

Rationally Speaking #234: Dylan Matthews on “Global poverty has fallen, but what should we conclude from that?”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and my guest today is Dylan Matthews. Dylan is senior correspondent for Vox and the head writer for Future Perfect, which is a subsection of Vox devoted to doing the most good and looking at the news through an effective altruist lens.

And Dylan is as of recently the host of the Future Perfect podcast about philanthropy and ways people try to do good. It's just beginning its second season.

Dylan, welcome to Rationally Speaking -- or welcome back, I should say. You were on our show a few years ago.

Dylan: Many many years ago, but yes, no, I'm grateful to be back.

Julia: That earlier episode was about your experience donating a kidney, and the science and ethical philosophy around that choice. It was great.

Dylan: Yeah, it was a good time.

Julia: We should link to that for any guests who missed it. So the context for this episode today is that Dylan wrote an article, a few months ago now -- I guess it was in February. And I read it then. I liked it, I tweeted about it.

And my mind has just been returning to it repeatedly since February. In part due to two recent episodes of this show, that sort of sparked my thinking and, I think, changed my take on his article. So, that's what we're going to talk about today.

The title of the article was “Bill Gates Tweeted Out a Chart and Sparked a Huge Debate About Global Poverty.” This is on February 12th. So, Dylan, I'll just give the brief skeleton summary and then you can sort of fill in some of the details...

The article was about this debate that had been sparked, I guess the previous week, when Bill Gates tweeted a graph showing a dramatic decline in global poverty. A lot of our listeners may have seen that online, it's been shared widely. It was put together by Max Roser at Our World in Data. And so, this graph showed that the percentage of humanity living in extreme poverty, which is living on \$1.90 a day or less, had gone down from about 94% back in 1820 to about 9% or 10% in 2015.

So, Bill Gates tweeted this graph and then an economist named Jason Hickel [*edit: I misspoke, Hickel is an anthropologist*], writing in the Guardian, wrote a kind of scathing critique of this graph.

Dylan, this topic, this general fact that a lot of things in the world have gotten a lot better over the last hundred years and people don't really realize it, is something you've written about before, right?

Dylan: It is, yeah. I've did a compilation of graphs showing the various positive trend lines, mostly in global public health and global poverty, and it's something that I agreed with and continue to agree with Bill Gates. It's sort of underappreciated. So I saw Hickel's article, and to some degree, a book he had written called *The Divide* as the first big, serious challenge to that narrative in the popular press.

Julia: Yeah, so the article that you wrote, what I really liked about it was that it was this very thorough, careful analysis of why Bill Gates, and the people in Bill Gates's camp who are excited about this dramatic decline in poverty -- like Steven Pinker, who focused on this fact in *Enlightenment Now*, or Roser... A lot of other people... Why that camp disagrees with Jason Hickel and other people in his camp.

And you really kind of got into the meat of the disagreement and tried to break it down and really understand what the cruxes of disagreement were -- which, as all of our listeners know, is something I love.

But before we get into the specific critiques that Jason made and your analysis of them... one thing that you talked about in your earlier articles about the improvement in these various metrics is how little awareness people have of them. In a recent poll, only 8% of US residents knew that global poverty had actually gone down since 1996. The vast majority thought it had gone up. Why do you think that is?

Dylan: I think some of it is negativity bias in news media, which is something that, as someone who writes headlines on a regular basis, I've had some exposure to the causes of that bias. And I don't think it's nefarious. I think people get frustrated who are news consumers when they see a torrent of negative headlines.

But I think there are financial incentives. People are drawn to stories about conflicts, are more likely to click on things about zero-sum arguments, than they are about positive stories. And also because some of these positive stories are very slow, gradual processes.

And I think another reason is... It's hard to tell big stories of progress without getting into the details of what happened in individual countries. I think one

of Hickel's points in this debate was: The trend line is down, but that's a chart that's showing a lot of really complex historical processes, many of which were not pleasant to endure for the people experiencing them.

And so, there's a way in which taking that step to zoom out and say: Okay, if you're looking just at material living standards, what has happened can be harder to do than to dive into the circumstances of individual countries.

Julia: Yeah. And that relates to a hypothesis I had about why so many people think poverty has actually gotten worse in the last 20 years instead of better. Which is that... I fear that these factual questions about trend lines over time have become a kind of polarized pawn in a bunch of political and cultural conflicts.

Like climate change before this. Or immigration more recently. Where there are... Obviously there are differences in values that people have, or differences in epistemology, and what kinds of experts do we trust. But there are also just a lot of factual questions that are hard for people to think about as straightforwardly as they otherwise might be able to, because your position on these topics has become this kind of referendum on which camp you're in.

And I think the camps here aren't exactly red and blue, right and left, but they're something like... I don't know, how would you describe the camps of people who are enthusiastic about the decline of poverty and the people who are annoyed at the enthusiasts?

Dylan: Well I think the people who are enthusiastic... It's a mix of a bunch of different groups. I think one group is just development economists. Because if you're a professional development researcher, one thing you care about is that you're making progress. No one wants to be in a field where you feel like everything is stagnating. And I think for people who work at the World Bank, who work at the IMF, who work in universities doing field research on ways to accelerate this process, it's sort of a proof point of... "What we're doing matters. We can make some progress." So I think that's one group, and I think that's the background, to a certain extent, that Max Roser comes from.

Pinker has a more ideological project that he's trying to do, that he views certain enlightenment values associated with free inquiry -- but also free markets and industrial capitalism -- as subject to unfair, negative critiques. On environmental grounds, on leftist grounds, on social conservative grounds. And I think that was a big theme of Enlightenment Now. And I think part of his argument for something like... "The liberal order" is a very vague phrase, but for something like the liberal order, or something like the the world created post-Enlightenment... is a track record of success at reducing poverty.

And I think part of why this got so heated is that that's in direct conflict with what Hickel wants to be saying, in a way that I don't think Roser's goals are as much.

So Hickel himself is a bit of an idiosyncratic. He's definitely of the left of... I sort of associate him with a sort of "soft anarchistic" tradition in anthropology, that people like James Scott at Yale are part of, where there is skepticism of the process of state formation in early human civilization. Skepticism of technical ways of looking at the world, and building knowledge about things like poverty reduction.

And in Jason Hickel's case, he specifically is part of the de-growth segment of the environmental left that... He does not believe modern economic growth is compatible with preventing catastrophic climate change. And thinks that Green New Deal types, and other people who think that you can have quick economic growth and correspondingly quick poverty reduction, without destroying the environment, are kind of fooling themselves.

And so he wants to build a model where it's not that the capitalism-fueled economic growth reduced poverty, but you still have millions of people in dire material need. And the thing that would actually bring them out is not this "everyone wins, global capitalism" process, but radically reconstituting the world order.

He's less specific about what that radical reconstitution would look like, but I think, in the tradition of many people in that school of thought, views his more role more as critique than trying to construct the alternative.

Julia: Right. Yeah, that's very well-put. And I have to say, when I read Hickel's critique, I had a very bad reaction to it. It's just very... I mean I'm not predisposed to agree with him on the merits of his argument, and his tone was also just very... Sort of dripping with disdain and contempt. And did not come off as someone who was trying to be careful, and objective, and intellectually honest and things like that.

So one thing that really impressed me about your article is that you seemed to either not have that reaction, or managed to overcome it admirably to really do a careful analysis of the disagreement. And as I mentioned, my views, I think, might have shifted since I first read his critique, and we'll talk about that in a little bit.

But let's do a quick survey of some of his main points. And you can give me your reactions.

So, to start: He basically, as you mentioned, Hickel sees the promotion of this graph, talking about these trend lines, as being always in the service of

praising capitalism, or neoliberalism, or globalization, something like that. Which is annoying to him for multiple reasons; partly because he thinks that's not a good story, but also disingenuous because a large percent of the success story in these declining poverty graphs is China. What do you think about that?

Dylan: Right. So I think this is where... This is sort of the meta point of the debate, and I think it's where he probably has the strongest claim.

So, there is a caricatured version of the case that he sees people like Gates and Pinker making. I don't think this is as nuanced as the case they actually make, but there's an air of truth to it, that I think he's plugging into: That you have these countries -- a literal communist society like China, a vaguely socialistic society like India -- you bring in global trade and reduce trade barriers, turn them into export centers, and suddenly poverty goes away. And it's this triumph of neoliberal capitalism. And I think the /r/neoliberal subreddit and neoliberal Twitter account will make this point explicitly and from a, "And that's a good thing" sort of point of view.

And so I think the point of bringing in China is the delta. Like, the change in China that precipitated this growth takeoff was toward markets, but it's not a free market society by any stretch of the imagination. There's State-owned enterprises, there's a lot of capital control, there's strict fencing around free enterprise zones, and nothing like free open competition of firms.

So I think it is a point that people... the sort of more moderate liberals who study globalization, like Sammy Roderick at Harvard, have made. That I think Sammy Roderick was pointing, as early as the 90s, to the actual system in China, and saying: This is closer to a very state-centric mixed economy like Germany than it is to the world that Margaret Thatcher wanted to build in the 80s.

And I think that's right. And I think in general, the kind of government with the best track record is some kind of mixed economy. And so where I agree with Hickel is that you can't point to what happened in China and say, "Therefore we need austerity." Or, "Therefore we need to adopt XYZ free market policies."

Where I part ways is that I do think the delta is important. That China got to something like a Northern European level of state intervention from the literal cultural revolution. And so it was the change from the most hellish and extreme Communist regime you can imagine, to some kind of mixed economy. And the fact that that was the direction is interesting.

And then similarly, that the reforms in India that precipitated a growth takeoff were deregulation -- various vast swaths of regulations involved in consumer markets and agriculture -- I think is interesting.

You can take that too far. I am not a pure free marketer, as you know, but I think it is important to recognize what direction that change occurred in.

Julia: Yeah. I mean, I think one thing that frustrated a lot of people about this debate was that it struck them that he wasn't saying... So, Bill Gates's tweet that started this all, he just posted the graphs and said, "This is one of my favorite infographics. A lot of people underestimate just how much life has improved over the last two centuries."

And then, Hickel's response did not seem to be saying, "Yes, I agree with those facts. However, some people mistakenly infer from that that unfettered free markets are the best, and here's why I disagree."

Instead, it seemed like he was kind of conflating the question of "What should we infer from these graphs, about capitalism or free markets?" with whether the facts of the graphs were in fact correct.

And I think this conflation was inflamed by the title that the Guardian chose for Hickel's response, which was "Bill Gates Says Poverty Is Decreasing. He Couldn't Be More Wrong."

Dylan: Yeah. He could be more wrong.

Julia: He could be. Literally. Yeah. Which I think is... There's so many cases like this where the headline --

Dylan: And Hickel himself has disavowed that headline. Yeah.

Julia: Yeah, he did. Yeah. It's just tough because people anchor to the headline, and then even if you disavow it, they're kind of going to read your argument somewhat tainted by that perspective. Or biased to assume that's... That's in the background of what you're saying, even if you've technically disavowed it.

Dylan: For sure, and also disavowing it and blaming that editor... I don't know how the process works at the Guardian. I think it's more bureaucratic than it is at a place like Vox. I always get final say over my headlines.

Julia: Oh really? Are you sure you want to admit that? You're completely obliterating your plausible deniability here.

Dylan: Exactly. I want to get rid of that excuse.

Julia: Oh, good for you.

Dylan: If I ever claim something like that in the future, yell at me, and tell me I'm wrong.

Julia: Oh, Dylan, tying himself to the mast. Good for you.

Yeah. So I think that was part of it. But... Well, let's move on to one of his other critiques, and we'll come back to the question of "How do these trend lines relate to free markets?" in a little bit.

So one of his main critiques was that drawing the poverty line at \$1.90 a day is completely unreasonable. That's way too low. Instead, we should consider the threshold for extreme poverty at more like \$7.40 a day, and if you do that, then there's still a decline in the poverty rate, but it's much subtler and less dramatic than the one that gets passed around.

Dylan: Right. So I think the key takeaway -- and I hope this is a point that I make clearly in my piece, but -- poverty lines are arbitrary. I think that's super, super important for people to understand. There's nothing magical about living on \$2.01 a day that is meaningfully different from \$1.99 a day.

It is somewhat different, and I think that because the sums of money that people are making in super poor countries are that low, even seemingly insignificant things like a \$0.06 increase in their daily income can be really, really important. But there's no scientific reason why we have this \$2.00 a day line that gets casually used.

Hickel derived the 7.40 number based on calculations about what people would need for an adequate diet. That itself... Defining adequacy is a whole tricky ball of worms. Obviously, there are people living on less than \$2 a day who are not starving to death. That should not be our line. Our line should be something higher than, "You are not literally starving to death."

But once you get above that line, is it "You can afford to eat a healthy mix of fruit and vegetables?" Is it "You can afford to eat as many calories as is recommended?" It just gets tricky.

So this is an area where there's a lot of disagreement among economists. Charles Kenney and Lance Prichett are people that have argued for 10 or 15 dollars a day, even, as a poverty line. The US poverty line is about \$17.60 a day for a family of four.

Julia: But as you say, you can pick any number, right? So what does it mean to pick one number as the poverty line? Why can't you just... Can't you just have a chart that shows, "Here are different daily earnings." And this chart will show

you how the percentage of people living below that line has declined over time -- and we'll just show you all the lines?

Dylan: Sure. So one thing is that if you set the line high enough, the increase starts to look small. So if you set the line as... Let's choose a very extreme line. At like a billion dollars a day, then there's no decline in global poverty. And if you set it as \$20 a day, there still has not been a very dramatic-looking decline. There has been some, but because a lot of the progress that's happening is below that line, it's people moving from making \$1 a day to making \$2.50 a day, that's not going to show up if you set the line that high.

Julia: But isn't there just a trade-off between how striking the progress is, and how widespread it is?

... Or maybe Hickel's point would be: Yes, there's a trade-off, but there's still some optimal point on that curve between those two goods, that you would pick if you wanted to optimize for making progress look best. And that's the point that they picked with the \$1.90 line. Or, yeah. Threshold.

Dylan: I think Hickel's point is that they're being deceptive, and that they picked the line to make the most dramatic looking decline in graphics. And that it would be less dramatic looking if you used his 7.40 number.

And this is I think another important thing here, is that we're talking about distributions. That, in terms of human well-being, what you care about is not if people get over some arbitrarily chosen line. What you care about is if people at the bottom end are seeing their incomes increase.

And Martin Ravallion, with Shaohua Chen, who's a statistician at the World Bank, graphed what poverty would look like at various poverty lines in 1981 through 2008. And what he found was that, for any line you pick between \$0 and I think it's \$13, poverty is lower in 2008 than it is in 1981.

It's not that they arbitrarily picked a number that shows a decline where you would not have seen a decline if you picked any other number. The whole income distribution has shifted rightward. Incomes as a whole have grown.

And so I see what Hickel is saying from the point of view of communicating graphs of numbers, about it looking more striking. But I think if the dispute is "Changing the poverty line shows that we haven't reduced poverty," I don't think that's actually what it shows.

Julia: Right. So what about the objection that the numbers in those graphs, for poverty before like 1980, are so messy and patchy as to be basically useless? And we shouldn't pretend that we know how poor people were back then? That's another one of Hickel's critiques.

Dylan: Sure. So this is one that... I think this might be the point I'm most sympathetic to Hickel on. And one he and Roser are most --

Julia: I think they're farthest apart on that, yeah.

Dylan: It's basically a question of, what can you take from data about agricultural production and productivity that people have carefully put together centuries and centuries in the past? What can you use from there to infer poverty rates?

And I think Roser's position, and the position of a lot of economic historians who do this research is that you can infer quite a lot. That before the industrial revolution, productivity in the economy was more or less synonymous with agricultural productivity. We can figure out agricultural productivity from... In the English case, we have incredibly good records about how much wheat and barley and what-have-you is being produced, even before the English Civil War. And that you can then infer from that things about global productivity and level of living standards in various parts around the country you're studying.

I think Hickel's dispute is, A, those are not actually poverty numbers, they're production numbers. And those aren't the same thing. And so there might be distributional issues that are being elided there.

And secondly, it's a very European-centric data set. There's not a lot of good data, especially in Africa, but also for Asia and Latin America. So presenting this as data for the whole world is not persuasive.

To that, I think Roser would say, "A, we do have data on areas accounting for a huge share of the world population." So if you only have data for like China and continental Europe, but that represents a huge share of world population, maybe that's not as much of a problem.

And so, one specific point he makes is that Africa was only about eight percent of the world's population in 1820, when these charts start. So even if everyone in Africa was not in extreme poverty, it would not affect the numbers that much.

But I think the deeper dispute is... What do you say about the people for whom we don't have data? And I think the assumption of Roser, and the assumption of many economic historians is they were in poverty. That A, they didn't have monetary systems, but there's just no reason to think that they had the kind of productivity growth that you saw in post-Industrial Revolution Europe. Every piece of evidence we have suggests that they were subsistence farmers. That it's a quality of life most analogous to subsistence farming, extreme poverty, that people experience now.

And I think Hickel, and many anthropologists, tell a less gloomy picture of pre-colonial agricultural societies in a lot of these places. That there were shared, common resources, that before the Colonialists came in and turned everything into markets and divided up land, that there was a sharing economy, and people were able to put together a fine living off the land.

Julia: I wasn't sure from reading his explanation -- I can't tell if that's an argument for why our estimates of GDP or productivity back then would be inaccurate, and actually wealth or productivity was higher than we would estimate? Or whether it's an argument that there were valuable things that contributed to well-being that aren't captured in our measures of GDP or productivity?

Dylan: Sure. Or that aren't captured in measures of poverty that we're computing exclusively based on old GDP data.

Julia: Yeah.

Dylan: Yeah, I mean I think he would claim that the normative and empirical disputes are tightly linked.

And so the reason we use these poverty numbers is to say something about how the condition of humanity has improved. And it might not necessarily mean that, if quality of life was pretty good in like Ghana in the 1820s.

I'm not an expert on Ghanaian history or pre-colonial African history of any kind, and so I try to be as neutral as I can about that. My understanding is that most economic historians believe that most of the world was in a Malthusian trap -- where you could get technological improvements, but if you did, there wouldn't be enough food to feed everyone, and then the population would crash again. That was just a pretty shitty existence.

That was my prior going into this. It's still more or less my prior. I think he's complicated my views somewhat.

The point where I'm really sympathetic to Hickel is that I think people like him, who've studied colonialism, look at a graph that shows poverty declining worldwide from like 1820 to like 1900 and say, "You are papering over some really horrible stuff that happened there." That it's telling a history of the world in which the king of Belgium sending in a private company to cut off the hands of Congolese people who didn't want to work in their rubber plantations does not get any weight.

And the obvious response to that is: Not every graph can tell every story. But this is a graph that's trying to tell a big story. And it's trying to tell it through a sweeping narrative about the world. And I am sympathetic to him that

including the old data papers over ways in which living standards for many people across the world became dramatically worse over that period.

So I'm sympathetic to that. I still think the graph is accurate, but this again is a, "How do you morally interpret the graph?" question, more than a, "Is the raw data correct?" question.

Julia: Right. So two things: One is that the economist Noah Smith made what I thought is an interesting point, that if you assume that Hickel is correct that living standards or incomes were actually much higher back then than our metrics suggest... assuming that's correct, the story of that graph is that poverty got worse during the colonial period and then began to fall after decolonialization. So if Hickel's right, this is actually a more pro-capitalism, pro-free market story than it had seemed before, right?

Because the... So, colonialism made the world much worse than the current graph suggests, and so, assuming our metrics now are correct, that means the delta is even bigger. That relative to how things had been, globalization and free markets made things much better.

Dylan: Yeah. No, I think that's a good point. But if he was... It's interesting the way you put that, in that it's "a better case for capitalism and free markets." Since I think it reveals different ways in which people are thinking about the stakes, and the teams here.

I imagine many of your listeners will have read, and if they haven't, they should, Scott Alexander's old post about conflict theory versus mistake theory.

Julia: I was going to bring that up! Yeah. Go on.

Dylan: Yeah. I think it's super relevant for this debate. So I think... The short version is... Scott divides people into mistake theorists -- which I would identify as, I think he is, I think you are to some degree -- who look at social problems and say, "What are some ways that we can work around these? What are some ways we can solve them that benefit all, or most, people?"

Julia: Sorry to interrupt -- the thing that's most salient to me about mistake theory is that it sort of assumes that the disagreements between people, about what we should do, what policies we should enact, are... We're all kind of doctors clustered around a patient, trying to figure out the right way to treat him. And if we disagree, it's because we haven't fully shared our models yet.

Dylan: Right. Right. We all want to help the world, but we just disagree on how to help it.

Julia: Right. And to be clear, I don't think Scott's point was that there are people who literally believe that it's true of everyone in the world. It's just kind of the assumption... The simplified assumption you tend to operate under.

Dylan: Yeah. All models are incorrect, but this is a model.

Julia: Right. So go on, sorry.

Dylan: And yeah, and conflict theory -- which I think sort of the canonical version is Marxism, but there are many versions of conflict theory -- is, "Stuff is bad because people have cause these problems, and so we need to defeat those people." That there are societal forces that have operated to make things bad for people. And the way to fix them is not to hover over like a doctor, but to gear up for a fight, and fight the people who made everything bad.

Julia: And specifically, I think the disagreements in conflict theory, through their lens are not... "You know, we all have wrong models to varying degrees." It's that if two armies are disagreeing over who has the right to the land, they can make appeals to justice or moral arguments or something, but at the end of the day, they're disagreeing because they both want the same land, and any arguments they make are just going to be rationalizations for their desires, which conflict with each other.

Dylan: Right, right. I think that the Israel Palestine conflict is the worst possible case for mistake theory and the best possible case for conflict theory. There's a plot of land that both people wanted.

But I think Hickel is very much a conflict theorist. And I think this is a view that is shared in a lot of post-colonial anthropology -- global capitalism as an extension of colonialism. As a way that Western powers exert power over poor countries through debt peonage, through interventions and coups. And so saying something like, "It looks better for global capitalism" ...I think he still views the post-1950s, 1960s period as an extension of that imperial reach.

Which I think is where I break with him. I think there is a real difference between Ghana for the Ghanaians, and Ghana as ruled from afar by the British. And there are still influences, and there's ways through which neocolonialism can be a useful analytical lens. But the US having a military base in your country is not the same thing as the British controlling food supplies... There's just a qualitative difference there that I don't think he thinks is as sharp. But yeah, there's more to say on the conflict-mistake theory elements going on here.

Julia: Yeah, yeah. We'll probably circle back to it soon. The other thing that I wanted to note is that... So, when I said that it seems like there are these

different camps that rally behind and against these graphs showing the decline in poverty, one way to divide up the camps, I thought, was mistake versus conflict theorists -- and another one that occurred to me was decouplers versus non-decouplers. Which is a distinction that I was talking about on that recent episode with John Nerst on erisology, the study of disagreements.

And he had made this... He had put forward this theory about why Ezra Klein and Sam Harris had disagreed about Charles Murray and IQ, and race, and things like that. Which we shouldn't try to get into here because we do not have the time, so please don't respond to that.

But in a nutshell, decouplers want to be able to talk about the specific claim, or the specific disagreement, without context. We should just be able to isolate these specific, factual questions and figure out who's right.

And the non-decouplers don't think that's feasible or desirable. And they're kind of suspicious that the alleged decouplers really are decoupling, as opposed to just trying to smuggle in a lot of attitudes and implications while claiming to be decoupling.

And so in this case, it seemed to me that... I don't want to put words into Hickel's mouth or anything, but it kind of seemed to me that he saw these graphs, these claims about progress being shared, as updating people away from what he saw as the true worldview, and so his arguments against the graphs were... They were less about the specific factual claims in those graphs, and more about: Are these graphs causing people to update the wrong way?

Dylan: Yeah. I think that's right. One of the most interesting responses... A big fan of Hickel's who writes in US media, who I follow as sort of a reasonably thoughtful lefty critic of a lot of the work I do, is this guy Adam Johnson, who writes for Fairness and Accuracy in Media. He might write for Alternate sometimes.

But he linked to the article and was sort of like, "They're having to rebut Hickel. We've got them on the run, boys."

Julia: What a conflict theorist thing to say.

Dylan: It was great. And one of the replies was, "I don't know why Matthews thinks it's important that they agree on this narrowly delineated set of facts, when the only important thing is what kind of world do you want?"

And yeah, I think there's just a disagreement about what questions we're trying to answer. I was trying narrowly in that piece to answer a question

about what has happened in the world since 1820, vis a vis these numbers. Is this graph accurate?

But I think there's an intelligible worldview in which what I was doing there was obfuscation, and distracting people from the real political stakes of what is being said. And serving as kind of -- insofar as I'm someone who codes, because of Vox's reputation, and my own reputation, as left of center -- doing sort of "useful idiot" work for, "Bad guys."

I don't think that's true, but it makes sense within its own logic.

Julia: Yeah.

Dylan: And I think there are cases in which... I don't want to get into the Sam Harris thing either, but I think there are cases involving historic injustices where I become less of a decoupler than I normally am. In part because I think decouplers are sensitive to frauds --

Julia: Like, people trying to game...

Dylan: Just bad actors. People who are trying to smuggle in bad claims. Who can rely on intellectual charity, and openness, and willingness to separate them from other contexts, in order to serve their interests.

And that's obviously some people, but I think Hickel thinks it's a lot of people. Like, a lot more than I actually think there are.

And so I find myself in the situation where I totally believe in a presumption toward good-faith dialogue, hearing your critics, trying to update honestly and debate about the issues at hand without getting into who people are -- while at the same time, I see the point that there are spoilers.

And I think this is a view that comes out a lot in DC specifically, because so much of life in Washington DC is hearing arguments presented in good faith that really are funded, in some deep way, and really are not coming from honest citizen scholars. When a lot of think tanks in DC write about how Jamal Khashoggi's death in Saudi Arabia really isn't a big deal, and then it turns out that they took a lot of money from Saudi Arabia -- you get kind of cynical about this.

And there are obviously ways in which that plays out in the Bay, there are ways that plays out in New York, but I think DC is sort of a conflict theory engine... The baseline economy of how ideas get funded is so based around existing conflicts that it lends itself to that interpretation very easily.

Julia: Right. Yeah. So I'm very decouply by nature, but an argument that sways me a little bit away from it is just:

When you evaluate an argument, even if it's very clear and straightforward and you can check the references, there's always some probability that you're missing something. Or you're being misled by some kind of misdirection, or something like that.

And the probability gets higher the more complex the argument is, or the more chance there is that the evidence the person is pointing to is unrepresentative in some way. There's all these ways that you can make an argument seem very convincing without it quite being true.

So there's that probability, that you can never fully erase, even if you're a very smart reasoner evaluating the argument.

And knowing that the person making the argument has a motive should give you a little bit of skepticism that trying to reason about the argument is a worthwhile thing to do. And the more skepticism you have, the more it makes sense to just not really engage with the arguments, and just default to the simplified assumption that people are just trying to advance their motives, and there's no real intellectual disagreement here at all.

Dylan: Right. Right. Well, it's also just a useful... I am not generally a fan of the work of Neil Ferguson for reasons that are beyond the scope of this podcast, but he had an interesting interview I read a long time ago, where the claim was that the saddest thing about the death of Marxism in history was that it denied everyone a theory of causation. That you needed some sense of how causation works as historians, and Marxism is just a very clear and easily usable theory of why things happen in society.

And he has this slightly kooky counterfactual version of doing history, which is social science with the smallest N you can possibly imagine and does not strike me as super promising. But I think that's a good point.

And I think that causation is really hard to sort out. And if you lived your life as a non-Bayesian, requiring a good, natural experiment to believe anything causes anything, you would go mad pretty quickly. And I think something that conflict theories like Marxism do for people is give them a theory of causation. Of why things happen. And I think Marxism provides one that's uniquely deleterious to certain kinds of debate.

But it's not the only one. I know very conservative Catholic folks who are very skeptical of sources of secular knowledge for similar reasons. Neoreactionary folks always talk about the "cathedral," and how you can't

trust knowledge coming from elite press and universities. So there are a lot of ways in which that skepticism manifests.

Julia: Yeah. Interesting. Okay, let's move onto the last one of Jason's critiques that I want to talk about: Which is that the graphs showing the dramatic decline in poverty are focused on the percentage of the world in extreme poverty, and that's the wrong way to look at it. Instead, we should be looking at the change in the absolute number of people in poverty -- which, at least according to Hickel's preferred threshold of extreme poverty, which is the \$7.40 a day, that number's actually increased in the last 30 years.

Dylan: Right. Right. And I think the difficulty here is that you... There are two things that go into a calculation of how many people are living in absolute poverty. There's the poverty rate, and then there's how many people there are period.

And so, if the rate has fallen, but the number of people has gone up, that almost definitionally means that you've just gotten population growth. And so a glib response to him would be to say, "You're playing games to try to get population growth to count as an increase in poverty."

I think what he would say to that is, "No, what I'm saying is that what we should be striving for is a system in which, if you are born in the world, you are not in poverty. Where the mere fact of population growth does not lead to more people being in poverty."

And I agree with that as a goal. I don't want the absolute number of people in poverty to be growing either. But talking about ways that arguments could be used and misused, I think, in a strange way, Hickel is not sufficiently sensitive to the ways in which that line of reasoning can be used to support population control measures in place of actually reducing poverty rates.

Dylan: One of the episodes of my podcast, I'm sorry to shamelessly plug, was about the Ford Foundation's funding of sterilization, particularly vasectomies, operations in India. They funded millions and millions of them over the course of decades. And then using the system they set up, Indira Gandhi forcibly sterilized about 8 or 9 million men in the course of a couple of years.

And if you look back and see the rhetoric that people were using during that period, it was all about reducing poverty. And they, I'm sure behind closed doors, people working at the Ford Foundation in the 1950s were not perfectly awesome about there being more brown people in the world. But that doesn't show up in their official documentation. What they're saying is, "We're going to see a massive increase in poverty just because all these poor people are being born. And so what we need to do is get these people to have fewer kids, and when it turns out that asking them to have fewer kids isn't

working, we have to sort of start offering them monetary incentives to have more kids."

And then when that doesn't work, you get things like the state of Bihar in India started cutting off food rations to families that had more than two kids. So you have to threaten them with starvation to not have kids.

So this is all a very non-decouple critique, but...

Julia: Well, I mean there are two ways you could interpret... Suppose someone says, "Okay, I'm going to penalize cities or societies or whatever for each additional person who isn't provided for by that city or state." There's two ways to interpret what they're disincentivizing there. One is they're disincentivizing population growth. The other is, what they really care about is: conditional on there being people, they're trying to disincentivize the society not taking care of those people.

And I assume Hickel would say the latter, although I don't know.

Dylan: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's what he actually says. And I think my argument -- similar to his argument that this chart can flip into apologia for global capitalism -- is that I think that claim of his, and using absolute poverty numbers, really easily flips into population control nightmares.

And as someone who reports on philanthropy and hears what philanthropists are doing, that's a real thing that's happened, that I think there's a lot of appeal to and attraction to. And anything that lends aid and comfort to that makes me a little uncomfortable.

So there's that, and then there's just the broader... That's an effect of population growth. That's not a sign that the system is working less well. Because your odds of being in poverty, given that you're born, seem to be going down.

Julia: Yeah. So I mentioned that one of the podcast episodes that I did that got me re-thinking about your article was the episode on erisology with John Nerst. The other one was my recent episode with Tyler Cowen, where we talked about his book defending big business against its critics.

And I didn't really get into this question with him during the show, but I wanted to describe an issue I had with the book to you, because it's relevant for this question of the Pinker-Hickel debate.

So, Tyler's argument was basically, big business... Corporations have made us much better off. They provide us all of these great products and services that

clearly we value a lot. They add a lot of value to our lives. Corporations have made us a lot richer. So it's good. Big business is good. Why are you mad at it?

But I just struggled with what the comparison point was, that allows us to say "big business is good."

So you could imagine a world of corporations that were doing the same things as real corporations are doing -- they're providing us products and services we value, they're making us richer, but also, in this thought experiment, the corporations dump all of their trash in our streets, and so we have to live in these smelly cities, we get sick more often... And suppose the corporations could put the trash in landfills, but they're like, "Eh, it costs us a little money, we don't feel like it, no one's forcing us to, so yeah. You just have trash in your city now."

So in that world, people might say, "Yes, okay. If I had to choose... Yes, on balance, the corporations are making our lives better. They are raising our standard of living, and yeah, the trash and the sickness is not good, but still on net, corporations are making our lives better." But we still are reluctant to say 'the corporations are good' -- because can't we have the world where the businesses don't throw trash into our streets? That seems like the relevant baseline, and that seems to justify being angry at the businesses, and not just shrugging and saying, "Well, big businesses are good because *on net* it's worth it for us."

And so, to bring it back to this issue, it seems to me that the implicit baselines of comparison that Pinker and Hickel are very different. Pinker's baseline would be something like, relative to the lives that these poor people *had been living*, they are now better off, so that's good. And Hickel would say, "Relative to the lives that they *could be leading*, that we as a society could *choose* to give these poor people, they're much worse off." And so it isn't enough to just look at this trendline and say, "Well, they're better off now than they used to be, and so it's good."

To extend my thought experiment, if you imagine you had a bunch of billionaires having a party in their mansion, and there are all these people almost starving to death outside, and the billionaires gave the poor people \$1 last year, and then this year they gave them \$1.50, and they're like, "Look. The trendline has gone up. They're better off. Isn't this good?" And Hickel would be like, "Why can't you give them more money? You have a billion dollars. This is not a trendline we should feel good about."

Dylan: Right, right. Yeah. I mean, I think baseline selection is always wildly important. But I would say, in regards to that, that we are getting closer to the standard that Hickel is setting. And that even if the correct response is not praising how far we've gotten, I think that's analytically useful.

So I tried to conclude on this note in the piece, but I think the big question now is not what happened in the 19th century, in these current accounts data. The big question is, "How do we interpret recent developments for what we're doing in the future?" And I think Hickel's takeaway is, "The system is broken. We need to throw it out."

And my interpretation is "The system is flawed, but we are making progress. And it really is possible to rid the world of the most extreme forms of deprivation, and it seems possible to do that without a global revolution."

And I think he would say that that really is the crux of the disagreement. Given that our goal is a world where no one has to worry about going hungry, say, just as a shorthand, I think we can get there broadly within the contours of the international system we have now, and he doesn't.

And that's not just of historical interest. That's a "right now" question, of should we be building up institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and trying to encourage labor and goods mobility between poor countries. Should we be embracing the fact that China is exporting a lot of their factories to Africa, and trying to do industrialized growth in Africa? Or should be worried about... How you feel about all those things happening right now depends a lot on, Do you think this trend is going to get us where we need to go, or do you not?

Julia: Relative to the other option, though, right?

Dylan: Right, right.

Julia: Like he might say, "Yes, eventually this trend will get us where we need to go, but if we were actually a just society, we would get there much faster by giving poor people a minimum income," or something like that.

Dylan: Well yeah. This is a part in his writing where it's... There's an old skit on "A Bit of Fry and Laurie" where Hugh Laurie would... It was a protest song, and he would list all these problems, you know. People are going hungry, and we're fighting all these wars, and we don't know what we're fighting for. And all we've gotta do is -- and then the chorus is just him playing harmonica. It's a listing of problems, and then, "What we've gotta do to solve it is -- " Harmonica break.

And I mean I think that the answer is it's really hard to imagine -- Fredric Jameson is the Marxist theorist has this famous quote that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. And I think that resonates with people because it's hard to articulate concrete alternatives.

But I would like that to be where this debate goes next, of... if Hickel shows up and says, "No, what we need to do is set up a trade regime where all participating countries have to agree to X minimum wage." I don't know where I would fall on that, but that's a very useful debate to have. And I hope that the debate over the numbers can serve as the motivation to get into the details of how we're actually going to get to the endpoint where everybody is above \$2, \$5, \$7.40, or whatever line we want to set.

Julia: Yeah. And I don't really want to get into the nitty-gritty of how feasible is it to reduce poverty, in what timeline, with free markets versus something more like socialism.

The thing that I found so interesting was that it had seemed so self-evident to me, when I first encountered this debate, that... "Look, here is the trendline showing poverty going down, and that is good." And that seemed so hard to argue with! The trendline is just a fact. And people being less poor now than they were before is just good. How could you say that's not good?

And so I feel like the added insight I got from mulling it over more was just that "good" doesn't really make sense without a comparison point, and there are implicit comparisons being made that I wasn't attending to.

I think, actually, the implicit comparison that is often made when these graphs are passed around is something I didn't see talked about in your piece, and that Hickel didn't mention, which is just "Compared to what most people think." Look at these trendlines, it's really good compared to what you thought was happening. That's a very sensible way to interpret "These trendlines are good."

And then Hickel's comparison point was: compared to what would, in his model of economics and justice, what we easily could be doing and are not, this is not a good trendline. The same way a bunch of billionaires giving \$1.50 to a poor person this year instead of \$1 last year is not a good trendline to celebrate.

Dylan: Right. And I think there's also a perceived callousness based on who's saying it. So just using it to try to motivate my intuitions here, with something that does get me upset: The Heritage Foundation periodically comes out with reports on poverty, arguing that we overestimate poverty, and one of their main metrics is what share of poor people own TVs, or refrigerators, or Xboxes.

And I, as a lib, am very triggered by this. And feel very owned. Because it feels upsetting to see well-paid think tankers dismissing the struggles of poor people in the United States by saying, "Hey, but they have an Xbox." It feels trivializing.

And I think for someone like Hickel looking at someone like me, or someone like Max Roser, or someone, especially like Bill Gates, saying, "Hey, we're making progress. All these people are no longer living on \$2 a day or less." It's like the guy saying, "Well, you have your Xboxes, why aren't you happy now?"

Julia: Especially if he thinks you could be solving this poverty and you're not. That makes it much more callous.

Dylan: Right. And specifically for someone like Bill Gates, who I would think he would say, his existence as Bill Gates is prima facie unjust.

Julia: One other thought I had, that might be a crux is... I wonder if you bite the "repugnant conclusion" bullet and Hickel doesn't?

Dylan: That's an interesting thought.

Julia: So you've written a lot about factory farming. Let's try this analogy:

Say this year, there are 10 billion chickens in factory farms, and suppose these chickens lead really miserable lives, but just barely better than not existing. And say there are also a thousand chickens that live wonderful lives on green pastures in very welfare-conscious farms.

So that's the world today in this thought experiment. 10 billion miserable chickens, one thousand happy ones.

And then, let's say, next year, or some years down the road, we have 20 billion miserable chickens and five thousand happy chickens. So that trendline is... The percentage of chickens that are miserable has gone down. But we have way more miserable chickens than we did before. So the absolute number has gone up. And they're not literally living lives worse than death, but they're still really unhappy. And so someone who bites the repugnant conclusion bullet would say, "Yes, that's a better world." And someone who doesn't would say, "No, that world's worse."

Dylan: Right. It's so funny you're bringing this up. I should keep my powder dry and not reveal all of this, but I did an interview a couple days ago with Torbjörn Tännsjö. Who is a professor at Stockholm University, who is a philosopher who bites the bullet on the repugnant conclusion, and is one of the most influential supporters of the repugnant conclusion.

And I actually asked him point blank, "I'm a vegetarian. Should I be eating meat so as to promote the further existence of animals?" And I think he drew the line somewhere between cage-free, free range, and then standard factory farming, that I think his view was --

Julia: Wait, the line was like, are their lives worth living?

Dylan: Right. That life as a permanently confined broiler chicken who, you crush your own legs under the weight of your own existence, is probably worse than not existing. But he was saying, "Yeah, you should be eating ethically raised beef and pigs. So you're sort of abdicating your duty to provide for these animals, and for their ability to have good lives."

And yeah, I'm attracted to that. I still, like many people, have the voice in my head that says the repugnant conclusion can't possibly be right.

Julia: I know. Actually, maybe just to clarify for listeners who haven't heard about the repugnant conclusion, do you want to summarize it?

Dylan: Sure. So the repugnant conclusion, coined by Derek Parfit in his book *Reasons and Persons* is the idea that... So it starts with the intuition that if what matters is the total amount of happiness in the world, then it might... If you have 10 billion extremely happy people in the world, maybe it's better to have 20 billion people who are only 75% as happy. Since each individual person is less happy in that world, but the the sum total of happiness is greater.

And so then you carry that out, and you get to a world of a trillion people, who are all barely surviving -- and are not committing suicide, and so presumably are glad to be alive, but it's not great. So the repugnant conclusion is the idea that that's the best of all possible worlds. That you want as many people as possible, even if each individual one is living a worse life.

Julia: As long as they're just barely above suicidal.

Dylan: Right. One of Tännsjö's more interesting points is that he thinks the difference between the best possible life and a life not worth living is not very profound. Because he's like, There are a lot of times when I don't think my life is worth living, when I'm deeply sad, when I'm depressed... And most of us end up just barely above. And I think if that empirically is true, that recasts the whole question a lot to me. Maybe a maximum population is not far from where we are now --

Julia: And to be clear, the relevance to the debate that you wrote about was... If you bite the repugnant conclusion bullet, then having the percentage of people living in extreme poverty go down, even though the absolute number goes up, is a good thing, but if you don't bite the bullet, then it's a bad thing.

Dylan: Right. And the people being born into poverty are still grateful to exist. And we should not be upset that they now exist, would be the conclusion.

And yeah, I think I would accept a soft version of that. With the caveat that I think a lot of this changes if you take the view of the sheer size of the future, and how many people are going to live there. That it might be that all of this is overwhelmed... That the size of the population at any given point in time is overwhelmed in importance by the duration of humanity. But that's a topic for many other podcasts.

Julia: All right, well that's probably a good place to wrap up. I mean -- I guess I'm curious, before we drop it, if your views changed at all in the process of analyzing that debate?

Dylan: I think I moved a little closer to Hickel, especially on the historical sources. I think there was more fallibility in where those numbers came from than I had thought before, and I grew a little more sensitive to what Hickel was saying about the risk of downplaying how bad colonialism is.

Julia: I guess the relevance of colonialism that we didn't explicitly talk about is... If you recognize how bad colonialism is, that might increase your sympathy for the view I'm assuming is Hickel's, which is that we have a duty to provide a decent standard of living for anyone who's born into this world. And so that's the relevant baseline that we should be comparing the change in poverty to.

Dylan: Right. Right. And that the previous trajectory before European powers came in and grabbed everything was much more positive, which I agree with, and I think most development economists would agree with. We're still only now discovering many of the ways in which the legacy of colonialism has held a lot of countries back. Yeah.

Julia: I had a friend message me in mild annoyance after I tweeted a link to your article back in February. And his complaint was that he felt like, in an effort to be really careful and charitable in laying out this viewpoint that you mostly disagree with, you are kind of inadvertently creating this false balance. Where someone casually skimming the article would just get the sense that like, "Oh, there's a genuine debate about whether poverty has fallen." Or something like that.

I mostly disagree with him. Especially in the sense that, upon thinking about it more, I think there are some genuinely good questions raised by Hickel -- or at least your steelman of Hickel, I don't know which. Even if they don't really change my view on the change in poverty or how good it is, they point out some important background premises or assumptions that are necessary, for me to hold this view that Bill Gates's tweet of the graph was basically correct and good.

So I don't really think it was a mistake to write this excellent analysis of the disagreement. But I'm wondering if you have any heuristics for thinking

about when to do this kind of careful, charitable reading of disagreements, versus when you say, "Yeah, there are going to be free riders on my... As a mistake theorist, there are going to be people who try to take advantage of that, and get more sympathy or attention for their view, because we feel compelled to try to be charitable to it."

Dylan: Yeah. That's a good question. I think, as an institution, Vox has... One of the things we tell writers when they come on board is to try to err on the side of charity, just figure out the best arguments. Similar points of epistemic hygiene that you talk about on on this podcast or that the Center for Applied Rationality tries to promote in people of steelmanning views and what-have-you. I don't do that all the time. Do you follow my Twitter? And I should probably do it more than I do.

I guess, yeah the best heuristic is... Who is going to be reading this? And what are they sympathetic to, and what are they going to expect to be treated with respect? And that maybe *shouldn't* be the heuristic, but I think one thing that I was thinking about writing this, is: A lot of people who read Vox are coming into this had something like Hickel's view. And I want them to feel like their view was heard and treated seriously.

Julia: That's a good point.

Dylan: But at the same time, I don't know. I struggle to come up with a sympathetic version of arguments sometimes. Like Trump's Chief Economic Advisor had some argument that workers pay 3,000% of the cost of corporate taxes. I really struggle to interpret that in a --

Julia: Yeah, I don't... I mean... The point of steelmanning, or the principle of charity, is not to practice bending over backwards and contorting yourself intellectually to find some way... I mean, it's a fun game. I think Scott once steelmanned the Time Cube guy. Do you know him?

Dylan: Oh of course I do.

Julia: That was before your time at MIT...

Dylan: "Time is a cube with four squares."

Julia: Yeah. Classic. Which was a fun intellectual exercise, but no.

I advocate applying the steelman or the principle of charity to... maybe not *just* when it seems useful, because you're probably underestimating the cases when it seems useful, but maybe cases when it seems useful plus 30%. To correct for your motivated reasoning, or something like that.

Dylan: And every day I'm trying to do it more. But yeah, it is not a human, natural cognitive pattern.

Julia: Well, I thought you did a great job in that article, and it clearly stuck with me, and kept me thinking for weeks, so thank you for that.

Dylan: I really appreciate that.

Julia: So we'll link to that article and some of the other missives in that debate, as well as to some of your earlier writing on the trajectories of progress. And to the Future Perfect podcast, which I'm very excited to see starting its second season. And Dylan, before I let you go, I wanted to ask you for one or more books that most influenced your worldview or your life.

Dylan: Books that influenced my worldview or my life.

Julia: Yeah.

Dylan: So we talked about it this podcast, and I think I mentioned it last podcast, but *Reasons and Persons* by Derek Parfit is the single most influential book for how I think about life and morality.

Julia: Oh, that worked out well.

Dylan: It worked out quite well.

I think the second one that I would say, and that I think is particularly pertinent for this issue and for understanding conflict theory is a book called *Gang of Five* by Nina Easton. I don't know if it's in print still, even. But it's a group biography of five conservative activists in the 80s and 90s, so it's Bill Kristol, Grover Norquist, Ralph Reed, David McIntosh, and Clint Bolick.

And some of those are reasonably famous in US politics, some are not. But all of them have been pretty effective at building institutions that have significant influence through advocacy, and I think it's useful for people regardless of their worldview to see how to effectively argue for your worldview.

But I think it's also an unusually detailed and rich portrait of what that landscape looked like in politics. And I think a mistake that some mistake theorists sometimes make is underestimating the degree to which all of these people view their lives through conflict theory.

Like there's some scene where Grover Norquist gives the speech from the movie Patton, but where every time General Patton mentioned Nazis, he put in "Democrats."

Julia: Man.

Dylan: And yeah. I mean, if you're in the fight, you're in the fight. And I think that's a worldview that is influential and important to understand.

Julia: Did it make you more "in the fight," or did it just make you more inclined to second-guess your default assumption that everyone is a good-faith actor trying to figure things out like you?

Dylan: I think it mostly did the latter. But I think there's also a degree of respect gained in it. I think... All the funniest anecdotes in it are from Grover Norquist, but there's some point where he was on the Harvard Crimson editorial board, and Jonathan Alter, who's now sort of a standard liberal writer biographer, but at the time was a revolutionary communist, was talking about how to plan a revolutionary overthrow in the United States. And Grover Norquist turned to him and was like, "Well, do you have any guns?" He was like, "No, of course I don't have any guns. We're liberals. We don't have guns." And he says, "Well, I have a lot of guns. So if you need to do a revolution, you come see me, I'll give you some of my guns."

And there is that sort of attitude of "We're all trying to do our projects." Like, he was being sarcastic, but there was also a tinge of, "I respect what you're trying to do." And so I think there is honor in conflict theory, is one thing I took from that.

Julia: Wow. I notice that I feel hesitant to make me feel that way. I notice twinges of the feeling you're describing, just hearing the anecdotes relayed, and I feel nervous about having more of that feeling.

Dylan: Right. I don't like how sympathetic I got to some of these people. I don't think Ralph Reed's approach to the world is ethical. But yeah, I think that's what makes it a good biography, also.

Julia: Great. Well, those are two excellent picks, especially two very different excellent picks. And we'll link to those as well on the podcast website. Dylan, thank you so much for coming back on the show. This was really enjoyable and really enlightening.

Dylan: Always a pleasure. Thanks so much for having me.

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