

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #399

# Genius or Forgetful? Decoding Moravec's Paradox

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn Poppleberry dive deep into the "absent-minded professor" trope to uncover the neurological reality behind why brilliant minds often struggle with basic daily tasks. By exploring Moravec's Paradox and the tension between the Task Positive and Default Mode Networks, they explain how an "interest-based nervous system" prioritizes complex problem-solving over mundane chores like making the bed or finding car keys. From the "spiky profiles" of neurodivergent individuals to the parallels found in modern large language models, this discussion offers a fascinating look at how we define intelligence and why self-compassion—rather than "living up to potential"—is the ultimate tool for navigating a world built for the neurotypical.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

### Daniel

Could you discuss the phenomenon of the "absent-minded professor"—the idea that someone can have high intelligence and aptitude in complex fields like AI and technology, yet struggle with simple daily tasks? What explains this pattern, particularly in the context of ADHD and different types of intelligence?

# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am joined as always by my brother.

## Herman

Herman Poppleberry, reporting for duty. And Corn, I have to say, the prompt our housemate Daniel sent us today is probably one of the most personally relevant topics we have tackled in a long time.

## Corn

It really is. Daniel was mentioning that nickname his mother gave him, the absent minded professor. It is a trope we see everywhere in fiction and history, from Archimedes stepping into a bathtub and forgetting he was naked to modern day tech geniuses who can build a large language model from scratch but cannot remember where they put their car keys ten minutes ago.

## Herman

Or in my case, forgetting that I am currently wearing my glasses while I am frantically searching the house for them. It is a fascinating paradox, right? This idea that someone can possess an incredible amount of intellectual horsepower in one specific, highly complex domain, while simultaneously struggling with the very basics of daily living. In cognitive science, we often look at this through the lens of Moravec's Paradox. It is the discovery by artificial intelligence and robotics researchers that high level reasoning requires very little computation, but low level sensorimotor skills require enormous computational resources.

## Corn

That is such a sharp way to put it. We assume that if you can do the hard stuff, the easy stuff should be free. But for the brain, the easy stuff is actually quite expensive. Daniel specifically pointed out the connection to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and the way we define intelligence. I think that is the core of what we need to dig into today. Why does the brain seem to prioritize the abstract and the complex over the practical and the mundane? Is it a choice, or is it a fundamental architectural difference in how some people are wired?

### Herman

It is definitely more about the wiring than most people realize. There is a common misconception that being absent minded is just a form of laziness or a lack of discipline. People see a brilliant engineer and think, well, if you can understand quantum computing, surely you can remember to take the trash out on Tuesdays. But the cognitive load required for those two things is actually handled by very different systems in the brain. Specifically, we are talking about the tension between the Task Positive Network and the Default Mode Network.

### Corn

That is a great starting point. Let us talk about that cognitive load. When we talk about the absent minded professor, we are usually talking about someone with a high capacity for what psychologists call fluid intelligence, right?

### Herman

Yes, fluid intelligence is that ability to solve new problems, identify patterns, and use logic in novel situations. It is what allows someone to dive into a field like artificial intelligence and understand the deep mathematical structures behind neural networks. But the day to day stuff, like remembering to buy milk or making the bed, which Daniel mentioned in his audio, that falls under the umbrella of executive function. This is governed by the prefrontal cortex, which acts like the conductor of the orchestra. It manages working memory, emotional regulation, and task switching.

### Corn

So, what you are saying is that the conductor might be really good at leading a complex symphony, but completely forgets to check if the musicians actually showed up on time?

### Herman

In a way, yes. For many neurodivergent individuals, especially those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, that conductor is easily distracted or perhaps just incredibly specialized. Dr. William Dodson calls this an interest based nervous system. Unlike a priority based nervous system, which can rank tasks by importance or consequences, an interest based nervous system only engages when a task is challenging, novel, urgent, or personally interesting.

## Corn

That explains the spiky profile of intelligence you mentioned earlier. Most neurotypical people have a relatively flat profile, meaning their abilities across different domains like verbal reasoning, spatial awareness, and executive function are all somewhat similar. But for people like the stereotypical absent minded professor, that profile is full of massive peaks and deep valleys.

## Herman

Exactly. If you are in the ninety-ninth percentile for logical reasoning but the tenth percentile for working memory, people are going to be baffled by your behavior. They only see the ninety-ninth percentile part and assume that level of competence should apply to everything else. This leads to a lot of frustration, especially in the world of technology. You have people who can stay in a state of hyperfocus for ten hours straight, solving a bug that has stumped an entire team. That hyperfocus is a superpower, but the flip side is that when you finally emerge, you realize you have not eaten, you missed three meetings, and you have no idea where your phone is.

## Corn

Let us talk about that hyperfocus for a second, because Daniel mentioned his interest in artificial intelligence. There is something about high stimulation environments like coding or research that seems to feed the brain in a way that making a bed just does not. Why is that?

## Herman

It comes down to the dopamine reward system. For a brain with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, there is often a baseline deficiency in dopamine or a lower sensitivity to it. This means that tasks that are under-stimulating, like folding laundry or filing taxes, do not provide enough of a neurological signal to keep the brain engaged. The brain literally struggles to find the fuel to start or maintain those tasks. Whereas something like artificial intelligence is a dopamine goldmine. You are constantly solving puzzles, getting immediate feedback from your code, and exploring brand new frontiers of human knowledge.

## Corn

It is like trying to run a high performance sports car on low grade fuel. It just sputters and stalls. But I wonder about the long term implications. If we live in a society that increasingly values those high peaks of intelligence, especially in tech, are we creating an environment where the valleys of executive function are becoming more of a problem? Or are we finding ways to bridge that gap?

### Herman

That is the big question. Historically, the absent minded professor often had a support system, whether it was a spouse or an assistant, who handled the logistics of their life. But today, we are all expected to be our own personal assistants. We have to manage our own calendars, our own health, our own finances, and our own digital footprints. For someone with a spiky profile, that is an incredible amount of friction. It is like being a brilliant architect who is forced to also be the plumber, the electrician, and the accountant for every building they design.

### Corn

I want to go back to something Daniel said about making the bed. He mentioned that it feels extraordinarily difficult, almost like the brain does not handle those physical directions well. Is there a spatial or motor component to this too?

### Herman

There can be. There is a condition called dyspraxia, or developmental coordination disorder, which often overlaps with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism. It affects how the brain plans and processes motor tasks. So, something like tucking in the corners of a bed sheet, which seems simple to most, requires a complex sequence of spatial awareness and fine motor control. If your brain is already struggling with executive function and task sequencing, that simple chore can feel like trying to solve a Rubik's cube while wearing oven mitts.

### Corn

That is a vivid analogy. It is like the difference between a computer running a dedicated hardware chip for a specific task versus trying to emulate that task in software. The hardware chip is fast and efficient, while the software emulation takes up all the central processing unit's power and runs much slower.

### Herman

That is exactly how it feels. And when you are already using most of your processing power to think about the ethics of artificial intelligence or the future of decentralized finance, you just do not have the cycles left for the bed sheets. So, the first step is self compassion. Once you realize that your brain is not broken, it is just specialized, you can stop blaming yourself. We need to move away from the idea that there is one right way to be an adult.

## Corn

That is the practical side. But what about the social side? The absent minded professor is often a figure of fun, but in real life, it can lead to a lot of social friction. Friends and family might feel neglected or frustrated by the perceived lack of effort.

## Herman

That is the hardest part. Relationships require a certain amount of executive function. You have to remember birthdays, you have to be on time for dinner, you have to listen and engage. When someone is constantly distracted, it can feel personal. But if we understand it as a cognitive limitation rather than a character flaw, that changes the dynamic. It becomes something that the two people can work on together. It is about building external structures to support the internal valleys.

## Corn

I think this also ties into the way we educate people. Our school systems are largely designed for people with flat cognitive profiles. They reward being pretty good at everything. If you are a kid who is a math genius but cannot keep your locker organized, you are often labeled as a problem student or told you are not living up to your potential.

## Herman

Oh, do not get me started on the whole living up to your potential line. That has been used to beat down neurodivergent kids for decades. What it usually means is, you are smart enough that you should be able to hide your struggles and act like everyone else. But that masking takes an incredible amount of energy. It is what leads to burnout. We should be encouraging kids to lean into their peaks while providing the tools to manage their valleys.

## Corn

It is interesting to think about how this applies to the field of artificial intelligence itself. In a way, we are building machines that are the ultimate absent minded professors. They can process vast amounts of data and find patterns that no human could ever see, but they have no common sense. They do not know that you should not put a toaster in a bathtub.

### Herman

That is a brilliant point, Corn. We are essentially creating silicon versions of the spiky profile. Large language models are incredibly deep in their linguistic and logical capabilities, but they lack the embodied, practical intelligence that comes from living in the physical world. They can write a poem about a sunset but they have no idea what a sunset actually feels like.

### Corn

And just like we have to build guardrails and specific interfaces for artificial intelligence to make it useful in the real world, we have to do the same for our own brains. So, Herman, what are some of the actual mechanisms that can help? If someone is listening to this and nodding along, what can they do?

### Herman

Well, the first thing is to lean into the technology we have. I use my phone for everything. If it is not in my calendar with three different alerts, it does not exist. I use task management apps that break down big projects into tiny, manageable steps. This reduces the cognitive load of trying to figure out where to start. Also, the point of use principle is key. If I need to remember to take a pill in the morning, the bottle has to be sitting right next to the coffee maker. Visual cues are essential.

### Corn

And I think there is also something to be said for the body doubling technique. It is just the act of having someone else in the room while you are doing a task you find difficult. Their presence provides a sort of social grounding that keeps your brain from wandering off.

### Herman

Exactly. And honestly, just talking about it helps. Acknowledging the struggle and laughing about the absurdity of it all. Like Daniel's mom calling him the absent minded professor. It turns a source of shame into a shared joke. It takes the power away from the frustration.

## Corn

I think that is a really important takeaway. The world needs the people who can see the big picture and the deep patterns, even if they sometimes trip over their own feet. Some of the greatest advancements in human history have come from people who were probably considered a bit of a mess in their daily lives. Isaac Newton was famously indifferent to his own physical needs when he was deep in thought. Albert Einstein was known for his messy hair and his lack of socks.

## Herman

These are not just quirks; they are symptoms of a brain that has its priorities elsewhere. It is a trade off. And as we move further into this century, where the complex and the abstract are becoming the primary drivers of our economy, we might see a shift in how we value these different types of intelligence. Maybe the absent minded professor will not be a punchline anymore, but a recognized cognitive style with its own set of strengths and needs.

## Corn

Well said, Herman. This has been a really enlightening discussion. I feel like I understand our housemate Daniel, and maybe a little bit of you, a lot better now.

## Herman

And maybe a little bit of yourself too, Corn. I have seen you stare at a blank screen for an hour because you were thinking about the philosophy of time, while your tea went cold right next to you.

## Corn

Guilty as charged. It is a family trait, I suppose. Before we wrap up, I just want to say to everyone listening, if you have been enjoying My Weird Prompts and our deep dives into these topics, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your favorite podcast app. It really does help other people find the show.

## Herman

Yeah, it makes a huge difference. And if you want to see our archive of past episodes or get in touch with us, you can find everything at [myweirdprompts.com](http://myweirdprompts.com). We love hearing from you, and we might even use your question for a future episode.

### Corn

Thanks to Daniel for sending in this prompt. It was a good one to chew on. Alright, I think that is it for today. Thanks for listening to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn.

### Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry. We will see you next time.

### Corn

Take care, everyone. And maybe go check if you left the oven on.

### Herman

Oh, good call. I will go check right now. Wait, Corn, one last thing before we go. We talked about the spiky profile and how it relates to intelligence. I was thinking about the concept of general intelligence or the G-factor. Does the existence of these highly specialized, absent minded geniuses challenge the idea that there is a single, underlying intelligence that governs everything?

### Herman

That is a subject of huge debate in psychology. The G-factor theory suggests that if you are good at one cognitive task, you tend to be good at others. And statistically, that holds true for a large part of the population. But neurodivergent individuals are the big exception to that rule. Their profiles are so uneven that the G-factor almost becomes meaningless for them.

### Corn

So, for them, intelligence is not a single number, but a complex landscape. It makes me think about how we define success in our society. If we only look at the engine, we might be disappointed when the car runs out of gas or veers off the road. But if we understand the whole machine, we can find the right track for it to run on.

**Herman**

Precisely. We need to stop trying to force every car to be an all terrain vehicle. Some are built for the racetrack, and some are built for the city streets. Both are valuable, but they need different things to succeed. The absent minded professor is definitely a racetrack car. Give them the space to do what they do best, and help them with the rest.

**Corn**

I love that. Alright, for real this time, we are done. Thanks for the extra insight, Herman.

**Herman**

Any time, Corn. Any time.

**Corn**

And thank you all for sticking with us. We really do appreciate your time and your curiosity.

**Herman**

Until next time, this is My Weird Prompts.

**Corn**

Goodbye!