

Themes of the Trilogy with Nathaniel Goldberg



[Opening theme music with voiceover.]

Nathaniel Goldberg

"Asimov's just giving us another thought experiment. He's the means to the end of trying to figure out what is better. Is it Galaxia, where everything is ultimately part of a single organism? Is it rule by the Second Foundation, where those who are wise, or at least claim to be wise, are pulling the strings? Is it ruled by the First Foundation, where those who are spirited and movers and shakers are those in charge? And if Asimov did not come to a conclusion by the end of 'Foundation and Earth,' that's fine with me."

[Theme music plays out.]

Joel McKinnon

Welcome back to another guest episode of Seldon Crisis, but today's guest has the honor of being the first returning guest to the podcast. He was also the very first guest way back in episode six of season one. Once again, I'm happy to bring you Nathaniel Goldberg, a philosophy professor who is such a huge fan of this series. He's made it a central feature of his teaching schedule, offering a special topics course on philosophy and science fiction, in which his students read the Foundation trilogy and compare it with Plato's classic work, "The Republic." The last time we spoke, we wanted to avoid spoilers for the second and third book in the series that we hadn't covered yet.

Joel

I always hope to get Nathaniel back on the podcast after completing the trilogy. And here he is. Welcome back, Nathaniel to Seldon Crisis!

Nathaniel

Thank you, Joel. It is an honor being back. Thank you for having me back. And as I said on my first time on the podcast, there's nothing quite like the Foundation trilogy. And I now want to add there's nothing quite like your podcast. So it's an honor and a privilege. Thank you.

Joel

Well, thank you very much. It's been an amazing experience to put it on. I met so many amazing people like you, and it's just been so much fun. So last time we had you on, our discussion was in the traditional interview format, where I asked you a series of questions and let you share your considerable expertise. Today I'd like to do something a little different and just have an open discussion of several themes Asimov introduces in the first three books.

The first one seems pretty obvious to me, and maybe the one with the most relevance to our times and that's of the lone figure with foreknowledge of imminent catastrophe for a civilization facing off against the ignorant and apathetic masses and leadership and seemingly insistent on maintaining the status quo. I'm talking, of course, about Hari Seldon's prediction of the collapse of the Galactic Empire and his duel with the chief administrator, Ling Chen, that sets up the first story in the epic, *The Psychohistorians*. I assume it's occurred to you, as it has to me, that there are parallels in our time to this basic conflict.

Nathaniel

Oh, absolutely. Though in some ways, this seems a little bit attention with the whole theme. And here Joel, I'm already throwing a curveball from the beginning a little bit in tension with the theme that the individual all by themselves can really be a harbinger or give warning to what's to come. So maybe your point is that today we're not exactly in the situation that Seldon was in because today there are lots and lots of voices who are talking about the impending climate catastrophe, but perhaps they're not being heated enough. So we've got sort of like the inverse of the Seldon case where there was one voice that was able to move the galaxy and here by hooker, crook, hundreds, thousands of voices aren't able to move enough of us. So I don't know, what are your thoughts on that?

Joel

You know, I always think about Greta Thunberg, and you know, how she became such a powerful voice just by the fact that she was so young and the apparently insignificant action of just taking every Friday off to hold up a sign. And eventually that did catch the attention of a lot of people and she became kind of a figurehead of the movement in some ways. But yeah, you're right. She obviously is not Seldon, that's capable of creating... she's not a scientist herself, so she's not capable of creating a plan to get us out of this and no single scientist would be able to. I would say the nearest comparison to Seldon is like the International Climate Protection something anyway.

Nathaniel

Right. The group that every ten years writes a scarier report than they did the last ten years.

Joel

Right. And they're doing modeling, which is kind of similar to psychohistory in a way, using mathematics to create, to figure out how things would work and where things are going.

Nathaniel

Yeah, but I don't want to be all doom and gloom about it because things are changing here slowly. And maybe a lesson from the trilogy is that things really started accelerating for the Foundation once the Empire started falling. The four barbarian kingdoms, Anacreon at the lead, get annexed to the Foundation when they secede from the Empire and when things already start to catastrophize in a way. So not to be too gloomy about it, maybe the silver lining of the increasing ambient temperature, increasing average rainfall in certain areas and lack of rainfall in others is that as our climate starts seceding from the norm, maybe more and more people will pay attention, just as Asimov described happened once the Empire started.

Joel

Yeah. Hopefully we don't have to become as resource poor and as isolated from the rest of the galaxy as Terminus was at the beginning.

Nathaniel

That's true. And hopefully we won't need to power our spaceships with fossil fuels the way that, Asimov pictured, they were doing when they ran out of nuclear.

Joel

Right, right. And speaking of fossil fuels, it just occurs to me that the fossil fuel industry in a way is kind of the analog with the empire here, in that the collapse of the empire could be likened to the economic collapse of fossil fuels as renewables get cheaper and become the more effective way of providing energy - anything to make Vladimir Putin sad sounds good to me. But anyway, I'm sure his name will come up in this conversation again. In fact, this just leads me to another thought about this idea of action versus apathy, taking action against the catastrophe versus not doing anything.

I think you mentioned something about the Actionist Party against Hober Mallow and how he solved the problem kind of by ignoring their intention to do things quickly and to take action. And now the best thing is to not take action in this case.

Nathaniel

Right. And given the increased timeline, or the shortened timeline, rather, for predictions about whether when the climate will be irreparably changed, I don't know whether that transfers neatly either to don't. Well, we're not being guided by a seldom plan, for one thing. So we do have to do something. Seldon wasn't guided by a plan. He created the plan. I'm bracketing the sequels right now, and the prequels where other things come into play. But no, we have to take responsibility. We have to be our own Seldons, in a way.

Joel

Right.

Nathaniel

Inspiration from the trilogy, but maybe not a direct recipe from it.

Joel

Yeah, I think it can be appealing to try and map things directly, and that's never really going to be the case. There are similarities, but there's always unique aspects of reality that get in the way of trying to fit it into a neat plan or neat analog. Another thing I was just thinking, speaking of the Ukraine War, the Actionists kind of remind me of some of the radicals on both ends of the political spectrum in that the short sightedness of, like, oh, my God, we can't be supporting Ukraine because Vladimir Putin's going to unleash nuclear war. And the longer view that appeasing a tyrant only makes him stronger.

But interestingly, in the story, it was kind of the reverse, in that the Actionists thought of the Anacreonions as an imminent threat that needed to be dealt with immediately. And Hardin was the one who was taking the longer view of inaction in that case.

Nathaniel

Yeah. In fact, Joel, if I could try another curveball related to Putin, though, I'm fascinated by how much Asimov plays by and doesn't quite play by his rules. So the rule for psychohistory is you can't predict the behavior of individuals, and yet there's a lot of that going on even before the Mule appears. But to put it in the context of Putin, and then I'll give you examples from Asimov, we might want to say that we can't predict what Putin will do. Will he or won't know, heaven forbid, use a tactical nuclear weapon. Will he or won't he try to seize more?

You know, you can make an argument that psychohistory could have predicted some of this, or at least something like psychohistory, because I lived through and I'm dating myself, and imagine you too, remember, have memories of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall and this moment of relief and of optimism that this conflict between what was the Soviet Union or the Russian sphere and what was the so called west was coming to an end. But then pretty quickly, the two sides still went their separate ways, even if there was more communication between them. And the two sides have deeply separate histories.

So I don't know whether we should be so shocked that the two sides are still in tension with each other, even without a Putin, maybe there would have been someone like him. And that's an argument for dealing with the devil you know, because who knows what his generals would be doing without him or what his successors would be doing? But then again, it's an argument for, well, they'd probably see a threat from the west, and the so

called west would probably see a threat from basically a petrostate, right? A gigantic landmass whose chief wealth is from oil.

We're going back to the climate crisis now, and maybe this is just the sort of thing that could have been projected by something like psychohistory, and maybe whoever's the president of the US, or the president of the Soviet Union or today Russia, maybe that's less important than the historical factors that went into where each state finds itself in the year 2022.

Joel

Yeah, psychohistory, I think, is going to be interwoven with a lot of these topics. And one of them that just leaps out at me is the idea of the great man theory of history versus the idea of psychohistory, where it really doesn't matter what individuals do. But in theory, it's like the classic example is if a time traveler went back and killed Hitler as an infant, would the Holocaust have happened? And the great man theory says, no, but that great man - in this case was great doesn't mean good - it just means very powerful, that he was essential for that.

But the alternative is that the other hypothesis is that it would have happened anyway under some other leader, because the societal movement was in that direction, and one person doesn't make that much difference. So if that's the case with Russia, then deposing Putin wouldn't be the great solution, because the real problem is the societal forces in Russia, and they believe in this, and the masses believe in this idea that Russia is destined to be larger and larger and more powerful. How do you solve that problem? How do you change the thinking of half the planet, almost, or a large group?

Nathaniel

And I don't think Asimov, though he plays a good game, as I started saying a few minutes ago, I don't think he's necessarily consistent on this either. Obviously, when it comes to the Mule so called Black Swan example, an exception to the rule, we understand he's a mutant, so the Seldon Plan can't account for that. But Asimov himself writes in characters into the early stories which seem to be governed entirely by psychohistory. There's no Second Foundation, as far as we could tell, pulling the strings. And in fact, we're even told after the fact that the Second Foundation didn't need to pull the strings in the early years because the trajectory was pretty much on course with the Seldon Plan.

But yet we have people like Salvar Hardin, who seems like a great man if there ever was one. And we have people like Mallow, right, Hober Mallow, who seems like a great man if there ever was one, even if their greatness consists in doing nothing. That was your point about the Actionist Party. And maybe sometimes we do have to do nothing, but they were great enough to know how to do nothing. And the more that I teach the Foundation trilogy, the more that I wonder how consistent was Asimov in some spots. And then I'll be quiet and let you defend the good doctor if you'd like.

But in some spots, Asimov gives us a reason he realizes this, so he realizes that this Foundation has to be established on Terminus. And therefore I think he says at one point that is it Ling Chen, who's the person who's going to decide who has the era of the Emperor, that that person was the most studied ever in history by psychologists. Because even though psychohistory is meant for billions or trillions or quadrillions of people, we still need to get him to position the original chess pieces so that the Foundation is on Terminus. So there Asimov is saying, yes, I realize psychohistory can't really do this trick, but we're trying really hard in other

ways to predict what the Emperor and what his counselor and government will do.

Joel

It was as if he believed they had to set up the initial conditions rigorously and that required the working with an individual. But you're right, I think he is really inconsistent about this. And it's a running theme throughout the whole thing. This contradiction of individuals don't matter, but powerful individuals are popping up all over the place and apparently making really important decisions that affect things. One of my favorite aspects of this, though, is Hober Mallow, and it's near the end of *The Merchant Princes* when he has this little aside at the very end where he talks as if he's almost knows he's a fictional character being written by someone.

In this case in the book, in the story. He realizes that it's Seldon who's written him or written the plan, so that he doesn't really matter and whatever, he's not a great man, even though he's accomplished great things. He just happens to be in the right place to execute what Seldon had predicted. And basically he sounds kind of, you know, annoyed by this, but at the same time he says, okay, well, I'm just going to make the most of it and play my part well, there too.

Nathaniel

Now I'm going to defend Asimov for a minute. He does seem to have realized that there are these exceptions that his story needs. And he handles the Mallow case in a way by basically telling us that Hober Mallow is Salvor Hardin's son. At least I think that's he's basically telling us that. And Salvor Hardin, we are told, was the first and last psychologist in the first. So maybe maybe Seldon somehow part of the plan, maybe the Second Foundation, maybe somehow they arranged to have a psychologist be there during the first Seldon Crisis because they knew that Salvor Hardin would be smart enough to know that he was to do nothing.

Joel

Right. Remember, he had those moments of introspection where they described him wondering about that. So it was not like he was explicitly trained or directed, but more like he had to maybe he was subliminally trained and that appeared to him in his introspection as the solution. But this is another running thing that kind of annoys me sometimes about this whole story, is that you have all these figures that you admire for their free thinking, and then you find out later that they were kind of programmed and it wasn't really them. We'll get into that later for sure.

But I wanted to turn things just a little bit to the role of deception, which is huge, we know, right, a couple of really important big lies being told along the way. The first one being Hari Seldon lying to the Foundation themselves about what their purpose was and how Seldon revealed that at the end of *The Encyclopedists*, right? And then later the big lie. Wait, what was the second one you mentioned?

Nathaniel

Oh, that the Second Foundation it was that Arcadia's father that was deceived, as was she.

Joel

But that in a way, these kind of bookend, the whole trilogy, right? Because the first one's very early and the last one's kind of the final, the big mystery just before the real solution is revealed.

Nathaniel

Yeah. That there were fifty martyrs.

Joel

Yeah, I want to get into that, too. That's another reoccurring theme is this idea of "the ends justify the means." It's okay to kill half the planet of Tazenda because that's part of the plan. And it's okay to kill poor Ebling Mis because he was about to reveal the...

Nathaniel

Right, and that fifty members, I think it was fifty, right? That fifty members of the Second Foundation willingly went to their deaths knowing that that was for the greater good plan.

Joel

Yeah, the idea of martyrdom, of the altruistic sacrifice.

Nathaniel

Right. And as I was just reminded, listening to your previous episode, the Acolyte asks the first speaker, couldn't we have managed with fewer than fifty martyrs? And the first speaker says, well, we could have, perhaps, but fifty already seemed on the low side. And I guess the statistical analysis, the calculation suggested we probably needed more, but we dare not have any fewer than fifty.

Joel

Yeah, that First Speaker is just such a... heart. Save twenty-five people. Yeah, back to okay, let's see. Oh, back to the big lie and the noble lie that we're talking about. This is obviously something that seems to have relevance in our modern time, in that we know about the big lie in United States politics of Trump claiming he actually won the election that was so obviously false. And selling that lie, finding a way to convince people of that. And it's obviously quite different than what Seldon did with the Foundation, but it's still a big deception. And there's another one I was thinking about, and it involves that guy, Vladimir Putin.

Again. I've been taking this course online. Just kind of auditing Timothy Snyder's Yale course called The Making of Modern Ukraine. I'm really fascinated with this whole subject because I know a lot of Ukrainians through my wife, who's emigrated from Russia and has some Ukrainian background herself. And one of the things that Timothy Snyder says is that this whole idea of to justify the war that Putin makes is a big lie. It's based on this... misreading of history, an intentional misreading of history in which he claims that it all started with Kievan Rus, when Valodimir was baptized into Christianity and that that formed the essence of Russia and that Moscow later developed.

As part of that, but that it's all linked and they're all one destiny, that this is all and he's just restoring this and bringing them back together. And Snyder is a historian, and he points out that this couldn't be more wrong, that Kievan Rus was more Viking than Russian. And the idea of calling the Muscovite state Russia came much later, was completely disconnected from what was happening in Rus. And that's just nonsense. But he's selling it. He's selling that big lie.

Nathaniel

Yeah. As I recall from my history courses, a long, long time ago, Muscovy was the most powerful state in that region. So therefore, the Mongol Empire, which controlled the region, put the Prince of Moscow, I think, in charge of levying taxes. So the Mongols were able to control that part of the world by having secret police and by turning allies against each other. And here's a moment where we do see the pull of history and psychohistory. If you're part of a country whose very founding was based on a secret police and the pitting of allies against one another, as Muscovy was when it expanded to include the other areas, the other city states and regions in its area, it's really little surprise that they inherited the idea of having a secret police.

Whether we call it KGB or its successor state, and whether we pit allies against one another or neighbors against one another, whether we call it Russia or Ukraine or some other area, we're all descendants of our history and the geopolitical situation. We find ourselves, yeah, to your point, Putin, maybe he's just particularly good at crafting lies, but there are lies everywhere. And sometimes I wonder how much the actual history matters. But maybe that's a different kind of philosophical question, right?.

Joel

Another major theme I noticed throughout the books was using cleverness against a kind of authoritarian strongman. Salvor Hardin against the Anacreon state with Wienes of Anacrion and kind of just being one step ahead of him all along and being the smart guy that kind of took him down by cleverness and making the right moves. Then it was Ponyetts faced with trying to get his pal out of detention on Askone and he came up with this BS device to transmute into gold, iron into gold. He basically won that story by the equivalent of something like what's this kind of spam where you try to embarrass the victim and malware.

And that's what it struck me as. Just like that. I didn't like Limmar Ponyets at all from at the end of that story. He just seemed like kind of a racketeer scumbag. But he was the clever guy and he figured out how to win the day by using his brain.

Nathaniel

Yeah, I do think that something fundamentally shifts in the trilogy with the introduction of the Mule. So before then, the stories, even though there's some tension, great person, great historical person versus just the currents of history or social view of historical change. Nevertheless, psychohistory plays a larger role and the way to succeed is to let trends happen. And if you're clever at it, then more power to you. Because as Hardin says, 'violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.' Then suddenly when the Mule appears and then the Second Foundation enters, it seems like there's a lot more action.

It's a lot more than just sitting back or being clever about it because the Mule is sending fleets to conquer worlds. Even if they surrender, he's still doing that. And the Second Foundation is they're not just being smart. And this is kind of interesting. They're using their intellect in a different way. They're not using their intellect just to solve puzzles. They're using their intellect literally to coerce other people through some sort of psychic wave. So Asimov has us turning psychological power into physical power, which is bizarre because you might want to say that the intellect is the hero of the whole trilogy because in the beginning, Seldon is the great intellect who sets up, discovers psychohistory, sets up the Foundation, both Foundations. Salvor Hardin and Hober Mallow and the others, the traders whom you mentioned, they use their intellect either to do nothing or to play the small game knowing that the large game is going to work itself out. But then with the Mule, suddenly the intellect becomes a physical kind of power because you can use your mind literally to cause people to save you if you happen to be Magnifico. Right?

Joel

Or to give up.

Nathaniel

Or to give up.

Joel

Like she did with Foundation- with Terminus, and with the trader world, Haven.

Nathaniel

So is Asimov really - I guess today's my day being a little bit critical of Asimov - is he really valuing the intellect or is he ultimately coming around to the view that the only way that intellectuals can win is by turning their intellectual power into physical power?

Joel

Well, let me try to answer that in a way that's kinder to Asimov. I think that his genius as a storyteller was dependent on him not needing to have everything neatly tied up in a bow. He was able to conceive of stories that he didn't fully understand as he was writing them. There were lots of loose ends, and his genius was reassembling those loose ends in new and unexpected ways as the story went forward. Later, I think in "I, Asimov," he says that he learned this very important the only important thing he knew about writing was understand how it ends and don't worry about how you get there.

But clearly that wasn't the case with Foundation when he started writing it, because he didn't know about the Mule yet. Campbell came to him and told him he has to come up with some way of subverting this pattern of the Foundation always winning. And it's also obvious when you read the sequels that he has different ideas in mind than when he was writing

the trilogy of how it should all end. Right. So I think it's the seat of the pants thing where he's constantly writing himself into blind alleys and then somehow figuring a way out of it makes him really interesting.

Nathaniel

No, I agree completely. And I can tell a bit of a historical story about maybe how that happened. So Asimov, as you've mentioned, and as I think your listeners know, he was a historian by hobby. He was a fan of Edward Gibbon's monumental "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," and it was that that modeled the decline and fall of the Galactic Empire. And I am not a student of Gibbon, but I've done my Wikipedia reading up on him and I've talked to people who actually are scholars of Gibbon, and apparently, as Asimov says, as he puts in Seldon's words during his court trial in the very beginning of the first book, the Empire has become too centralized, and there's a lessening of incentive and a lessening of intelligence and a lessening of spontaneity and a lessening of progress because of that.

And I gather one diagnosis that Gibbon gives for why well, that is some of what Gibbon says, why Rome fell. But one diagnosis for why we need not worry about that happening, in Gibbons own age, early modern Europe, is that early modern Europe was not centralized. There were all these different principalities and republics and kingdoms. And if you read the first few stories before the Mule appears, that does seem to be the template for the Foundation. It's a loose confederacy held together somewhat by religion, somewhat by trade, but there's no centralization in the geographic sense because Terminus is nowhere near the center of the galaxy, and there's no super strong political centralization either.

It feels a bit like 18th century Europe, where there was maybe a Holy Roman Empire. Maybe it's a little bit more centralized than that. There were people who had more control and less control, but it wasn't anywhere near like the Roman Empire. So I think that's why the first few

stories have that feel. And then when the Mule comes around, suddenly the Mule does unify everything, and then the Second Foundation has to undo this. And then Asimov starts wondering, will the first Foundationers be willing to have a centralized government? On the one hand, because they're not going to be the ones in charge, but also on the other hand, because by history they're a bunch of merchants and traders and yes, and religious proselytizers, too, but they're not really Empire builders.

So the model becomes different, I think, in the later books. And something that you and I have been talking about for a while now is how I've been reading and you've told your listeners I've been reading Plato and Plato's Republic as an influence on Asimov. That really only comes out in the later couple stories. But as you're saying, Asimov left enough loose threads that we can sort of retrospectively see going back to the very beginning, that there was a kind of model that we were going to have this group of people, these Second Foundationers, who, as you put it in your previous episode, were going to act something like philosopher kings.

They're never identified early on, but it does seem to fit. And there are these metaphors and other models. You've been talking about the big lie. Plato and the Republic talks about the noble lie, which is something that the Republic tells its people to try to make its society work. So I don't want to overplay the influence of one author on Asimov, because you're absolutely right, there were threads everywhere. Asimov was a Renaissance man, as you pointed out a bunch of times. He was deeply influenced by theater, and he wrote on Shakespeare, and he wrote on the Bible, and he read Gibbon not once, but twice.

I also think later on Plato Resurfaces and never by name, but I'm pretty sure it's there.

Joel

Yeah, actually, I read your report [paper] you just wrote on Socrates as Seldon or Seldon as Socrates. And I hadn't seen all those parallels with the Republic that are so striking when you point them out. And I think you're probably right that he didn't intend to make it, base it on the Republic in any way, but it's just they're kind of universal themes that fit in the same way.

Nathaniel

In a lot of ways. Once you see them, it's hard not to see them. And I was taking all this to know we can't help. But when we say that there's a method to his madness, we don't realize that we're quoting Hamlet. But we are right? And when we talk about I'm trying to think of other expressions from Shakespeare. So there's things from great literature that just permeate the language because people once upon a time all read them and then they started quoting them and mimicking them. And Plato's one of those people and there's some things that have just entered storytelling.

So initially I thought, well, that's all it is. There's some similarities, but you know what? There's similarities between Plato, between the Republic and Moby Dick. And I mean, lots of stories have similarities, but then when I started looking, especially the language of the Second Foundation so I know I'm jumping the gun a bit, but just to point at one concrete thing in particular the central image or a central image of the Republic? Is this allegory of the cave that the way to gain knowledge is to transcend the physical world and live in a world enlightened literally by the sun?

It's to step outside from ignorance and be enlightened in the allegory. It is to be walking out and have the sun illuminate the world around you. When the first speaker speaks to his acolyte in the final story, the final half of the third volume of the trilogy, he uses almost exactly that same language. The prime radiant is a radiance like the sun. It is literally illuminating the

Seldon Plan. The speaker says to the acolyte, don't worry, you won't cast a shadow. Shadows are things that are seen inside the cave, but not in the light of the full midday sun.

The first speaker tells the acolyte we are doing this because we have to love Seldon's plan. That's the reason that's motivating us. And that's the reason why we're willing to sacrifice fifty people of our own and half the population of Tazenda because we think the plan is good. And the story in Plato's Republic is the reason that their version of the second guard, of the Second Foundationers - I almost said it, he calls them the Guardians. The reason that they are in charge of the Republic through telling their own noble lies is because they have to love the good, because they have to be willing to sacrifice their lives and their well beings for something greater.

So once you start seeing the language mirrors, it's just impossible for me to think that this was not explicitly on Asimov's mind, at least when he was writing the final story.

Joel

Yeah, if it wasn't, if he hadn't read The Republic, it's pretty miraculous that he rewrote the Republic so closely in science fiction with this whole idea or all those aspects of the Republic.

Nathaniel

Yeah, in fact, if I've got a minute, I can lay out more structurally where I see them similar or maybe it's fairer for me to talk about Plato and the Republic themselves and why I like teaching the two works together, especially now that there are no worries about spoilers because we know how the trilogy ends. So Plato was this famous Greek philosopher. I did some research. I should know this, having taught him, but I never actually remember. So he was alive roughly the fourth to the well, in the fourth to the fifth century, before the Common Era.

He's thought to have written *The Republic*, which is his most famous work in the year 375 BCE, before the Common Era. And the topic of *The Republic* is it's meant to answer the question, what is justice? And sort of superficially speaking, that does not come up in the *Foundation* trilogy. Right. It's sort of remarkable. It's a space opera and it's a work of on a grand political scale. But there the concern is how do we shorten the interregnum and make sure that the Second Empire is established as quickly as possible so few people suffer?

Joel

Yeah, it's mostly power politics. Right?

Nathaniel

It's mostly power politics. But don't we want to ask whether - so that I don't filibuster, Joel, maybe I'll ask you - what do you think? And then I'll go back to filibustering if you let me. But don't you think it's a legitimate question to ask? At the end of the trilogy, was the Second Foundation justified? Were they interested in justice or in their own control? And how about yeah, I think it's.

Joel

A great question, and all you have to do is think about Tazenda - half the planet being ignorant of their fate, presumably, and being sacrificed for the good of the galaxy. Is that just? Should the Second Foundation be given a pass for that also? Go ahead.

Nathaniel

How about the Mule himself, or even his successor, who tries to carry on the Mule's military imperium? The Mule says, and his successor says, Stettin says, we are doing in a generation what the Seldon Plan was meant to do over a thousand years. So why are we not better? Isn't it more just to bring about the Second Empire more quickly? Why go through the Seldon Plan if you could just shorten the interregnum to 200 years instead of 1000 years?

Joel

Yeah, it's a great question. And that brings me to something I want to call out, is, please, some performances from my voice actors. I'll get to Amanda in a moment because she was brilliant and I want to thank her for everything. But her husband, Zac Kreidler, performed Lord Stettin, and I was just amazed by how well he did that role, because I had perceived that character differently when I read it. I had perceived him as a stereotypical Putin-like character in a way of being just a power know, not very intelligent character. And when Zac read those lines that I had picked out for him to read, he sounded like a smart guy. He sounded like... and a justified guy in his worldview that it made sense. What he was saying... 'we can match them!'

Nathaniel

Right.

Joel

I felt like joining his cause at the end of those lines, just a very different... so I'm really, really glad that he was able to put that much oomph into that character, because it's...

Nathaniel

No, I am, too. I thought he did a great job. Yes. At the end of reading *The Republic*, those who are cynical, which I think everybody who reads everything, should have a healthy dose of cynicism sometimes because it helps us be critical when we read. But we can ask the question, all right, if the Guardians or these philosopher kings are supposed to be in charge of the Republic, is that really any different from having a tyrant be in charge? And it's the exact parallel. Right. Is it any different to have Stettin be in charge than it is to have these mind manipulators who will brainwash people and use infants right?

Experiment on a newborn to alter her brain? That's pretty horrific. Let alone having half of Tazenda and fifty of their own die? Now, who's the tyrant here and who's the unjust one?

Joel

And I think that's what Dr. Darell was trying to get across, or Asimov, through that character and his perspective. Dr. Darell didn't care about Lord Stettin. He didn't see him as, yeah, we can fight that kind of a devil, but somebody who controls our know, that's a whole 'nother thing. And that's what really terrified him.

Nathaniel

Yes. And that's new to the second couple, to the Mule, and the stories that come after that. As you said, there were loose threads, and there's a new loose thread that appears in the story, and that I do think just parallels so well with *The Republic*. So to answer the question, what is justice? Plato starts a thought experiment. He says, well, let's try to imagine what a just city would look like. And he says, well, a just city or just Republic would have three classes of people. Most people would be needed to produce things. They'd farm, they'd mine, they'd get natural resources.

Maybe in today's society, we'd say those are people who sit behind desks, people in the information processing world, people who do things, and lots of people, most people have to do that. And in the galaxy, at least during the time of the Republic, sorry, during the time of the Empire, most people are not part of either Foundation. And as the Empire recedes, they still go about farming, they still go about trade, and the first Foundation then encroaches on that. But still most people are the source of natural resources for Terminus, things like that. Plato says the second group are going to be the auxiliaries, basically the spirited ones.

They're going to be the military, the police force, the people who are loyal beyond any shadow of a doubt to the Republic. They're the ones with the oomph, the fighting spirit that are going to defend it and expand its interests. And that seems to be what the first Foundation is doing. They are loyal to the Seldon Plan. They're going to expand the sphere of the Foundation, ultimately to become an empire. And they're going to use and trade with the majority of people in the galaxy who are not from Terminus. And even if the Foundation expands outward to create a new empire, most people are not going to be mayors of Terminus City.

Most people are not going to be in the intellectual hub of the Foundation. They'll still be the merchants and the producers. Anyway. The third class is we've already said I've said they're the Guardians. And this is like the Second Foundationers. They are distinctly a minority. There are very few people who are going to be Guardians, just as the number of Second Foundationers there's some on different planets, but many of them are on I guess it's okay for me to say this now, on Trantor, where all stars end, and they're going to be there because they're intellectuals.

Something else striking about this in Plato is the Guardians are to live in poverty because they would be tempted otherwise. Look at who they are. They are the most philosophically trained in Plato's Republic. They're the most intelligent. They're the ones who are running the show. So for them

to have material wealth around them would be too tempting for them to take over. And that is exactly the way that the Second Foundationers are described. They're farmers, right? Preem Palver. It's just remarkable. He's interested in trading potatoes, of course, he's ruling the galaxy, but he himself does not have material wealth.

And just think for a moment, the Second Foundationers could crown themselves king if they wanted to. They could do what the Mule did if they wanted to, but they don't because they love the plan. Or in Plato's language, because the Guardians love the good. Now it gets a little bit even closer. And I don't know how well or poorly I am at drawing the analogy, but on Plato's story, let's just do Plato for a minute. The way that we understand for a society to be just look at it's three parts. You need some part that rules.

Let's have the Guardians be in charge because they're the highly educated, wise ones. You need some part that helps the Guardians rule, because intellectuals by themselves will just be sitting in a room. Let's have that be the soldiers of the auxiliary class, the ones that are spirited, the ones that want to spread the influence. And then let's have a majority of people just go about their lives, producing, farming, working in offices. Justice is, Plato says, when each part does the part that's best suited for it. So when the educated class, when the Guardians are in charge, the spirited class helps out, and the third producing class produces things.

Now, that transfers completely to Asimov's Foundation what I think makes a case that the galaxy for Asimov is just, I think, is that those in charge of the best educated, that's the Second Foundationers. But what do intellectuals do? They sit in a room talking. What they really need is some auxiliaries, some spirited group of people who can actually do things, spread the word, catalyze change. And that's the First Foundation. So the First Foundation is helping them with the Plan, just as the auxiliaries help

the Guardians govern. And then most of the Galaxy is just going on with their business, producing, consuming, doing what they need to do.

So one more thing. The pice de resistnce, the cherry on the cake, is that the person who creates or the person who's in charge of the Guardian class. The shortest way to get the ideal state is to crown someone as philosopher king, someone who also lives in poverty, someone who does not use material wells to their advantage, but someone who starts the process. And in a way, the first speaker of the Guardian class. And I've already tipped my hat or showed my hand, because in Asimov's story, it seems like Seldon plays that role. He starts the process moving.

He is pretty implicitly understood to be a member or a proto member of the Second Foundation. He's the one who's aware of Seldon's plan because it's his plan, and he's the one who orchestrates things, just as the Second Foundation would. So he is a philosopher king. The Second Foundation are the Guardians who are pulling the strings. The first Foundation is the auxiliary or military class who's spreading the good word. And the bulk of the Galaxy, like the bulk of the Republic, are farming and producing and manufacturing and trading. And as long as each part does its part, you have a just society. I'm done with my filibuster.

Joel

That's cool. But that leads me to talk about something that might not be right up your alley, which is the sequels, because I know you focused on the trilogy and your course, but I wanted to talk for a moment about how Asimov extended the story 30 years later when he came to it, and how his mindset appeared to have changed about what his goals were for the, for how things should turn out. You know, because at the end of the trilogy, it's kind of like resolved that the Second Foundation is good, we need them. And what's ultimately good is just a good, functioning society where everybody does their part.

And the Second Foundation is necessary to keep that on track. So thirty years later, he decided to continue the story with a novel called "Foundation's Edge." And he seemed to find that this idea of an endless cycle of creation, of an ideal state and its subsequent decay and collapse, didn't appeal to him as much. Maybe he didn't really believe in the durability of what was created that that wouldn't work out in the long run. Eventually, it's going to fall apart and then you've got to go back to an interregnum of suffering and everything and hopefully there's a Seldon around to keep the interregnum to only a thousand years and you get another one right, a third Foundation, fourth Foundation or whatever.

And he didn't seem really satisfied with that. And a few years before he wrote that sequel, James Lovelock came out with this Gaia hypothesis and Lynn Margulis was his companion on that, co publisher of that, I believe, about the Earth as a sentient harmonious entity. And Asimov seemed to become entranced with that vision and he extended it to the entire galaxy with a cosmic entity known as Galaxia. And at the end of the first novel, spurred by a representative of a planet actually called Gaia, the main character, Golan Travis, and here I'm going to do a spoiler...

So if you really want to be don't want to be spoiled when I do Foundation's Edge, then turn off the sound for a couple of minutes here because I'm going to tell you what's going to happen. Golan Trevise makes the choice for Galaxia, and for kind of enigmatic reasons. Golan Trevize is kind of the chosen one who gets to make this choice. And from that point on the fate of the universe or the fate of the galaxy is whatever he determines it's going to be and he decides it's going to be Galaxia. So obviously Asimov kind of liked this idea of a galaxy that's all interconnected and everything is harmonious, instead of a top down kind of hierarchy and a republic kind of idea.

It's just a living being, that's all. One right, very hippie kind of idea that he loved. And then you get to the next sequel of "Foundation and Earth"

and he seems to be having second thoughts because this character Bliss from Gaia is along for the ride and part of one of the core principles in Foundation and Earth. And a lot of the book seems to be them just bickering back and forth about which one of them is right. And Trevis seems to really regret that he chose Galaxia and isn't so sure it was the right choice.

And Bliss keeps telling him, no, you did the right thing. And my theory is that Asimov wasn't really sure what the best thing was and he had kind of an internal dilemma did I write the right story? Did I come up with the right ending yet? Or what is the right ending? And he still didn't know. And one of the things that I love about Asimov is that he didn't feel like he needed to know to write a story. He didn't have to have all the ends tied up neatly. And in this case, there was a big gaping kind of mess at the heart of the story because he couldn't figure out what he wanted to do with it.

And it seemed like he was through this dialogue, he was trying to straighten it out in his own mind along with the readers. And unfortunately, if he had lived another twenty years, he might have come up with a pretty solid thesis on this. But he unfortunately did not live that much longer, and we never got to see his ultimate resolution of this, if one was forthcoming.

Nathaniel

So it wasn't a spoiler for me. So I've read the whole Empire Robot Foundation series, all nineteen or twenty something books, and I remember enjoying the philosophical back and forth that Asimov has with himself through his characters in Foundation and Earth. I don't think that he is actually terribly different from Plato on this either. So though I don't talk about this in my class, I can go out on a limb here and say that you might remember, Joel, in fact, I'm sure you do, that the Mule is explained as being a renegade guy in someone who grew up on this planet which had a single consciousness.

And the Mule for me still makes me wonder, would the Mule have been any less just than the Second Foundation were the Mule to govern the galaxy? And you're right, Asimov was concerned about, won't there just be another decline and fall, even with the Second Foundation in charge? Here's my plug for Plato. Plato himself recognized that there was always going to be decline and fall because human beings are imperfect. And he describes in The Republic a cycle of declining and falling. And after the ideal state, his ideal state is established, it eventually will turn into an oligarchy, and then it will turn into another state.

He calls it democracy, and then it will turn into a democracy, which is not a good version for him or for Asimov, if you think about it. And then it'll turn into a tyranny. And the most worrisome thing about a rogue Gaian and the most worrisome thing about the Mule is that these are people who could have been Seldons. Plato is explicit about this. People who could have been philosophers, who are wise and spirited and have the wherewithal to produce and desire things, but are themselves improperly governed. So Plato introduces a character in the Republic called Thrusimachus, who is the spitting image of the Mule.

He is as smart as a philosopher king. He's not governed by wisdom. He's not governed by spirit. He's governed by his desires, which is what the bulk of the galaxy is. And the Mule is like that. And your point about well, we have Gaia, we have a world planet that is a single civilization, and Galaxia would be a galaxy like that. We can ask the same questions. Who's to say that Gaia will be any more just than the Mule would have been had he controlled the Foundation? Or who's to say that galaxy will be any more just?

It still seems to come down to how do you balance the needs of life and how do you look out for the I'm going to quote Star Trek here. How do you look out for the goods of the many and the good of the many and the good of the few or the good of the one? How do you answer these fundamental questions, whether it's a planet or a Foundation or a galaxy?

Joel

Well, I think one of the charms to me of the Gaia and Galaxia idea was that the many are the one. It's a merging of them together, and there's no need for hierarchy anymore, because everyone, is everyone is part of I.

Nathaniel

And I remember the analogies in Foundation and Earth are to cells in a body. So wouldn't it be wonderful if, instead of being an individual cell, we were all cells within a single human body? And that might be right, I suppose, if we're really individual human cells. But does that scale up? Can individual human beings really become nothing more than cells?

Joel

It does seem like a big leap to go from one planet to the whole galaxy in an instant. It seems like you would need to try this on a greater and greater regional scale to have any chance of working.

Nathaniel

But if I can come full circle to something that you asked me about on my first time on your podcast, I was interested in the role of the Foundation trilogy as a thought experiment. So here's the Galactic Empire that's falling. What do we do? And we could look at Roman history. We could look at the decline of the Spanish Empire or the United States Empire, if we want to speak that way. Or we could put it out in space and see whether there are philosophical lessons to learn from that. And it could be that by giving Golan Trevise this I don't know, this inexplicable choice or this inexplicable justification, he was the one who intuitively would know how to choose correctly.

Asimov's just giving us another thought experiment, he's the means to the end of trying to figure out what is better. Is it Galaxia, where everything is ultimately part of a single organism? Is it rule by the Second Foundation, where those who are wise or at least claim to be wise, are pulling the strings? Is it rule by the First Foundation where those who are spirited and movers and shakers are those in charge? And if Asimov did not come to a conclusion by the end of Foundation and Earth, that's fine with me, because at the very end of the Republic, Plato ends by introducing a myth, a myth about what happens when you die.

And it has nothing to do with an ideal state. It has nothing to do, really, with much that came before in the Republic. But I think it's his way of just showing the thought experiment continues. We're always going to have these questions, and they're always going to be different ways to think about them. And that's the beauty of what Asimov did. The loose threads are good threads if they get us thinking.

Joel

Yeah, I think you and I can appreciate that and a lot of people, but there's also a lot of people who can't who want things to be resolved neatly. And I think that's where a lot of the dissatisfaction with that final story comes from people reading that and saying, what? He didn't ever tell us, which is right. Tough on them, I guess.

Nathaniel

Tough on them. I'm going to let you and your listeners into a little secret. Hopefully this doesn't make me seem too pessimistic, but it's something I tell my students. We don't know what the ultimate answers are to most things, maybe we don't know to anything, really. It's useful to say we know, and certainly it's extremely useful in the hard sciences. There are assumptions we make that our current theories work, and we're going to believe that until we get new, better theories, and we do this in the humanities and the social sciences.

Even in math, people develop non-Euclidean geometry is relatively new in the history of math. People were convinced Euclid had the final word until people were convinced he didn't. It's just in philosophy, and I think in science fiction, and maybe especially in Asimov, we're self consciously aware that we really ultimately don't know. So I understand. I get this from my students, and for me, too, it would be good to be able to pin something down and had Asimov decided for sure, galaxy is the way to go, or the Second Foundation is the way to go. That would go a long way to maybe making it for a more satisfying story, but it wouldn't match reality, because reality is we're always searching.

And until we stop being human, I don't think we're going to stop questioning. And Asimov just does that, does that with a wit and wisdom that few of us can ever approach.

Joel

Right. This kind of leads me to a final thought before I get into wrapping things up. The value of science fiction. This is, as you said, it's great for thought experiments like this. And I just read a paper by a guy who was previously on this podcast named Paul Levinson about this idea of how you can introduce philosophical concepts through science fiction that are really engaging. Because it's a story. It's a fun story, and people don't even realize that they're learning philosophy or experimenting with philosophy, playing with philosophical concepts, but they're just engaged in the story.

And this happens all the time in science fiction, and we've seen it in Star Trek, for sure. The Orville is one of my favorites now because they really get into some excellent philosophical concepts and societal dilemmas and things like that. But a lot of people don't understand that about science fiction who don't read it and think it's just an escape or something. And I think it can be a way to approach really fundamental things. I'll post a link to Paul's...

Nathaniel

Yeah, please do.

Joel

...thesis on that because I found it really interesting reading. He talks about Dune, too, and how Foundation and Dune have different ways of dealing with a very similar topic in the Foundation takes it on a macro level of the whole galaxy and their fate.

Well, Dune does too, but Dune makes it more of a personal level in the person of Paul Muad'dib and how his development changes through the story.

Nathaniel

Yes, that's absolutely right. And it doesn't stop just with Herbert. And Asimov you and I have talked about, I'm trying to read lots of contemporary science fiction and I was blown away by the "Three Body Problem."

Joel

I keep being told I must read that. It's in my queue and I will get to it.

Nathaniel

Right. By Lu Cixin. I'm probably mispronouncing it. It's a Chinese name, Chinese work, and it's as philosophical. In fact, it's inspired by Asimov. In some ways, Asimov is implied, or at least the Foundation trilogy exists in that universe because there's a character who reads the Foundation trilogy. It's mentioned just once on one page. But there's so many exciting contemporary authors who are following an Asimov's footsteps, sometimes explicitly. So science fiction can be about spaceships shooting at each other and it could be only about that. And there's some science fiction that only does that. But the really good stuff makes you think, and Asimov's part of the really good stuff, because he makes you think.

Joel

Yep, that's a good place to end, I think. And so many ideas we could have gone into that had to skip over for time. So maybe there'll be another opportunity to have you on.

Nathaniel

Well, that's very...that's very kind. I'll get off my philosophical soapbox next time.

Joel

Before that, I want you to close with letting our listeners know a little bit more about you and where they can find you online if you want to be found and what other projects you're working on.

Nathaniel

Sure. So I don't have much of an online presence other than my university website. And you can Google my name and philosophy and it'll pull it up. I published a couple years ago a book called "Superhero Thought Experiments" that talks about superhero comics, actually, and a little bit of current Marvel, DC movies, but mostly the comics and how they get us thinking about personal identity or the nature of time or the question of justice. And finally, Joel, to your question, what am I working on now? I've teamed up with a wonderful co-author. I actually co-authored the superhero book with him.

And the two of us are trying to write just a general, more popular book on how do we understand the role of reboots and retcons and sequels and movies. And can we apply that understanding to reboots and retcons and sequels in, say, things like Supreme Court cases like. When you overturn Roe v. Wade, is that a kind of retcon? Or how about in the history of science when you overturn scientific theories? So are there these tools from pop culture that you could kind of say.

Joel

Putin's story of the history of Russia is a retcon in a way, right?

Nathaniel

It absolutely is a retcon. Yep, you absolutely could say that.

Joel

Retcons can be dangerous.

Nathaniel

So that's what I'm up to.

Joel

Cool, sounds very good. I'll look forward to checking those out. So I'm so glad we had you back. Wishing you well with your future endeavors.

Nathaniel

Well, thank you, Joel. You've been gracious, as always. And thank you to your listeners, too.

Joel

So great spending some time chatting with Nathaniel again, one of the many wonderful people I've befriended along the way in making this podcast. We just hit a cool milestone in having a single episode reach one thousand downloads for the first time. That would be episode number one, The Psychohistorians. I never imagined that I'd find that many people who would enjoy hearing me share my perspective on this story. We're approaching 14,000 downloads in total since April of last year, spread across 71 countries. It looks like there are a lot of Asimov fans out there. In addition to the dual appearances by Nathaniel Goldberg, I've featured conversations with astrophysicists Stephen Webb, historian TCA Achintya, Sci-fi writers Tobias Cabral, Erasma Costa and Paul Levinson, literary analysts Pria D and Danielle Pajak, and original fanfic by Sarita 1046. We've covered a lot of ground besides Foundation by Asimov, including the works of Plato, Fermi's Paradox, lots of Star Trek and the Orville, Dune, the history of the British Empire, and some analysis of the Apple TV version of Foundation.

Along the way, I've shared my personal reflections on notable figures I've encountered on my life's journey thus far, including Kim Stanley Robinson, Elon Musk, and Mars Society president Robert Zubrin. I've also had the pleasure of discussing another Asimov classic in "The End of Eternity," one of the best time travel stories ever told, ruminated upon the great man theory of history and discussed the value of imperfection and the necessity to challenge fate. I even went so far off topic as to summarize my rock opera Planet and Sky and provide some retrospective on the story of its creation.

It's been a hell of a ride so far, and I plan to keep this going a lot further, and I hope to continue to keep your interest as we delve further into the great story of Foundation once more. I welcome you to visit the podcast website seldoncrisis.net, where you can find dedicated pages for each episode, including links to all of the major podcast platforms, full transcripts, some of them in the new active transcript format. I hope to convert all of the transcripts to this format over time. It allows you to play the episode audio while the words are highlighted in text, includes timestamps, and you can search for something you might have heard and want to remember.

I also plan to include more bio data on all my wonderful collaborators eventually. There's also an excellent reviews page where you can see some of the wonderful feedback I've received from grateful listeners and contribute your own review if you would be so generously inclined. Last but not least, if you'd like to help me to create these episodes, please consider becoming a patron@patreon.com. A link is always present in the show notes. Thanks to everyone who helps this podcast by downloading, listening, interacting and spreading the word, and I'll join you again soon, here on Seldon Crisis!

[Closing theme music.]