Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef and with me is our guest today, Professor Eric Schwitzgebel. Eric is a professor of philosophy at UC Riverside, where he focuses on a bunch of different interesting topics, from philosophy of mind to moral psychology, epistemology and science fiction. He also blogs at the Splintered Mind, which is one of my favorite philosophy blogs.

Eric was actually a guest on Rationally Speaking about a year ago, talking about the moral behavior of moral philosophers, or lack thereof. He's returning now to discuss another topic entirely, called Crazyism. Eric, welcome back.

Eric: Thanks for having me.

Julia: So what is Crazyism?

Eric: Let's define a position as “bizarre,” just in case it's highly contrary to common sense. And a position as “crazy,” in my technical sense of the term, just in case it's highly contrary to common sense and you're not epistemically compelled to believe it.

Julia: Not epistemically compelled to believe it -- does that mean that there isn't good evidence or argument supporting it?

Eric: There might be some good evidence, but not enough to compel belief or bring you all the way to rationally justified high level of confidence in a position.

Julia: OK, so that's “crazy.”

Eric: Just to clarify the terms just a little bit more -- this is all just technical terms that I invented -- a position is bizarre if it's contrary to common sense. But some bizarre positions, we're epistemically compelled to believe.

For example, the twin paradox in relativity theory. Seems like there's excellent scientific evidence that if one twin is travelling at a high velocity, relative to another twin, and then turns around and comes back, the travelling twin will have aged less than the untravelling twin.

To someone who hasn't been trained in the field, is a non-expert, this seems ... This is highly unintuitive, but we now have very good scientific evidence for that. That would be a bizarre position that was not crazy in that sense.

Julia: Because it's not dubious, because there's strong evidence for it, right.

Eric: Right, it's not dubious. Dubious is another term that I'm using technically. A position is dubious, just in case we're not epistemically compelled to believe it. So these are just all my vocabulary for talking about this.

Julia: Before you define crazyism, would you say that the concepts of “bizarre” and “dubious” map onto the Bayesian concepts of having a low prior on something, and having low evidence for something, respectively? Before we get any evidence at all, we should put very low probability on something being true if it seems bizarre, and if we don't have very strong evidence for it, then it's dubious?

Eric: That's probably a reasonable translation, I'm not sure I'd commit to that exactly.

Julia: Okay, fair.

Eric: At least as a first approximation on it, and maybe as a final translation, that would be fine. A bizarre position would be one that ... I don't define it in terms of priors, probably because I don't know priors exactly are, they seem to work out differently in Bayesian, different kinds of accounts of ...

Julia: I think it also gets a little complicated, philosophically when we're talking logical or philosophical arguments as opposed to empirical claims. So I think you're especially justified in being hesitant to commit to that definition here.

Eric: The way that I prefer to talk about bizarreness is that non-specialists would be highly confident that it's false. Perhaps implicitly, they might not have explicitly thought about the issue before. Either implicitly or explicitly are confident that it's false.

Julia: Maybe someone would officially defer to experts and say, "Okay, well, the physicists say that, I'm not a physicist, so okay." It still seems intuitively impossible that it could be true, but they're willing to defer to authorities at least, explicitly.

Eric: Right.

That would be bizarreness. Before Copernicus won the day with the idea that the Earth moves around the sun, that would have been bizarre. And also I think, crazy, in a sense, when it was first proposed, the evidence that Copernicus appealed to was probably not sufficient to compel belief that the

Earth did in fact, travel around the sun. When Copernicus first proposed the position, or when Darwin first proposed the theory of evolution by natural selection, these positions were both contrary to common sense, and dubious, and so, crazy.

But then as, eventually, scientific evidence came in, they lost first their dubiety, and then became really bizarre. And then common sense, I think, can change over time. It's now maybe no longer as strongly contrary to common sense, maybe not contrary to common sense at all, to think the Earth goes around the sun rather than the other way.

Julia: To some extent, I think common sense evolves, and to some extent, I think it just gets stretched out. My common sense has been stretched enough by things like quantum mechanics, there's more room for other things that I would have considered crazy to slip in, for me to go, "Wow, okay -- maybe." If quantum mechanics is true, then God, it's just hard for me to reject anything! Or many things out of hand, that I otherwise would have.

Eric: Quantum theory is a good example of a domain in which, I think, crazyism is pretty appealing. There are various ways of interpreting what's going on with quantum mechanics. There might be no collapse views in which the world is splitting into many worlds, that's a common interpretation these days. There are also collapse type views in which the observation of a process causes the way function to collapse, which is also ... Both of those views seem pretty strange by the standards of common sense.

I think both of those interpretations are crazy in the sense that I've defined, obviously that doesn't mean only a clinically insane person would accept them, but there's a sense in which it's not too unfamiliar to say something like, "Wow, it's crazy to think that the world is splitting into uncountably many universes." I don't think we're epistemically compelled to accept that interpretation of quantum mechanics.

Julia: We haven't actually defined crazyism yet, we've just defined crazy.

Eric: Right, then crazyism would be the view that something crazy must be true about a domain in question. So if we define relative to a domain, then you would be committed to crazyism if you're committed to the idea something crazy must be true.

Julia: That whatever the truth turns out to be, some part of it must be crazy.

Eric: Right. For example, there might be four different plausible approaches, maybe

four broad approaches to quantum mechanics. Each of them is bizarre and dubious, but one of them must be true, you think. Or alternatively, there'd be something even more bizarre and dubious that's true. Whatever the truth is, it's going to be something bizarre and dubious that is crazy.

Crazyism about interpretations of quantum mechanics then would be: Well, there are various options, but whatever the truth turns out to be it's going to be something that's highly contrary to common sense, and that we currently don't have compelling epistemic reason to believe.

Julia: When I read your description of crazyism, it reminded me of this quote from Niels Bohr, I don't remember who he was talking to, but he said, "We all agree that your theory is crazy. What we don't yet agree about is whether it's crazy enough to be true."

He sounds like a crazyist about whatever that topic was in Physics.

Eric: Yes, I think crazyism is pretty plausible in certain cutting edge areas of science. The way academic work sometimes goes is that kind of adventuresome people, intellectual adventurers, find themselves endorsing theories that are highly contrary to common sense, and for which the evidence is less than compelling.

And then they put the work into developing those theories, and eventually, if they're really successful like Copernican theory was, or like Darwin was eventually, the scientific community comes around to them. Trying to chase down the crazy is an important academic task.

Julia: Before we get into the reasons why we should expect crazyism to be true in certain domains, maybe we could just discuss what other domains outside of, say, Physics, do you think it might be reasonable to be a crazyist about?

Eric: The one that I've thought about in most detail is the metaphysics of mind, that's one. Which is broadly the issue of what sorts of beings in the universe have minds, have conscious experiences, and how does having a mind relate to existing in the physical or material world, if the physical or material world exists. That would be one domain where I think crazyism is pretty plausible.

I've also been thinking about extending it to ethics, and so that's something that I haven't worked out in as much detail, but I'd like to think about that.

Julia: I've thought more about moral philosophy and metaethics than I have about metaphysics of mind. And I keep bumping up against these situations where I'm forced to choose between unpalatable options, or between bullets that I

have to bite, essentially.

In fact, one of my favorite works of philosophy is a relatively recent paper by someone named Gustaf Arrhenius, in which he ... It's a very rigorous, precise paper, for Philosophy, and he basically lays out all of these seemingly common sense principles that we would want a moral system to have. Principles like ... I may slightly misquote or mis-paraphrase some of these, but there were things like, "All else equal, adding more happy people to the world isn't bad." Or, "All else equal, making currently existing people happier isn't bad."

He has a list of six or seven or so of these principles, each of which we just want to accept almost unquestioningly, it just seems self evidently true, and then he shows rigorously that they cannot all be true. You've got to give up at least one of them if you want an internally consistent moral system.

Eric: That's interesting, I should check out that paper.

Julia: Absolutely, I'll send you it.

Eric: Send me the paper, that'd be awesome.

Julia: In fact, maybe we should link to it on the site. There's a bunch of sort of more concrete, moral philosophy thought experiments that can arrive out of this ... Where our intuition produced these paradoxical results. Gustaf's paper is a nice formalization of why we get these paradoxes.

This is specific to a utilitarian philosophy, so if you're willing to abandon utilitarianism, you don't have a problem.

Anyway, in metaphysics of mind, what would be ... Are there specific questions in metaphysics of mind where we're stuck between a rock and a hard place?

Eric: I think there are some questions, and I'll get to those in a minute, but first I want ... A general connection to the issues that you raised about meta ethics, also. One, to bring out, in my own way, what you said pretty explicitly already was: If common sense is incoherent in some domain, then it's not going to be possible to have a well developed theory that respects every aspect of it. It's going to have to conflict with common sense in some respect.

That, I think, might be true in moral theory. Although in moral theory, I think, it's a little hard to tell sometimes whether you have, in common sense, straight up conflicts, versus different criteria that edge against each other, that can be weighed against each other.

Julia: Sort of like: I value people having autonomy. And I also value people being happy. Sometimes, those things conflict with each other, but that's not necessarily a logical paradox.

Eric: Right, exactly. Whereas, if you're committed to exceptionalist principles that sort cases differently, they can straightforwardly conflict with each other and then create robust violations of common sense, I think. That's one thing that I'm trying to think about with the moral theory case -- to what extent it's, new and competing considerations that can be weighed against each other, versus outright contradiction in the folk psychological principles underneath.

Julia: I think the reason it was possible for Arrhenius to do such a nice, clean job of showing inconsistency in utilitarianism is that utilitarianism just has this one thing that it's prioritizing, which is utility. It's a very poorly defined thing, but whatever the good thing is -- happiness or flourishing or whatever you want to say -- there's just that one good that utilitarianism is trying to maximize…

Eric: I want to ask you a question about this, before we get into the metaphysics side, which I've thought about more. One interesting case that I've puzzled on a little bit on the utilitarian picture is the hedonium case from Nick Bostrom -- do you know this?

Julia: Yeah, but why don't you explain for our listeners.

Eric: Just postulate that hedonium is whatever substance or structure that generates the most pleasure, let's say, with the fewest computational resources. On a simple version of consequentialism, say a pleasure-maximizing one, then it seems like the best thing to do would be to convert all of the mass of the solar system into hedonium.

Julia: Even the mass of the beings who would want to use or enjoy the hedonium?

Eric: Well, the hedonium would be whatever substance it is that is doing the enjoying, right?

Julia: Oh I see, I see, right, it's not like a drug, it's just a thing that itself, experiences whatever good we care about, like happiness or flourishing.

Eric: That's right, so you might think of it as like an artificially intelligent being that's basically programmed to most efficiently have happiness. In the hedonium case, then, what you might want to do basically is convert the entire solar system into one giant, kind of orgasmic, being.

Julia: Blob.

Eric: That doesn't seem very in accord with normal common sense values. And yet it's a pretty straightforward way of ... Or not, not totally straightforward, but it's one way of thinking about if you accept certain premises about computations and maximizing pleasure. It's one thing you might think, "Wow, from a certain kind of utilitarian perspective, the best thing to do, the best possible thing to do would be to just commit suicide of the entire system to create the giant solar system sized orgasma-tron."

Julia: Orgasma-blob.

Eric: Orgasma-blob, right. I think that's an interesting kind of case, we're thinking about the boundaries of common sense.

You might say, "Look, I'm just going to take as a common sense supposition starting point, that that's not what we want. That's not the moral ideal." Then, based on that, I'm going to make my consequentialism less simple or less focused on simple hedonic pleasure or something like that. Because I don't want that case to turn out that way.

Julia: It's funny, in these cases, sometimes what one person intends as a reductio ad absurdum -- like, "Well, X implies Y, and Y's clearly absurd and therefore, that shows a problem with X" -- another person will just say, "Well, I guess Y then, because X implies it."

There's this expression, "One man's modus ponens is another man's modus tollens." Which is two different ways to react to that “X implies Y.”

Eric: Right, I think the thing that happens once you think that common sense is no longer trustworthy as a basis for philosophical opinion, is that you lose a little bit of a hold on that gain. So you say, "Okay, well look. This is highly contrary to common sense, highly contrary to cultural presuppositions, but now I don't know how much weight to give to the fact that this does violate that in that way."

Julia: I used to be really quite fascinated by paradoxes in moral philosophy. Cases in which my moral intuitions strongly suggest X and also strongly suggest Y, and also my logical mind can see that X and Y are in conflict with each other.

And I still am sort of interested in those paradoxes, but I am a little less interested. Because, just thinking a priori about my moral intuitions and how

they evolved -- human moral intuitions were not programmed from the top down, to be an internally consistent set of intuitions. We have different intuitions that evolved in response to different pressures. And there is not a ton of intentional coordination between those different intuitions. So just thinking about that system, in an outside view, you wouldn't expect that system to produce consistent judgments.

So I've become a little less fascinated and intrigued by cases in which I see these conflicts between my intuitions, because I sort of expect that to be the case. I'm also a little more pessimistic about resolving those inconsistencies.

To finish this thought, the best that I think I can hope to do is reach some kind of reflective equilibrium. Where I try to make whatever changes I need to, to my moral positions, that produce rough consistency overall, and require the least amount of violence to what seems to be common sense to me. But I allow that some violence to common sense will have to be done. I just want to minimize it, essentially.

Eric: Right. I'm not as sure about the reflective equilibrium thing, but up until that point, the position you were expressing is very close to the kind of position that motivates me in thinking about crazyism.

Human beings, in thinking about minds and in thinking about morals – so, tracking back a little bit to the metaphysics of mind quote, our intuitions, our common sense, evolved and was culturally selected in a range of environments for a range of purposes. Stepping back, you might think, "Well, it's probably satisficing in whatever environment it emerged in."

Julia: Where satisficing is, finding the solution that's good enough to work, but doesn't have to be the best.

Eric: Right. If we look at how intuition has fared in fields where we've had a chance to kind of test intuition against rigorous empirical evidence, it turns out that physical intuition is great for picking berries and putting them in baskets, and throwing stones, and that sort of stuff. But when it comes to the highly energetic and the tiny and the huge and the fast, it's a mess.

Likewise, I think, when we start stepping outside of the kinds of cases that we're really familiar with, and start thinking about unfamiliar types of cases, like artificial intelligence types of cases, or alien-mind type of cases, or if we think about the possibility of beings with minds very different from us that we could design computationally… then the kind of culturally given and evolutionary selected processes that give us our intuitions might not be

expected to have anything very clear, or high quality, to say about that stuff.

Julia: I was thinking about this with respect to mathematical, sometimes logical, paradoxes. In my experience, something like 95% of all of the mathematical paradoxes out there involve either infinities or self-reference. And something like infinities -- infinities are not a thing that human brains would have had to deal with as they were evolving.

This is setting aside the question of whether infinity is even a coherent concept in itself, because if it's not, then this could explain why the paradoxes arise. But regardless, it's also true that our brains did not evolve to be able to think well about infinity. So of course, things are going to seem counter-intuitive to us.

Eric: Right, and we evolved in an environment in which the only beings who were capable of linguistic thought of the kind of quality that we're used to as human beings, are other human beings, with forms similar to ours and with certain kinds of maximum capacities.

We did not evolve in the context where there were highly intelligent group intelligences, or artificial intelligences. We did not evolve in a context in which we might interact with a being who is capable of vastly more pleasure than we are, or hugely more intelligent than we are. So our moral intuitions and our intuitions about the metaphysics of mind are ... We might not expect them to transfer very well to those unfamiliar types of cases.

Julia: This is kind of an a priori argument for crazyism. That just knowing about our brains and how they evolved, we should expect there to be domains in which our common sense intuitions just don't ... There isn't a way to *not* conflict with them in some sense.

Then, there's also more ... I think you have other pieces of evidence pointing towards crazyism in some fields. Like the fact that areas of physics and cosmology have continually generated crazy answers that have turned out to be correct, where the dubiety has gone down over time. So there's precedent for crazy solutions turning out to be correct.

Eric: Right. I think what we've seen in the history of science is: often, especially when we're talking about the science of the very large and the very small and the very energetic, we've seen things go from crazy to bizarre. Basically, all the common sense options get left behind centuries ago, and there are only bizarre options left.

That's one good reason to think that -- an empirical reason, just looking at the

history of science, to think that crazyism is likely true of the very large and the very small and the very energetic.

With metaphysics of mind I think the argument is similar, although a little different. Because in metaphysics of mind, we haven't got the kinds of consensus answers over time that we got in physics. We gave up geocentrism. We basically agree about relativity theory. Maybe if we can figure out how to reconcile it with quantum mechanics is still an issue, but we've made progress in those things.

It's not as clear we've made that kind of progress in the metaphysics of mind. There is a similar type of empirical argument, which is that in the history of philosophy of mind, every single well-developed view of the metaphysics of mind has been bizarre and dubious. Every single option that's been on the table, well developed option, is crazy.

From an economic market point of view, you'd think, if it was possible to create a metaphysics of mind that accorded with common sense, then someone would have done it.

Julia: Because surely, the rest of us would go, "Oh, thank God, finally something we can wrap our minds around."

Eric: It might not be as fun or niche or whatever, but you'd think that some people would be attracted to it and would be famous.

… It's somewhat hard to defend a universal claim, but my contention is, my challenge is: every single theory that's been put forward in the metaphysics of mind -- that's well-developed enough to commit on specific details like mental-physical causation, and the scope of mentality in the universe, what sorts of being have minds and what sorts of beings don't -- every single theory is bizarre.

That would include even, say, I think Cartesian or actionist dualism. And Thomas Reed's so called “common sense” philosophy, even though when you look at the details of them, they're… pretty bizarre stuff.

Julia: I do want to get into some of the examples of crazy theories in metaphysics of mind, but first, I just want to go a little deeper into this. We were kind of making this inference, where we said, "Look, a lot of these crazy theories in science have turned out to be correct. Therefore, we should put higher probability on crazyism in the areas of philosophy like metaphysics.”

I'm not quite confident that that arrow is justified. Because it seems like the goals of science and philosophy are relevantly different. The goal of philosophy is to make sense of the world. So if the answers that philosophy gives us seem nonsensical to us, then it hasn't really succeeded at that goal.

Whereas there's no such constraint on science. The universe doesn't owe us a reality that we can understand or that makes sense.

Eric: Here's a case where I think the metaphysics of mind and morality might come apart again. I'm still inclined toward crazyism about morality, but I think the case is easier for metaphysics of mind here.

I think that there are metaphysical facts about what types of beings have conscious experiences. As with the physics, those facts might not be accessible to us. The universe does not owe us, as you say, an explanation. Or the ability to understand or make sense of what sorts of weird, alien beings, or group consciousnesses, or whatever, would be conscious or nonconscious. But there would still be facts about those.

There's license for some more skepticism in philosophy. Because we don't have the scientific tools, I think, to detect phenomenology in quite the same way that we have the scientific tools in cosmology. At least for some of the cosmological questions, I think there still is this realm of facts that's independent of us, that we wouldn't necessarily expect common sense to be well tuned to deal with.

In morality, I think it might be slightly different. And this is again, why I'm a little hesitant about extending crazyism to morality. I'm inclined to think that I would at the end of the day.

One reason for hesitation here is, you might think of morality as something constructed by us and in that sense, we kind of make it so, by accepting something, in a way that we cannot make an alien conscious by accepting that's conscious or nonconscious, right. That creates a kind of ... There's at least a possible bridge there for us to reconcile our morality with our common sense, perhaps.

Julia: It's funny, I was going to go the other way and say that I'm more inclined towards crazyism in moral philosophy, than in metaphysics!

Because moral questions are more like questions about our preferences, than they are questions about how does the world work, about what is true. I think there's a stronger case that our preferences didn't evolve to be internally

consistent, than the case you could make about, “how does the world work” questions not making sense inherently.

Eric: Maybe so. I could kind of see that going either way.

On the metaphysics of mind case, I think there's a case from analogy to the sciences, and there's a market-based empirical case. That one hasn't been developed yet, and you’d think that one would be developed if one were available to be developed.

Neither of those is completely decisive, I think, but those two considerations along with these kinds of, as we're saying, a priori, evolutionary considerations, combine all of that together, I think there's a good reason to have fairly high credence in crazyism.

Julia: We keep alluding to all these crazy sounding metaphysical theories, let's finally give an example of one for our listeners.

Eric: Right, well one that I've been working on quite a bit, it's not the only one but it's definitely has some shock value for some people, at least -- or I think maybe most people, but not everyone -- is the idea that the United States is literally phenomenally conscious.

Julia: What's the case for that?

Eric: Most theories of mind, most contemporary philosophers of mind, are either materialists or pretty close to materialists. David Chalmers has a kind of dualism, but it's got a lot of structural similarities to materialism for the issue in question.

Most philosophers of mind think that what's necessary for mentality is something like complex information processing. Sophisticated responsiveness to the environment. Maybe a kind of evolutionary embeddedness in historical environment, that gives your actions and reactions meaning and function, and stuff like that.

If you look at the kinds of features that most philosophers of mind describe as characteristic of, maybe sufficient for, the existence of consciousness in an entity, it looks like the United States -- or any country; I choose the United States because I think it's perhaps the best case country for this -- has those features.

What I want you to do is kind of imagine the United States the way a planet-

sized alien might imagine the United States. Think of all the individual people in the United States as something like cells in your body. They trade information.

As an entity, it does things. Like, it invades Iraq, it sends this kind of army-like pseudopod out to invade another country. And in doing so, it's responsive to sensory input. It doesn't hit the mountain, it goes around the mountain. It hunts down Saddam Hussein, or whoever.

The United States, as a collective entity, imports goods, exports goods, develops its environment, monitors space for asteroids, speaks collectively as a group. Citizens of the United States trade huge amounts of information with each other. The United States represents itself in certain ways, self-represents. It monitors its own states, it monitors how many people it has, it monitors unemployment rate, all that kind of stuff.

I'm not saying the United States is, in fact, literally phenomenally conscious. Or I think it's possible that it is. The first point that I want to make here is that if you look at what most philosophers of mind say about what makes something a being with mentality and consciousness, and then you just apply those criteria straightforwardly to the case of the United States, it looks like the United States meets those criteria.

Julia: I imagine that you could make this thought experiment even more compelling, to people who don't yet find it compelling, by asking them to imagine a country, maybe the United States, that literally copies the processes that a human brain is going through. Over the course of, say, an hour. But with humans playing the role of neurons and sending signals to each other the way neurons send signals. The same process is happening, the same information being transferred in the same patterns, but by humans in physical space. Or in larger geographic space instead of neurons, but the same pattern.

Eric: Yeah, so Ned Black has an example, something like this. You could imagine that scenario. But the brain has like, 80 billion neurons, right? So it's ... You'd have to take more than any one nation, right? But it's not --

Julia: It's not logically impossible to imagine.

Eric: It would be a lot slower than the brain, realistically. Now, what kinds of intuitions do we have about what would happen in that kind of case?

When Black sets up this kind of case, he doesn't do it actually exactly with neurons, he does it with functional states. But I think it's a similar idea. He invites the reader to think, "Well, it's absurd to think that that entity,

constituted of people, trading information with each other, would have a higher level of conscious experience in addition to the conscious experience of all the individuals constituting it."

If he's right, that ... Well, I think he's right that that's somewhat contrary to common sense. I think it's even more contrary to common sense, it's even a sharper violation of common sense, to say the actual United States, as it exists right now, without further messing around, has a stream of experience too. You could have strengths of violation, and non-violation, of common sense.

Julia: I forget who said this, but there was one attempt to approach this question from a different angle that said, "Okay, imagine that we replace the neurons in your brain, gradually, piece by piece, with these little robots that are programmed to do the same things that neurons do, to take in the same inputs and produce outputs according to the same rules."

Gradually, your neurons get replaced by these robots. Fine. Most people, I think, would still say, "Okay, yeah, I'd still be conscious even though I had robots instead of neurons doing the processing."

Then this person said, "Well, the robots themselves could not possibly be conscious, because if they were, then the whole system would stop being conscious." That doesn't seem very intuitive to me. As long as the robots are doing their job properly, why can't they be conscious without my own consciousness ceasing to exist?

But this is just the US, or China -- the giant, 80 billion person nation -- thought experiment. On a much smaller scale, but it's the same thing.

Eric: Right. Some people think, for some reason, that consciousnesses can't nest in each other. That you couldn't have consciousness at two levels of organization at once, at the lower level and at the higher level at the same time.

That principle's been proffered by a few people. Giulio Tononi has defended it… But I think part of what they want to do is avoid… They see the possible implications of, say, standard theories of consciousness for a group level consciousness of entities like the United States. And they want to avoid that conclusion. So they introduced this, I think, as a means to avoid that conclusion.

Introducing it as a means to avoid that conclusion -- if it really is justified in that way, I don't think that's totally clear how it's justified, but if it's justified because you want to avoid that conclusion -- then what you're doing is, you're

engaging the philosophical message that takes, as a fixed point, “Groups like the United States couldn't be conscious.”

One of the questions I'd ask about that is, "How do you know that?" It's contrary to common sense, but if what we've been saying earlier is correct, then common sense might not be a very good guide to these kinds of issues. So why should we take that particular violation of common sense as an evidential fixed point?

Julia: Right. At the least, it seems pretty likely that we have to choose between counterintuitive conclusions, whether that's “Consciousnesses can't nest” or “A country couldn't be conscious.” It's possible there's a logical loophole that I'm missing or something. In all these cases, it's possible. But this is, I think, a good example of where crazyism seems pretty well-supported.

Eric: Right. If you look at nesting, people who have what I call “anti-nesting principles”… When you push on those principles, they tend to have their own counterintuitive consequences, again, that Block suggested.

For example -- this is really far fetched, but it's a clean, simple example -- if it were possible for there to be very tiny beings who acted out the role of one neuron, and you inhaled one and it became part of your brain, you would lose your consciousness as a result.

That seems unintuitive. Maybe it's true, I'm not sure what role intuition should play in this. Not all the intuitions are on the same side in this issue.

Where another kind of group consciousness, intuitive case, I think is: we can imagine the science fiction case where we were visited by beings who look like woolly mammoths and who behaved in intelligent, linguistic ways. Maybe they were a little bit slower-paced than we are, maybe it takes ten times longer for them to say anything as it takes for us, but that doesn't seem like that big a deal.

It turns out, in this scenario, that their mentality is substantiated by a hundred million insects that they contain in their heads and their hooves. Each insect has a tiny little set of sensory organs and its own insect-like intelligence.

In that case, it might be intuitive to think, "Well, the insects have insect level consciousness.” But also, these beings who -- maybe you can imagine a science fiction story in which you've already established social relationships with them, maybe there's been cross-species marriage -- it would seem highly chauvinistic to say, "No, those beings can't be conscious, because their mentality is

substantiated by the interaction with insects rather than the interaction with... "

Julia: That's just anti-insectism right there!

There is actually another way out of this rock-and-a-hard place dilemma, that I didn't mention. Which is just, you can say, "No, consciousness can only be instantiated on a brain. It can only have biological substrates, and not other substrates."

Which feels unintuitive to me, but not to some people, I think.

Eric: Right. People do say stuff like that, and I guess I was kind of assuming a falsity of that in what I was saying before.

Julia: That does get to the point that what feels like a violation of common sense varies between people.

Eric: You mentioned at the beginning that I've been interested in science fiction. And actually I think one of the wonderful lessons of science fiction is that it's intuitive that consciousness and intelligence could be instantiated in a wide variety of beings.

Once you think about the way science fiction authors have set up mentality, fairly plausibly in a wide range of possible cases, then readers are drawn in to think of these beings as having mentality. If they behave in sufficiently sophisticated ways, and they exist in societies, and they have recognizable interactions, and morality, and cares and things like that.

I think anyone who would insist upon neurons specifically, or something like that, would be violating that aspect of common sense that's so nicely drawn out in the science fiction literature.

Julia: We have a few minutes left, and I think my top choice thread to close on would be: Whether the unreliability of common sense as a guide to these questions means that we ... What should we do about that fact? Does that mean common sense doesn't apply to philosophical reasoning?

That seems too harsh. There are many, many cases in which I think we need to be able to say, "That seems absurd, clearly we must have gone wrong somewhere in our reasoning." Philosophy's just not ... It's never going to be a purely logical deductive enterprise, where you can just prove something the way you would prove it in math. Aren't we just going to have to use common

sense, a lot?

Eric: Yes, I do think we have to use common sense. I think we're stuck with basically three unreliable tools. One is common sense, or culturally given assumptions. Another is empirical methods. The other is appeal to abstract virtues like simplicity.

What I think is the case about the metaphysics of mind, in particular, is that none of these tools is going to give you very solid answers. We kind of have to rely on all of them. There are some things that have basically no scientific merit. No merit in terms of simplicity or elegance. No merit in terms of common sense. And we can discard those, right?

For example, here's a theory. On your 18th birthday, you get an immaterial soul for exactly seventeen seconds. There's no scientific merit for this, it violates common sense, it's completely inelegant.

It's not like all theories are going to be equal. I think we're in a tricky epistemic situation where we have various means of trying to figure these things out, but none of these means are very powerful. That doesn't mean that we are kind of just left completely shrugging our shoulders. Some theories have more plausibility than others, but we left in a position of dubiety, where we can't resolve confidently upon any one theory or even any broad class of theories, like materialism.

Julia: That sounds like a very common sense thing to say. I can get behind that.

Eric: Crazyism is not itself crazy, I think. Perhaps it's bizarre, I'm not even sure about that.

Let me just conclude with one thought about this way of doing metaphysics, as opposed to some other ways of doing metaphysics.

I think most metaphysicians are interested in resolving upon what they see as the one metaphysical truth. Here's materialism, it's right. And here's my version of it, and here's why it's right. Here's transcendental idealism, and here's why this is the correct view.

The way that I am approaching these issues, I think of it as disjunctive. In the sense that disjunction is “this, or that, or that, or that.” I'm more interested in opening possibilities that you might not have thought of or taken seriously before, like that there could be a stream of consciousness in the United States,

than I am in closing the possibilities and resolving upon a single answer.

Once we no longer think of common sense as a decisive criteria, even though it has some value as a criteria, and we start thinking about all the different possibilities that are out there, a variety of bizarre and beautiful possibilities open up. I find that kind of exciting. We lose our moorings a little bit, and the world seems to me, kind of more wonderful and amazing and incomprehensible and beautiful, once you see the weakness of the presuppositions that you might have had, entering into doing philosophy.

Julia: Well said. Let's wrap up this section of the podcast, and we'll move on to the Rationally Speaking pick.

[interlude]

Welcome back. Every episode we invite our guest to introduce the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode. That's a book, or article, or website, or something that has influenced his or her thinking in an interesting way. Eric, what's your pick for today's episode?

Eric: My pick is Borges' “Labyrinths.”

Julia: Excellent, tell us a little bit about that book.

Eric: That was a favorite book of mine as a college student, and still is a favorite. It's a collection of his most philosophically interesting short stories, gathered and translated into English. It's full of ideas about infinitude, and idealism, in the metaphysical sense of idealism, where mentality is fundamental to the universe, full of paradox and weirdness.

Also, for me a little bit of a schooling in how you can write philosophy science fictionally, or speculatively. Or how you can do a speculative fiction philosophically.

Julia: I remember, I think it was in Labyrinths, I was reading a poetic passage about a different civilization that had a totally different ontology. They divided up the world in a totally different way that seemed very arbitrary. Like, there was a whole category of “Things that have 5 legs.” … It was weirder than that, it's hard to be weird on the spot.

Eric: Yes, Borges' text, I'm not sure if that's in Labyrinths or not, but he has this stuff, this wonderful taxonomy of animals, and it's like 14 different categories that make no sense of relationship to each other. One of them is “Things that when

viewed from a distance look like flies," another one is ... This is the taxonomy of animals, animals that belonged to the King... It's so hard to remember, because the categories are so weird.

Julia: So weird and seemingly arbitrary.

First of all, it was sort of whimsical and poetic and absurdist in a sort of pleasing way. But it also made you reflect on the fact that there's a reason ... The way that we categorize the world -- the categories of animals we come up with, or fruits, or vegetables, or people, etc -- could be seen as equally arbitrary for a totally different creature with different needs and ways of interacting with the world. There's a reason that we developed the taxonomies that we use. It was a very nice, poetic way to make that point, I thought.

Eric: Yes, Borges is ... I was talking at the end of the episode about how I think metaphysics can be bizarre and beautiful once you let go of insistence upon common sense. Borges is just an example of someone whose thinking is bizarre and beautiful. It's really, to me, an amazing book, it bends your mind and makes you think about things in new ways. So yeah, I really love that book.

Julia: We'll link to Borges as well as to your blog. And I guess "The craziest metaphysics of mind" would be a good thing to link to, as well, which is that paper that you wrote on crazyism and metaphysics of mind.

Eric: Right, and maybe the USA consciousness paper too, since I talked about that a little bit.

Julia: Great, for sure. Eric, thanks so much for coming back on the show, it's always a pleasure having you.

Eric: Yeah, thanks for having me again.

Julia: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.