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MBS (00:00):

So many of the models that underpin our society like science and economics in particular have as their basis that we are rational people doing rational things. Now, look, that's not totally untrue, but oh boy, you and I both know, I mean, some people are nuts. And I'm not just talking about the them who are on the other side of the fence, whatever that fence might be for you. I'm talking about your friends and your family. I mean, I'm talking about me. I'm talking about you.

MBS (00:34):

Welcome to Two Pages with MBS. This is the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book. Now, Julia Galef is the author of The Scout Mindset. And that book is a combination of a long-time quest of hers, how do we improve human reasoning and judgment? Julia's pursued this

doggedly. She co-founded a nonprofit called the Center for Applied Rationality. And she's hosted a podcast called Rationally Speaking for the past 10 or 11 years.

MBS (01:04):

Now, look, I know I'm irrational. I mean, first I know a little bit about how I'm primed by my environment or my cognitive biases. Plus I can see what's going on inside my head. I mean, trust me, it's ugly in there at times. So is it even a useful goal to try and be perfectly rational?

Julia (01:25):

It's not possible to be perfectly rational. That is accurate. I think of rationality as this kind of Polaris, like a North Star, as kind of a thing to aim towards, but no human, no matter how smart they are or how much effort they're putting into it can be perfectly rational. It's an abstract ideal. And as you say, there's always going to be cognitive biases built into our minds. I mean, we just have limited computing power in our brains and limited time to devote to reasoning. So you can't actually, you can't come to the perfectly calculated ideal optimal decision or optimal answer. You'd have to be a supercomputer with infinite knowledge.

MBS (02:08):

Well, speaking for myself, I'm no supercomputer with infinite knowledge, but what about those people who are convinced that they're always rational, which of course means they're convinced they're always right?

Julia (02:20):

In my experience, those people are the minority, not a tiny minority, but still the minority. And a larger group are the people who say, "Yes, of course I've been wrong in the past. And of course I recognize that humans in general are not perfect reasoners and humans in general have biases and get things wrong. And so I recognize that I'm not an exception to the rule of humanity. I get that," but

still, despite that intellectual recognition of their own bias, it still can be very difficult to in the moment recognize, "Oh right now I'm rationalizing" or, "Oh right now I am in denial." That's really hard.

MBS (03:02):

So how do we lift our thinking game? How do we open ourselves to be not just smarter, but better humans. Julia frames her new book with a powerful metaphor of two different mindsets, the soldier and the scout.

Julia (03:17):

Soldier mindset is my term for essentially when you're reasoning about something or deciding what to believe, you're often unconsciously reasoning as if you're a soldier defending your beliefs, the things you want to believe, against any evidence that might threaten them. You can actually see soldier mindset reflected in the language that we use to talk about reasoning and belief in argument. We talk about shooting down opposing arguments or poking holes in someone's logic. We talk about our beliefs as if they're fortresses, that should be strengthened and defended, so we use language like searching for evidence to buttress or support or reinforce a position. And we talk about beliefs resting on firm foundations. There's just this metaphor built into our language. And so that's why I used the metaphor of soldier mindset. But I'm not the first person to point out this feature of human psychology by any means, so you've probably heard soldier mindset described as rationalizing or motivated reasoning is the term that cognitive scientists most often use to refer to this type of thinking.

MBS (04:28):

Yeah, give me a metaphor any day. Motivated reasoning, whatever.

Julia (04:30):

I just love metaphors.

MBS (04:30):

But soldier mindset, now we're on to something interesting. Yeah.

Julia (04:34):

Right. So to your question about where I got the metaphor from, the term is mine, but it was inspired by, I think the first person to kind of popularize or to point out this metaphor in the English language was a linguist named George Lakoff. He wrote a book called Metaphors We Live By and he was just pointing out how our language kind of has these implicit metaphors in it. And so two of the examples he gave were beliefs. I might be misremembering the exact terms he used, but one was basically beliefs are like fortresses, or beliefs are like buildings was the exact term he used. And also arguments are like battles, or argument is war. I think I encountered that, I don't know, 10 years ago or so. And that really stayed with me. And then scout mindset is the alternative to soldier mindset.

Julia (05:27):

So a scout, unlike a soldier, their job is not to attack or defend. It's to go out, see what's really out there, and form accurate a map of a situation or a landscape as possible. And it's not that the scout has no preferences about what's true. They may hope to learn that there's a conveniently located bridge over the river where they need to cross or whatever, but above all the scout just wants to know, "Okay, what is actually there?" They don't want to draw a bridge on their map where there isn't a bridge in reality. So scout mindset is just my term for essentially reasoning with the goal of actually trying to figure out what is true, what's my honest, best guess about the truth here? So it's trying to be as objective as you can, trying to be intellectually honest and just curious about what is actually out there. That metaphor came-

MBS (06:20):

That's really helpful.

Julia (06:20):

Oh good. Thank you. Yeah, that metaphor was partly just in contrast to the soldier or what would be the metaphor there. And it was also inspired by a metaphor from a mid century philosopher whose name I'm blanking on now, Korzybski, I think. It's a long name, but he had this metaphor of the map and the territory.

MBS (06:39):

Yeah, the map is not the territory.

Julia (06:40):

Basically the... Exactly-

MBS (06:42):

Is that the line? Yeah.

Julia (06:43):

Yeah. So the idea, it sounds very simple, and yet it's something that if it's actually really salient to you and you're sort of trying to pay attention to it, it can really change the way you think. The metaphor is just that your judgments about the world, your perceptions are just the map. They're not reality itself. And all maps are imperfect and incomplete. And so your map is different than reality and you always want to be conscious that your map might be missing things and-

MBS (07:14):

Soldiers are defending the map.

Julia (07:14):

Yeah, so-

MBS (07:14):

Soldiers are defending their map, and scouts are creating a map.

Julia (07:20):

Yeah. I mean, that blurs the metaphor a little bit, but I agree with your point there that being in soldier mindset, your goal is to preserve the beliefs that you currently have or that you want to have. Whereas as a scout, if you find out you're wrong about something, great, you've just made your map more accurate and that can only help you as a scout. You want to learn what your map is wrong about and add things to your map and change things. So, yeah, that comes out as a real difference in the way you think about evidence and react to new information. So anyway, so my metaphor in the book is basically like this chimera hybrid metaphor that was inspired by different things I'd read in the past.

MBS (08:03):

Tell us about the book you've chosen to read. It's got a fantastic title.

Julia (08:06):

Yes. So this was definitely an influential book in my trajectory. It's called How to Actually Change Your Mind, Rationality: From AI to Zombies, which is a complicated title.

MBS (08:25):

Great subtitle. Oh no, it's a wonderful title.

Julia (08:25):

It's basically a compilation of blog posts written in the mid-2000s by Eliezer Yudkowsky, who is a blogger who founded the blog LessWrong.com. I don't think he writes there anymore, but he was sort of the main blogger for years. And so Less Wrong is a community of people interested in rationality,

interested in improving reasoning and decision making, basically a bunch of amateur but very smart and motivated enthusiasts. And so this community kind of formed around Eliezer's blog posts and people would discuss and debate them in the comment section and then post their own blog posts. How to Actually Change Your Mind was kind of a sequence of posts that Eliezer wrote that really addressed the kind of emotional or motivational side of trying to be more accurate. And that's what really spoke to me and felt...

MBS (09:23):

Love it.

Julia (09:24):

But what sort of struck me as really under appreciated. There were a lot of books out there trying to give people cognitive tools or knowledge, like, "Here's a list of the top 20 cognitive biases," or "Here's a list of the top 20 logical fallacies" or whatever, "Here's logic 101." But that alone is not really enough to make yourself more accurate because it all comes down to your motivation, how you're motivated to use that knowledge. And you could be incredibly knowledgeable about cognitive biases and logical fallacies but be motivated to use that knowledge to beat your opponent over the head with. I'm sure many of your listeners have encountered this person online, who comes to the debate equipped with a list of cognitive biases and just uses it to say, "Now you're subject to the ad hominem fallacy," or "What you did just there, that was a modus ponens, whatever fallacy." And that person is not improving their own reasoning. So anyway, this sequence, which Eliezer called How to Actually Change Your Mind, was sort of one of the first times I started really thinking about and getting interested in the details of the motivational side of reasoning, of actually wanting to make your beliefs more accurate.

MBS (10:40):

It's such a great question.

Julia (10:42):

Yeah.

MBS (10:43):

So as the subtitle says, it goes from AI to zombies.

Julia (10:48):

From A to Z.

MBS (10:49):

A to Z. Exactly.

Julia (10:50):

Yeah.

MBS (10:50):

Or A to Zed as we say up in Canada here.

Julia (10:53):

Ah, of course.

MBS (10:54):

How did you pick the two pages you're going to read for us?

Julia (10:58):

So I just tried to pick a section that was relatively self-contained and that felt sort of the most central. I mean, if anyone has read or ends up reading my book, The Scout Mindset, you will recognize, "Ah, I can see how reading this blog post or this section of the book sent Julia on the course to write The Scout Mindset.

MBS (11:17):

That's brilliant. Well, Julia, let's hear these two pages. I'm excited to hear them.

Julia (11:27):

"Politics is the mind killer. Debate is war. Arguments are soldiers. There's the temptation to search for ways to interpret every possible experimental result to confirm your theory, like securing a citadel against every possible line of attack. This you cannot do. It is mathematically impossible. For every expectation of evidence, there is an equal and opposite expectation of counter evidence, but it's okay if your cherished belief isn't perfectly defended. If the hypothesis is that the coin comes up heads 95% of the time, then one time in 20, you will expect to see what looks like contrary evidence. This is okay. It's normal. It's even expected. As long as you've got 19 supporting observations for every contrary one. A probabilistic model can take a hit or two and still survive so long as the hits don't keep on coming in. Yet it is widely believed, especially in the court of public opinion, that a true theory can have no failures and a false theory no successes.

Julia (12:24):

"You find people holding up a single piece of what they conceive to be evidence and claiming that their theory can explain it as though this were all the support that any theory needed. Apparently a false theory can have no supporting evidence. It is impossible for a false theory to fit even a single event. Thus, a single piece of confirming evidence is all that any theory needs. It is only slightly less foolish to hold up a single piece of probabilistic counter evidence as disproof as though it were impossible for a correct theory to have even a slight argument against it. But this is how humans have argued for ages and ages, trying to defeat all enemy arguments while denying the enemy even a single shred of support. People want their debates to be one sided. They are accustomed to a world in which their preferred theories have not one iota of

anti support. Thus, allowing a single item of probabilistic counter evidence would be the end of the world.

Julia (13:16):

"I just know someone in the audience out there is going to say, "But you can't concede even a single point if you want to win debates in the real world. If you concede that any counter arguments exist, the enemy will harp on them over and over. You can't let the enemy do that. You'll lose. What could be more viscerally terrifying than that?" Whatever. Rationality is not for winning debates. It is for deciding which side to join. If you've already decided which side to argue for, the work of rationality is done within you, whether well or poorly. But how can you yourself decide which side to argue? If choosing the wrong side is viscerally terrifying, even just a little viscerally terrifying, you'd best integrate all the evidence. Rationality is not a walk, but a dance. On each step in that dance, your foot should come down in exactly correct spot neither to the left nor to the right, shifting belief upward with each iota of confirming evidence, shifting belief downward with the iota of contrary evidence.

Julia (14:13):

"Yes, down. Even with a correct model, if it is not an exact model, you will sometimes need to revise your belief down. If an iota or two of evidence happens to counter support your belief, that's okay. It happens sometimes with probabilistic evidence for non-exact theories. If an exact theory fails, you are in trouble. Just shift your belief downward a little, the probability, the odds ratio, or even a non-verbal weight of credence in your mind. Just shift downward a little and wait for more evidence. If the theory is true, supporting evidence will come in shortly and the probability will climb again. If the theory is false, you don't really want it anyway.

Julia (14:50):

"The problem with using black and white binary qualitative reasoning is that any single observation either destroys the theory or it does not. When not even a single contrary observation is allowed, it creates cognitive dissonance that has to be argued away. And this rules out incremental progress. It rules out correct integration of all the evidence. Reasoning probabilistically, we realize that on average, a correct theory will generate a greater weight of support than counter support. And so you can without fear, say to yourself, "This is gently contrary evidence. I will shift my belief downward." Yes, down. It does not destroy your cherished theory. That is qualitative reasoning. Think quantitatively. For every expectation of evidence, there is an equal and opposite expectation of counter evidence. On every occasion you must on average anticipate revising your beliefs downward as much as you anticipate revising them upward. If you think you already know what evidence will come in, then you must already be fairly sure of your theory, probability close to one, which doesn't leave much room for the probability to go further upward.

Julia (15:50):

"And however unlikely it seems that you will encounter disconfirming evidence, the resulting downward shift must be large enough to precisely balance the anticipated gain on the other side. The weighted mean of your expected posterior probability must equal your prior probability. How silly is it then to be terrified of revising your probability downward if you're bothering to investigate a matter at all? On average, you must anticipate as much downward shift as upward shift from every individual observation. It may perhaps happen that an iota of anti support comes in again and again and again, while new support is slow to trickle in. You may find your belief drifting downward and further downward until finally you realize from which quarter the winds of evidence are blowing against you. In that moment of realization, there is no point in constructing excuses. In that moment of realization you have already relinquished your cherished belief. Yay, time to celebrate. Pop a champagne

bottle or send out for pizza. You can't become stronger by keeping the beliefs you started with, after all."

MBS (16:52):

That's fantastic. And the only thing I'm going to argue with is, I don't think it should be either champagne or pizza. It can be both. You can totally do both of those.

Julia (17:02):

I'll take it up with Eliezer.

MBS (17:02):

What is it about that this book and this chapter in particular that was so resonant for you?

Julia (17:11):

So, I mean, partly it was just calling my attention to the fact that reasoning itself is not necessarily aimed at truth. There's a specific kind of reasoning where you're really aimed at truth and that sort of rationality is a dance where you're trying to update properly in response to new evidence. I don't know if that will resonate with everyone, but it resonated with me. And also the idea, I feel like people often have it backwards where they think allowing uncertainty, seeing the world shades of gray instead of black and white is stressful or emotionally unsatisfying-

MBS (17:55):

Or weak. Yeah

Julia (17:55):

Yeah, that too. But focusing on the emotional side of things, I think people feel like it's more satisfying or comfortable to just have certainty in your beliefs. And

one thing that I loved about this chapter of How to Actually Change Your Mind was kind of pointing out the emotionally satisfying aspect of uncertainty, because as Eliezer points out, if you see things in black and white, then you have to fight off any evidence that contradicts your theory, because if any piece of evidence gets in, then everything crumbles. But if you have beliefs in shades of gray like, "I'm 75% sure of this political belief" or "I'm 85% sure that this job is going to work out" or whatever it is, then pieces of new evidence are not, they don't threaten to invalidate the entire belief. They just mean you adjust your belief a little bit downward. And if more and more evidence comes in, as Eliezer says, you up your belief a little bit downward and a little bit downward, but each adjustment is emotionally gentle. It feels very freeing to me to not have to see things in black and white. And so I found that kind of emotional aspect of probabilistic, rational reasoning to be very exciting. And that's part of what I was trying to convey to people in writing my book.

MBS (19:20):

Yeah. I mean, I love this idea that your position in the world is less brittle if you're able to allow some ambiguity and some counter evidence in.

Julia (19:32):

Right, right. Less brittle is a good way to put it. Yeah. It's like the whole, trees and skyscrapers have a bit of flexibility built in so that the wind doesn't threaten to break them. Yeah. I just think that's an under appreciated emotional benefit of accurate reasoning.

MBS (19:52):

To be able to allow in counter evidence, in some ways you have to disassociate the position you're holding from who you are and your own identity. Because one of the things that I find that can happen with me when I get somebody arguing against a position, it's like, "You're not taking on my argument. You're insulting me. You're challenging my identity and who I am in this world."

Julia (20:20):

Right, right. Exactly.

MBS (20:21):

How do you help people manage an ability to engage in arguments in a way that doesn't or is less threatening to their actual sense of self?

Julia (20:34):

Yeah. Yeah. Another essay that was actually quite influential for me in this particular way was by Paul Graham, it's called Keep Your Identity Small. And he just points out that so many beliefs from politics to religion to many other things can become part of our identities in the way that you're describing, where when someone disagrees with the belief, it feels like they're attacking us personally. And questions that otherwise would have been just simple matters of empirical fact become referendums on our worth as a person. Paul Graham's point was, "Well, if you want to think as clearly as possible, then you should let as few things into your identity as possible." So every label you give yourself from feminist to atheist to libertarian, whatever, all these labels kind of constrain your thinking because they create this thing that you have to defend in order to defend the honor of your tribe or your own honor.

Julia (21:36):

And so he said, "Yeah, let as few things into your identity as possible." And I think this is good advice, but it doesn't go all the way. Because as I learned from trying to implement this advice myself, it's kind of practically impossible to not have labels for yourself. Labels have descriptive power. Libertarian might be a good label for your views or you might in fact be an atheist. And it's hard to avoid that label. And it's hard. You might also-

MBS (22:10):

You also find your tribe that way.

Julia (22:12):

Yeah, that's exactly what I was about to say.

MBS (22:15):

Because if you have no label, then people don't know whether you're with them or against them. And there's a very basic wiring to our brain going, "Are you with me or are you against me?"

Julia (22:23):

Right. Right. Yeah. And there are often, I think, causes, political parties, or activist groups that you think are genuinely doing good and you want to help. And part of the way you help is by identifying yourself with them and touting them publicly. And we don't want to sacrifice that. Part of the trick is keeping your identity small and reducing the amount of labels you have for yourself, but another part of the trick is just learning how to hold those identities lightly. That's the phrase I use, where yes, you may call yourself a liberal or atheist or feminist, but you try to not let that label be a point of pride for you. It should feel like just a descriptive label you put on something and not like a flag that you're waving or a badge that you're wearing proudly.

MBS (23:05):

Right. That's interesting.

Julia (23:08):

And you should try to be on the lookout for when you feel smug because the atheist won the argument or there's an article that smacked down religious people and you feel pleased with being on the right side. I try to notice those feelings in myself and gently separate my identity from those labels. And sometimes I'll do things like, if I notice myself being smug about, I don't know, a liberal argument or something, I will then remind myself of liberal arguments that I think are bad or liberals who I think are not a credit to the group or

something, just to kind of try to reduce that feeling of cheering for my side that I think is unhealthy to good thinking.

MBS (23:49):

Smug is a really good word.

Julia (23:51):

Yeah. Smug or righteous.

MBS (23:53):

Can you unpack smug for me? I love it, but what are the elements of smug that get in the way of rational thinking or even the scout mindset?

Julia (24:05):

Well, it's a little hard to unpack to be honest, but there's... So partly, I think identities form as a result of pride where, I mean, just normal human pride, not...

MBS (24:21):

Not smug pride.

Julia (24:22):

We're humans. We like to take pride in things. That's fine. I'm not complaining about that. But there are certain belief systems that you feel like it says something good about you that you believe it. So for example, someone might believe, someone might be optimistic about the future or optimistic about technology. And that's an empirical belief where they're like, "I think technology is good for the world," or "I think technology is going to keep making the world better." So that's just a claim they believe.

MBS (24:56):

Yeah.

Julia (24:56):

But I think a lot of people feel that having that belief makes them a better person, the fact that they're optimistic, it says something good about them. It means they're more... It's a little hard to describe.

MBS (25:09):

Morally righteous or something.

Julia (25:11):

Or admirable, or the kind of person other people want to be around. I don't know. Different people might have different associations with the idea of being techno optimistic. But then, when you defend that belief or you uphold that belief, you're kind of reaffirming that you have those good traits in yourself and that's, again, a very natural thing to be proud of. And then the other thing that I think can really make a belief into an identity is feeling embattled. So if you've had to defend a belief. Let's say you decide not to have children, and a lot of people criticize that choice or question it and so you have to keep insisting to people that it makes sense and it's valid. Then the fact that you've had to defend the belief for so long can make it part of your identity in the sense that changing your mind about that would feel like letting these people win who were attacking you all this time. I think that can also contribute to the feeling of aha, that the other side has been smacked down. And again, that's very understandable and natural. People have been attacking you, especially unfairly, it can be very natural to feel smug when those arguments are smacked down. So all of this is understandable. It's just not helpful.

MBS (26:35):

I was reading a New Yorker article recently about cults and pointing out that a cult that goes, "The world is literally going to end on the 28th of August 1972." And when it didn't happen, it actually strengthened people's belief in the cult. Not everybody.

Julia (26:56):

I remember reading that. Yeah.

MBS (26:57):

There's probably a bunch of people who went, "Okay. Maybe this isn't a cult for me." But for a lot of people, it's like, "No, I'm doubling down on this because there's something hard to let go of. The identity and the proof that I'm wrong just makes me defensive rather than open to maybe there's an alternative here."

Julia (27:15):

I remember a similar phenomenon. So the magician and skeptic James Randi, the Amazing Randi who recently passed away, he pulled off this huge hoax in Australia in, maybe it was the seventies, where he convinced the country that he was, I think, psychic, or... I forget what it was now. And he got all these followers and then revealed, "Actually, this was a hoax and here's how I did it. I'm a magician." And even though he had himself confessed that it was a hoax, there were still tons of people who doubled down and said, "No, no, no, you really are psychic. And you're just trying to deflect attention or something."

MBS (27:51):

"This just proves you're the Messiah."

Julia (27:52):

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. That's human psychology, man.

MBS (27:59):

I want to get better at admitting I'm wrong. How do I do that, Julia?

Julia (28:06):

Yeah. I think part of the answer is changing how you think about being wrong and focusing on it as you're making yourself stronger and better, you're making

your map more accurate. And also being wrong does not mean you did something wrong necessarily. The way the scout thinks about it is, we all start out with these completely imperfect inaccurate maps, just necessarily because humans have imperfect information and limited time and even the most brilliant person in the world is going to be wrong about tons of things necessarily. And our goal over time is to make ourselves less wrong and to make our maps more accurate and keep revising and redrawing them. And so when you have to revise your map, i.e. when you discover you were wrong about something that does not mean you screwed up somewhere/ that's how things should be happening. Because I think a lot of people just implicitly figure, "Well, if I was wrong about something, I must've screwed up somehow." But that's not necessarily true. I think recognizing that is an important step towards being willing to find out you're wrong.

MBS (29:10):

That's really helpful. Data is changing rather than I screwed up. And therefore actually I'm dumb, stupid, bad, inadequate, whatever it might be, whatever you might tangle into that.

Julia (29:21):

And to add a little more nuance to that, sometimes being wrong means you did something wrong. Sometimes when I look back, I recognize, "Oh, I got that wrong because I was really careless. I could've just double checked before I shared this article. I knew better. I should have double checked before sharing this sensationalist article and I just didn't. So yeah, that's on me. I screwed up. Oh well, I'll do it better next time." But a lot of the time being wrong, you didn't do anything wrong. You formed the best beliefs you could given the information you had at the time, and now you have new information and that's fine. So yeah, I think that's kind of the most important first step is changing the way you look at being wrong.

Julia (30:07):

And then I'll add one more piece of advice to that, which is in a specific instance, when it first occurs to you, "Hmm. I wonder if I'm wrong about this," and you're tempted to kind of push that thought out of your mind. I find it's helpful to stop and just ask yourself, "Okay, suppose I was wrong. How bad would that be?" Suppose you're in an argument online.

MBS (30:29):

That's interesting, yeah.

Julia (30:32):

And you want to make yourself open to being wrong, ask yourself, "Okay, suppose I was wrong. How bad would that be? Or what would I do about that?" And the first second you think about being wrong, it's very unpleasant. You feel stressed out or defensive or like, "Oh, that would be really terrible." But then if you think about it for more than a second, often what I realize is it wouldn't be that bad. here's how I would word my concession on Twitter. I'd be like, "Oh, actually-"

MBS (30:56):

Like gracious concession.

Julia (30:56):

Yeah. "Oh, you know what? I realized that makes a lot of sense." Or "I hadn't thought of X, Y, Z," or something. There's often just a phrasing I come up with. And then I'm like, "Oh yeah, I could say that. That wouldn't be so bad. I've been wrong before and people haven't torn my head off." And all of that takes one or two seconds. And then I just feel much more willing to find out that I'm wrong if I am, but you have to kind of first reach the acceptance of the possibility of being wrong before you're able to think clearly about whether you are wrong.

MBS (31:26):

I do love the idea of having a short number of phrases that you're able to deploy to admit wrongness. You're like, "I've got five phrases that I don't mind saying that help me in a gracious way."

Julia (31:41):

I mean, it helps. Yeah. Or just things to make being wrong more palatable, silver linings, if you will. One thing I sometimes remind myself of if I'm trying to come to terms with the possibility that I'm wrong is, "Well, if I tell people I'm wrong now, I'm investing in my ability to be convincing in the future because I'm proving to people that I'm not the kind of person who just always sticks to her guns no matter what. I'm proving that I am willing to say I'm wrong if I think I am." And so then in the future, if I'm trying to argue a point, people will know, "Oh, she's not just sticking to her guns because she is that kind of person, so she's actually more credible now." So it's kind of like I'm putting some credit in the bank if I admit that I'm wrong. And that doesn't always make being wrong pleasurable, but it often makes it kind of palatable enough that I'm willing to do it.

MBS (32:33):

Right. Julia, one of the things that I have in my head around being rational is rational thinking is a removal of emotion in terms of how I think better. It's like if I can just get rid of these pesky human aspects of who I am, I'll be able to rise and become increasingly rational.

Julia (32:59):

Best Vulcan in the world.

MBS (33:00):

Yeah, exactly. Best Vulcan in the world. And I've seen some research that is counter to that, but I'm curious to know what you think the role of emotions and feelings are in being able to think better.

Julia (33:15):

Yeah. It is neither necessary nor desirable to get rid of all your emotions in the service of rationality. It's true that sometimes emotions can cloud your ability to think clearly. That's true. If I'm really afraid of something being true, then I'm so strongly motivated to deny it. Or if I'm really angry at someone it's really hard for me to think clearly about-

MBS (33:45):

They might have a point.

Julia (33:45):

Was it really their fault? Yeah, exactly. So that is true. And there are definitely situations in which kind of separating yourself from that emotional reaction can be helpful, but oftentimes emotions are just, they're cues to what you care about and what you want and what you value. There's nothing irrational about that. When I feel joy at the idea of a certain life for myself or joy at a certain future for humanity or something, that's an emotion and there's nothing irrational about that. That's a recognition of what I want to strive for for myself or for the world. And then rationality can be a tool to help you more effectively get that life for yourself or improve the world in the way you want to improve it.

MBS (34:37):

That's helpful.

Julia (34:38):

But the emotion, there would be no reason to do anything if we had no emotions at all, if nothing made us feel better or worse than anything else. So

emotions are definitely essential. And they can also, I think, be cues to information that you were not consciously aware of. So if I feel uneasy or if I feel, I don't know, afraid or something, and then I examine that emotion, often there's a reason, some information I was ignoring that actually should factor into my rational decision-making. Yeah. Emotions can be valuable in that way as well.

MBS (35:14):

That's great. Thank you. Julia, I love this conversation. I've been looking forward to it for a while. A question that I love to ask at the end of interviews like this is, it's quite big, but let me ask it to you. What needs to be said in this conversation between you and me that hasn't yet been said?

Julia (35:35):

Well, I guess, I mean, one important thing that I always try to emphasize if I can that I haven't yet gotten a chance to talk about is how you should feel when you notice yourself in soldier mindset, when you notice yourself rationalizing or being defensive or not engaging with-

MBS (35:58):

Buttressing. All of that.

Julia (35:59):

Yeah, exactly. Because I think people sometimes come away from my blog posts or my interviews thinking, "Oh, being in a soldier mindset is really bad. And if I ever notice I'm in soldier mindset, I should feel bad about myself." And that's actually the opposite of what I'm trying to say. Because as you pointed out towards the beginning of this conversation, we tend to just not notice when we're in soldier mindset. We tend to just feel like we're already rational and objective and oftentimes we're not. And so if you never notice yourself in soldier mindset, it's probably not the case that you're just an exception to

humanity who never, never has any biases or rationalizing. It's much more likely that you actually are in soldier mindset and to start noticing it. And so if you start to notice soldier mindset more, that's a good thing. That's actually progress. You're developing more self-awareness and it's an essential step towards becoming more of a scout. And so you should feel good about yourself when you notice like, "Oh wow. I was being defensive there. Oh, wow. In that argument, I wasn't actually listening to him. I was just-"

MBS (37:08):

Preparing my own stunning argument.

Julia (37:09):

Preparing my own rebuttal. Exactly. And that is cause for celebration that you noticed. And so, yeah, I just want to make sure, I'm glad you asked, because I just don't want anyone to come away from this conversation thinking they should beat themselves up when they notice themselves in soldier mindset, because it's just the opposite.

MBS (37:33):

So let me be a little provocative and ask you a question. Actually, I'm going to ask you two questions, but it's really the same question asked two different ways. First, where is your thinking brittle? And second, where are you feeling smug? I mean, in both cases, I suspect I'm asking you to identify where is your soldier mindset, that place you're dug in and you're defending? I'm asking myself the same question, of course. And it is a little uncomfortable. I notice I have answers for what I see out in the world so for instance, my political understanding and stance on some things. But what I'm most noticing right now, probably because of the book I'm working on, is how that thinking affects my own view of myself, what I can do, what I'm allowed to do, what I should be doing. And also what's inappropriate, what's above my station, what's not mine

to dream. So as you think about scout mindset, the way that you explore the world, don't just notice the world with new eyes, notice yourself.

MBS (38:43):

You'll find Julia's book in all the usual places. There are links as always in the show notes. And you can find Julia at JuliaGalef.com. The same for Twitter, @JuliaGalef. And her podcast is IrrationallySpeakingPodcast.org, O-R-G. Thanks for listening. It's always a joy and a pleasure to have you listen to the episodes. Thank you for giving it a review on whatever your favorite podcast app is. And thank you for the many of you who have signed up for the free membership site. It's called Duke Humfrey's. It's named after a library in Oxford, which I love, where the cool books used to be kept. And at Duke Humfrey's you'll see transcripts of the podcast, plus other videos and interviews that we haven't released, plus some downloads as well. You're awesome, and you're doing great.