

Rationally Speaking #178: Tim Urban on "Trying to live well, as semi-rational animals"

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and I am delighted to introduce today's guest, Tim Urban.

Tim is the author of the long-form, stick-figure illustrated blog, "Wait but Why," that covers life, the universe, and everything. Tim's posts range from the future of artificial intelligence, to how to choose a life partner, to philosophy of personal identity, happiness, and rationality. It's a huge spectrum, and I'm a big fan. Tim, welcome to the show.

Tim Urban: Thank you, Julia. Thanks for having me.

Julia Galef: Before we jump into the wide range of topics that I am excited to talk to you about, I just want to embarrass you briefly and talk about something I love about "Wait but Why," which is: You manage to simultaneously accomplish both rigor and soulfulness.

You're a very analytical blog. Each article is delving into this rigorous model of how we make decisions, or how we should make decisions. Or how some phenomenon in the world works. You break it down into this analytical model.

But at the same time, you don't lose sight of what it feels like to be a human in those situations, faced with those choices, and what makes the thing you are talking about painful or beautiful or sad. It's really lovely. I'd say most of the analytical bloggers or scholars, they just have this zoomed-out, outside view that can be kind of clinical. There's nothing wrong with that, it's just their project. But it's really nice that you manage to hit both of those notes at once.

Tim Urban: Thank you so much. I mean, I try to do that because I just feel like humans -- we can probably get more into this -- I just feel like we all have two things going on in our head. We are perfect, rational creatures. Then, we are perfectly irrational animals.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: I, as the writer, am both of those things. I know the readers are both of those things. I feel like zig-zagging back and forth between acknowledging both sides of those things, and acknowledging that the animal is there while you're trying to do a perfect, rational breakdown.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: To me, it's a fundamental fact that cannot be escaped that the irrational animal is always there, always with us. To me, they have to go hand in hand if you're going to really wrap your head around a full issue.

Julia Galef: Yeah. That tension between the rational -- what I believe I *should* do, or how I *should* feel -- versus how I actually feel, or what I'm actually motivated to do, is this common theme that I noticed in a lot of your posts.

One of your cornerstone posts, and your wildly popular TED Talk, is about procrastination in the face of your conscious knowledge that what you're doing is counterproductive or irrational. Then, you have posts about how we shouldn't care about social approval, yet we do. Posts about how if you really examine your life, your conscious priorities often don't match up with how you're actually allocating your time, your revealed priorities.

Tim Urban: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I would say, actually, I didn't realize that was a theme until ... It wasn't intentionally a theme. I didn't go into this saying, "I'm going to talk about that concept from many different angles".

What happened was I would just write about things I thought mattered. And I would spend a long time thinking and thinking, trying to get to the bottom of what I think goes on in people's heads. I ended up in the same place again and again and again. Then, thinking about my own life and my own struggles and the struggles of people I know... It's all this same issue, including even thinking about the big struggles of the world. The major problems we have in the world.

To me, it's all explained by the fact that there's this rational consciousness was turned on and born and looked around and said, "Shit, I'm in an animal."

Julia Galef: I'm trapped in meat.

Tim Urban: Yeah.

Julia Galef: A meat body.

Tim Urban: "Oh, I'm in an animal that has all the things that suck about animals. That's what I am." He's trying to somehow get control of things inside of this primitive animal. It's not easy. And I just think it's hard for to think of almost anything bad about my life, about my friend's lives, about the world, and not end up saying, "It boils down to that problem."

If we were just animals, we wouldn't care so much about making things good. We would just be with our tribe, trying to make sure we were safe, trying to defeat the other tribes if we have to, making sure we have enough food, jostling with each other for alpha status, and for mates. It would just be simple. That would be the world that we live in.

And if we were just the rational creature, we would live and we would all be sitting there on the acropolis just sitting there, playing music and laughing and talking and hugging each other.

But because we are both, we have this unfortunate situation. We are a transition species between the first thing I said and the second thing I said. We are not there yet. We can see what that should be like. We can see the species that we ideally would eventually become, but we are not that species. We are a transition species. We are coping with everything that that species would have to cope with.

Julia Galef:

It sounds like you, at least aspirationally, identify with the rational side of yourself.

...To give a little context for this comment, I made some observation on Facebook recently about how I, and people in my circles, sometimes instead of saying "I think", we'll say, "My brain thinks", which is a way to de-identify with the thoughts. To frame them as, "These are thoughts that occurred to me, but that I don't have to live inside them. I can step outside of them and see them as a thought that occurred in my brain that I may or may not endorse."

And someone responded saying, "It's interesting that people in this rationality community, when they talk about their brains, they are talking about, essentially their intuition, their System One." My intuition produced this thought or this reaction. I can step back and examine whether I want to endorse what my intuition produced.

But other people, for example on Tumblr I think they said, they also talk about "My brain", but they are using it to refer to their *rational* self or their conscious-deliberative self. So they are implicitly identifying themselves with the intuitive-emotional side of their identity. Whereas for the so-called rationalists, it's the reverse.

It's just so interesting that when we separate ourselves from our brains, we are doing it in the completely opposite way.

So, I'm curious, you've set up this good-bad dichotomy between the rational-irrational or the logical-intuitive sides of yourself. I'm wondering if you endorse that good-bad dichotomy.

Tim Urban:

Yeah. I mean, I think a lot of resistance to the concept of that being good-bad is they think of the rational side as inherently cold and non-human. That doesn't have to be it. The way I look at it, the rational side gets the full situation. The rational side gets that we are an animal. Eating an unhealthy meal here and there because it's delicious and it brings you joy is an awesome thing to do. The rational side's into it, because rationally, the rational side knows that's not going to kill you. It probably won't have any effect, one meal.

Julia Galef:

Oh, thank you. It's so refreshing to hear someone say that. I'm so used to people saying, "If you're rational, that means you can never do anything fun or indulgent."

Tim Urban: A truly rational side understands the value of balance and understands the value of sacrifices, compromises, and things like that. You don't have to be perfect. The rational side wants you to go out in nature and be a human and all of that. The rational side just doesn't want you to self-defeat.

The fact is the animal side is perfectly optimized for us to survive in 50,000 BC in a very tough world of tribes. Probably even more so. 50,000 BC is pretty recent. Probably 5,000,000 BC and we weren't even humans yet. It's optimized for that, right? That's fine.

The problem is our biology moves along extremely slowly. It's basically changed 0% since 50,000 BC. While the entire world, and what it means to be a human and what the purpose of a human life and the experience of a human life is, is vastly different now that we've built a civilization.

Suddenly, this animal is not optimized for this. But all of its instincts are still there. Things like instincts about caring so much what other people think, which makes sense in 50,000 BC.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: Just like we are scared of an animal running at us, because we could die physically. We need food, because we need to eat. We needed to be in a tribe. If you're not in a tribe, you die back then. Fitting in was as important as getting food and running away from an animal. We have an absolute, immense biological instinct for all this stuff.

Today, not only is that not important, but fitting in actually prevents you from being yourself. Or being a leader, or being happy in many ways.

Julia Galef: And the "tribe" that you're motivated to try to fit in with is the whole world now. Because everyone on the internet can see what you post, et cetera. Which is very different from the tribe that we evolved to fit in with, right? Which was our immediate tribespeople, who had the power to ostracize us and ruin our lives if they decided they don't like us. Which is not actually true of our "tribe" in the modern world.

Tim Urban: No. There's no actual ...

Julia Galef: It's another asymmetry.

Tim Urban: The fear of not fitting in, the fear of being ostracized, or being excluded, or being talked badly about -- back then, that fear was there for a very good reason.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: As most things in evolution tend to be. Things aren't usually there if they are not for a very good reason. That fear, it was translated to real danger.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: Genuine, real, bodily danger. Today, that fear translates to fake danger, to non-danger. Our animal brain has no idea about that. Only our rational brain gets that.

If the rational brain can't figure out how to take the wheel in some of these situations, and you can't get in the habit of trusting and listening to the rational brain, then you will just live in fake fear -- like you said -- of this entire world tribe, and the smaller sub-tribes around us. We still do have sub-tribes. We have our university. We have people in our career. We have our friends and our relationship.

It's just a sad, unnecessary sacrifice that we make, then. It's like never, ever jumping in a swimming pool ever, because in our ancient brains, back in the day that would kill you. Now, we've figured out how to make water safe. It's sad if someone never, ever jumps in the water in their whole life. Won't anything -- won't take a shower, won't get near water, other than drinking it, because they have this fear. That would be really unfortunate given that water is safe.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: They would miss out on this stuff for no reason. It's a strange example, but that's the idea.

I'm talking about fitting in right now, but there's so many examples of how this comes up. I think that when you look at religious war or something -- yeah, we had to come up with sacred objects back in 50,000 BC, because there was an evolutionary advantage.

Because if we did that, and we all rallied around this sacred object, it gave us something to bond about. The protection of that object against foreign invasion made all of us one, and allowed us to be a fierce unit of cooperation. We would do anything, including kill if we needed to, to stay as a unit and to defend that thing. That was huge.

The tribes that didn't do that, they got killed by the ones that did. It's not that the ones that did were better, they were actually shittier. It's just that the other ones didn't survive. We are all the descendants of those people who were the ones to surround a sacred object.

Now, again, you can see it all over the place. It's unfortunate today, all the things that that quality does in the world.

Julia Galef: Tim, I have to ask: To what extent do you feel you are able to take these insights about why your animal brain wants you to do this or that, and turn those insights into actually being able to change how you behave?

A couple test cases would be: procrastination on the one hand, and the drive for social approval on the other hand. Have you been able to reason with your animal brain effectively? Or not?

Tim Urban: Yeah... What I'll say is it's a yes-and-no situation. The yes is absolutely, positively being aware of this fact. You're saying "My brain thinks" -- that's a healthy thing to do. Because what it's doing is, it's a reminder to yourself to be aware of the fact that your talkative left brain -- the one that has all these thoughts and ideas -- is also just a mechanism in your body, like your heart or your liver, that is doing a job. Its job is to see stuff and draw patterns and make conclusions. It's going to get a bunch of stuff wrong, like our immune system. I'm allergic to dogs, because my immune system made a mistake there. Our left brain can make a mistake with a pattern. Overall, it just does its best. It's often not something you should trust 100%, because it's just taking its best crack at it.

What you're doing is you're reminding yourself to have awareness of that. When you have awareness of it, the power of the left brain goes down. Instead of being like, "This is a fact", you look at it and say, "Oh, my left brain is *suggesting* that that's the fact. Oh, he does that a lot of the time. That's what he does. He suggests things are facts."

Now, I need to -- the "I", which is this inner center of consciousness, needs to now judge, and look at how much I should trust this? Because the left brain is often wrong, right?

Julia Galef: That's *ideally* how it works, right?

Tim Urban: Right, right. No, the point is the reason I'm saying you need a reminder is because ... The "yes" part is that reminding yourself does remove the power of these things.

I labeled the part of us that's terrified of what other people think, and is conversely dying for approval, that part I label as "the mammoth in our head." The social survival mammoth. Labeling it as the mammoth, just labeling it with an image and a word, immediately helps you remember it and be like, "That's my mammoth talking". It takes away some of the power.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: The "no" side of the question is: it's amazing how easily we can just -- we are getting into a lot of stuff here! -- I talk in another post, being on step one or step two of consciousness.

Julia Galef: Oh, I love that post.

Tim Urban: Oh, thank you. Yeah, just seems to be right in line with a lot of your thinking.

Julia Galef: Yeah, go on.

Tim Urban: Step one is when we are just being a full animal. We are being petty. We are being jealous. We are being vain. We are being narcissistic.

Step two is when we are being a full rational being.

Of course, most of us are never either one of those. We are somewhere in between. We oscillate between them, on that spectrum -- based on the topic, based on our mood, and our place in life, how much we've grown up, whatever.

Step two, you can see everything. You can see step one. You can see the people on step one. You can see through everything. You see what it is. You see yourself.

But on step one, you can't just look up at step two. You don't even realize step two is there, when you're on step one, because there's something I call the "fog". Which is: when you're down on step one, it's a foggy place. So foggy that you actually forget you are on step one. You don't even realize you're on step one. You don't remember that there is a step two in those moments.

It's this thing that, no matter how much you remind yourself, you will identify with your left brain the next day. You just will, because we are a transition species. It's like a three year old is emerging into consciousness. We are emerging into rationality, but we are not there. You are going to be on step one a lot of the time. You're going to have fog that hovers over your brain and makes you forget.

The best thing I think we can do, which is what I try to do with these posts -- and I know you try to do this with your writing and your talking -- is just help to articulate, in a way that can be memorable, these concepts for yourself and for others. Because if you can just remember to stay aware, it can help you.

It can help you clear out ... That's a fog-clearing mechanism that you can use. You're going to have to continue to use it. Maybe eventually -- I don't know. I'm only 35. Maybe I'll be 55 and I'll say, "I'm almost never on step one anymore." That would be awesome.

But I doubt it. I highly doubt it. I think that we are human beings, and humans are step one creatures a lot of the time. I guess that's the long answer.

Julia Galef: Yeah. I love the example of the mammoth. The social approval craving mammoth. Because as you say, having this handle, even this identity for that impulse in yourself, helps you do this thing I've heard referred to as a "subject-object shift." Where you go from being subject to something -- you go from that, to taking it as an object. It's basically like stepping outside of the story that you're a part of, and looking at the story and the role that you're playing.

Tim Urban: That's all this -- Buddhism and Stoicism, they all talk about how it's not about what happens to you. You can't control that. What you can control is how you respond and how you react. I think it's a little like that.

Julia Galef: Right, but you have to be able to step back and see the pattern before you can do that.

Tim Urban: Right.

Julia Galef: Which I think is what all of your different creative handles and concepts and characters help us do.

Tim Urban: Well, also, if you don't realize the mammoth is there, then when the mammoth is scared, not only do you think that you're scared, you think that the thing ...

Julia Galef: You think the world is scary.

Tim Urban: ... You think the thing is scary. Exactly.

Julia Galef: Yes.

Tim Urban: If you realize, "Oh, my mammoth is scared" and you've learned -- because you've thought about it hard enough to realize you shouldn't take the mammoth very seriously, because he's a feature from a computer program that was developed 100,000 years ago... Then, you're more able to not only not be scared, but not even identify with it. To say, "This is a thing that's making me feel this way."

I still do feel this way -- just like I might work out, and know that's good, but it still hurts. I don't want to be working out. It doesn't make it fun when your mammoth is scared, because it's still a part of your actual brain, but at least you can realize ... Like you realize working out is worth it, through the pain. Well, you can realize that taking this risk is worth it through the social fear, because your rational brain can see the big picture and gets the mammoth's place in it.

Julia Galef: One angle we haven't really touched on yet is whether those seemingly irrational impulses or intuitions can sometimes contain nuggets of genuine

insight, and wisdom, that you maybe haven't articulated in your conscious, rational calculus, but are actually true and important.

Like, just to take an example -- I'm not necessarily endorsing this example, but sometimes people will point out, "Yes, it looks like I'm being irrational when I'm procrastinating. It might seem that way. But really what's going on is it's some unconscious part of myself recognizes that this task isn't worth doing, and that's why I'm avoiding it."

Or "Some part of myself recognizes that I'll actually be more creative if I leave it to the last minute. There's a method to my madness."

To what extent do you think that makes sense?

Tim Urban: Yeah, no. I think that's a great point. I think that this taps into part of why this is such a hard struggle, right? It's such a hard struggle because the same exact creatures in our brain, the ones that don't serve us in so many ways... Well, the world hasn't changed *entirely*. The fact is a lot of what those creatures are doing, they are optimized not just for 50,000 BC, but they are optimized for a human being animal to live and do their thing.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: Yes, there's plenty of times when it's important to listen. For example, the mammoth. Part of the mammoth is having a high EQ.

Julia Galef: Emotionality quotient?

Tim Urban: Yeah, yeah. Sorry.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: I don't even know if that's an official term, but I use it. IQ, EQ.

Julia Galef: Yeah. That's a term.

Tim Urban: EQ is more on the human side, you know?

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: The mammoth, wanting to, for example, wanting someone to like him is also not that far away from wanting to be a likable person, which is not so far away from being thoughtful and courteous and considerate.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: The part of you that really, really rubs you the wrong way to just be a dick to somebody -- the mammoth hates that, because the mammoth's going to hate me. There's something to that too, right?

Then, the procrastination example that you gave is an even more obvious one, where it's like part of the time when you're procrastinating, your brain is actually burned out and needs time to regenerate.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: It just does. On the other hand, it can go way, way too far and become totally self-defeating and utterly irrational.

Again, I still go back to the fact that when I talk about the rational center of consciousness, in the procrastination post I talk about it as you're the rational decision-maker who wants to be productive. Then, in the mammoth post, I talk about it as the higher being. Then, in other posts, just whatever it is, it's always the same guy. It's this rational center.

...Sorry, in the mammoth post, it's the authentic voice. In the other post, it's the higher being.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: Whatever it is, the thing that I think some of my readers make the mistake ... Like I said, they think that that creature rejects the animal entirely.

That's not true. He's rational... If someone says, "If you don't care what other people think, if you ignore your mammoth, the world would be a horrible place. Everyone would just be being mean." No, your authentic voice inside has thought about this and understands the golden rule, and is very clear on the fact that he's not more special than other people and that you have to be considerate. The rational being can come to that. You don't need to be a primitive animal to be altruistic.

I guess the big point here, that I'm saying to your question, is: I think the rational being, if he's being really rational, understands that you need to "procrastinate" sometimes. And when I talk about the "instant gratification monkey," who is the character in the procrastination post, who's the animal character who makes people procrastinate --

Julia Galef: It's a whole menagerie on your blog! This whole menagerie of animal metaphors.

Tim Urban: We have a nightmare zoo over here.

...The way I define him is he's just purely, he only has a simplistic drive to do whatever's easiest in this exact moment, period. I think that's never going to

be really the answer. Yes, sometimes that happens to coincide with a break that's needed for your brain, but the rational decision maker can figure that one out and give you a break. You don't need this primitive, mindless brain device to do that.

Julia Galef: Yeah. I see this pattern a lot where people point out that this seemingly irrational behavior of theirs is actually good because it has this good side effect. Like, "Well, actually procrastination is good because I get a burst of creativity at the end." Or it's good because I end up avoiding things that aren't worth doing.

Tim Urban: Yeah. That's not called procrastination. That's called taking a break, which is good.

Julia Galef: Right. They are correctly pointing at a silver lining of their action, but whenever this pattern comes up, I always want to ask ... Let's say that was your goal. Your goal was to finish your work, but also avoid things that aren't worth doing and not burn yourself out. Is the policy you've so far been following the best policy to achieve those goals?

And usually, I think the answer is no. Usually, I think it's a silver lining, but there's still a cloud. If you were optimizing for the goals, you would need to know what you're doing.

Tim Urban: Yeah, it's like, "Oh, I went out and shot a bunch of people, but one of them actually turned out to be a rapist, so sometimes it's good to shoot people." No, it's never good to shoot people. You should go and you should try to find the rapist and arrest him ...

Julia Galef: Ha, let's go back to the animal metaphors.

Tim Urban: Yeah. I sometimes go insane with examples, but yes. I think the fact that sometimes a completely mindless or rational tribal impulse happens to coincide with something your rational being would have, in that moment, decided to do anyway, because it had a productive purpose...

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: The rational being still can listen to the animal. That's the thing. The rational being, he's not sitting there completely separate. He can say, "You know what? The animal feels tired. Let's go to sleep."

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: The animal seems burned out. Let's take a brain break. That's not procrastination, that's an intelligent break. Procrastination, to me, is those moments when the rational being is looking at all the factors. All the factors. Your schedule, your time, your brain, your energy, your environment, and

saying, "It makes sense to work right now." It'll be better for everything if we work right now.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: But you don't work, because the instant gratification monkey, at that point, takes over. Well, that's when you're procrastinating, which is its irrational breaks. It doesn't make sense. Yeah. I think you can still get away with saying those animals are purely bad to listen to...

Julia Galef: I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about a post of yours -- I think it's one of your most popular posts, I've seen it linked all over the place -- "How to be insufferable on Facebook".

This post came up in discussion for me with a friend recently. Either I or someone else had linked to it approvingly on Facebook. And she was pushing back, and said, "You know, a lot of these ways to be insufferable on Facebook that Tim is complaining about --"

(They are things like thinly-veiled bids for attention, or thinly veiled bids for sympathy. Thinly veiled bids for approval, like humble bragging. Vague-booking would be an example of a thinly veiled bid for sympathy, where someone pretends like they don't want to talk about something, but actually they are hoping that everyone will say, "No, no, tell us about your problem!" right?)

-- And she said, "It's a very human, very understandable impulse to want attention, approval, and sympathy. People feel like they can't ask for these things, but it would be a better world if people felt like they could ask for these things that all humans want and need, and don't get enough of. Why are we shaming people for doing these things on social media that they need to be psychologically healthy?"

I feel like I have an answer for this. I'm not super confident in it. I have an answer, but I'm first curious to how you feel about that objection.

Tim Urban: I think she's basically right. I would agree with her against myself on that for the most part because ...

Julia Galef: Oh, okay.

Tim Urban: ... That was the first post I wrote, right? It was partially ...

Julia Galef: I didn't realize that!

Tim Urban: Yes. I wrote that six months before ...

Julia Galef: Wow, you really knocked it out of the park on your first swing!

Tim Urban: Well, actually what I did was I went to Easter Island for a month and wrote about six posts before "Wait but Why" started.

Julia Galef: Oh, okay.

Tim Urban: And I picked that from the six as the one to start with.

Look, I think 90% of that post, I would basically stand by. If I could write it again, it wouldn't be that different, because the basic idea of the post was: in in-person interactions, we have all this etiquette, that a lot of times is there for a good reason. If you're in a two-person interaction, and you talk about yourself for 30 minutes without a break and don't ask the person questions, there's a reason that that's considered bad.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: We have an etiquette, that in many cases, helps us be pleasant, social creatures.

Julia Galef: And not tear each others' heads off.

Tim Urban: Yeah. The etiquette's there to remind us to not be social monsters that are terrible to interact with, right? It comes from our parents. At the age of three, we have parents being like, "What do you say? Say, 'Thank you'". We learn to be reasonable humans to interact with at a young age, right?

Now, the internet comes around. There's no rules and it's a totally different thing. It forms its own culture.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: I think that culture is a very immature, very primitive social culture compared to our in-person culture. It's a culture that I think we will look back on in 50 years and we will all cringe, because I think it's ... Just like we cringe watching sexual harassment in Mad Men.

Julia Galef: Oh, god, yeah.

Tim Urban: It's very primitive to us.

Julia Galef: Or even in 80s movies, to take an even more recent example. I was just re-watching some old 80s favorites and it was like, "Oh, my god. This is horrifying." Someone was literally just sexually assaulted, and it was portrayed as funny and light – a romp!

Tim Urban: Literally five or seven years ago! It's amazing how recently sexual assault or harassment or misogyny was totally fine.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: That's really shifted recently. You can tell by looking at things like movies.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: Or stand up comedy from the 90s.

Anyway, the reason we cringe when we look at the past, a lot of the time, is that I feel like society evolves. If biology evolves over the spans of millions of years, society evolves over the spans of decades.

Each young generation looks at their parent's generation as if they are an audience and the parent's generation is on stage. They can see what they like and what they don't. They can be critics. And when they are on stage, they are better, because they got to watch that show... I feel like we all get better as we go along, right? We cringe when we look in the past.

To me, when I look at Facebook -- which is just an example; there's Twitter, there's YouTube comments, there's Reddit -- it seemed obvious to me that even people who are 10 today, by the time they are 25, they are going to look at that as very "old person" thing to do, the way we all behave on Facebook or whatever.

Julia Galef: You have a very optimistic view of our trajectory as a species, really. We're moving forward into rationality, we are going to move forward away from our current immaturity... It's very inspiring.

Tim Urban: Well, just because history tells me that's what happens, usually. It doesn't happen in smooth curves, but...

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: We'll go up and down, but the curve, overall, archingly moves up. That's why, as Obama said in his speech the other day, that even if it doesn't seem like it to some people, this is the least racist time to be in the US. We are less racist than we ever have been.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: That makes sense. The farther you back in the past, the more tribal and insane it seems. I do think that's what's going to happen.

But I think the internet was a new, fresh slate we all jumped on. I think the worst of our tendencies, a lot of times, take over. We do things where, if someone did it in person, we'd be like, "Oh, my god. You're such a braggy narcissist. You're so unappealing." Or whatever. "You're so transparent," whatever.

Now, this was comedy, to get attention for the post, because it was my first post and it was supposed to be a funny post. But it was also pointing out that very real thing.

Now, the thing that I said that I think I agree with her on, is the tone was not ... The thing I would do today as the "Wait but Why" writer that I am now, versus what I was at the beginning, is there would be a whole other angle. I would take one more step. I took a few steps back for that post; I would take one more.

That final step back would then have a lot more empathy in it. To understand, like she said, why people are doing this. These are human needs. If someone's acting lonely on Facebook, that's a sweet thing that they have Facebook. If someone is reaching out to get compliments, that's nice. That's love.

I would still criticize, a lot of times, the way that it's happening. Especially I would criticize some of the totally self-absorbed narcissistic stuff. I don't think there's much defense there. For someone who is being a transparent, sweet person, I wouldn't be so mean to them in that post. I would basically say, we should criticize these things; then, on the other hand, we should stop criticizing these things so much, and understand that this is just another expression of love and the need for love.

I would be a little bit more three-dimensional, I think. Tell your friend that she's right.

Julia Galef:

I'll tell her. She might be listening, I don't know!

Yeah, it's hard when you put up content on the internet and it just lives forever. People discovering it don't have a great sense of where it's positioned in your trajectory as a thinker. And I basically agree with your "We need to break it down into empathy for the need, and maybe criticism of the way the need is pursued, et cetera." I basically agree with that.

The model that I had in mind was this:

To some extent, sympathy, attention, and approval are limited goods. Not completely limited, but people do have limited resources for how much sympathy and attention they can give. And we have this implicit incentive system, where we want to make sure the sympathy and attention get allocated to the people who need/deserve it the most to some extent.

The way that incentive system works is that you can bid for attention, or sympathy or whatever. When you do, you spend a little bit of credit. Meaning that if you are constantly bidding for it, people start to be a little more reluctant to give it to you, unless you have a really strong case for why you need it more than other people.

Now what's happening in the case of humble bragging and vague-booking and all these other kind of thinly veiled bids for these goods ... What's happening is people are trying to bid for things *without spending their credit*. They are trying to get the attention and sympathy without showing that they want it, without just being open about what they want. And that's bad for the system overall.

Tim Urban: Yes. I love that. That's what I'm saying. If I went through the post, it was probably 10 or 15 things I'd criticize. I'd probably pick out 11 that I would continue to criticize and then four that I feel bad about. I think something like humble-bragging would be in the 11 for the same reason you said. I'm not sure I would have thought of such an awesome way to articulate it, but I love that.

Julia Galef: Cool.

Tim Urban: That's what it is. If you just want to openly brag once in a while, that's fine. You realize you can't do it too often, for the reasons you said. People try to basically get a freebie.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: You can't. Save your brags for when they matter. When my TED Talk came out, I was proud I did a TED Talk. I can post that. I don't feel like, "Oh, here's Tim, self-promoting." I'm not going to do very many of those. I'm going to post it and I'm going to expect you to watch it and say you liked it, if you liked it. But I'm not going to then do that the next week for a smaller thing that happens.

Right. I think that's a very, very cogent way to look at it. I think people have a hard time articulating why humble-bragging is so unappealing.

Julia Galef: I know. It's so interesting. I actually tried for a while: "Oh, it's so annoying. Why is it so annoying?"

I do have this starting hypothesis: That whenever people are annoyed at some social behavior, my starting hypothesis is that there's some way that behavior damages the social fabric, even if it's not obvious to us. That's why our annoyance evolved to punish it. That was how I started searching for this model.

Tim Urban: Yeah. It's like you said, it's almost like stealing. In a way, we have a fair system that if you brag, you're taking something from society, and it's okay. If you do it too much, you're penalized and that you're ostracized for it. People stop liking you, right? It's a market, and it's a market that works. When you humblebrag, you're stealing. It's a black market, right?

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: It's the same reason we wouldn't want someone shoplifting. No, you have to pay for your thing. When you humblebrag, you're trying to ...

Julia Galef: Right. Right. I know you want it. I know you need it...

Tim Urban: Yeah.

Julia Galef: ...But we also need to have a system where people pay for things.

Tim Urban: Yeah.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: That costs something. You can't just not pay. You're trying to not pay. You think I don't see you shoplifting, but I have a camera and I can see you walking out the door with that. Stop it. Stop thinking that no one notices what you're doing.

Yeah. I think that's a great point. It's the fabric of society. It's a marketplace. Yeah. It's a great point.

Julia Galef: Cool. So, we have a few minutes left, and I want to make sure I bring up a post that actually really impacted me personally this year. Or maybe it was last year. I don't remember.

It was one of your series of posts about blocking out the time in our lives, and how we are allocating that time to different activities. It was actually a very sobering series of posts, because you point out, "Gee, assuming an average lifespan and making these other basic assumptions about our time, we have this many days left with our parents. We have this many visits to the beach. We have this many... et cetera."

Doing that basic arithmetic to see ... It was a very sobering post. One thing that it made me realize was my priorities were not actually aligned. In some cases, they were not at all aligned with how I was allocating my time. I've been calling my parents so much more since that post, and spending more time with them.

Tim Urban: That makes me so happy. Great.

Julia Galef: I just wanted to thank you. Yeah. I was curious what your main takeaways were from that exercise. Also, if you have changed the way you are spending your time since doing that calculation.

Tim Urban: I think I still have room to be better for sure, but I've been thinking about the concept in that post for a while. Probably since college really. I think that's helped me.

One of the things -- everyone's rational in some ways and irrational in some ways. I'd say one of the ways that I'm pretty good at being rational is that it's just an obvious truth to me to prioritize family and close friends over almost anything. Now, granted I'm not always great at acting on that. I try my best, but if I'm not acting on it, I'm highly aware that I'm doing something dumb and irrational.

Julia Galef: Yeah. Yeah.

Tim Urban: If there's a family trip happening of some kind, I don't think there's anything in the world professionally or socially that could ever make me even miss a day of that. It's not negotiable.

The same thing to a slightly lesser extent, but my friends, my college friends, we have a once-a-month dinner. We've probably done 40 of those. I think I've missed one where I was in town. Other things, I'll make up an excuse, or I can't because I have to work. But I just don't mess with those.

I think that comes from the ideas in that post. The ideas that that's what actually matters. When you're back with your good friends, that's this time that enriches your entire life. I think I'm okay about it. I think I still could be better for sure.

It's a double whammy, because you love these people and your time with them is limited. Selfishly, you want to do it. Also, selfishly for another reason -- all these studies of people on their deathbed. I mean, that's what they wish they did more of, but it's also that the studies of happiness show again and again and again human relationships is what makes people happy. To me, it's such a failure of rationality to mess that up. Yeah.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: I think at least just keeping that in mind, so that you know you're being irrational when you're not doing it, is better. Some people go many, many years and they don't get that they are being irrational. Or you hear a story of a famous person who stops talking to their old friends. Or you hear a story of a busy person who doesn't see their family. I just think that only happens if you haven't absorbed this simple truth yet.

Julia Galef: Yeah. Although... at least for me, there's this weird dance I have to do between being aware of how precious and limited my time is with these people I care about, so that I make sure to spend more time with them... And on the other hand, not being constantly conscious about it when I'm with them. Because I feel like I can't be in flow and enjoy the moment, enjoy the time with them, if I'm thinking about how limited it is. It's like being on a weekend and thinking about how Monday morning is looming or something like that.

It reminded me a little bit of an experience I had when I was a kid. I had just read this play called "Our Town". There's this moment in the play where the main character, Emily, I guess she's just died ... Sorry, spoiler alert there! She's in heaven looking down on the world. She's talking to her guide, or an angel or something. And she says, "Now I can see how precious all those days were. People on earth don't seem to appreciate it. Does anyone ever appreciate every, every minute of life?" And the angel says, "Well, the poets do. And the saints do. But most people really don't."

I read that and I thought, "Oh, that's so inspiring. I want to appreciate every, every minute." So 12-year-old Julia went around constantly focused on how amazing and wonderful each moment was. And to be honest, I was a very annoying and exhausting person to be around, for those four days I was trying to do that. It only lasted like four days anyway, because it's just not sustainable.

Tim Urban: I guess what you're saying is if this goes too far, can it ruin it? I get that concept, where it's hard to actually lose yourself in a happy, present moment if you're like, "Oh, my god. This is going to end." Just like if someone were like, "Oh, you're going to die on Friday." Suddenly, I'm not sure I could have that much fun on Monday anymore.

Julia Galef: Right.

Tim Urban: I think part of making what makes life enjoyable is our ability to forget that it's finite.

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Tim Urban: On the other hand, I think there are two extremes that are bad. One is remembering that it's finite. Having a hard time being present. The other extreme is just completely not remembering, and letting your whole life pass you by. Then, having immense regrets on your deathbed.

First of all, between those two, the lesser of the two evils is remembering too much that it's finite, I would say. Secondly, I think that you still are going to forget. But just having that memory will at least pull you towards that part of the spectrum, which is probably right where you want to be. Not quite at the end, but somewhere where you have it in your head that those things are important and precious.

When you're a 12 year old with your parents, you don't think anything's precious about that. When you're 12 and you're with your parents, nothing about that seems precious. Some people just stay there their whole life. Then, they realize at the end that was a huge mistake.

That's definitely not what we want to be. I think it's a small price to pay to maybe sometimes to be too aware of the finiteness of all of this. That it maybe takes you out of the present moment -- I still think it's worth doing, I

guess is what I'm saying. I still think it's worth the reminder. The thing you definitely don't want to be is you realize you were 12 your whole life when it came to this stuff.

Julia Galef: Tim, we are just about out of time. I want to give you the opportunity to introduce the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode, which is a book or article or something that has influenced your thinking in some way. What's the pick that you would recommend to our listeners?

Tim Urban: I am obsessed with Sam Harris' podcast.

Julia Galef: Oh, yeah.

Tim Urban: If you care about rationality, there's no one more rational. I think he's a really humble thinker, a great thinker. I think he's just done his homework, but he still has humility. He'll adjust his views. I think he just approaches the toughest issues like a scientist. I really appreciate it.

In particular, if you want one particular episode, I would point you to one I listened to recently between Sam Harris and Glen Loury. Glen Loury is a black professor at Brown. The two of them talk about race in just such a fascinating and frank and just open way that you don't hear people talk about race like that. I would highly point you to that episode. Really many others. I just think I feel like I learn a ton and change my thinking after every episode. Yeah. That's what I would say, yeah.

Julia Galef: Cool. Well, I'm also a huge fan of Sam Harris' podcasts. We'll link to that on the podcast website. Although, I bet a lot of our listeners are also already fans. Tim, I'll let you go now. I just want to thank you so much for coming on the show. It's been an absolute pleasure having you.

Tim Urban: Yeah, I feel like we got to three of 20 things we could have talked about, so we should do it again sometime.

Julia Galef: Absolutely.

Tim Urban: Thanks for having me on.

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