philosophical Silk Road and what that means.

So, one of the reasons for the change of terms was—in the proper sense and not in any kind of manipulative sense—rhetorical. The religion that was not a religion was just pissing everybody off on all sides. It was bothering the religious people, and when it was bothering the nonreligious people. People would grudgingly admit that they got my point, but they still didn't like it. And also for me—I have moved more and more away from the atheistic pole on the religious spectrum if there is such a thing.

And I'm more and more into a much more vibrant and vital non-theism. The sacred is speaking to me. Sorry, that sounds really pretentious. But I'm experiencing it as the sacred speaking to me more. And the more people I talk to—and I mean high-caliber, high-quality people in this whole arena, like Ilan MaGilchrist and Daniel Schmachtenberger—the more the advent of the sacred as a response to the meaning crisis is a growing theme. And I have become more and more called into service to do whatever I can to afford the advent of that sacred in as many people as possible.

And so a third thing happened.

I was in Aetna last year with Bishop Maximus. He's a dear friend with tremendous respect for my work and a profound commitment to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. I leave it to him and how he manages that wonderful friendship and that deep allegiance. It seems to work for him. It certainly works for me, so I am grateful for that.

But he said, John, I really like the philosophical Silk Road you've been talking about, but I don't like this religion that's not a religion. And I thought, yeah, there's something there. And I realized that the advent of the sacred is not exclusive to the Nones. (The non-religious). It also includes people in the legacy religions and homed therein.

And then I thought, well, I want to do something that affords and extends the courtyard of dia-logos so that people can walk between the various homes. Nobody lives in this courtyard; people move along it.

CS Lewis has a very similar notion. Paul Vanderklay told me that Lewis, in his book Mere Christianity, calls this hallway Christianity—Christianity that lets people move through the various rooms and denominations that people live in, but nobody lives in the hallway.

But man, if you don't have a hallway in your house, you're doomed, trapped, imprisoned. The Silk Road is meant to be a much more global hallway with an extended courtyard where people can find a shared philosophical framework and language that allows them to travel like the anthropologist returning from another culture and recovering their home deeply. As TS Eliot said, “seeing it again for the first time.”

I understood this is a more full-bodied and appropriate response to the advent of the sacred. I should not be pronouncing on how these legacy religions may or may not comport themselves to affordance and participation in this. I will make what I can available to them, and, of course, it is up to their agency and their choice how they will respond. Of course, this is still directed toward the Nones as everything in my work.

It was clear that I could not do as I had done in any other courses. This could not be merely intellectual, philosophical, or even the teaching of practices like “After Socrates”; it had to be something that I shared by undergoing a pilgrimage to various places on the Silk Road and engaging with various sages, both sages who will come along for me along the way and sages who represent various homes that I will visit and dwell within.

When I made that decision, it was like a switch was flipped deep in my chest, deep in my psyche. I don't want to build too much into this, but I don’t have a better word:

there's been something like a purification process I've been going through—a preparation process—a deeply personal spiritual transformation to make myself proper to the pilgrimage. And so that is what is happening.

When I proposed this to our group at the Vervaeke Foundation, there was an immense reception. Chris was particularly enthusiastic and has continuously been deeply enthusiastic. Of course, he is very concerned with the philosophical and the spiritual. But there is also the opportunity to bring in drama, animation, music, geo-philosophy, and aesthetics as a way of carrying the message. The way that he and others, especially Chris, have taken this up, and it has called to them, has enriched and encouraged me.

So that's my initial response as to what the philosophical road is.

Andrew: I was thinking about, as you were speaking, that I'm not a None. I became a "real" Buddhist at a certain point in my twenties. And in Buddhism, you "take refuge." You vow to be—It's a strange thing—a homeless refuge. This is kind of strange because, in a way, the meaning of crisis you speak of is about finding a home. But in another sense, there's an embrace of homelessness. I'm thinking about the dialectic between home and homelessness in the world.

Anyway, Chris, what about you? Do you want to respond and tell me a bit about your pilgrimage?

Chris: Well, I can take that up what you just said. I like that. There's something about religiousness that is implicitly homeless in the sense of culture. I'm curious to see what you say about this, John, because I sometimes think we have similar ideas about this, and sometimes we have different ideas about this, but I think there is a healthy dialectic between them.

The idea of having a religious home and the thing that I find healthy and compelling about the idea of the Silk Road and the way that John envisions it, especially for this series and in general, is that the idea that there is a kind of implicit religious or symbolic grammar that is sort of native to each of us. And that doesn't mean that that's immutable and can't be influenced and changed across time.

But there is a way in which our particular disposition and psychic life commend us to a certain way of being religious, which is a certain way of encountering the sacred.

We don't all encounter the sacred exactly the same way, and we each have a different road to take to get there. And that particular road that is individual to us idiosyncratically, I think, is much more the home that I understand the religious life to be, which is to say, it's something within us.

Andrew: So the road is the home?

Chris: Well, I think so, yeah. There's a way in which I think the road is the home. I mean, the religious motifs and the motifs of the religious journey always involve, almost invariably, the renunciation of home in the sense of the protective, enculturated sense of home. And the departure from that seems to be essential to that motif, essential to that pattern. And so the homelessness of religion is, I think, something very important.

I guess this is a very stoic idea, in addition to whatever other kind of idea it is. But the idea of the Silk Road to me is that the wandering, traveling, encountering different influences, and metabolizing of a lingua philosophica helps to create a space within oneself into which that inward process can pour itself, discover itself, and metabolize itself. Right?

The more I engage with this work, the more I realize that so much of the dawning consciousness of our encounter with the sacred is ultimately a process that happens to us. It occurs to us. We can bring consciousness to bear on it, augment it, make space for it, and inquire within it in such a way as to invite it.

So, I do believe that consciousness, the training and honing that come with the Socratic way, and all of the attendant practices have a very, very powerful role in sensitizing us to it, drawing it out, and inviting it. The whole idea of the dialectic is the inquiry that makes space for that which is unconscious and upswells into our awareness, as opposed to something that we contrive or create from the top down, which, incidentally, was the overtone to the religion that is not a religion.

That, I think, was the thing about it that didn't work. It implied design principles, a top-down determination of something that is fundamentally an upswell and can be tutored and honed and trained and finessed and disciplined by Socratic inquiry, and necessarily so. But it's ultimately something endogenous within the person that has to be discovered. We can bring all kinds of techniques to tutor it, but we have to let it be what it is.

And all of these techniques, journeys, adventures, and philosophical language, really at their best, serve to make space for a process that happens to us and that we have to simply receive. And there's a humility to that, to me, that makes it much more authentic as a religious journey and as a religious pilgrimage.

As John likes to use this word in the positive sense, the *humiliation* of the project is what makes it trustworthy to me. And so there's the fundamental idea of the Silk Road as being a journey to discover that native language within that commends us to the character we must become in order to access the self that we are and become that, and become unto it. And become unto it in a way that we can realise ourselves in relation to the sacred.

Maybe not in a way that is identical to any one person, but we find, I think, it's much easier for us to find. We can accord and find peace in our relations with other people if we find the home within, as opposed to the home underneath a canopy, grouped with a bunch of people who may have a very different idea of what this is to them.

John: First of all, I want to respond to that, Andrew, and then I'll let you take us further. Thank you for that, Chris.

I think, as he frequently does, Chris articulated the exact point: the shift from a very, almost imperious, top-down orientation with a religion that's not a religion, an engineering attitude or stance, to one that is properly from the standpoint of humility attitude.

The stance is one of *inventio* towards the advent of the sacred. (It's a nice turn of phrase, *inventio towards the advent*.) I just want to reinforce the shift that he is pointing to in the orientation, the standpoint, and the stance. I think that is fundamental. He fundamentally articulated what is central and crucial about the shift from the religion that's not a religion to the philosophical Silk Road.

As he said, obviously, it takes discipline. Discipline means to follow. And if you're going to walk a road, you better follow a path, right? You just can't wander aimlessly. But that discipline is always within inventio in service of the advent. So, first of all, I want to thank Chris for that. I think that was astonishingly articulate and to the point. And I'm grateful for that.

Andrew: I love the path image contrary to the reactionary movement back to religion. It feels as if people are going back to the safety of a prescribed kind of modality of religion. It could be in the Christian or the Buddhist or any religion, whereas The Silk Road is a very open path. There's a uniqueness to every particular journey, a whole tapestry of different Influences—not only individually but collectively.

John: The advent of Christianity transformed Judaism; the advent of Islam transformed Christianity. There's always this toing and froing and mutual transformation, some of it hostile, some of it friendly.

And I want to say I'm under no delusions. The actual Silk Road, which was for commerce and also creative ideas, had violence, bloodshed, and warfare associated with it. I'm idealizing from that. What it created was a lingua philosophica. It created this pathway where you had sort of Neoplatonism from the West and Zen from the East, reaching towards each other, being influenced by Vedanta and other things along the way.

Now, about the issue about homelessness, I agree with Chris. I think the move is from the cynics who thought you had to abandon a particular physical home, to the stoics as Chris said, to the Socratic sense of being cosmopolitan, where the cosmos was your polis, that you're at home in the cosmos. And I think part of that is the recovery of something that is now becoming increasingly more scientifically plausible and increasingly more realizable, which is a recovery—in the Tolkien sense—of the microcosmic, macrocosmic relationship—mutual internalization and indwelling—and the recovery of that profound interpenetration. Finding that through-line is exactly what we're talking about. It's that sense of home.

And this has again landed for me very personally, very recently. I was very honored when Jordan Peterson called me and invited me to participate in his next big series, the Gospel Seminar. And I'm somebody who has a very fraught relationship with Christianity, I don't know if that's the right word. I was there and I made this very clear.

In fact, at one point, we were doing individual interviews, and I was saying how I'm there as a non-theist, Zen Neoplatonist, and skeptic in the ancient sense of deep inquirer, open, and wanting to hear.

And the director said, you just made that up right now? And Jordan said that's why he's here. They wanted me here for that and thanked me for it. And so I want to make very clear that I was well received and welcomed and I participated in a way that I think, in a virtuous sense, I'm very proud of.

But as I was doing this, I came to the realization—and I'm I'm reading a lot of books on Jesus, some of them from Christians, some of them from Zen Buddhists, which has been really wonderful. Sally McFag's presentation on the parables and her proposal that Jesus is the parable of God—all of this was just resonating. When you try to talk this way, you sound like you're in a, you know, an old time Disney movie or a Hallmark commercial. It's frustrating. But a great peace came over me because I realized my longing to return to Christianity and the envy I had fell away from me, and I felt deeply, deeply at peace.

And the problem I'm struggling with is that this sounds very negative. That sounds like I finally was completely orphaned and homeless and in one sort of technical sense, that's true. But I found that I had come into a more living relationship with Jesus of Nazareth and I am not criticising the Christianity that was made present to me because I was very impressed by it and I want everybody to hear that and very respectful of it and appreciative it.

I learned a lot and genuine dia-logos were taking place repeatedly. But I just realized that the Silk Road and what it is coming to mean for me are giving me that peace.

Andrew: And, John, when you're talking, I felt shivers all over me about this popular return to Christianity. I'm sympathetic to Christianity, but I have the feeling that they are starting a war—a big conflict between Christianity and Islam. And there's a lot of really intelligent Christians out there, but they seem to have a wall around them. They don't seem to be open. I did have good conversation with Jordan hall about his conversion, and I do listen to Jordan Peterson and the Exodus series—I listen to that stuff—but I have a feeling that there are strong lines being drawn, which feels somewhat dangerous to me. Does that make sense?

John: Yes, it does. And that was definitely there. Not so much on camera, but off scene. And the privilege I had was both off-scene and especially on camera, I critiqued what is now called cultural Christianity. Richard Dawkins has just came out as a cultural Christian. And of course it's part of the defence against Islam, the

defence of western civilization against Islam. And Islam is not innocent in any of this.

Religions are capable of being aggressive and adopting a conquest mentality, and there are certainly aspects of Islam like that, but of course, there are and have been aspects of that in Christianity and everything else.

And so I was able to criticize and critique, in the philosophical sense, cultural Christianity because I think it is a great disservice to what Jesus of Nazareth was trying to share with people. It instrumentalizes Christianity and, therefore, fundamentally perverts it from what it is supposed to be and how it is supposed to operate.

And so I stand, and I'll say it here publicly, I stand against cultural Christianity and, for similar reasons, against Christian nationalism. Both of those are instrumentalizations of Christianity and idolatry, putting it in service of what their true God is, which is Western civilization on the one hand, and the United States of America on the other. And I do not regard either one of those as proper entities for ultimate concern or worship. I think that is a profound sin of idolatry.

And. Sorry, you can hear the anger in my voice and I think it is a great, great disservice. And if that is what Christianity is turning towards, and I don't believe it is, but if it somehow weirdly turns out that that is what Christianity turns towards, then I will stand against that Christianity because I think it has nothing but an idol. It is nothing but an idolatrous perversion of the spirit that lived in Jesus of Nazareth.

Andrew: I'm fully on board with that. You articulated perfectly what I was feeling. Any comments or thoughts about this, Chris?

Chris: I mean, I agree, deeply, deeply, deeply. This is not a new problem.

It's not a new critique. It goes back a fair way, but it's certainly as present now as ever. The idea is that Christianity is something that you culturally absorb or dispose yourself to as part of a collective that turns towards some practical, worldly affair. And I think the idea of instrumentalizing it in service of another good. That's a really good way of describing that kind of idolatry, and I think it's exactly right.

And the idea that you can systematize Christianity into a set of values or beliefs about, or a fleet of ethical standards that don't have to do with the core orientation of having a relationship with the person or persons of the divine if I can put it that way. The idea that you can be a Christian without actually trying to cultivate a mysterious relationship with, you know, Jesus.

Andrew: Like this triumphalist mode of Christianity is the opposite of Christianity. It's like the Antichrist, right?

Chris: Well, that's interesting. I mean, it kind of reminds me of Jung a little bit. One of Jung's great comments was that one of the things that Christianity never fully did, never evolved into, was a proper integration of the Antichrist that was produced from itself. And that is a project, I think, in many ways, that continues Christianity. Like John said, it's true. I mean, it's not static; it's not immutable. It's not standing still. Nothing does. Nothing does. It continues to work itself through us and evolve and evolve through us and our understanding of it. And that somehow, what we give back to it, the way that we understand it, and the way that we somehow comport ourselves changes the very thing that we behold.

So the stakes are always high. But the idea that Christianity is a cultural ethic rather than a profoundly fundamental relationship with being that is made manifest in relationship to Jesus Christ, that is, to me, the essence of what Christianity is. Right? And that, of course, is bound in the virtue of love. But the idea that there is a Christianity that does not have that as its absolute cynosure, as the center of it, that binds it all together, and if we're not talking about that, what are we talking about? We're not talking about anything, really. We're just talking about some kind of worldly ethic that has used Christianity to execute itself, basically.

Andrew: I'm so happy to hear this from you guys because this is not the culture war, and I'm so tired of it. I don't want to engage in it at all. And I think people have to go beyond it and have this kind of conversation.

Chris: The other problem is the idea that you can reason your way into it and can represent it—make representations of Christian doctrine and ethics. They're scaled versions, refractions of something nameless, right? I mean, I think to me that we have to come back to something properly apophatic.

When we return to Christianity, I think that the central relationship is made flesh so that it can be made known, present, and embodied and can actually get intelligible traction in our nervous system. That, to me, is the importance of the embodiment of that symbol. That relationship is so important because it makes manifest and present something that is otherwise. In the Neoplatonic tradition, I find it a little bit more difficult to access when it is abstracted into a fleshless kind of reality.

There is something about the embodiment of that reality in the prism or in the matrix of the human relationship that is our deepest, deepest, deepest touchstone to what is most real and visceral within us that gives it its power, right? Whether the symbol or the Christian symbolic framework is essential is a difficult question to answer, right? We're getting into levels of reality that we don't even have access to. And I have no interest in accessing because of their sheer unknowability.

The fact of the matter is, what makes the infinite and mysterious present to us, such that we can relate to it deeply in a way that touches us and feels most real in us and such that we can become in its likeness? To me, that is the power of Christianity, not arguing for its essentialism or its supremacy over other traditions. To me, it's just like a pointless question, right? It's a question of personal relationship that matters. It's not a question of abstracting into metaphysical certitudes. That's where I think we often go wrong. We try and abstract ourselves away from what is real in our experience. When we do that, we start systematizing things, generalizing them, and creating these hierarchies. We just miss the plot completely because we miss what is most real in our own experience.

And so, if someone doesn't find that in Christianity. Fair enough. Fair enough. But those who do find a great depth in the texture of the capacity to relate to that which exceeds our comprehension so thoroughly that we can never hope to grasp it. And there is something about making that present in the very thing that we know so deeply, which is the reality of our own human relationships. We somehow gain access to what is inaccessible. And that doesn't scale into the body politic, that doesn't scale into ideological ethics. It just doesn't scale that way. And if someone wants to make that leap, whatever they're doing, it's not Christianity anyway.

Andrew: I can translate everything you say into Buddhist language, and I don't have a problem. You know, I was just listening to a Tantric Buddhist master who said that

the Christian mass is an ultimate tantric ritual. You're drinking the blood and eating the body of Christ. This is so deep that it's beyond any religious identity.

John: Man, I love you, my friend. Oh, my gosh, the spirit in you is just so astonishingly beautiful. And I mean that in the profound platonic sense of what beauty is. Do you see how he was exemplifying what I was trying to put into words about Christianity being transformed and recovered as it enters into walking the philosophical Silk Road? And then you, Andrew, started walking with him, accompanying him.

And it's not like you found some logical identity and propositions, some pathetic perennialism between Buddhism and Christianity. You found this through-line that allows you to translate without logical identification or reduction so that you can accompany each other. I mean, that is the philosophical Silk Road right there. It happened in front of your eyes.

Andrew: Cool. That's very cool.

John: Now, to the point that Chris makes, I think Chris exemplifies his patron philosopher, Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's great critique of Christendom in service of Christianity is now cuttingly relevant. Everybody thinking about Christianity needs to read Kierkegaard deeply because his critique of Christendom comes from the heart of Christianity. Chris has internalized this profoundly, which I think is super-relevant right now.

In connection with that, within After Socrates, we did a series where Kierkegaard does an unresolvable but intended infinite game—in James Carce's sense—between Socrates and Jesus. He looks like he's going to resolve it but keeps toing and froing back and forth; there's this ongoing reciprocal opening—tonos—this creative tension between Socrates and Jesus. We're both being pretentious, so take this with a grain of salt: I was taking the role of Socrates, and Chris was speaking through Kierkegaard of Jesus as the Christ, the cosmic Christ especially.

There was a stage in the Jesus seminar where they were talking about the logos in Christianity—I'm being as sincere, as honest as I can—and I said I'm deeply committed to a relationship and participation in the logos. I was talking about all of this in practice and allowing it to go into the very warp and woof of my psyche, myself, and my personhood.

And then they said, why then aren't you a Christian?

I said, because I actually respect Christianity, and it makes certain claims that I can't accept. Right?

I make a distinction, and it's a valuable distinction. I'm not throwing the distinction away between what is psychologically indispensable and what is metaphysically necessary. An easy example, its psychologically indispensable for my cognition to speak English. But that doesn't mean all cognitive agents have to speak English. It's not metaphysically necessary, but it's indispensable for me, given my background.

I can't tell about my inability to take on Christianity: if it's because I found certain things that I don't agree with metaphysically or because there are just psychologically indispensable things about me because I had a traumatic relationship with Christianity. I've stopped trying to find out because I think they bleed into each other. I was treating it as if there was this fine line and easy distinction between them. But it's not so easy when you get into the depths of the psyche between what is indispensable to the psyche and what is metaphysically necessary to being a cognitive agent because we are, as Chris said, we are persons who take a personal stance.

So I stopped also trying to resolve the dialogos between Jesus and Socrates. And that is where I dwell now. I talk about the symphony of sages. I think the Silk Road is also a way for people to live what you and Chris just demonstrated: Buddha and Jesus, the symphony of sages. The music took hold, and the Buddhist part of it and the Jesus part of it, the Christian part of it, aren't identical, but they fit together; they belong together. We talk about musical accompaniment for a reason. There's a symphony there going on. There's a symphony of sages.

Another way of thinking about the Silk Road is singing the song of the symphony of the sages. What both of you just so beautifully exemplified becomes available to us as an alternative to let's draw up the battle lines and see who's going to win in the zero-sum battle.

Chris: I rejoice at the piece you're describing, John. This is just letting go. We spend so much of our time inwardly clenched and in a state of perpetual strain when we come up against apparently insoluble questions and feel as though we have to resolve those questions and bring everything into order.

And if only we could understand more, in ever finer degrees of resolution, we could somehow force upon ourselves a peace and a coherence.

One of the things I'm hearing from you is that you're getting to a point where you realise that some things within are, in fact, insoluble or perhaps indecipherable, even when subject to the fastidious kind of analysis that only someone like you could bring to them.

And if, at the end of all of that, they're still insoluble, that there's some mystery beneath them regarding your relationship, that you now have the opportunity to let go, step back, and let be what is.

It occurs to me that any real resolution, and the nameless kind of resolution that could never be reduced to a proposition that could never be adequately explained but known within, in terms unknown, is the kind of resolution that could only be made possible by letting it go, by making peace with the incomprehensibility of certain realities within us and allowing them to be what they are.

And perhaps in letting them be, there's a chance that greater understanding comes from relinquishing a certain hold over them.

John: I think that's beautifully well said. The way I've been thinking about this is shifting the emphasis from propositional contradiction to performative contradiction. Not the propositional contradiction doesn't matter, but that performative contradiction is way more important.

I've also correspondingly shifted from propositional resolution to performative resolution, which, of course, Kierkegaard and Socrates recommend. And there's a way in which you can't resolve these.

This is where the Taoist training comes in the Wu Wei. You can't resolve the tonos of the yin and the yang. If you try to, you will misunderstand and misapprehend. But you can make a performative resolution in which you commit yourself to being responsible for and faithful to it as the thing that is beyond your final conceptualization.

And I think that personal resolution, which I think is what Kierkegaard meant by faith and purity of heart, is what really, really matters ultimately for bringing about

the cultivation of wisdom and virtue. And along the way, I've been doing a lot of work about the imaginal, and how it feeds into the imaginal within the rational and the rational within the imaginal.

I think Jesus, Socrates, and Buddha are both properly imaginal figures who enliven and vitalize ritual and practice within an ecology of practices in a way that no proposition ever can. Therefore, I think personal resolution to follow their way is the import.

Again, I don't want people to mishear me as some kind of lackadaisical romantic. Resolving propositional contradiction is important. Getting conceptual clarity is important. But in the end, the cultivation of wisdom is not driven by that. Those are merely necessary and very far from sufficient conditions. And so one of the gifts that came out of the gospel seminar is that, for me, *Jesus is imaginal.*

Andrew: I was thinking when you guys were talking about a Zen master I met who once said that the function of religion is to save people from themselves. That strikes me as true. And then he said, "Zen is not a religion."

I also was thinking about what it means to be, like, saved, right?

So there's a way in which Christianity does this dirty trick and says if you don't follow Jesus, you're going to go to hell, and you won't be saved. But I always liked the idea of universal salvation better. So, the people within the religion and those without are equally saved. You know, it's just a long process.

Again, they are not saved by taking on any kind of dogma. The conversion is deep, a deep transformation that can occur inside or outside the religion.

John: The verse that is often quoted is misquoted. Jesus didn't say believe in my doctrine. He said, *I am the way, the truth and life. No one cometh to the Father, but by me.* He didn't say Christianity is the way. He said, I am the way. And who and what is he? He is the logos. He's the parable of God, the resolution to be faithful to the logos, which we practise in dialogos, dialectic into dialogos.

That to my mind—and I presented that to the seminar—is the way of living out that verse that Jesus was talking about. And again, there was a very welcoming reception to that proposal. And I think the disservice, and this is a tricky thing to say, but it

goes towards the Christendom and Christianity distinction. I think the way Christianity has often identified itself with Jesus as if it is Jesus, is problematic in some ways. It leads to a kind of idolatry of Christianity itself. One of the things that gets in the way between Christians and Jesus is Christianity, paradoxically. And I don't say that as some kind of harsh village atheist, right? I'm not the village idiot. I'm trying to say this from deep, deep respect and, you know, and understand. I'm trying to say it as much as I can from the inside.

And so I think Christianity needs to rethink that very provocative verse. So one of the reasons I went to the seminar is because I knew Douglas Headley was going to there. We sort of hit it off in Cambridge, but we didn't have time to gel but this time we got quite close. And he said there's now very good argument and evidence that's upturning things. It looks like John might be the earliest gospel. John is so philosophical. It was always said that John comes much later and is far removed from the historical Jesus. But there's all this new scholastic work saying John might be the closest. John is the one who presents Jesus in the most Divine light, and that has tended to be easily assimilated to the doctrinal structure of Christianity. What I'm saying is, if that verse is in John and John is closer, something is going on there.

Is Jesus really proposing adherence to a set of propositions when it means to understand that he is the way? I don't think so. I think he's what the letter to the Hebrews says. He is the visible icon of the radiance of God, of the invisible God. I think that's what it means. And I think to follow him, as John says, is to become exactly like him as much as we possibly can to become sons and daughters of God.

See, this is what often happens to me. I end up taking the language of Christianity from somebody who is trying to criticize Christianity and perhaps call it back to what it should be in my mind.

Andrew: I was thinking about Jordan Hall and our conversation—and I'm very fond of Jordan. I always felt that there was something profoundly Christian in his spirit before he converted, that a lot of the time, he was talking about was Christianity unknowingly. What he was looking for was a church and other things, and then he found them in Christianity. But that was already there on some level. And there's a lot of people who aren't within Christianity, who have a sort of a Christian operating system. That's an ugly metaphor, but there are many people, I think, who are deeply Christian, like Jordan, without realizing it.

John: And for them, I mean people can come home to Christianity via the philosophical Silk Road. I was just talking to Jordan yesterday. He said, you know, he said, he makes a joke about me being like a gateway drug into Christianity for people, but I was talking to him about exactly that kind of thing, about how he recovered something that was, I think, as you divined, within him—Oh, nice play on words there.

Jordan was looking for what Christianity, at its best, offers people, and he found it. But many people don't understand why he's at home.

Jordan is a dear friend and I love him. And so I say this from that perspective. I said this to him, and I've said this to other people, and they've acknowledged it. Jordan is warmer than he ever was before he became officially a Christian. It gave him access to a depth of himself and an affective, in the good sense of the word, side of himself that he couldn't get otherwise.

Andrew: Maybe that's what it means to be saved, to recover that warmth of humanity, in a sense, because you could live in the head; you know, there are so many philosophers out there who are very cold. You know, they're not in the heart. They've developed huge conceptual structures, which are, you know, even unbelievably incredible. But they are not in the heart.

I'm very fond of the mystic Gurdjieff. He talks about three brains. We have three brains (the mind, the heart, and the body, roughly speaking). And, you know, a lot of philosophers are just so mental. I think Jordan's pain, in many ways, was because he was searching for the heart, if I could be so bold as to say so.

John: But he found the language of the philosophical Silk Road very helpful: a lot of the work I did on Neoplatonism and his reading of James Filler's astonishing book Heidegger, Neoplatonism and the History of Being. He found that Silk Road helped him recover, in the Tolkien sense, helped him recover Christianity.

Andrew: And it might help somebody recover Buddhism, Sufism, or any other religion, I think, is what you're saying. Like, the religion we choose is the one we are most fond of and like the best, in a way.

John: But not in a facile way. Not in a fast. “I'll have one of those.” It's not that.

Andrew: It's more like falling in love.

John: Right. That is the appropriate method. It's not who you are in love with. It is the one you fall in love with.

Andrew: It's funny. In my discussion with Jordan, I was talking about how he thinks through everything because he's a philosopher, you know, I'm not. I'm just not a philosopher by nature. I became a Buddhist very early because I fell in love with certain people. It almost had nothing to do with the doctrine but only with beauty of it. It was an instantaneous reaction. And so I started sitting in Zazen and Buddhist temples. Later, I sort of started to think about what it meant and about Christianity and other religions. But for him, he had to sort of think his way through there until, you know, he fell into it or something.

John: But he met people. Yeah, I think that's a pivotal point. This also came up with the discussions I was having in Nashville. Nobody is ultimately persuaded to do a metanoia through a set of propositions. Again, the propositions can be valuable. What changes people is meeting people deeply, like you said, falling in love with them, not erotically, or at least not in our current sense of erotically, but philialically and agapically.

It's people that are the portals of metanoia. This is why I think any attempt to understand what happened to Jordan, just as an inferential structuring of propositions that leads to a conclusion, is a mistake. I think he went to a place where he found people living what he was looking for, and he fell in love with that. It's an entire way of life carried within and between people that really affords metanoia. The Buddha, the dharma, the sangha. Right. And Jesus. I am the way where two or three are gathered in my name.

There I am also like, this is the profound—it sounds like a bloody hallmark card—but if you can get to a place where that is shocking again and wakes you up, you're getting it. Then you're really getting it.

Andrew. No, I agree. I didn't mean that about Jordan in any negative sense. I was thinking about his just different styles of people. Some people, you know, in the Hindu tradition, talk about karma yoga, people who work towards redemption. It's the work that does it. Other people are primarily devotional. They're bhakti yogis. Jordan would be more like a jhaniYogi within that system.

John: Please don't misunderstand me. I wasn't misattributing that to you. I wanted to foreclose on people who might have heard that in what you were saying. I wasn't attributing that to you at all. And I wanted to make clear, and I think.

I knew about that taxonomy, but I'm thinking this is just. It's something I think The Vervaeke Foundation should go back and look at again more carefully, these four fundamental orientations. Right, the recovery or the falling in love with the sacred.

Andrew: You said four, but I mentioned three. What's the fourth?

John: Well, I mean, there's the way of work, there's the way of devotion, there's the way of sort of mental training, and then there are people—sorry, I'm blending traditions together, and I shouldn't have done that—but then there's also the Zen idea of people who have a spontaneous sort of satori. It comes over them. There's no other way of putting it. Those people also have to be given a framework other than the way of work, the way of devotion, the way of mental training.

The reason why the fourth one matters, just so I don't seem as just uselessly pedantic, pathetically pedantic, is that approximately 40% of the population has profound, anomalous experiences, mystical experiences, transformative experiences, visionary experiences. And there's no framework for them. There's no framework—that's part of the meaning crisis. And so they flail in many, many ways. And, you know, the psychedelic renaissance is ramping up all of that. People who have that happen to them need a different kind of framework. You can't immediately say, well, go into work or go into mental cultivation or go into devotion. There's something else. A way in which they need to be received into a relationship to ultimate reality. That's what I meant by the fourth. Sorry, in my haste of thought, I was sloppy.

Andrew: You're forgiven, John. I thought that was very interesting, that fourth. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around that.

John: We are talking about people who have a mystical nature or mystical experiences or who are on the margins of standard consciousness and sense of self, either by disposition, constitution or because of these spontaneous occurrences. And they often are uncomfortable, at least initially, with sort of the tried and true pathways that have been laid out. They have a sense of overwhelming *inventio* that has to be properly responded to.

We can't just acquiesce in it because that will rabbit hole them in a lot of ways. But we also can't just try to immediately assimilate them into existing things because it trespasses on who they are. Something we've been putting our finger on repeatedly here as something utterly unique that has happened to them. And so, to my pedagogical mind, that is the tricky part. The other three need to be properly represented. And I have too often overrepresented the philosophical and the mental cultivation and not given enough due regard to the devotional, which I'm trying to ameliorate right now in this conversation.

But I also want to be properly responsive and responsible to the people who have these satori experiences. I use the Zen term because there's no equivalent, you know, the person who's sweeping in the garden and the stone hits the bench, and then they're suddenly enlightened.

Andrew: Well, I know a yogi who, in a manner of seconds, go into an extreme ecstatic state to the point where they might pass out. And that's not ordinary. That kind of person doesn't belong in an office.

John: There's a wildness to the sacred we tend to over domesticate. There are ways we over domesticate what work or intellectual, physical, or devotion, or psycho spiritual cultivation. We domesticate it, and we lose the wildness. The wildness is important. I think the fourth is one of my favorite lines from CS Lewis. *Aslan? Is he a tame lion? Oh, he's not tame, but he's good*. Right.

Andrew: That's crazy wisdom in our tradition.

John. Yeah, yeah. Crazy wisdom. The numinous is terrifying in some aspects, like the wildness. And I think the fourth duly represents the wildness of the numinous, of the sacred, of the ultimately real.

Andrew: And crazy wisdom doesn't mean crazy. It's a way of being that is not understandable through our ordinary modes of understanding.

John: And one of the things I got onto, and it took me over like a spirit when I was at the gospel seminar, was recovering the wildness of Jesus. I said the wildness, the strangeness, and what I was grateful for, happy, is that everybody else took that up; they wanted to get back to it. I deeply criticized the reduction of parables to children's stories or allegories. A parable has to be wild and undomesticated, or

you're not getting it. And if you domesticate the parable and if Jesus is the parable of God, you're domesticating Jesus, and you're losing something essential to what he was portraying.

Chris: One question I often have, and it's a question I hear in the offing here, is the relationship between the domains of activity, study, and experience, between philosophy and the sacred, or philosophy and religious activity.

And I have never been able to fully separate their relevance. It doesn't seem natural or intuitive to me to regard them as different projects, but obviously, they are different in some very significant ways.

The question that I have right now is: what is the sameness and difference between those domains and activities, especially when we talk about the volatility and the chaotic and mercurial nature of the sacred, how we encounter it, and how untamed and destructive it can be if it's not approached, perhaps if it's not approached with the right comportment.

And then, to me, that invites a question of what the role of philosophy is in helping to train that deportment.

And I think in many ways you were talking a little while ago about Jordan as an exemplary kind of philosophically inquisitive mind and how there's a contrast in some ways between the philosophical inquiry that is explorative and probing and constantly casts into doubt, constantly calls into question, and the simplicity, and I mean that in a positive sense, the simplicity of falling in love with a way that is religious or that we would call religious.

I find that word so difficult because, you know, let's say, when I use the term religious, I mean as related to the sacred or of the sacred. I think what happens in so many ways, and what I remember hearing from Jordan and what I've felt and seen in others, is that falling in love with the way, in some ways, is falling in love with the experience of being loved. I think that's really what Christianity is about: falling in love with the experience of being loved. It's falling in love with a certain kind of agape solicitude. It's what is meant by the idea of God being agape. There is a process that a person often has to go through, canonically speaking, in order even to be prepared to encounter an experience like that. And to be receptive to it so that it's possible at all.

It can happen to certain people, I think, more than others, I think, because certain people are disposed of in such a way that they have a kind of receptivity or a natural openness, a natural vulnerability that allows them to be so struck and that allows them to un-neurotically experience that kind of divine solicitude, that mysterious kind of love that has. That there is no accounting for. It simply accounts for itself as inherently meaningful and inherently virtuous. But I think not everyone has that vulnerability.

And I'm not speaking in a judgmental sense. I'm also speaking reflexively. I know I don't always have it, and I know that a lot of people don't always have it because there is something mysterious and unjustified about it.

Right. We can think of all kinds of reasons to distrust it and all kinds of reasons to deny it. And it is the denial of that which is unaccountable in that agapic solicitude that is in the Christian canon, the deepest sin. Right? It is the denial of your love. And that's really what it means not to be saved. It is simply to be in denial. Some fundamental things are so fundamentally real that their reality cannot be accounted for or justified. Right? Error and sin, if I can use that term, can be justified given the decrepitudes inherent to our nature.

And that seems to be, in some ways, the thing that is most natural to us.

But there is something about that, the fullness of that solicitude that remakes people and in virtue of which people are remade, that is unaccountable. And therefore, it's also easy to deny.

Okay, so then, you know, if some people are disposed to fall in love with that experience such that they take it upon themselves and then become vessels of it and for it and become that transitive property that confers it back out onto the world, they become carriers of it. That's what it means to become in the image of Christ, right? It is to carry forth that love and participate in it, not as though you're feeding off it; participate in it insofar as you become it. You become it. There is no distinction anymore between what you are and that in itself that now you are remade into. And that's what I say, grace that we can sometimes behold when someone is struck by the way that they fall in love with and become that way that they fall in love with, that grace, I think, has something to do with that experience.

Okay, so then if that is the religious experience, the experience that we don't rationalize our way into that, we don't infer our way into that. Simply, it strikes us, and we fall in love with it, and it remakes our way of being in the world. Then, what is this role of philosophy that is much more about the process of inquiring, the process of probing, and trading propositions? Not just that, of course, but it starts there, right? The process of ideation, the process of argumentation, and the process of dialectic. What does that do, and what relationship does that have with the sensitization to being able to fall in love with something more real than you've ever known before?

So then the question is, okay, well then, what is the role of philosophy in relation to that project? They could easily be two completely different things belonging to two different categories of life, and never the twain shall meet. But of course, John invoked Kierkegaard earlier in the relationship between Socrates and Jesus. I feel quite certain that there is a deep relationship between those things. What is the relationship? What is the role of philosophy in the sensitising, the vulnerability to falling in love with the sacred, and therefore with that which is most real?

And I think in many ways, and this is really how we teach the dialectic practise? It is a kind of existential decluttering performed socratically, right? I suspect that the role of philosophy, socratically speaking, is to turn transparent those invisible beliefs that are actually circumscribing our sensitivity to those mysteries that exceed us, to get them out of the way.

That it actually has a negative function, an ironic function, which is to disabuse ourselves of those systems of perception and conception, those paradigmatic beliefs, the patho-logos, as Grimes called them, those sick beliefs that are actually standing between us and the capacity to be humbled before something mysterious in virtue of which we can be remade.

So philosophy is a kind of existential decluttering of the psyche, but it actually has to traverse all of the different forms of knowing and knowledge in order for that project to be possible. To use John's typology, it has a propositional correlate and a procedural correlate.

This is a really important question because too often, I feel like these projects are considered to be separate things or are conflated as one thing. To me, I think it's really important to understand how the philosophical disposition, with all of its rigor

and inquiry and discipline, is trying to clean and organize and tidy and remove those obfuscating systems of patterns of behavior and belief that are actually closing us off to those things, that have the capacity to conduct us into those aspects of reality that awaken us to, well, to ourselves.

And anyway, I wanted to take this question up. I want to give that proposal to you. I want to see what both of you do with it, because I want to understand that relationship better. I think that relationship is going to be really important to the Silk Road, because you're making a philosophical, philosophical argument in service of sensitising an encounter with the sacred. So clearly, there must be a relationship between those things, and I want to understand how they function with one another.

John: I've been thinking, of course, in a convergent way. I mean, the simpatico between us is pronounced. So, I think philosophy is not just the love of wisdom; it is that love of wisdom that affords us loving wisely. And falling in love with somebody is not sufficient for loving them wisely. It is necessary but not sufficient. And what is it to love somebody wisely? I think there is the decluttering, the existential decluttering, but I think there is also the cultivation of virtue and virtuosity with respect to the beloved. And that's what I mean by loving. Wisdom allows you to love wisely.

A little bit more concretely. There's two currents to the work I've been doing, so let me just mention both and then I'll turn it over to Andrew. I've been trying to show how profoundly at the heart of the rational is the imaginal and the ritual. I've been making argument after argument. To me, that is the religious argument, that is the religious movement. To see that within the heart of the rational is the imaginal ritual, the ritual imaginal.

But the reverse is also the case. There is also the rational within the imaginal. Now, it's not exclusively or centrally the rationality of propositional coherence. It is the avoiding and overcoming of performative contradiction. And there is a normativity to ritual. Does it transfer broadly and deeply to many domains of your life? Does it transfer broadly and deeply to many levels of the psyche? That is a normativity. That is a ratio. That ratio is moving away from performative contradiction and trying to bring about those two things that make up anagogy—that inner justice and that deep connectedness to reality.

And I think that is the rational within the imaginal philosophical. So, the imaginal within the rational is the religious. The rational within the imaginal is the philosophical. And when we do them both, we not only love wisdom, we love wisely, and each is irreducible to the other, but they are inseparably bound together.

That is where my thinking is now because you are absolutely right. This is a central question that we must at least begin answering or at least questing upon if we are going to be properly prepared—because you're going to join me on a lot of this journey for the pilgrimage of the philosophical Silk Road—and this is the second person who has sung this to me

I'm doing this course for Halcyon Academy, Ultimate reality, God, and Beyond. And we're doing Nishida and Robert Carter—a Canadian—and his astonishingly great book, *The Nothingness Beyond God.* Nishida is a deep practitioner of Zen, but he never gives up his profound commitment to being a philosopher for a moment. Zen takes him into the imaginal ritual realization of nothingness. But his Neoplatonic exploration into intelligibility gets him to Basho and the ultimate pure relationality that makes all intelligibility possible. The two are constantly singing to each other because the articulation of Basho prevents performative contradiction, overly simplistic reductions, and a failure of imagination for the religious experience. And the religious experience keeps driving the philosophical inquiry deeper and deeper and deeper.

So, I think of him as the patron saint of Zen Neoplatonism. Of course, he's read the Neoplatonic philosophers, and he's deeply, deeply internalized Heidegger. Given Fuller's argument, Heidegger is a great attempt to return Neoplatonism to Western philosophy. And that's why the proposal of Zen Neo-Platonism is an attempt to answer the question you have posed, not just in words but in exemplification. It's about a performative resolution, not just a conceptual resolution.

Andrew: I had a lot of thoughts actually about that when you were talking, and forgive me for being too Buddhist here, giving a Buddhist answer.

John: I don't think that's a sin.

Andrew: Well, it is if I'm repeating a bunch of Buddhist phrases that I've learned, if I'm not really engaging in thinking.

John: Okay, okay, fair enough.

Andrew: I was thinking of the word *view.* Buddhism talks about cultivating *view*, so philosophy is about cultivating a *view*, I would say. But I don't think it's just about decluttering. I think there's a playful aspect as well. So you declutter, but also you discover. In the tantric tradition, they talk about the twilight language, the language of the Dakinis, which is the imaginal area that John was speaking about.

John: Exactly

Andrew: So it's not just decluttering. Decluttering is sort of sutric early Buddhism. And then, and then you move into the more playful, you know, embodied aspects of practice.

John: One quick point. Those are interlocked. To have serious play, you have to safety frame. That's in play research. You have to do the decluttering Chris has talked about. So you have the space and the framing in which the serious play can actually take on life. I just want to say that.

Andrew: I think you need to be more prepared in sutra when you become tantric because you have to be very careful when dealing with more dangerous energies. I could give you just a personal example of the practices you would do as preparation. You might do 100,000 prostrations, then 100,000 mandala offerings. And then you would, you know, do a zillion mantras so that your mind and body are decluttered enough to enter the tantric space. So, I think that's built into the traditions. I think you need to go through a process. But again, it's not a process of getting something; it's practice. It's not grace; it's practice.

John: You have to become a person who can engage in certain cognitive and conceptual actions. This is part of the transformative truth proposal. Some truths are only available and disclosable to us because we have to become the kind of people who can think the thoughts receptive to those truths. That is the part that religion, but also what you might call the religious side of philosophy, calls us to. But that's what you, again, picked up very well, I think. I was trying to put together Chris's proposal for decluttering, which I think of as the safety framing that is discussed in play literature and serious plays.

Andrew: The wildness, too, that we've talked about before.

John: The wildness and the serious play.

Andrew: You don't start with wildness because then you just auto-destruct, right?

John: That's it. The serious play is where the invention of religion takes place. And that's what I was trying to get at with the imaginal. Ritual is imaginably augmented serious play that powers transformative experience so that we can properly aspire to be the people receptive to the deeper truths of ultimate reality. That's what ritual is. And I think that is something that philosophy is in service to. But I think it's also something that powers philosophy.

And Plato knew this. He talks about that. There's this thing going on beyond the argumentation and the conceptual. There's something in the drama and the presence of the personage of Socrates that seduces people into the philosophical life and carries them towards the good.

Chris: I mean, one of the ways of thinking about this that connects the philosophical to the sacred a little bit more clearly is the idea that you have to be brought to exhaustion of your worldview; you have to be brought to exhaustion of your capacity, brought to exhaustion of the thoughts you think, and the ideas you have, and the words you use.

I mean, John, you've been describing the process of purgation in advance of the Silk Road. And I think that either we think of this philosophically or we think of it religiously. But in either case, there is a purgation. There's a purgation of that which you have at your disposal and the drying out of what you have at your disposal. And I think that what calls a person to the necessity of having to change, the necessity of having to wander somewhere that we've never wandered before.

In some sense we're not predisposed to desire such things. It's the exhaustion of where we are *in situ* that provokes the appetite. And I think that's where the Socratic project and the overtly religious project speak to one another more profoundly.

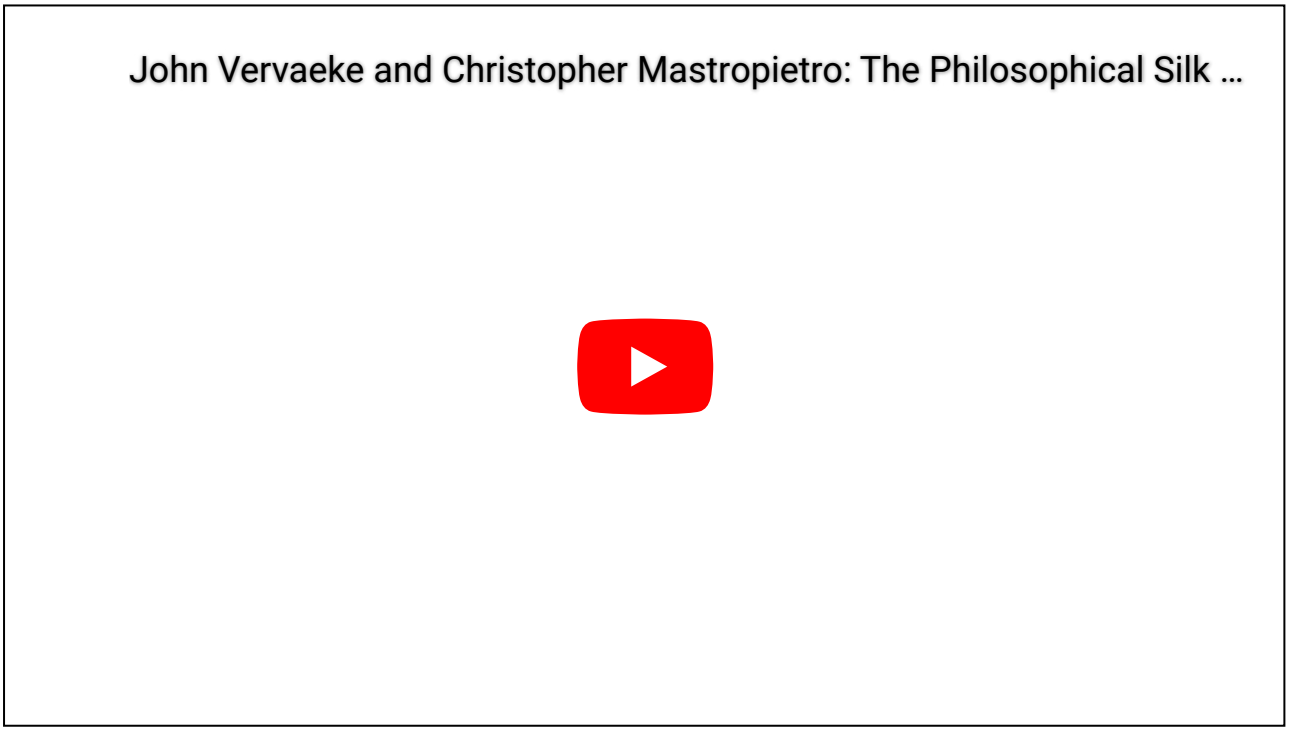
John: And I think there's a way in which, to go back to some of the cognitive-science literature, you have to exhaust the work frame to do the reversal, the metanoia, into the playframe. So you don't try to reduce or logically identify them; you properly see that both are needed and are in the proper relationship.

Andrew: Gurdjieff's first books were designed to speak to the unconscious and try to undermine our mechanical thought patterns in every possible way. His second series brought Christian mysticism in contact with the East and West and how to find an actual path. The third series was the more secret one, which is ineffable and not easily describable.

So I think the exhaustion process is fundamental. The exhaustion of *samsrara.* You exhaust yourself philosophically, you exhaust yourself of the physical knots in your body, then emotionality. All of that process of exhaustion allows a new kind of energy can arise inside of you, which is more distilled—it's a very alchemical process.

John: Yeah, but think about it. Let's play with the it analogy. I mean, you can physically exhaust yourself by just leaping around chaotically. Or there's the kind of dexterous exhaustion that comes through extended martial art practice, in which you realize that just flailing about won't actually bring flexibility and opening. You need detailed dexterity to get into the minute fascia of the opening. And that is what something like this, a deep Neoplatonic endeavor, properly does.

Note: The origional conversation can be found here:



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