Rationally Speaking #229: John Nerst on "Erisology, the study of disagreement"

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the
             borderlands between reason and nonsense, I'm your host Julia Galef, and
             my guest today is John Nerst. John works as a data scientist based in
             Sweden. He blogs at EverythingStudies.com.

             The reason he caught my eye is, John essentially invented a new field
             called "erisology," which doesn't quite exist yet, but I think it absolutely
             could and should. It's the study of disagreement, and that's what we're
             going to talk about today.

             John, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

John: Thank you so much for inviting me. It's a pleasure.

Julia: John, I said you work as a data scientist, but I got the sense from reading
             your website that your background is in philosophy, and you've published
             philosophy papers. What was your actual degree in?

John: I have an engineering degree. It confuses people a little bit, because I did
             write one work in philosophy, but it's not published in any journal or
             anything like that. I don't know, maybe you don't have the equivalent in
             the United States, but at a certain level, when you've studied for a subject
             for certain time, you're supposed to write your first original work, and it
             doesn't have to be published at all, but you have to write an original work.

             I have an engineering education that is rather unusual, because I have
             studied a lot of topics and fields that engineers typically don't study. You
             hear a lot of complaints from some people these days that engineers don't
             learn enough humanities to become well-rounded people, and understand
             people very well. Well, when people make those complaints, they're sort of
             asking for more of me to be created.

Julia: That's nicely put. Is there more structure to the degree than that?

John: Oh, very much so. Yeah, it was started about 20 years ago now. I started it
             when it was only six years since is started. It was a reaction to a perceived
             need for more well-rounded engineers.

             They took a regular engineering education, five years long, and they took
             out everything that wasn't exactly needed. They took out all the math and
             technology that was more than what was needed to be called an engineer.
             That you would still qualify as an engineer, but all the empty space, they
             filled up with courses in history, and philosophy, and economics, and
             economic geography, and economic history, and business, and all that sort
             of thing. We had to read a lot of research, humanities research about

technology and it's impact on society, and what it means, and how it comes about, how scientific knowledge works, how it is produced, all that.

Julia: That's so fascinating.

John: Yeah, it was. It was. I picked it because I found it fascinating. It was a little bit of a risk because it was entirely new. I had no idea what my employment prospects were coming out with this degree, but I've done fairly well for myself.

Julia: Man, I would be so curious to see how differently people with this degree compared to normal engineering degree perform at jobs, and differences in how their employers see them, or what they've achieved in 15 years or something like that. Although, I imagine it would be hopelessly corrupted by selection bias, so I don't know how much we can learn from it.

           Well, I guess with that background, I'm less surprised than I was that you invented an interdisciplinary field. Why don't you tell us, first off, just what the word "erisology" means and where it came from.

John: It's a new field of study that I want to exist. And also [respectable] fields of study, they need to have a Greek name, of course. Eris is the goddess of discord, the Greek goddess of discord, that created, or it started when a disagreement eventually led to the Trojan War. So that's a pretty good name, for me.

Julia: It's great, yeah. And it goes well with the suffix -ology. Kudos on the naming.

John: Thanks. I don't remember exactly how I came up with it. Yeah, and as you said before, it is the study of disagreement. And I wouldn't exactly say that that's a new field -- because a lot of people do research and they write things that is relevant to it. As you know, of course, there's moral foundations theory, and there's a lot of political science about what different ideologies people have, and there's a lot of philosophy about how arguments work.

Julia: Well it seems interdisciplinary in the same way that the field of decision theory, or decision science, is interdisciplinary.

           In that you have psychologists working on the descriptive side of it, "here's how people actually make decisions," and then you have computer scientists or philosophers or economists reasoning about how people "should make" decisions, for some meaning of should.

           I got the sense that erisology was interdisciplinary in a similar way.

John: Yeah. Very much so. That's what I'm thinking. Behavior economics is a
          good example of a similar field that brings together economics and
          psychology, and all these things.

          Erisology, when I'm saying it, I'm thinking of something that takes
          material or insights from many different fields, including philosophy, of
          course. And anthropology, where you can study how differently people see
          things in different cultures. And psychology, of course -- how we work,
          how people work. And economics that studies signaling behavior, which is
          also an important factor.

          And of course cognitive science, that studies how concepts work in our
          head. Because I think that's very important -- how we represent
          information in our heads is relevant for how we interpret information out
          there in the world, and how other people interpret that information
          differently, which is a huge thing for disagreements.

          There are materials from plenty of fields that you can bring together into
          one. I think erisology as a concept should exist as a center of gravity for all
          insights that are relevant for understanding disagreement and how it
          works.

          When I say disagreement, I'm perhaps mostly thinking of online
          disagreement, what happens when people are fighting online, which
          happens all the time.

Julia: I didn't realize that you envisioned that as the center.

John: I think I do, because the vast majority of disagreement that I come across
          is online. I don't really get into fights with people in real life, and I don't
          really see people fighting about things in real life that much.

          But if you go into a comment thread on Reddit or go into Twitter at any
          time, or a forum or anything, people will be disagreeing with each other,
          and they will be misinterpreting each other, and they will misrepresenting
          each other, and all of that.

          And I've been reading comment threads and forum discussions online for
          probably 20 years. I've actually been counting this, and I'm thinking I
          might be up to that famous 10,000 hour mark.

Julia: Oh wow! As an expert in online disagreement in Twitter threads, I'm
          picturing your eyes looking hollow and vacant after your 20 years of
          reading Twitter disagreements, or the equivalent before Twitter.

John: Twitter disagreements, that's the latest evolution, really the most powerful
          stuff. For most of the Internet's young life, it's been forum discussions that

has been the standard format of disagreement. And that's a little bit less virulent than Twitter, it's a little less chaotic.

Julia: Have you developed any theories over the course of your 10,000 hours or so -- about which formats, be it Reddit threads, or Twitter, or Tumblr, or something, Facebook, which formats online are more or less conducive to good disagreements?

John: Yeah. As I was saying, I think Twitter is probably the worst of everything.

Julia: How come? Not why do you think that, but why would that be the case?

John: Because -- you know, as well as me, that it's terrible.

Julia: No comment. I mean, what features of Twitter do you think are causing it to be worse?

John: I think the reason it's worse than forums, is that forums have a set context. In a forum there are regular people. That forum might have a theme, and there's certain etiquette in this forum, or we have a better understanding of what the context is, in a forum.

           The thing with Twitter is that there's almost no separation into different contexts. You can just see something, at any time something can pop in to your field of vision, that comes from, what I would call in the idea space, very, very distant context.

           People who believe very, very different things than you, they might be in theory in the concept space very, very far away -- but on Twitter that sort of distance doesn't exist at all. So all the walls between different contexts are broken down, so you can see this fragment of alien thoughts that really might annoy you.

Julia: The interesting thing about that factor you've pointed to is that it would be present even if everyone was perfectly good-natured and emotionally charitable, and not looking for outrage or looking to criticize, or assuming the worst about people. It's almost a pessimistic model -- in that even if everyone were angels, we would still have this cognitive problem of misinterpreting or misunderstanding what people mean, because of lack of context.

John: If we were perfect angels, it would play out differently than it does, because we would probably be confused, more than we are angry.

Julia: That's a good way to put it.

John: And I think in most cases when we are angry, we probably could be confused. But, I mean, we probably should be confused more than we should be angry.

Julia: There's this interesting thing people do -- when I say interesting, it's not really, it's annoying -- where they say they're confused, or they say, "I don't understand why you think such and such." But they aren't actually expressing confusion, they're expressing... it's performative confusion. Where they're like, when they say, "I don't understand," they mean, "I think it's terrible that you think that, and I would never think that. It's so far from how I think."

John: Yeah. That's the type of rhetoric or the style. Look, isn't it funny how those people do that over there, it's interesting that all the people who are saying this, they're also saying-

Julia: "Amusing. It's amusing." There's a lot of performative amusement as well, online.

          What do you think are people's biggest misconceptions about disagreement? Either descriptively, what's actually happening when a disagreement occurs -- or normatively, about how one "should" approach a disagreement. People might have, in your view, mistaken beliefs about the best way to approach a disagreement?

John: The second one is more tricky because people want different things out of the process of disagreement.

Julia: Go on.

John: When you're disagreeing with somebody, you don't necessarily want to do something that I would consider to be constructive, like effectively communicating an idea, or engaging in a mutual process of evaluating an idea or a set of ideas together, which would allow you the function of a public debate.

          Often you just want to slam the enemy, you want to get a good zinger in there, or you want to impress your friends. Or maybe you just want to vent, you're having a bad day. Or you want to build bonds with the other people who are watching the disagreement, and you want to show that you're on their side, or something like that.

          I think we're making a mistake if we're assuming that everyone wants to disagree in way that results in the effective evaluation of ideas.

          What was the first part of the question?

Julia: I was asking about misunderstandings that you think people have about disagreement. One misunderstanding could be that people overestimate how often it's the case that a disagreement is actually about ideas, and not about signaling or beating down the other side, or something like that.

But I'm a little more interested in, when there are two people who at least consciously think they are trying to disagree about ideas, what do you think they do wrong?

John: One thing that people tend to do wrong, I think, is to assume that a disagreement means that one of the parties is wrong. Somebody is right and somebody is wrong, and that's what we're trying to find out. I think that's rarely the case.

I mean, of course, people disagree about things that have right and wrong answers like math theorems or what's the capital of Spain, which have these ... these questions have real answers. But those aren't really interesting disagreements. They don't cause any sort of chaos, they don't erode the public's fear or damages the public debate or anything like that. They're very simple. We don't need an elaborate theoretical construction to deal with those.

In most cases what we're dealing with when we're dealing with a disagreement, people are disagreeing because they each have adopted a very low resolution belief, like something very abstract and general. If somebody believes "the capitalist class is exploiting the workers" and the other person thinks "we must let entrepreneurs create wealth for all of us," or something like that. Those are very, very abstract beliefs. They don't really get proved or disproved, because none of them map onto reality in any simple way, in a straightforward way. They're more stories than they are beliefs.

And I think many of the things that people disagree about in the most complicated ways, they are beliefs more of this kind. Very low resolution, very abstracted, more story-like than fact-like. So that's a big misunderstanding, I think.

When you get beliefs like that, they're not true or false -- they are typically kind of true, or kind of valid. True or false doesn't even apply to them exactly. So we need to understand that proving that you yourself are correct, doesn't mean that the other person is wrong, and vice versa.

Julia: There's this cartoon that sometimes gets shared on Facebook, of two people pointing at a symbol scratched into the ground, and one person looking at it from one angle says, "It's a six," and the other person looking at it from the other angle says, "No, it's a nine." And the point of the

cartoon was they can both be right. I'm sure it was said more catchily in the cartoon.

But then there was an updated version of that cartoon that got shared more widely, at least in my corner of Facebook, that added another caption, saying, "No, actually they both can't be right, because there is a truth of the matter about what the original artist intended when he drew that symbol."

Like, which way was he standing when he drew it? Was he standing such that it was a six, or a nine? Don't try to create false agreement, when there actually is a truth about who's right and who's wrong.

John: That's actually quite interesting. I haven't heard that before. It's interesting because it does this thing that's kind of problematic with analogies, it takes features that don't really transfer to the thing the analogy is trying to represent. For instance, nobody created reality, and means something with it. And they were disagreeing about some pretty basic fact.

Julia: Yeah. It's true, although ... Sorry, go on.

John: The real world is much more complicated than that, and we're not trying to find one single fact, like is this a six or a nine? We're trying to compress reality, and represent it in a much smaller piece of information than actual reality. And we're doing that in different ways. And we're trying to discuss which one of these different compressions of reality is more valid, and it's an extremely hard question.

Julia: Yeah. One view that I lean towards on my more optimistic days is that you could take ... I completely agree with you, and I think it's a good and under appreciated point, that disagreements are often about these low-resolution, abstract narratives, like "capitalism exploits workers," and "it's important to let entrepreneurs create wealth for us," and that it almost doesn't even make sense to talk about whether they're true or false, because they're not detailed enough to have truth value. I agree with that. That's a great point.

But on my more optimistic days, I think that if you actually had the time and good faith willingness to put in the effort, you could hammer out specifically, like:

"Well, when I say that capitalism exploits the workers, here are the more specific empirical claims that I'm making, and/or moral claims that I'm making, we can factor out the two from each other." And we can talk about the different components of my belief, which maybe I've never really

consciously formulated before, but they're in there in the background, causing me to feel the statement "capitalism exploits workers" is true.

And if we really put in the effort, we can figure out which parts of those views we agree and disagree about. And maybe some of it will boil down to empirical questions that we can't really answer definitively and we have definite intuitions about, and maybe we'll end up having some more disagreements, but we could do that if we really tried. It's just that when we talk online we rarely do.

How much do you agree with that optimistic view?

John: I think we definitely could, if we really tried to, hammer down the details, as you said. What's interesting to me is that while I'm interested in how this all feels from the inside out, feels in our heads.

Julia: What do you mean?

John: Let's describe it this way. I mean, if particle physics is smashing particles together until they break so easy what they're made of, a disagreement is a way to smash minds together, until they break and see what they're made of. Part of the reason I'm interested in disagreement is because it tells us things about how minds work.

Yes we could break down our high level, low resolution beliefs into more specific beliefs and debate them. Absolutely, we could and we should do that. But, I don't think that is how our beliefs feel like in our heads. I don't think that's the way we have beliefs, always. And you said that, you don't believe that anybody necessarily has thought about their beliefs that way. They haven't thought about them in that great of detail.

And that's interesting to me that we tend to have our beliefs, we keep them in our heads in not very specified forms. And that is the level on which they differ. Do you understand what I mean?

I mean we can have beliefs that almost, if you try to specify them in great detail, they might look the same. But if we abstract them in a different way, add a little different connotations on them, they will seem like they are different and we disagree about it, but we don't necessarily disagree.

I had this friend when I was a student. He was a gender studies student, and we often discussed the large-scale patterns in society between the sexes. And the more we spoke -- I mean, I'm not a great fan of that whole theoretical construction, and he was, and the more we were talking about this, the more we realized that when we pointed to individual facts about almost anything, we didn't really disagree that much at all.

We believed almost, not exactly, but almost, that the same things were true. But in the abstract, when we take all these individual beliefs and turn them into high level beliefs, they look very differently. And I think that happens a lot.

Julia: This feels like it might be a way to describe what I would have gone on to call the "pessimistic," what I believe about disagreement on the pessimistic days. Which is that you could hammer out disagreements on those specific components about capitalism and the economy, and wages and so on, and even if you could hammer out that disagreement, it still wouldn't feel like you had actually resolved anything.

John: You mean, you think it wouldn't resolve anything?

Julia: Well, it still wouldn't feel like you had done any useful work on the original disagreement that you cared about... I think I'm saying what you were just saying, that you can talk about these specific components and these specific facts, and still feel like there exists an important disagreement between the two of you that you don't know how to adjudicate.

And I don't know, maybe some people wouldn't call that pessimistic. But I feel an urge to be able to get to the bottom of these things, and so that feels like a pessimistic state of affairs to me.

Yeah, I mean, do you think the takeaway -- assuming that's the case, that your experience with your gender studies friend is common? Do you think the takeaway is that you both just have different emotional associations with these concepts, and that's why the disagreement still feels like it persists, despite agreements on the facts? Or do you think that there is a real disagreement there, that you just can't quite get a handle on?

John: That's a hard question. I mean there are factors that cause you to generalize patterns in different ways, I think. Your own experiences, whatever inborn temperament we may have for certain cognitive styles, or what other theoretical frameworks you've learned before, and of course your own emotional reactions to things.

What I think one should do, and what I try to do, is to learn how to look at things in different ways. There is this model here, and it generalizes reality in this way, or compresses reality in this way; and there's this other model that focuses on getting these very different features right. And when you're trying to get different features and describe them accurately, you're going to use a different set of rules, and abstract them in a different way.

There are many kinds of different belief systems that capture different parts of reality or the human experience, not as well. Some belief systems, they capture some things well and not others, and for other belief systems

it's the other way around. So that's why you need to collect so many of them. You really should not have just one.

I think it reminds me of this quote, I think it was Robin Hanson that said it, "Philosophy is mostly useful as a defense against other philosophy's."

Julia: Doesn't that suggest that the ideal situation is to never study philosophy and then you won't need a defense?

John: Oh, no, no. There is this other quote also. I think it's about economists from the beginning, so it applies to philosophy, which is that, "If you think you don't have beliefs about economics, you just have the beliefs of some bad economists."

That's a paraphrase. But everybody has philosophical beliefs, and if you don't understand the nature of philosophical beliefs or learn about other philosophical beliefs, you're not going to know what they are. And you're going to be their prisoner, more or less.

That's why I want things like anthropology to be part of learning about erisology, because you learn how to think about things in a very different way, because different cultures think about things in different ways.

Julia: Do you have any examples of new frameworks, new ways of looking at things, that you consciously adopted? That ended up being valuable to you, that you didn't expect?

John: Consciously adopted-

Julia: I just mean that you didn't start out with. You had to seek out and try on.

John: Well, maybe between 10 and 15 years ago, I was really hostile to what people carelessly called postmodernism, this idea that there's no definite knowledge and there's no definite meaning to words or anything like that.

I learned about it from people who were criticizing it, and got pretty upset about it, as well as many of us do. ... It was a part of my education to read texts by people who were of this persuasion, who had this sort of attitude to life, or to science, and knowledge, and all that.

It was annoying at times, because people had very different assumptions about what was important, what was interesting, and they did not acknowledge that there was a conflict here. That, okay, I'm making these certain assumptions and I'm ignoring these other things here. Often people just don't say anything like that, and you just read it and you're supposed to just follow them along on the little journey they're going on.

It's very frustrating to read something when you don't have the same background assumptions or preoccupations as the author. You just want to start arguing against him, like every other sentence. Well no, that doesn't follow from that? Why do you care about that, that was not the takeaway from the last paragraph? It's exhausting.

Julia: What's an example of an author in this camp of "postmodernists"?

John: It's a carelessly used word. We're reading texts by people like, Andrew Pickering, and Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sharon Traweek. They're not super famous outside of science of technology, and science and technology studies fields. They typically described things like particle physics as an "ideology" --

Julia: What? Now I'm raring to argue.

John: Yeah. It's very annoying to read somebody who does that when they don't even recognize that this is a very particular perspective.

My professor, he picked out people who wrote from a perspective called "methodological relativism," which means that when we describe historically why a particular idea became dominant in a scientific field – like, why do people believe in relativity, or why did they believe in the germ theory of disease, or whatever -- we're not supposed to make any sort of reference to the fact that it was correct.

It was supposed to be described as purely a social process, who convinced who. [Which] sort of thing is convincing, and for what reason, and all that.

Julia: ... I'm so unhappy right now.

John: It's just so annoying to read about --

Julia: But what did you get out of it? There's gotta be a "but" coming here.

John: Yeah. There is a "but" coming.

I was annoyed by this, because I took it as an attack on science and objectivity and everything one holds dear. But there was something in this that is correct, and something about it that gives you important insights. And I have adopted and understood some of the philosophy called post-modernism which I think is largely correct, namely that we don't have the absolute knowledge that the earlier modernists, like the logical positivists, believe that you could get through a systematic study of science...

The definitions of words as I've talked about many, many times, they're slippery, there aren't objectively correct definitions of words in a

metaphysical sense, in the way that philosophers have seemingly believed ever since Plato or before-

Julia: Didn't the logical positivists also say that in a much clearer and straightforward way?

John: Maybe they did.

Julia: Oh okay. Well okay. Then a different way to ask my question is, as you were saying the "postmodernists" that you read, they were speaking from within this whole world view, and they weren't trying or able to step outside of it and say, "Here are the assumptions were making. Here is the framework we're using. It's one possible framework, et cetera." And that framework was frustrating for someone who was not ... for whom that wasn't a natural way to think. As you're communicating what you got out of it to me, I'm just wondering, could you have gotten it much more easily from someone who thinks the way you do, who just says, "Hey, here's the value of science, and reason, and truth, and objectivity, here are exceptions to the rule." And you could have gotten all that same insight without all the frustrating detours into pos-modernism?

John: Oh absolutely.

Julia: Oh.

John: That's absolutely true. That's part of what I want to do. I've been Googling things like, "Postmodernism for materialists."

Julia: Oh interesting.

John: And I was arguing with my professor, that I found it really frustrating that these thinkers, these writers, they did not put their theories on a solid metaphysical ground, they didn't explain how it related to physical reality and all that. How do you get this [in a] physical universe?

          And he said, "Well it's not so important. Here in history we're more interested in the studying power than studying metaphysics." That's something I didn't like. I'm more of a philosopher than a historian that way.

Julia: So you wanna be a translator?

John: Yes.

Julia: You want to be a guide between worlds.

John: Yes. That is something we need. That sort of material doesn't exist, not as much as it should because there are certain shortcomings in how science works. I mean, it could work better. The knowledge production, knowledge distribution, and idea evaluation and all that. And the choices scientists make when they study certain things, especially in the humanities or the social sciences -- less so in the physical sciences, but still there too. They make certain choices, and some theories are adopted and others are forgotten or they're rejected, and as I said before, many scientific ideas are not so extremely detailed that they can be considered completely true or completely false because people make generalizations in the scientific world as well.

All these phenomena, they can be studied as sociological phenomena, that is true, that is a valid approach, I think so. But in order to absorb those insights better, you need to know that people aren't trying to tear down science and replace it with revelation or personal intuition, or whatever it is. It's really important to understand that these are corrections to earlier overexuberance.

I wrote in one of my pieces, I think, that we should understand philosophical arguments called postmodernism as a reaction to the over promise of the earlier modernists. But I was born in 1983, and that's four years after the book that's called The Postmodern Condition was published. I have grown up in "the postmodern era," so the arguments that they were trying to correct against, I don't even know them. I have not grown up in a world where that was assumed, so it had to be criticized.

Julia: Yeah. As you've been talking, and also as I read your blog, I've been trying to think about good principles to have in mind that might help prevent some of the more frustrating failure modes of disagreements -- and it seems like one theme that's emerging is [the importance of] understanding what the other person is arguing against, or what they feel needs correcting.

To give you an example, just as I was walking to the studio to tape this episode, I was on my phone on Twitter, and I was having this friendly disagreement with Russ Roberts who does EconTalk, about -- it started out as a disagreement over whether it would be useful to run a study, just a long-term survey on people who were unsure about whether they wanted to have kids, and then look at 20 years later, the people who had kids, and the people who didn't, ask them about their life satisfaction, whether they regret their choice.

Oh, and I also said that ahead of time you should ask them a bunch of questions like, do you enjoy playing with kids? Are you satisfied with your life now? Do you feel enthusiastic about having kids? Like what are your

main reasons for hesitation?" And then 20 years later you could look at sort of what factors tend to predict being happy with their ultimate choice.

Anyway, so Russ objected to this, saying, "You can't learn anything from data, you need to just take the leap." I think he even said, "Reading fiction like Jane Austen would be more useful than running a study like this." Which seemed completely absurd to me.

John: You're friends with this person?

Julia: No, no, he runs EconTalk, I love following him on Twitter. He has a great podcast.

No, no, no, where I was going with this -- and I do think we made progress in our disagreement. The ultimate result of the conversation was we actually agree quite significantly. That, yes collecting information about how people feel about how their choices turned out, that is useful.

But Russ was much more concerned than I was about people over-weighting such evidence, especially if it's called "scientific evidence," or "the results of a Study." And he was more concerned than I was about people failing to mentally correct for things like, I don't know, selection bias, or confirmation bias, or all the things that can make studies less than perfect evidence.

And so it's possible that he overstated his position because he was reacting against what he thought my position was -- which was that you run a study, and now you know the answer to whether you should have kids or not. Which was never my position, but maybe it is a lot of people's position.

And so, yeah, maybe the takeaway from that and some of the examples you have been giving, is that when someone's making an argument, it's hard to interpret that argument without knowing what it's an argument against.

John: Yeah. Precisely. I think that's a great example of precisely this thing.

Yeah, the thing is, people will assume all kinds of things that you're not actually saying because we cannot communicate our full position when we're trying to say something. The other person just fills in the blanks.

And what's important in this little discussion that you were talking about, and the same thing I see all the time, is that we have these certain assumptions about what everybody else believes. Like "Everyone in society thinks that experience is the only thing that counts and data doesn't. Everybody just ignores scientific studies." And then the other person says, "Everybody just takes them far too seriously"-

Julia: Right. Yeah, exactly.

John: Yeah. And what you believe is the case depends, of course, a lot on what you see around you, what environment you're in, online, or in real life, or that.

There are things tend not to be explicit. We tend not to say, "Oh, everybody thinks this. So therefore, I'm arguing this." This is unstated, this is implicit usually.

There are many moving parts here, because people have different ideas of what the background assumptions are. And then the relationship the other person has to the background assumption. We might have different ideas about what society thinks, and we have different ideas what the other person thinks, and how they relate to what society thinks, and why they got that image.

They may have gotten their image by misinterpreting people. I might go around and misinterpret what everyone says, so I think everybody believes something that they don't believe.

There are so many moving parts in this.

Julia: Yeah. Is this related to the concept you wrote a post about, called "Zebras," where the figure-ground relation can shift?

John: It wasn't called Zebras. It was called The Signal and the Corrective, and it was about correctives like this. I used the example of the zebra, because you can call a zebra either a white horse with black stripes or a black horse with white stripes, and it's sort of silly because it's the same thing.

But when we have more complicated ideas – like, "Yes, we should trust science, but it also has these imperfections." Or someone else can think, "Well science is mostly useless, and we should rely on intuition and our own experiences, but I guess it can be useful sometimes."

If they're trying to make some sort of practical decision about should we trust this particular study, and do this particular thing, they might some down very close to each other. They might agree because they're both moderates in a way. They both agree that both perspectives have some value.

And then most people are like that. I mean, I don't think most people are these ideological zealots that just believe one thing and one thing only. I think those are over represented among the people who shout the most on social media, but I don't think most people are like that.

I think it matters a lot which order you believe things in.

Julia: Order in terms of time, like chronological? Or importance?

John: No. I mean that something is the basic thing, and then there's the other thing that corrects it in the opposite direction.

Julia: Right. Yeah, yeah.

John: You throw a ball farther away and then it rolls back, or you throw a ball a little way, and then it continues to roll forward like that

Yeah, the thing about having a signal and a corrective is -- the signal and corrective is a play on "signal and noise," by the way. When you have a signal and a corrective, you tend to first be concerned that your signal is respected. I mean, your basic belief is something that needs to be respected. Once you know that the other person isn't threatening that -- you're not against science, or you're not against personal experience, fundamentally -- then I will be prepared to show you that I kind of, sort of agree with you, in that my very basic first order approximation is not fully correct.

Julia: Right. Yeah.

John: It requires that the fundamental belief is acknowledged as legitimate first.

Julia: Yeah. I think that's actually a perfect description of what I think was happening with me and Russ -- in that I really needed him to acknowledge that doing the kind of survey I described was better than zero evidence.

That seemed like a very fundamental point that I needed acknowledged. And he did acknowledge that, but his sticking point was he needed me to recognize that people over-weight data, and data is not conclusive, and there are a ton of ways that it can go wrong or not be relevant to your decision.

Which of course, I believe. It's just more important to me that we first acknowledge that data is more than zero evidence. Anyway.

John: I think our social senses play a big part here. We want to know if this person is an enemy or not.

Julia: Although it's interesting -- I think of Russ as very aligned with me, but I guess as soon as he said a thing about survey data that seemed wrong to me, it felt like he was on the opposite side of some very important argument. Which, anyway.

John: Yeah. Yeah. Because it changes the content and the contest of the conversation. I mean, if we're on the same team, then okay, we can talk about this a little bit more relaxed.

Julia: Yeah.

John: But if you're on the fundamentally opposite team to me, then I need to be on my guard, I need to defend myself. You know, don't give an inch.

Julia: A topic that sounds like it might be related to this, but either way -- I wanted to make sure to bring up as some point in this conversation is decoupling. This is something I wish was more widely known because it seems really relevant to understanding disagreements, and you've written a fair bit about it.

            Can you explain what decoupling is, and how it relates to having good arguments?

John: Yeah, it's a concept from psychology, and I think I got it from a psychologist called Keith Stanovich, who's done a lot of research into rationality, thinking. I'm not sure though that he would agree with my elaboration on this concept, because I've been using it fairly liberally, and I sort of developed my own idea about what it means.

            But in the original version, I think he means that in order to think in a sort of abstract hypothetical way like in logic, you'll need to abstract away, and get rid of all the real life context that might help you understand a question. Like if you give a hypothetical, and you're like, "If you robbed a bank --" and then you object, "But I would never rob a bank, I'm a moral person. I wouldn't do that." Then you don't understand what a hypothetical question is.

            He talks about cognitive decoupling as removing all the possibly relevant context for a question, and just thinking about it given the stated rules in the problem, or everything that is relevant is present here. It's like a mathematical problem. Everything that's relevant is stated, and you only use the information that is in the problem.

            And this is something that people are unequally good at. Some people do it very easily, and other people don't. And that's what he calls cognitive decoupling.

            I use this particular model to analyze the fight between Sam Harris and Ezra Klein about a year ago. Or was it a year ago now? Yeah, it was a year ago.

Julia: About Charles Murray?

John: Yeah. I don't know if ... I assume not everybody listening here knows about this story.

Sam Harris had the political scientist Charles Murray on his podcast, after he had been... I don't know if he was assaulted, but something like that, when he was going to give a talk at a university. And he's controversial because, among many other things, he believes, and has said, as far as I understand it, that there is probably a genetic component in the difference in IQ scores between black and white Americans. This is very controversial, obviously.

And Harris had him on his podcast to support him when he had been through this incident at the university. And Ezra Klein wrote, I think, I don't know if it was an article right away, but he wrote a lot of things criticizing him at his publication Vox, where he was an editor. He published another article that was fairly critical of them -- according to Harris, was really beyond the pale, to write what they had written.

Anyway, they had this fight, and they were on this podcast together when they were talking about this.

And I used this idea of cognitive decoupling to describe their different ideas, with which they approached the central question. Because what they were disagreeing about, it seemed to me, was: When you ask this scientific question -- what is the cause for this gap in IQ scores that they were discussing -- what factors do we bring in? What factors are relevant for examining this question, and discussing it, and trying to figure out what the truth is?

I don't know if you listened to their podcast when they're talking, but they spoke for two hours. Argued, more. A lot of it, as far as I remember -- I listened to it twice, but it was a year ago now -- is simply disagreeing about what things are relevant or not.

Julia: Was it disagreeing about what things are relevant to the empirical question about the IQ gap? Or was it disagreeing about, morally, which things ... I could imagine someone saying, "It's irrelevant whether there is or isn't an IQ gap, that's not even the right question to ask. The right question to ask is, should we be talking about this? And I think the answer is 'no,' for reasons, X, Y and Z."

That's different from saying "There is no IQ gap because reasons X, Y and Z."

John: I think asking that question in the first place is sort of an exercise in decoupling because you're separating those two questions.

Julia: I can't get out of my decoupling mindset, I guess?

John: No, but this is very interesting in terms of how you analyze this question, either from a scientific perspective, "Is this true or not?" or from this social perspective, "You see what sort of role has this issue or this belief played in history. What consequences can it have? What implications does it have? What are the reasons people believed it in the past?"

         That's the sort of thing that Klein discussed as very highly relevant as to why it was pushed in the first place. Harris was disagreeing about that.

Julia: I mean, I feel like I also care about the history of this discussion, and the what it means to raise these questions, and so on.

John: [But as a] separate question, and you treated it as a separate question.

Julia: I do, yeah. Well then I guess my ... I hope this question doesn't sound vain or self-congratulatory, or anything, but then isn't decoupling just strictly better than not decoupling?

         Because you can still talk about both questions, you're just talking about them separately. Or is that just a very decouplingist thing to say?

John: I assume it is. I think that if I were to say what Ezra Klein would say, is that people use, "No, no, that is not relevant," as an excuse to not have to talk about uncomfortable things. I think he believed that both Harris or Murray said what they said partly because of their own beliefs and their own identity, their own personal experiences. They didn't appreciate the importance and the impact this issue would have on other people.

         I would say that I think he would argue that you cannot separate this, because in real life they are not separate. And you can't just wish away consequences, and you can't wish away historical factors. Because they're there, and discussing things as if those things didn't matter, would be irresponsible.

Julia: Okay.

John: I think that would be the argument. Now... I'm also very decoupling. I wanna separate things -- this isn't exactly the same as that. These are two separate things.

         I do that all the time. But I do my best to understand why somebody would think that that's a cop-out, that that's a way to get away from the [issues].

Julia: Okay, here's another proposal -- maybe the ideal is to be good at decoupling *in your own head*. And if you are good at decoupling in your

own head, and you decide that, thinking about what it implies to people, or the harm that it can cause to even have the discussion about the factual question, is great enough that it's not worth having the discussion -- then you just say that. Like, "This discussion is really not worth the harm it's gonna cause. That's my position."

Then you don't actually have the two conversations. You just recognize that there are two conversations, and you decide not to have one.

John: We run into a rhetorical difficulty here, because if you're being up front with the fact that you think that it's irresponsible to have this discussion in the first place-

Julia: **whimpers** ... I'm as unhappy as I was during our post-modernism conversation, now.

John: If you're being clear with that fact that you think that something should not be said because it's irresponsible, you're kind of admitting that it's not obvious that it's false.

Julia: I see.

John: You understand what I mean?

Julia: Yeah. I do.

John: If you say that, "Well, we shouldn't do this because it's dangerous." You open yourself up to this thing, "Oh, but it's true?"

Julia: You wouldn't say that if you thought it was false. Yeah.

John: Yeah. You wouldn't focus on that if you didn't think that it was true.

Julia: Yeah. Yeah. Oh man. Yeah.

John: So you can't make that explicit. That's a big theme from that particular discussion, is that being open about such reasons, it doesn't work.

Julia: Yeah.

John: I've been thinking about that particular thing a lot. And it's impossible to discuss "dangerous ideas" in a way, because my approach to anything is to just pick it apart, and make everything as explicit as possible, and you can't do that with a thing like that.

Julia: All right. Well, shifting topics to something-

John: Sorry to make you depressed.

Julia: I've pulled out enough hair in the last hour, I have to stop, or I'll go bald.

John: I really don't think that this is all terrible, or the discourse will never work. But we need to know why.

Julia: No, I don't either. Yeah.

John: We need to know why.

Julia: Yeah. One last question I wanted to ask before we start wrapping up is -- suppose that some generous funder offered you one million dollars to fund research into erisology topics, and asked you what question or questions would you want to study, what would you pick?

John: Research? Original research...

Julia: I mean, you don't have to have, like, a research plan on the spot. But what questions are you curious about, that you wish you understood better? Or that you wish you had more data on, or something?

John: Yeah. Yeah. I've been very particular about not calling erisology the "science" of disagreement because I'm unsure how useful scientific methods are.

            Interesting, because that ties back to your discussion [with Russ], because I think it's mostly [about] comparing and analyzing it in sort of a philosophical way. And philosophers don't really do research in an empirical way. And I very very much respect empiricism, and the nitty-grittiness of it, but I'm not very good at it. I'm a "castles in the sky" kind of guy. So I haven't been thinking, "Oh, I want to do this experiment," maybe with a few exceptions.

            I'm often very disappointed in how surveys are done, and the sort of questions that they have. Because as I said before, our beliefs are often very low-res, and survey questions are often extremely low-res. It's often the fact that I'm thinking, "What does this even mean?"

            You can answer survey questions very well if the abstraction they make matches your own abstraction, you can answer them pretty well. But if they make abstractions that are just across your own, and don't match them, then they just don't make any sense to you...

            I would like to work on ways to improve how surveys work. Write questions in such a way that you will make it possible for people with different sort of internal abstractions to answer them. And maybe write,

"Oh this question does not match the structure of my head, it doesn't fit into anything where I can produce a yes or no answer." Because yeah, you can say if you agree or disagree with an issue, and with a question or a statement, or anything like that -- and sometimes when you do political quizzes, you can also answer, "I think this is very important, or this is not important." That's also a big dimension that people have been ignoring.

I miss an option that says, "This question does not make sense to me."

Julia: That would be interesting, to see how much the distribution of responses change when that option is added. It might be a lot.

John: Yeah.

Julia: I know that often on surveys, even just about factual questions, when you add the option, "I don't know," a ton of people answer that, and it makes you realize that maybe the results we got when we didn't have that option were meaningless.

John: Yeah. They are. I usually say that "it depends" is the answer to almost everything.

I was annoyed about that because at my old workplace, we did a lot of surveys, and we wrote reports based on what came out, and I often complained about the questions. And my boss Marlon told me, "Well you're not the target audience." Well, maybe I'd like to research methods to develop surveys that would have me as the target audience.

Julia: Nice. I would also be interested in those surveys. I feel like they would ... I've nitpicked survey questions often enough that I feel like I might qualify as being in that target audience.

John: Yeah. Because we define people based on if they answer yes or no to certain questions, but I think we should also define people in terms of what questions make sense to them.

Julia: Right. Yeah. Well John, before I let you go, at the end of each episode, I like to ask my guest to nominate a book, or article, or some other resource. And I think for you, the question I'd like to ask is, is there a book or other resource that you think is either a good exploration of some erisology related question, or makes a contribution in some way to the new field of erisology?

John: Yeah, yeah. There is. By the way, there are many books that are important, but one in particular is one that almost ... it ignited my love for picking apart very complicated controversies into tiny, tiny parts, and looking at them from 100 perspectives.

This is a book called *Defenders of the Truth, the Sociobiology Debate*, by a sociologist of science, or I should say historian of science anyway, called Ullica Segerstrale. I think she's in the University of Illinois or something like that. She's a sociologist of science, and she wrote this book analyzing in excruciating detail the controversy around E.R. Wilson's Sociobiology in the 70s.

Sociobiology was this pioneering work that looked at animal behavior as biological adaptions. And it had parts, it had a starting chapter and a closing chapter that was about humans, and how our behavior also could be seen as adaptations. There was this massive controversy around this.

Of course this is a controversial topic still, but then it was also massively controversial, and there were protests, and there were academic criticisms, and all of that. Lots of people involved.

She describes in detail what different beliefs about science, about society, about the nature of truth, and the responsibilities of researchers, and everything like that, caused these people in the controversy, mostly academics, to disagree so much. I mean I read it 10 years ago, but I should really read it again, because I think it was fantastic. It's really not that well known. I never seen anyone mention it.

Julia: Yeah. That's fantastic. I'm so excited to read that, at the very least as balm for my tortured soul after our many threads about the slipperiness about disagreements and postmodernism. Yeah, that sounds great. I'm gonna go download it right away. Remind me again the title of the book.

John: Defenders of the Truth-

Julia: Great, yes.

John: And it's called the Sociobiology Debate. It's a long title.

Julia: Okay, great. We'll link to Defenders of the Truth, as well as to your excellent website, EverythingStudies.com, which has a bunch of posts on erisology as well as some other interesting topics, highly recommended. Oh, I also think everyone should follow you on Twitter. It's EveryTStudies ... What's the Twitter handle?

John: EveryTStudies. I didn't realize I would have to say it when I ... it's basically Everything Studies, but it's too long, so it's just Every Studies with T in the middle.

Julia: Got it. Okay. Hopefully they can remember that. Well John, thank you so much for coming on the show, this was really enjoyable, and enlightening for me.

John: I'm sorry. I'm sorry I caused you so much anguish, but it looks like you had quite a good time.

Julia: I'll unknot myself gradually over the course of the day. Cool. Well, until next time.

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