

## Rationally Speaking #207: Alison Gopnik on “The wrong way to think about parenting; also, downsides of modernity”

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'm here with today's guest, Professor Alison Gopnik.

Alison is a professor of psychology and philosophy. She's famous for her work on developmental psychology, how children learn. She's the author of several books, including most recently, *The Gardener and The Carpenter: what the new science of child development tells us about the relationship between parents and children*. Alison, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Alison Gopnik: Hi, glad to be here.

Julia Galef: There are a few things I wanted to talk to you about today, but let's start with your recent book. You argue in your book that modern parents think of parenting as akin to carpentry, where you have a blueprint in your mind for the kind of person that you want to create, and you try to shape your child accordingly as they grow, through teaching them how to behave, instilling discipline, teaching them good values, getting them classes in chess or piano, or SAT prep, et cetera.

But actually, you argue in your book, children are not so much analogous to raw lumber that you can shape into any shape that you want. They're more akin to seeds that will grow into something, of their own accord. And you as the parent are more in the role of the gardener, where you can weed the garden and water the children, but you don't have quite so much control over what the final product looks like.

First off, feel free to amend my summary of your thesis however you see fit, but my first question is going to be, what is gardening in the domain of parenting? What are the things we *can* do to affect how our children turn out?

Alison Gopnik: Yeah I think the point is that thinking in terms of the things that we can do to affect how our children turn out is the whole wrong way of conceiving of the whole enterprise. It's not so much, oh if you're ... This has happened often in interviews that I've done. It's not so much, “Oh, well if you just do your parenting the way I say, if you're a gardener parent, everything will come out fine, as opposed to this other way, the carpenter parent.”

The point is that the whole point of childhood is that from an evolutionary perspective, it's a way of introducing a lot of unpredictable variability into the species, so it's a way of having many, many, different options, many different possibilities. Part of the reason why I made the analogy to gardening, is at least if you have a cottage garden or organic garden, you're going to ... what you really want in a garden like that is to have many, many, many different possibilities, many different species that thrive in different conditions.

When you have that kind of ecosystem, that kind of variable unpredictable ecosystem, you have a system that's going to be much more resilient to change than if say you're an orchid hothouse gardener, just making one particular plant grow to its maximum amount.

One of the things we've really learned from biology is that, that kind of monoculture, that sense of, "Here's the things to do just to make this one particular plant grow the best it possibly can," that ends up actually defeating the whole purpose of gardening or farming. That actually ends up making organisms that are fragile, that are not resilient to change. And making systems that are fragile and not resilient to change.

What I want to argue from a scientific perspective is that we should think about being a caregiver as a matter of providing the love and support, and resources, and care that we provide for our children. You can do that, and of course if you don't provide those things for your children, they are not likely to thrive. But sort of beyond that, what you've got is a system that intentionally is unpredictable and is going to generate new things.

Even if you could accomplish this goal of "Here's how I want my child to turn out," you would be defeating the whole point of childhood by doing that.

Julia Galef: First off, maybe we should talk about: How do we know that the carpentry model doesn't work?

Alison Gopnik: Well, if you look at the data about what's the relationship between early experience and later life, what comes out is that there is an important relationship, in the sense that when children don't have the kind of support and resources in general that they need, when children are impoverished or abused, they're more likely to have difficulty of various kinds when they become adults.

Given a baseline of attentive caregivers who have enough money and enough resources, and enough caregivers who aren't isolated, then there's not very much relationship between the kinds of things that parents stress over, like "Do you sleep train your baby? Or do you not sleep train your baby?" Even nowadays, there's great battles about should you have the stroller facing front or should you have the stroller facing back? Or do you give homework or do you not give homework There's not very much evidence that any of the kinds of things that middle class parents are consciously anxious, and battling about, make very much difference in the long run.

Even if you think about the basic facts of resilience, there's so much variability in what children are like, in what parents are like, in what environments are like, that it's very hard to make ... The very best you can do is to make sort of statistical predictions about what's going to come out.

Now again, the general fact of "Do you have a number of warm attentive caregivers?" that makes a difference. But the kinds of things that people think that they can consciously manipulate by, say, reading a parenting book or

having certain kinds of techniques or others, there's not very much evidence if that makes much of a difference in the long run.

Julia Galef:

It's hard not to compare your argument to that of another recent podcast guest of mine, Brian Caplan, who a few years ago published the book, *Selfish Reasons To Have More Kids*. His argument is somewhat similar to yours, that parenting techniques basically don't matter in the long run. They might have some difference in the short run, but that seems to fade out over time.

It kind of intuitively feels like parenting matters, because if you look at parents who put their kids in after school programs and spend a lot of time reading to them et cetera, you see those children doing better in life.

But Brian points out, you have to take into account that the kind of parents that do those things are also genetically different from the kind of parents who don't.

If you want to tease apart the effects of genetics versus parenting, you have to look at children who are biologically related to their parents versus children who are adopted, and compare their outcomes over time. When you do that, it looks like genes explain roughly all the variation in the outcome measures we care about, like happiness and success, and IQ and things like that.

I'm wondering how that ... Is that basically what you're saying? Or are you saying something different?

Alison Gopnik:

I think I'm saying something that's quite different from that. This is the kind of, "Well, parents don't really matter" argument that people have made, because it's all genetic.

The first thing to say is that it's a little odd, because in the sort of popular science world, the whole argument about "Is it genes or is it environment?" is taken quite seriously and people talk about it a lot. But I think it's a fair summary that essentially anyone who is actually doing the science, whether it's in biology or whether it's in developmental psychology, thinks that that's not a useful distinction, that that's the kind of folk distinction that doesn't capture what's actually going on in development.

It's one of those cases where there's really a very large gap between what you'd even read in a first year developmental text book and what you see out in the world of public intellectual discussion about psychology. The wisdom that comes out of the science is that, that's not actually a really useful distinction. What happens is that there's these really complicated interactions, literally from the time that an egg is fertilized, between genetic information and environmental information.

We know that environmental information is shaping the way that genes are expressed, shaping the phenotype, again, from the very get-go, and doing it in very complicated and ways that we don't understand very well. I think as a

scientist, to the idea of saying, “We can partition off, this much is genes and this much is environment,” I just don't think that's a very good scientific view.

That's true, even people who work in the assumptions of behavioral genetics, which where that was sort of the original picture, I think would say that as well, but actually the interesting things are that you've got all these nonlinear gene by environment interactions.

I think sort of, “Is it genes or is it parenting,” is not a sensible or intelligent or scientific way of thinking about the whole question. Having said that, I do think one of the interesting things that comes out of that literature is again, the point about variability. So it turns out that it's very hard to find systematic relationships, as I said before, between particular kinds of parenting and particular outcomes, that go beyond just the facts that when you have a lot of resources, you do better than when you don't have a lot of resources.

But again, if this evolutionary picture is at the point of childhood, is introducing variability, then that's kind of exactly what you'd expect. So the picture is what ... it's a kind of interesting paradox, what caring tremendously for each individual child does, which is what we all do. Caring overwhelmingly for this particular child and being willing to provide resources and love for just this child, not all the other children.

The effect of that is to allow unpredictable variability, and unpredictable variability is exactly the sort of ... That's exactly what you end up seeing, is that what's sometimes called the “non-shared environment,” which just means that even when you have the same parents with different children, you get an incredibly wide array of different kinds of outcomes.

The point that I'd make is that's not just because it's noisy, that's actually not a bug, that's actually a feature of how caregiving works. It doesn't mean, “Oh caregiving isn't important, it doesn't count,” it's quite the contrary. It's exactly because you have these committed resources and then you can have so much variation in the way that children come out.

Julia Galef:

How do we know that the love and resources matter? If my description of the data is accurate — and I'm getting this from ... I'm summarizing Brian's work, or Brian's summary of the literature — if adoptive and biologically related children have life outcomes that differ in a way that can be explained by genetics, then why is it not accurate to then summarize, like, “Whatever the parents are doing, call it love or resources or parenting techniques, none of that seems to actually predict outcomes.” Why is that not the right conclusion?

Alison Gopnik:

That is not the right conclusion, and here's the reason why it's not the right conclusion. If you're thinking about something like adoptive versus biological parents, of course that's happening in the context of parents and families who are already committed to having resources and already committed to having their resources that are available for caregiving.

I don't know if you've talked about this on the show, but there's really fascinating work for instance by Eric Turkheimer who's actually a behavioral geneticist working in this field, that shows that the degree of inheritability of various kinds of features, varies depending on socioeconomic status. Now that might seem kind of weird, right? So how your environmental status changes how influential genes work, but of course if you think about it for a minute, you can see why that would be true.

In a middle class environment, everyone's providing about the same amount of care, everybody's providing resources for the children. Then as I said before, the sort of small differences in parenting technique are not going to show up, and genetic differences are going to be more noticeable, if you're talking about cases where there's differences in that basic caregiving.

We have controlled experiments, we have interventions that show this. That for example, providing early support in the form of early preschool or early child visitor programs where someone comes and actually helps parents. We have a lot of evidence. I think as good scientific evidence as we have for anything, that makes a difference to life outcomes in the long run.

But again, the point is that those interventions aren't about "Do you let your baby sleep it out or not? Or does the baby sit in the front of the stroller or in the back of the stroller? Or do you use this parenting technique or do you use that parenting technique?" Those interventions are about "Do you have the basic resources to be able to care for children at all?" Then in those cases, you can really see rather striking long term outcomes.

The point is that's not about "Do I shape a particular kind of child?" That's, "Is there a garden?" Is there enough support for children so that they can shape themselves, come out in the ways that you'd want? I think that body of evidence is really quite clear.

So it might seem a little confusing, because after all, does that mean that parenting matters or does it mean that parenting doesn't matter? But again, I think the important thing to say is that providing the care and support, we have a lot of evidence that that matters. Because we have lots of evidence that children who don't have that in all sorts of ways, do worse than children who do, but the kinds of small variations in outcomes that middle class parents stress about don't. Even more importantly I think the whole orientation, the whole way of thinking about it in terms of what my job is as a parent is to bring about a particular outcome, to shape a particular outcome... I think that's just philosophically as well as scientifically, just the wrong way of thinking about it.

I give the example sometimes of ... we don't ... it's interesting that that very word "parenting" is a very recent invention. It just came in a period at the end of the 20th century. Of course for millennia, we've been parents and we've been mothers and fathers, but the idea that it's this goal directed activity that brings about a certain outcome, that's a very recent idea.

After all, we don't wife our husband, and we don't child our parents, even though we think those are really important, deep relationships that we have to put a lot of time and energy into. We wouldn't think about whether our relationship with our spouse was a good one in terms of, "Well, how are they coming out? Are they better than they were 10 years ago when they got married?"

We just say, no, those relationships are really important relationships, important for human beings to thrive, and mutual, and involve feedback. And I think that's a much healthier way of thinking about relationships between parents and children.

Julia Galef:

It still sounds to me like your model is basically the same as Brian Caplan's model except above a certain minimum threshold of healthiness of environment. And maybe Brian would say this too, maybe his model is just overall in general for a typical household, parenting environment doesn't matter. But I think his model would still allow that if you abuse your child and nutritionally deprive them, they're going to turn out worse.

Would the right metaphor basically be like, "As long as your backyard isn't full of pollution, you can plant seeds and just let them grow? You don't have to weed and water the garden?"

Maybe that's where I got thrown off with the metaphor, is I was imagining gardening as an active thing.

Alison Gopnik:

Right. What I think is an important thing to say is look, being a bad parent requires more energy and work and resources than anything else that you do. You think about the difference, the contrast between this and say a marriage. If I leave my husband alone all day, and come in at 5:00 and we make dinner and talk a while and think about what his problems are, then that's being a pretty good wife. If I did that with a child, that would be hideous child abuse and the baby would die. Just the amount of work and attention and resources that you need to keep a baby thriving at all is staggering.

Importantly, from an evolutionary perspective, it's actually part of what makes us human. So humans actually put more of those resources into babies and always have, since we were foragers, than any other species does. If you look at chimpanzees for example, chimpanzees are independent, when they're seven years old, they're producing as much food as they're consuming. Even in forager hunter-gatherer societies, that's not happening until kids are 15.

It's an enormous amount of work and energy. So that's why it's not like just well you can throw the seeds out to have this process work at all — it requires resources, and not just resources from individual parents, but resources from the entire community. That actually is part of what happened in our evolutionary origin. It was exactly the demands of having a whole group of people who were taking care of babies together that led to a lot of our other kinds of capacities for things like cooperation and understanding.

It's worth pointing out, 20% of American children still are growing up in poverty and worse than that are growing up in social isolation without having a community of caregivers who are looking after them. We're not just talking about well, some extreme isolated case where children are being abused. I think we have good reason to believe that a fifth of American children are growing up in environments that aren't the kind of environments in which they could thrive.

I think we could say that that's true, and again, there's a kind of strange paradox particularly in the United States where on the one hand we have billions of dollars being spent on this parenting industry to get middle class parents to make small adjustments in their behavior that are probably not going to make any difference... and at the same time, we have 20% of American children growing up in circumstances that we're pretty sure will make a difference in a negative direction. And we can't seem to get the wherewithal to do very much about that.

Julia Galef:

Right. This is something that I had in mind when reading the literature on parenting before I got to your book, that even if the effect of average parenting is basically zero, it could be that it still matters in the tails. That really bad parenting does have a measurable or predictable impact — and maybe also really good parenting has a predictable impact, and that wouldn't necessarily show up in the data overall.

You've been talking about the low end, the low tail. What's your impression — even if it's just an intuitive impression if we don't have data — about whether exceptionally good parenting can make a difference?

Sorry, I know you don't like the word parent as a verb, but I'm just saying — is it possible, that it is actually possible to parent, if you do it really well?

Alison Gopnik:

Well, again, it kind of depends on partly or largely on what do you think a good outcome is? This is a paradox that comes up again and again in thinking of developmental psychology.

Let's say I wanted to have a child who had some particular skill. I probably could, or might be able to use behavioral reinforcement methods to shape that child to come out to do that particular thing. Of course, what you'd end up with if you did that is a kind of lack of resilience.

Now suppose the environment changes. Now suppose you've got a child who's in a different setting, in a different circumstance, and you want that child to be able to adjust, deal with something new, something that they've never been exposed to before.

One of the big ideas we've been thinking about recently is something that neuroscientists and computer scientists call the “explore or exploit” trade off. And the thought is that actually being incredibly well adapted and designed to do one particular thing actually has costs in terms of your ability to explore and find out what to do in new circumstances.

I think a nice example of that is if you look at the literature about the effects of play on later development, there's a kind of paradox. Because I think intuitively people feel it's really important for children to play, it's something that they naturally do, it's something that young of all species do. But it's kind of puzzling about what good effects does it have? Because if you take, again, any particular skill, you're going to do better if you're just a goal directed creature trying to accomplish that particular skill.

But where play seems to have benefits is in this area of flexibility and resilience, being able to adjust to something new, being able to come up with a new idea or a new skill.

I think especially now in some ways, we recognize that that's something that we want, that's actually a ... I think that's always been a really important feature of human beings. One of the things that's always been distinctive for that is that we can thrive in more different environments, and more unpredictable variable environments, than any other species.

The way I like to put it sometimes is, Our environmental niche is the unknown unknown.

It seems like a good idea to try to have those individual children and the whole community of children available to be able to do that. That's something again where the outcome of having a community of people who are all caring for individual children, who have different strengths and weaknesses, and who love those children all in the same way, that actually seems to be a good model for how to do that. That's certainly the evolutionary model.

Julia Galef:

It seems to me that we can be pretty confident that the environment isn't going to change so much for our children that there aren't some skills that we could predict would still be useful, across 99% of plausible futures that they might inhabit.

For example, if I were going to try to raise a child, I think I would ... there's some things I think I would try to instill. Like, cognitive behavioral therapy has various suggestions for how to cope with anxiety, or how to be resilient. And how to stop yourself from assuming the worst about any given situation. Or keeping perspective in difficult times.

I have other friends who have young children now and are trying to instill in them general self efficacy — like, here's how to think about problems that come up in your life, there's usually something you can do, let's problem solve together, here's some different kinds of tactics you can attempt.

I think the thinking is sort of, if you instill these things at a young age, they have this generalized tool kit, that will be pretty useful to them in most futures that they can end up in.

I don't know of any data on teaching CBT to kids, but...

Alison Gopnik:

Here's the thing, and this is part of what the second part of my book is about. It's tricky because the ideas are a little complex, but it is also clear — just as it's clear that adult humans are investing incredible amount in their children, just keeping their children, giving their children that period of childhood... It's also clear that a really enormously important thing that happens in that period of childhood is that children figure out the values and strategies and skills that the previous generation had.

Because humans are such a cultural species, that's a really, really important thing that children are doing, that children are learning from caregivers. Children are indeed exactly learning whatever values or skills or knowledge that has been accumulated in their particular culture in their particular community. They are internalizing that, figuring it out, using it to figure out how the world works. That's a really, really important thing that parents are doing.

One of the things that comes out of the science is that children are amazingly good at extracting that information, by doing things like watching what the people around them are doing. Or just listening to the everyday language that the people around them are using. Imitating the skills that they see other people doing.

That's one thing, and the other thing is that it's really clear that each generation of children both takes on all the cultural information that they've got from the people around them, and modifies it and changes it and does unpredictable things with it, that are different from the values and skills and knowledge that the previous generation has. And that's actually an [engine] for cultural change and development.

What that means is that we have lots of beautiful studies that I describe in the book — for instance, if you do something in front of a child, like one of the nice examples I have is cooking... so one of the things that I do and that people have been doing with kids forever, is integrating them into the real things you have to do in life, like making lunch.

The evidence is that when children are, say, just imitating what someone else is doing — like, here's grandma whipping up the eggs, now it's my turn to whip up the eggs — they're very sensitive to fine details in how you do that, and what things are important and what things aren't important, and what you're intending to do. In ways that go far beyond what you could self-consciously manipulate.

I think the picture that a lot of middle class parents have is, “Okay, I need to shape my child to have particular kinds of skills, and if I sit there and self-consciously read the manual the way I would if I was doing something at my work, I can make those children who would otherwise wouldn't get that information. I can make them, by my self-conscious, deliberate efforts, come out with those values.”

I think what the evidence suggests is children are very, very good at both picking up and transforming those values by doing things like listening to details in language.

A nice example that recently has come up is generics. Now, you probably don't even know that you're using generics or you're not using generics.

Julia Galef: What are generics?

Alison Gopnik: Generics are things like, "Girls don't cry." When you use a linguistic form that implies that you're making a generalization about the whole category. It turns out that kids are really sensitive to whether you say something like, "Girls don't cry," or you say, "This girl doesn't cry," or "Many girls don't cry."

You can already see how that might end up leading to stereotyping for example, but I couldn't even tell you whether a sentence that I use has generics in it or doesn't have generics in it.

I think the important thing is that, again, from an evolutionary perspective, if you look at how children have been taken care of from most of human history... children are very good at learning the skills that are important to them, but the way they learn it is through participating in the way that people around them are engaging in those skills. By taking on a piece of the cooking, or if you're in a culture where reading books is really important, than reading books is really important. Rather than an explicit curriculum that parents can articulate that will make the children come out in a particular way.

Julia Galef: Does this mean that we should, instead of worrying less about our parenting, we should maybe reallocate our worrying, to how we're using language? And what impressions we're giving our children about the world, and how they should be as people, by whether we use generics or not?

Alison Gopnik: My advice is it's really important that we ... I think the idea of allocating our worrying is a good idea. You wanna worry about something? Worry about climate change.

Like... do you need to worry about your children? You could spend a lot of time worrying about climate change. Worrying about whether you're doing the right thing, or using the right language, or your details of how your parenting are going are gonna shape your children... that's kind of a foolish thing to worry about.

In fact, one of my summaries sometimes is I think the answer is that if you're worried about your children, you probably don't have anything to worry about, and if you're not worried, then maybe you should worry.

And, that's a joke, but there's an element of it that's true. I think part of what's happened is — and again, this is a terrible catch-22 — this emphasis on a kind of high-investment parenting model. One effect it clearly has is to make parents,

and especially mothers, guilty and anxious and worried. And divided among themselves about whether they're doing the right things or not, spending their time shaming each other on blogs, or worrying that they're going to be shamed about what their parenting is like.

And, I think everything we know suggests that's exactly not the environment in which children are going to thrive.

Julia Galef: Right.

Alison Gopnik: I think part of the problem... I have some ideas about solutions to this, but why is this happening?

Well, I think one reason it's happening is because for the first time in human history, people are having children who haven't had very much experience with children. So, how did we solve this problem for most of human history? Well, the way we solved it was by the time you had children yourself, you had taken care of your younger brothers and sisters and cousins. And you'd watched your parents take care of children, but you'd also watched your aunts and your grandmothers and your uncles, and each of them did it in a slightly different way, depending on who the child was.

So, for most of history, you'd had a lot of practical expertise by the time you were raising children. And I think there's good reason to believe it's that kind of practical, intuitive expertise that's involved, not anything that you could go out and read a bunch of books about, that really makes the difference as far as children are concerned.

I do think it's a real issue, that even for high resource, middle-class parents, those sources of kind of intuitive expertise have kind of disappeared. Lots of people don't even have, we don't even have teenage babysitters anymore, because they're too busy studying for their SATs. So, then they think, okay, well, what I should do is study for my parenting SAT.

Julia Galef: So, would you say that the implication of your thesis for the education system is that having kids required to attend school, and have a certain curriculum, is not actually beneficial to them? And if families have the resources to just unschool their kids — like, just let their kids hang out at home and just interact with the family, and be left to their own devices to read whatever they find interesting — that that would be better?

Alison Gopnik: Well, in the broad scheme of things, and I think there's been many models of this over the years... that having children interacting with a skilled community of people who are doing things well and who have the time and resources to integrate the children into their activities, I think we have reason to believe that that would be at least as good, in terms of outcomes, as our current educational system is.

Now, of course, the problem is, at the moment, the way that you would do that would be having a particular mother, for example, who gives up work and stays home to do that, so you end up having a catch-22.

Again, without wanting to be too sentimental about our past, if you look in foraging societies, what happens is that the children are right there with the people who are doing skilled activities, and the skilled activities that those people are doing. And, I think that there's quite a bit of evidence that this kind of guided apprenticeship is a very, very good way for children to learn the skills that are going on in the world.

Now, of course, part of the problem is that we have a much wider range of skills that we want people to learn now, than you would have, say, in a forager culture. So, we can't just sort of say, "Look, everybody needs to be able to do X." We have a much wider range, and more specialized things like doing mathematics or being able to code. And we don't have most people having the resources to be able to provide that rich environment.

But one of the things I say sometimes is I think what especially young children need more of is mud, livestock, and relatives. Those are the real environments, the real elements in an environment, that will lead to a rich learning environment for children. We don't have very much mud, livestock, and relatives around most of the time, so we have to figure out how we can have schools and preschools that kind of provide the equivalent of mud, livestock, and relatives. Maybe that's a sandbox and a hamster, and a bunch of dedicated preschool teachers.

And, I think the same thing's true when you're talking about school. I think probably in an ideal world, you would have children who are interacting with people who are really skilled in particular abilities, and the children, from all we know, are very good at learning in those contexts.

But, of course, we're not in that world, so we have to figure out ways that we can make the school more like the village, and I think there are some ideas about how to do that.

Julia Galef:

I have one long-running disagreement with some of my friends who are new parents or who plan to become parents. And that's over whether we should ever force kids to do something that they don't want to do.

I'm pretty permissive in my philosophy, about giving children autonomy and treating them as people, maybe more so than the average parent. But at the same time, it just seems to me that there's at least a large handful of things that children have to learn how to do that are not fun or obviously useful to the child, from the vantage point of being six years old, and the only way that the child is going to learn to do arithmetic, or sit still and behave, or be nice to other people, is if you kind of make the kid. And then, as the kid grows up, he will be grateful for those good habits that you've instilled in him.

And parents probably overextend this principle beyond what they need to, but it's at least true of some things.

But some of my friends think that, basically, you can just talk to the kids like an adult and if the kid doesn't want to do things, then fine, and he'll still turn out okay. That seems less plausible to me.

What's your take?

Alison Gopnik:

Yeah, I mean, again, I think a point of caregiving is to manifest and imbue the values that are important to you. And children are very good at picking up on the values that are important in a particular culture.

And those values can be very variable. It's important to say different groups of people at different times, and different individuals, have different ideas about what's important in life.

But again, imagine that you were interacting with someone in a cooperative situation at work, or you have a community that's trying to do something. In most communities, you wouldn't say "Okay, the way we're gonna do this is no one is ever gonna have to do anything. They can just independently make their decisions." That's not the way any human group works. You're always in a situation in which there are norms, and children are extremely sensitive.

Again, we had beautiful, empirical work about this. Children are very sensitive with norms. They're very good about picking up on "What's the thing that we do? What's the thing that's important for us to do? What's the thing that's forbidden for us to do?" That's one of the things that they're learning, maybe more than anything else.

So, not giving them signals that say, "Oh, yeah, this is something that we really think is important in our culture, or in our family, or that I think is really important. This is something that I think is just terrible" ... You're depriving them of really, really important information, maybe the most important information that they can have. So what you're doing is saying, "This is what's important. Here's the kind of habits you should have, here's what counts, here's what doesn't count."

And then, of course, it's perfectly possible for children, especially when they start, for instance, reaching adolescence, to say, "You know what? I don't think that's right. I don't think those values are important. I'm gonna try out a different set of values." But, it's not gonna help if they don't at least have the information about what the values are, that are important to the people around them.

But, again, I think the evidence suggests that the idea that you have to have this very self-conscious set of policies about all this, that's probably not what's making much of a difference anyway. What's making a difference is the way in your everyday life that you're engaging with the child.

And, again, it's a bit of a catch-22, because you could think I want to be a really good parent, I want to convey these values, I want children to be like this. But the best way to do that is just to be the parent that you are, in a loving, interactive relationship with this particular child.

Julia Galef:

Well, I think probably we should switch tracks at this point to make sure that we have time to talk about the other question I have for you, which relates to an article that recently came out in The Atlantic magazine. It was your review of Steven Pinker's latest book, Enlightenment Now.

Pinker's thesis is that by nearly every important metric of human well-being, the world has gotten a lot better in the last few centuries. Violence is down, extreme poverty and disease are down, life span is up, etc., which flies in the face of this common wisdom that the world is going to hell in a handbasket.

In your review, which was in the April issue of The Atlantic, you expressed some reservations about that argument. You felt that Pinker was ignoring or downplaying some of the problems with modernity. Can you talk a little about that?

Alison Gopnik:

Yeah, sure. You know, I basically agree. I think it'd be hard to find someone who would argue that we aren't better off than we were, say, in 1700s, or even 1500s. I think the evidence for that is really clear. And, indeed, better off than we were in 1900, on all sorts of dimensions.

But what I argue in that piece, is that there are dimensions of thriving that just kind of aren't there in Pinker's worldview and what you might call the kind of neoliberal world view in general.

I think this is one of those cases I really like Isaiah Berlin's take on liberal pluralism, that there are values in our lives as humans that are really in tension with one another. There isn't a formula you can use to maximize everybody's thriving, because things that are important to us can really be opposed to each other.

And, what I wanted to argue in the piece is one thing that really seems to be important for human beings are these close, often irrational, attachments to a particular child, for example, or a particular partner or a particular town or a particular community. I think those are really foundational to what people are like. And also, interestingly, in a larger sense, they're rational. So, they might look irrational, that I love my particular grandchild and think that he's the best thing that ever happened on the face of the planet, compared to all those billions of other six-year-olds on the planet. But, in the larger context, those particular emotions actually end up being a really important part of the way that we deal with conflict, the way that we mediate all the differences in our interests.

There's an interesting part of the philosophical literature, that those emotions of care and trust and love and belonging and particularity and specificity,

actually help us to get out of the typical prisoner's dilemma situation, where everyone is just looking to maximize their own utilities, which ends up causing problems for everybody overall in the long run. So, if you just basically cared about one or two people, you would do better than just trying to have contracts that would make your life better.

I think that's a really profound thing about human beings. And I think there's tension between the kinds of devices we can use to make sure that everyone maximizes their individual utility, which is the picture of at least some versions of neoliberal enlightenment. And, the simultaneous desire to have this network of strong, close attachments.

And I think there's at least some empirical evidence that, maybe not over the last 200 years, but at least over the last 20 years, and maybe not all over the world, but at least in the United States, and maybe not through all of the United States, but certainly in places like rural and low-income areas, that those dimensions have really been under threat.

Julia Galef: Got it. Okay, so if I'm understanding correctly, your concern is that even though Pinker's correct that there're far fewer people in the world in extreme poverty than there were, and child mortality's gone down, etc., the concern is that as these societies reduce poverty and develop more, they will start to suffer from more of the problems that you're pointing out in the West, like social isolation or alienation or breaking down of close ties, basically.

Alison Gopnik: Yeah, I think that's right. And, I think, again, it's one of those things where things like mobility, autonomy, those are real goods. Unfortunately, they're in conflict with other real goods, like attachment and tradition and particularity. I think one of the challenges for contemporary enlightened liberal societies to try and figure out how do you negotiate those tensions?

A very good example of this, which we were just talking about, that we just take for granted is people talk about, oh, "How do you get work-family balance?" So, we talk about that, about the stress and trying to raise a family and have work at the same time, and I think we treat that as if it's kind of, oh, it's just a problem around the edges, but I think it's actually something deeper that's going on. Those are really importantly, varying dimensions of human life, and it's challenging to figure out how you put them together.

Julia Galef: I'm curious about whether we have any hard data that would indicate that people are feeling lonelier or more alienated. Because one thing that I like about Pinker's book is that he kind of goes beyond people's sense that, "Oh, things are getting worse, the world is getting worse," and he says, "Okay, what do the data actually show?"

And, of course, poverty and disease and things like life span are some very important metrics of welfare, but they're not the only metrics, as you say. There's also social connectedness.

I think he addresses that a little bit in the book... but I'm wondering, you've been talking about the sense that people in the West are feeling less connected, but what kind of hard data would you point to that indicates that that's a problem in the West, or getting worse?

Alison Gopnik:

Well, here's an example of something, and again, it's interesting that this is recent. This is in the past, let's say in the past 20 years, or even the last 15 years, in the United States, but I think this has also happened in Europe and other places. For instance, the number of people who are, not just legally married, but partnered, has gone down substantially.

So one metric of social connectedness is do you live with, in close relation to, other people or not? Or do you live by yourself?

And again, you can argue back and forth, well, maybe there's benefits to having people who are living by themselves. It's always tricky with humans, about how much of this is choice, and what kind of choices you can make.

But, it certainly does seem to be true that the number of people who are married have gone down, and interestingly, if you look especially in a lower SES context, the number of people who are trying to raise families on their own, the number of single mothers, has gone up. And those are both pretty clear statistical tendencies, and they have the consequence that you're not going to be socially connected or have as much of a network as you did before.

That whole dimension of "How do you raise your children," this gets back to what we were saying before — is there a group of people that you can turn to when you're doing something like raising children?

Those are all things that really do seem to be trending in, or at least have trended in, the direction of being less socially connected.

Julia Galef:

Is that a trend across all developed countries, or are you just talking about the U.S. in particular?

Alison Gopnik:

Well, it seems to be true in Europe as well, so it's that, and some of the kind of populist impulse that we see, seems to be coming from that trend. So, we certainly see these very radical drops in fertility, for example — which is a good thing, in general. But, one of the things it means is you don't have the kind of wide family support that you once would have had.

And, it should be said, other countries, of course, do a better job of coping with this than the United States. Because other countries have things like universal preschool, or official ways of supporting people who are having children, even if their extended family, which was once a way of supporting children, has disappeared.

Here's another interesting statistic that shows up in figures, but it doesn't show up in people's thinking very much at all. This came out of an interesting SRCD

report. We talk a lot about, in the 70s, when mothers started leaving the home and going to work — but one thing we don't think about is, when did fathers start leaving the home and going to work?

In fact, if you looked at the United States — or looked at places in general, but certainly the United States — in, say the 19th century, the overwhelming majority of people were working in agriculture. And one of the things about working in agriculture is that, if you're a farmer, your home and your work is the same place, so your children kind of naturally have a group of people who are taking care of them, 'cause work and family are literally in the same place.

The fact of industrialization — which again, had all sorts of benefits in other respects — one of the things it did was separate out work and life, separate out work and family.

Julia Galef: As you say, it's hard to know whether the decrease in rates of partnership or marriage is actually is a result of people having less connectedness in their lives by choice, versus not by choice. But couldn't we just look at the overall happiness statistics? Like, if these lower rates of community support, etc., are actually making people less happy, then why wouldn't that just show up in the happiness metrics? Which do seem to be better for developed countries that undeveloped countries.

Alison Gopnik: In general, I think I would argue — and you could go back and forth about this about the statistical specifics — I think what the consensus about the happiness statistics is, which Pinker tries to argue against in the book, is that above a certain level, things like income don't seem to lead to increases in happiness. So, there's a kind of minimum level of prosperity, which really does make a difference in happiness, but then, there's a point at which that isn't the thing that's really making the big difference.

Again, I think if you look at specific cases — it's curious, because Pinker, again, doesn't talk about the fact that the suicide rate has genuinely increased in many places. The opioid addiction rate has genuinely increased, again, especially in the places like rural United States.

You know, the suicide rate going up seems like a pretty good indicator of people not being very happy.

Julia Galef: Yeah, I guess it's confusing. I think that happiness is... well, I'm not equipped to get into the statistical arguments right now, but I thought that happiness does correlate with the wealth of nations overall. But again, I can't actually argue that on the spot, so I won't try.

Alison Gopnik: Again, it's pretty clear that, up to a certain point, that is certainly true, and again, that's the point that I think is the positive point about Pinker's book. There's no question that having more prosperity, being able to have enough to eat, being able to have a warm house, all those things really do make a difference to people thriving.

The point that I was just making is that there's a whole lot of other things that make a difference to people thriving, like feeling connected to your community, being able to be in the same place as your parents and grandparents, being able to feel as if your children are connected to your community. Those are all things that we have lots of reasons to believe are important for thriving too, and I don't think we're going to have a good polity unless we can take both those dimensions into account.

And, as I say, some of the sad reality of human life is that there are lots of cases in which those things might be in tension.

I guess part of the point, if you want to try and diagnose, well, if Pinker's right and things are so much better, why do people feel as if they're getting worse? I think this dimension would be a good place to look to see why people think they're getting worse.

Julia Galef: One big reason I think people feel like the world is getting worse is that they genuinely don't know that extreme poverty has plummeted. If you look at surveys where people are asked "Has extreme poverty gone up or down? Has child mortality gone up or down? And disease, etc.," they genuinely believe poverty has gone up in the world. They're shocked when you tell them that poverty has plummeted. Not just in the percentage of the world, but in the actual numbers of people living in extreme poverty.

So, it doesn't seem like a huge mystery to me, why people think the world is getting worse, if they literally don't know the most important facts. It doesn't seem like we have to reach for explanations along the lines of, maybe people are feeling some modernist ennui...

Alison Gopnik: Well, I don't think it's about modernist ennui, I think it's about, if you look at ... so, here's the puzzle, again, if things are so much better, you'd think that people would feel that in their everyday life, and they'd feel that in their projection of what's going to happen in the future.

Julia Galef: So, you're talking about statistics like, "Do you feel like you're better off than you were 50 years ago" ... so, you're saying people in the West think that they're not better off than they were 50 years ago?

Alison Gopnik: Right, and another psychological point that I think — oddly, given that Pinker's a psychologist, he doesn't pay much attention to it — we have lots of evidence that people's judgments about things like happiness or value are anchored. So we don't think in terms of an abstract value, we think in terms of, compared to X, am I better off than I was before, or do I think my children will be better off than they were before?

From that perspective, which I think we have lots of reasons to believe that's the perspective that matters for human beings, that psychological perspective... In some sense, the fact that we're all better off than we were in 1500, if that isn't really relevant to those kinds of judgments and decisions, those are the things

that shape the way that you feel and the decisions that you're going to make, say in a political context.

Julia Galef: Yeah, I guess, unfortunately, we don't really have happiness data from the 1500s, so we can only really speculate about whether people were happier in 1500.

Alison Gopnik: One of the other things that we know is that there's a lot of homeostasis when it comes to happiness. That's one of the things that comes out of psychological research, is that people tend to kind of return to... famously terrible things can happen to people, or wonderful things can happen to people, and it makes much less of a difference to their happiness rating than they think it's gonna be. They think it's going to make a difference beforehand.

There's actually some fascinating work in economics, arguing that this hedonic treadmill that we all find ourselves on, where you keep working to try and make yourself better off, but you don't feel any happier. There's actually some good reasons for why you might have a motivational system that would like that.

So, what counts is not to look back and say, oh, did things get better over the last 300 years. What counts is what should I be doing now, and what I should be doing now is gonna depend on what anchors I'm at now, what I think is important now, what I think is missing now.

Julia Galef: Yeah, I find the hedonic treadmill argument pretty compelling, and I'm quite willing to believe that after everyone's basic needs are satisfied, and they have the autonomy to pursue whatever kind of life they want, that above that point it might be hard to eke out more than small gains in happiness. And that it's also possible that the increase in choices, and increase in expectations that people have, or standards that they're comparing their life to, might in fact make them less happy.

I guess my preference would still be to get everyone in the world to the point where — as you say, if you're worrying about your children, maybe your life is pretty good. I'd like to get people in the world to that point, where, you know, we can deal with that problem when we come to it.

Alison Gopnik: Yeah, I don't think there's any argument about that, and as I said in the review, that's a very positive aspect of Pinker's work and Pinker's argument. I think that's completely true. And the fact that there's still lots and lots of work to be done, to just get those just basic kinds of utility going for people, and that modernity has moved us very much in that direction... I think all of those things are completely true, and are important things that it's good to point out. I just think the texture of the picture isn't going to, you aren't going to really get a full picture of human thriving.

Here's another nice example that I think is interesting, if you think about happiness metrics, for instance. There's a lot of evidence that having children, in the short run, makes you less happy. You know, you're more stressed and

there's more things that you have to do, but when you look at whether people feel as if they got deep satisfaction or was important in their life to have children, then they say, yeah, children are a deep, important part of satisfaction. So, that's another question, which is, how do you sort out what is happiness?

Julia Galef: What's the right metric, yeah.

Alison Gopnik: I think maybe a better word than happiness is thriving. So, when do you feel that a community or person or family or a child is thriving, is doing well, is acting in an engaged, satisfying way, rather than just trying to quantify how happy they are?

Julia Galef: Well, Alison, I'm gonna let you go in just a minute, but before I do, I wanted to ask you if you could name a book or article, or even a particular writer or thinker, who you don't agree with or you have substantial disagreements with, but you respect. And you think is worth engaging with. You know, you think their argument is well-thought-out, or their hypothesis is intriguing and worth considering, even if you don't agree.

Alison Gopnik: Yeah, so one of the interesting controversies in my field is this question about how much is our understanding of the world, our knowledge, shaped by innate forces that have happened over the course of evolution — versus how much is the result of learning mechanisms that will actually let us go out and learn?

And I'm very much on the side in that debate of saying that learning mechanisms are really important, and that we're able to really throw off the constraints of our evolutionary history, or our innate structure. And that's a big, central debate in my field.

On the other hand, I think the alternative — someone like Noam Chomsky's a good example, Chomsky's arguments about language and why you might think that language is innate. I think those are good arguments. Those are arguments that we need to take seriously, and arguments that are informative and tell us something important. And trying to figure out where did those arguments go wrong and where they're limited and where aren't they... I think that's a really important, helpful thing for people to do.

Julia Galef: Would it be possible for you to recommend, either, one of Chomsky's works, or a summary of Chomsky's arguments that people could check out?

Alison Gopnik: Well, you know, in fact, Steve Pinker has, in *The Language Instinct*, had some summaries of Chomsky's arguments. But I think you're better off actually reading Chomsky. So, there's actually a kind of classic older book called *Rules and Representations*, that I think is a really interesting attempt to make that argument.

Another book is — someone who sadly, a philosopher who just died recently — Jerry's Fodor's book, *The Language of Thought*, where he tries to argue for an

almost absurdly strong nativism view. I think that's an interesting set of ideas to engage with.

Julia Galef: And, would you also happen to have a recommendation for a good rebuttal to Fodor's and Chomsky's idea?

Alison Gopnik: Yeah, well, this is gonna sound egocentric...

Julia Galef: Well, go for it.

Alison Gopnik: Words, Thoughts, and Theories, which is my academic book — not so much a popular book, but it's still written for a general audience — I think is a good example, it includes a bunch of arguments against that.

Julia Galef: Awesome.

Alison Gopnik: Let me think of another, sort of more popular example... Well, in *The Scientist in the Crib*, which is my first book, we also made some of the arguments in the other direction. We explicitly sort of took on how much is innate and how much is learned.

Julia Galef: Perfect. Well, we'll link to all of those works, as well as to *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, and to your website, with more of your research on it.

Alison, thank you so much for coming on the show. It's really been a pleasure having you.

Alison Gopnik: Thanks so much for having me, Julia.

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