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**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Welcome to the Free Range Podcast. I'm your host, Michael Livermore. This episode is sponsored by the program on law communities and the environment at the University of Virginia. With me today is Nick Agar, a moral philosopher whose work focuses on examining the implications of technological change. His most recent book is *How to Be Human in the Digital Economy*, published by MIT Press. Nick, thanks so much for joining me today.

**NICK AGAR:** It's great to be here.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** So I'm looking forward to chatting about your recent work, but I was hoping you'd indulge in some discussion of your earlier contributions in environmental ethics, and in particular, your book *Life's Intrinsic Value*, which I teach in my environmental law class and which is now in its third decade. That book remains one of the leading biocentric accounts of environmental ethics.

And I'd be curious to hear how-- what-- here you reflect a little bit on how those ideas have aged, whether you have updated your views or just moved on, and so on. So the way maybe just I would quickly-- for our audience-- summarize the argument in the book in 10 seconds or less would be something along the lines of an environmental ethics that's grounded in the preferences.

In the book, you call them bio preferences of individual organisms. And we read those preferences off of the behavior structure and evolutionary history, and we use them for an account of the intrinsic value of non-humans. So maybe the first question is, since I teach this to students, is that a relatively OK summary of the argument?

**NICK AGAR:** I like that summary.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Good. Well, I'm happy to hear that.

[LAUGHTER]

So looking back, the book is just entering its third decade. Is this an account you still find persuasive or are some arguments that you've heard that you've taken on board over the years?

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah. No, no, no. One of the things I love about the philosophical debates have contributed to is how you can do it and engage in a debate at a particular time and contribute something then. But it's fascinating to watch those ideas age and mature. And so I always think whenever-- you present views. Here there are very analytic philosophy. There are sometimes very careful people who don't really want to say anything because they'll, yeah, what could be wrong? Or they'll change their minds. I'm very much a believer of saying something. You put a marker in the sand.

And it certainly there's much I've heard that has led me to modify the views. And to look back-- so especially some of the later chapters in that book, I say-- in a way I give-- it's like when you-- the thing that I'm most attached to about it-- about was this idea that, well, when we look at philosophers, the bias towards sentience and personhood. And if you pose the question in that way, then the merely living non-sentient, non-rational beings just count for nothing.

And I always think, well, isn't it a role of philosophy to say, well, what happens if you challenge that? Because yeah, there are-- philosophers get into a habit, some patterns, and they're difficult to break out of. So that's the thing I definitely am attached to. That when you say that, well, because that non-sentient, that, I don't know, that plant is non-sentient. I mean, if Peter Singer's famous line about if a tree's roots get flooded and it dies, there's nothing to take account of.

The only beings that you would ask would be the people who would say, I liked that tree. And that seemed to me to be far too narrow. So in a way, the difficult task is to work out how could I get that value? And you-- it's a conjecture. I love philosophy that it's full of conjectures.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** And it's what the implications would be or can we state it in a way that makes sense and fits with at least some of our existing intuitions?

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So whenever-- sometimes there's Mill's harm principle that I believe that that's a pernicious principle on ethics because it basically says, well, look, there aren't harms that a utilitarian would recognize, then there's nothing. So I always think it's great to say, well, yes, that's obviously a powerful idea. What happens if we challenge it?

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** And what would you say then just in the spirit of discourse or some of the unforeseen implications or counterarguments that you've come across in that work? It's obviously-- it's very provocative in the sense of as you note the history of analytic kind of Western moral philosophy.

We're very human-centered. And even a lot of environmental ethics has a human-centered orientation and it's a struggle to come up with anything else. Are there challenges to the biocentric account or at least the one that you offered that you find particularly difficult, or troubling, or interesting?

**NICK AGAR:** Well, I guess the thing is if I was to take back parts of that book, it would be the later chapters where I almost-- because I was doing the hard work. What I perceived is the hard philosophical work of showing the merely alive count for something. And then, of course, I mean, in a way when someone says to you, well, you've got to say something about, I don't know, which species should we say? Those big issues. The headline issues.

And I suppose that's the kind of thing where I'd say, oh, well, I wanted to come up with something. I wanted to prove my relevance. And those are areas where every time I come across a debate, I say, well, well that's-- yeah, I'm still thinking about that. And I do think. I mean, I think the merely alive do count.

And that the one of the worst things that we can do is count them for nothing or only count them in an anthropocentric way. My preference is for him and for the beautiful, charismatic species and the ugly ones trash them. That's not a very good way to view, to think about the value of life.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** As someone who's participated in this debate in a broad way over the last several decades, are there trends in environmental ethics and especially at this question of intrinsic value for life, non-anthropocentric views that you think are particularly promising and have made headway on some of the difficult questions like how-- for example a difficult question would be, assuming that there is value outside of the human domain and even outside the domain of sentient life, how do we make trade offs across domains and those kinds of questions?

**NICK AGAR:** Well, it's interesting, isn't it? Because that trade off question, I mean, in a way that's part of being rational. That's to say-- I mean, once you say that every living being has some value, well, suddenly the world-- I mean, the good thing about a utilitarian ethic that centers on sentience is you know where the valuable things are.

I mean, there are some issues because you can certainly look at insects and say, what was that? Could that be sentient? So there are some-- there's a big line drawing problem. So you create a lot of value and that creates a lot of headaches. But I often think it's-- well, I mean, because you've got to make trade offs.

You can't suddenly say, well, yes, every-- I mean, in the perfect world, no living being would ever die. And it would be wonderful to inhabit that world. But we're not in it right now and we're unlikely to be in it. So how do you make trade offs? And I sometimes think it's like the difficult task of making those trade offs is part of the prompt to say, well, look, I don't-- yeah, let's just not count these things at all.

But the orders, I don't know, I mean, there's an analogous issue. Maybe this is an overly provocative analogous analogy which suggests that, well, I don't know, the lives of people in the poor world. I mean, we didn't use to have to care about them. Now we do. And annoying because suddenly we've got to think about-- we've got to make trade offs and worry. We didn't used to have to worry about them at all.

But I often think that in a way, they-- it would be such a hassle objection. It's not a good one. And so the main task, I think, for a moral philosopher in this area is to identify the things that count because the worst thing that can happen to you is for some moral judge to say, oh, by the way, you don't count at all. Nothing that happens to you matters. Well, I mean, maybe it matters to you if I find you beautiful because I count.

**MICHAEL** Right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICK AGAR:** And that's-- I think that's a bit of a moral disaster. So I guess my challenge is just to get them on. And then it's like, well, how do you get the value? I've created-- I've made the world messy and complicated. Yes. I don't know. I mean, obviously living beings are dying all the time and that there's got to be-- but taking them into account is progress.

**MICHAEL** Yeah. No. And the hassall objection is an interesting line because, of course, it's true we part of living in the  
**LIVERMORE:** contemporary world and modernity. Part of the-- maybe part of what troubles people about modernity is the vast interconnection of our lives and the overwhelming responsibility at some level that we have just given our technological circumstances or for folks in the West given our resources and our ability to do good in the world. If we choose to do that, it's an awful lot of responsibility to be saddled with just within the human domain.

**NICK AGAR:** I mean, that's I think--

**MICHAEL** And--

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICK AGAR:** Oh, no. Sorry. I just going to interject there. I think that's part of the nostalgia for the past actually. In a way, why do people-- I mean, when people are nostalgic for what they imagine the 50s were like, they're imagining at a time when no one had to bother with that. I mean, the world seems so much more simple. You didn't have to worry about the distal effects of your actions and your choices. And now there's all these people telling you have to care, and I'd rather not.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** It's actually an interesting-- there's a thread here with respect to technology and autonomy. We as human beings over the centuries and the millennia, we have developed technologies that enhance our ability to affect change in the world, and improve our material circumstances, and our scope of action, and at the same time we are burdened with the responsibility that comes along with that. And it's just a-- but nevertheless, we don't stop--

**NICK AGAR:** No, no. We don't stop.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** --seeking out that technological change.

**NICK AGAR:** But we do then flock to populists who say, yeah, all these people who are telling you to care about that, forget about it. I excuse you.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** It's an interesting thought that there's that part. And I wonder if that's historically we could think about that if that's part of the appeal of at least some forms of populist discourse is to certainly othering others and in-group, outgroup that kind of thing. That's a big part of it, but is it-- is part of the appeal arise out of a sense of responsibility or responsibility that people don't feel.

Because another-- I mean, going around in circles a little bit, but that part of the trick as well is if people are going to feel responsible for their actions in the world. It is helpful for them to have a moral framework that they can understand and feel comfortable with in order to fit that into. And I think part of the trick-- tricky thing these days is that people might feel a little at sea in the sense of having a felt responsibility for much that goes on in the world without necessarily a one-- a confident sense that how to navigate that or can make reference to a framework that they feel comfortable with.

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah. No, I think that's exactly right. So in a way that's, I think, that, I don't know, we've connected with populism, but, I mean, maybe that's a slightly speculative connection. But I think that's largely-- that's much of the appeal of anthropocentric ethics and the environment as-- well, I don't know. I mean, it suddenly if you look and say that, well, there is a moral difference between a non-living slab of concrete and a living moss.

That way, as soon as you say that there's a moral difference, I'd much rather you told me there was no difference. Thank you. Because that way I can treat them identically. Well, actually, I mean, if you-- look, if I'm an anthropocentrist, are you-- I mean, and you love that bit of concrete, I'll care about it too.

Now maybe you're more likely to love the non-sentient and living thing, but if I have simplified the world for you by saying, well, look, none of that stuff counts. I mean, it counts if you like it. It counts in the way that your iPhone counts. If you like your iPhone, then yeah, I'm not going to destroy it or I'll feel bad about destroying it.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Right. Well, your grandmother is wardrobe or something that she left.

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's a nice simplifying move and that has a lot of appeal, but sometimes I think the world is complex. And it's morally complex.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Yeah. And then in terms of the tools, of course science, or the scientific worldview, or a secular worldview that rides along with that maybe also makes it difficult at the same time if we have a more morally thick universe or morally full universe of interest that were to account for, and we have greater scope of action in that universe due to technology and interconnectedness and so on.

And at the same time, there may have been a point in human history where the Moss would have a spirit that you would just associate with it, or the tree would have a spirit that would be associated with it. And so that's-- and that would be in that cosmology you would inherit and you would be comfortable with and grow up, and it would be part of a long articulated tradition--

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** --of a kind of moral universe that you could exist and you feel comfortable with. And we've done away with that as well.

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah, it's interesting. I like-- by the way, I do like morally thick universe. So I think that's what we need to come back to. But it's interesting, isn't it? When you look at those the spiritual views that you're talking about. I mean, it's easy to mock them and deride them. And you can say, well, why did they come about?

Well, I guess one part is that people just wanted to understand the world and they lacked the scientific tools and evidence. That understanding of evidence that we have. But I guess another thing is that, yes, they did look at the moss and said, yes, that is not-- that mosque is different morally from that stone. So they're responding to that.

So you can say, well, I don't know. Maybe I invent spirits as a theory of how the physical world operates. But maybe also when I'm doing it, I'm responding to the sense that these things matter. I mean, certain things matter. I have to tell a story about it. And of course the stories fall out of fashion. We don't tell those in the West-- the secular West.

I mean, you'd get mocked if you tried to tell that story and tell people to take it seriously. But I think if you look at the roots of it, you can say, well, yes, maybe the details of that story are wrong, but the roots of it are, I think, very ethically viable.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Yeah. I mean, just to push that further along, I wonder if the Peter Singer's position that the tree is just-- we can't speak in a sensible way about its interests, and whether it lives or dies is no different than whether a rock is eroded or not.

Is that a bigger mistake than the person who attributes a spiritual value or a spirit-- just a non-physical spirit to the tree and accordingly assigns it some value. From a scientific perspective, Singer's might have more correct beliefs about predicting the tree's behavior but from a moral perspective, which is a larger mistake.

**NICK AGAR:** I'm 100% behind that. Yes. Yes. I mean, in a way whenever-- it's great when moral philosophers take a constructive approach to value. So the part that Peter Singer who says, well, look, these sentient animals can suffer and right now we're treating them terribly. Please care.

But when he uses that same tool as he does with the tree as a way to exclude things, I think that's often a mistake. And I suppose the provocative nature of some of Peter Singer's statements about newborns and infanticide. So I've written a piece on-- I hope this is OK for your podcast. I mean, I think sometimes philosophers engage in what I call moral shit stirring.

[LAUGHTER]

And moral shit st-- I shit stir you if I just-- I don't mean it seriously, I just want-- I don't know. Maybe-- I don't know. You've got a mole on your forehead or whatever and I want to mock you, and I offer you some fake advice, hey, have you seen a doctor about getting that mole removed? Now I know you're aware of that mole, but it's in a way I know it will make you uneasy. I think some of the statements that utilitarian-- the exclusionary sense.

The one that says who cares about that tree, it's nothing. And also the one that says, oh, this is a sentient newborn. And just if you do kill it, that's fine. Just do it painlessly. Yeah, lethal injection will do. That's the exclusionary. It's not the constructive view. And I think that's a terrible mistake and it's a real disservice to people who-- I know the kind of people who do look and say, well, look, I do view that tree-- that tree represents my ancestors.

And of course our first reaction is to say, well, that's nonsense. Your ancestors are long dead, so how can-- anyway, you can say that, but I'm basically going to ignore everything. But if there's something they're latching on to, that tree has moral importance. And often it's the case, isn't it? That I think in ethics if we can see-- in a way, it's almost like we get too lazy.

So someone says something confusing to us like, that river has always passed through that area and it's been-- it's a great value to my people. And so like, whoa. OK, I'm not going to try very hard on this, but I know you're speaking-- I know. I'll believe you about how long the river has been there, but the rest of it is nonsense.

Yeah, I think that sometimes that indicates a philosophical laziness. Sometimes all you have to do is ask a few questions. What I mean when I say that rock is my ancestor, what-- yeah, I know that my ancestors did really.

**MICHAEL** Right. And there's a sense in which, I mean, we can talk and the conversation keeps going basically.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah,

**MICHAEL** Right. It's easy to mistake understand-- a misunderstanding for an error essentially.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL** A misunderstanding on your part for an error on the other person's part.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL** And it's lazy to do that.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah. Let's have more conversation.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Yeah. Just to-- I don't know if this is a defensive of Singes's statements, but I wonder if to some extent he makes those particular exclusionary provocative statements as a way of saying, look, yes, I think animals are valuable, but I don't think everything is valuable. Gosh, darn it. There are limits and I can be a bad ass too, it's just that I think that we're drawing the wrong lines.

And it's-- he kind of does it in an extreme way to-- I have no idea, but I can imagine the strategy along the line-- rhetorical strategies along the lines of so that I don't-- so that my position is not perceived as just too soft and without limits. So I'm going to draw these very provocative lines as a way of showing that my view doesn't just lead to everything has equal, everything has value and too much softness.

**NICK AGAR:** I mean, you can see that that's a useful accounting exercise for him. But I often-- the things that I find persuasive about Singer are the constructive bits where he says, well, look, here's what's it like to be a factory farmed animal. Let me tell you. Now I noticed that I find-- I respond to that enormously.

And it's yeah, I mean, that's-- I get that. But then when I look at the bit that says where you're saying, well, look, I'm not crazy. I'm telling you to care about a lot of stuff you would rather not care about because you like eating meat. But I find the, look, I'm not crazy. I'm going to ban some things, but that was done much more hastily.

And that sort of foreclosure-- so one of the things I tried to do in life's intrinsic value was to say, well, I don't know. I don't want to be crazy either, but if we count these things as valuable and when we go beyond saying that the tree with the flooded roots that that's nothing, we go beyond-- so we say, well, it was something. It's dead now. So yes, it's not alive. That we can actually. You can if you-- it's difficult. But I mean, is philosophy supposed to be all easy?

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** As for philosophers get paid the big bucks.

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, we get paid the little bucks.

[LAUGHTER]

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Some bucks, anyway.

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah, some bucks.

[LAUGHTER]

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** I'm curious what your-- as we're talking about this intersection of kinfolk, different ways of folk theorizing about relationship to nature. One of the big movements. And I've written a little bit about this in the last couple of years-- big movements. And global environmental law is around the notion of environmental rights, and specifically nature's rights.

So establishing legal rights for nature in general, or for rivers, or landscapes, or mountains. I've expressed some skepticism about this particular view, but I wonder what your take is of these ideas. Obviously what you've written in the past is organism-focused, and then ecosystems and species and the like could have value.

What I take to be your argument is due to the relationship of those higher level collectives to individual organisms and their life cycles and so on. So what then do we make of the nature's-- I'm curious what your thoughts have been if you followed that at all or--

**NICK AGAR:** Sorry. Here's-- I mean, can I just basically present one of my not very well considered biases? I mean, I come from a part of the world philosophically where rights talk is-- we view that as a, well, not exclusively, but, I mean, it's not an Australasian thing as much. I mean, there are some philosophers that do talk about rights.

So and I guess in a way my view is, I mean, if you want living-- if you want nature to count, then the great thing about rights talk is that it does connect it with-- I mean, it's easy to integrate with legal protections because you can say, well, I mean, yeah, there are philosophers complaining about what rights are whether they're just constructs-- human constructs.

But the good thing about to-- if I really want to have laws that count, if I can formulate this in terms of rights, then that's something. I can immediately go to a legal scholar-- someone like you-- and say, yes, can you-- what would be a policy? I mean, how do we respect these rights? And I like that.

So in a way-- so when I think about getting things in the moral accounting book, getting them to count at all, I suppose I come from a tradition which started with-- the utilitarian tradition that started with can it feel? If it feels, it definitely counts. So yes, that's just a statement about I don't know where I came from, where I originated philosophically. But yes, so, I mean, in a way, the great thing about rights talk, even if some people will claim not to understand it at all, is it connects with legal protection.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** So has that-- there's a practical pragmatic value to rights talk even if we don't necessarily-- even if a legal regime of nature's rights doesn't map onto in a clean way morally important interests--

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** --in as much as they are a practical way of protecting those interests or forwarding those interests, then it's a good thing.

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah, well, I think it can be a useful thing. I mean, it's a bit like-- I'm going to guess the earlier chat about the tree spirit. I mean, in a way that-- I don't really know what-- I don't know what that is. I mean, I guess I'd have to ask someone who believes that there's a spirit in the tree and I'd probably find out something there, but I bet I would still remain quite perplexed.

But then as a pragmatic thing, I look at-- you look at what sort of Maori and New Zealand do, they had similar such beliefs they tended to try to protect. They certainly protected trees from the destructive impulses of the market. I did those things. So it's like, yes, I'm confused, but yeah, there's a good thing too.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Yeah. Now that's interesting.

**NICK AGAR:** And it's a pragmatic level.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Yes. We can think of the consequences of beliefs in addition to their truth content, right?

**NICK AGAR:** Yeah. Yeah. It's almost like, I don't know, I have a sense. There are many people I disagree with. And when I bow-- I'm not a Christian, but when I look at many Christians and certainly some of the things that they recommend make sense to me, and I recognize that my atheistic tradition struggles to make sense of that and I say I'm-- you're not everything that Christians say. Obviously, I view in this way.

But many things is when I say, well, that matters. And I say, well, I don't really understand that because that's not-- I don't-- your holy book is not my holy book. But-- so this is what you're going to do as a consequence of that. I like that.

**MICHAEL  
LIVERMORE:** And of course in a pluralistic society we make due with agreeing about ends and agreeing about choices that we make collectively even if we don't agree about the reasons for those choices. And that's to be expected, and perfectly fine, and maybe to be celebrated.

**NICK AGAR:** Well, that's moral debate and moral discussion. I guess these philosophers sometime have this idea that basically if you can formulate a powerful enough argument, you'll convince everyone. So I don't believe in that. But I do think, well, oh gosh. That's your conclusion. Well, I don't know. It's a philosophy paper. There's a whole lot of stuff in there that I don't have time to read. But that's your conclusion, count me in.

**MICHAEL  
LIVERMORE:** Yeah. It goes a long way certainly in practical politics.

**NICHOLAS  
AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL  
LIVERMORE:** Maybe just shifting gears a little bit, not very much but just a slight shade on the conversation. Part of what I think is fun and less intrinsic value in a lot of your work is that there's a interdisciplinary element to it and in particular a kind of ongoing conversation between the humanities and specifically your discipline of philosophy, and in particular hard sciences, physical sciences, life sciences, technological development.

I assume that, in your recent work, you're very interested in information technology, digital technology. And that's a whole technical discipline as well. One just thought that comes to mind is, what initially drew you to that intersection of what is often a difficult and fraught terrain with the intersection of humanities and the sciences? And what have you found productive or challenging at that intersection as a humanist and moral philosopher?

**NICHOLAS  
AGAR:** Well, one of the things that I really love, by the way, is the conversation. So right, you're a legal scholar. I'm having a conversation with you and I'm enjoying it. Now, in a way, how do these conversations work? And there are ways for them not to work. So if I was to take a philosophy paper published in an analytic philosophy journal, that would not be a productive way to have a conversation.

My view is that the way the academy is currently set up is it's too hard to have these conversations. So we say that we want to be interdisciplinary, but the design of the academy is tragically made sort of in a way-- this conversation is quite a rare thing and it's too rare. But if you were to suddenly go on to some of the legal detail of your work, well, I'd be out. So I'd say, Michael, I'm not enjoying this conversation, because I just don't much about that. So anyway, I'll just let you go.

**MICHAEL** It got very boring very fast.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** Yeah. Well, I mean, in a way, it would be interesting. It's interesting for academic insiders. But see, this conversation, there are many arguments. We're having an end of this very conversation right now. And from my perspective, it's going very well. And from my perspective, I've learned some stuff from what you've said.

**AGAR:**

Now, I mean, I guess, if I was to remake universities, which I don't expect to happen-- I mean, things like climate change wouldn't be something that is dealt with in the way it is currently. You can certainly get a philosopher to talk about climate change and there are some. And there are some great philosophers talking about climate change. You can get economists to talk about climate change.

But often, sort of in a way, given the journals, economists tend to publish in economics journals that are read mainly by economists. Not exclusively but mainly. That's the main market. Philosophers publish in philosophy journals, and they tend to be read by philosophers. And the one problem is, if we were to say let's publish this conversation, the insights that we've gleaned from it and send it to a journal, well, it's quite a broad-ranging conversation. It's a very interdisciplinary conversation.

And from the perspective of your discipline, law, it looks shallow. From the perspective of philosophy, my discipline, it looks shallow. But for interdisciplinary conversations to happen and be successful, we have to sacrifice some depth. I mean, philosophers are famous for going in-depth and this question, this question, and this question.

But each time they add another question, it's almost like you already saying, oh, I think I've had enough of this. In a way, I mean, interdisciplinary conversations require breadth and maybe a sacrifice of depth without being conflated. I don't think this is a shallow conversation, but we're not going to be looking at many different formulations of philosophers' theories about how sentience counts morally.

**MICHAEL** Yeah. This is, I think, just like the question of interdisciplinary work in general in some senses, is the breadth-depth trade-off. So at a law school, at least at a US law school, one of the interesting things is what draws scholars together is an object of study rather than a methodology, generally speaking.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** Yeah.

**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** And so we have a faculty at UVA, we have economists and philosophers and historians. Those are three disciplines that are very prevalent in law schools. And then you'll also have political scientists and anthropologists and so on, some people with science backgrounds occasionally.

**LIVERMORE:**

And so it's a fun interdisciplinary environment for that reason, because there's a sense where the philosophers are going to talk to the economists and the economists are going to talk to the historians and that's just expected. But there's always the tension with respect to the economists, what is the value to the economists of getting feedback from the historians? It's like a tension that is always constantly being negotiated.

**NICHOLAS** Yeah. No.

**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Because there's often something there. But sometimes, there isn't anything there. And there's certainly domains where the economist views the historian or a deontologically-oriented philosopher talking to a more consequentialist welfarist economist. You could just recapitulate debates between the pros and cons of utilitarianism, but that's not necessarily all that productive either.

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** No. But I just think it's built into us, as questioning, reasoning beings. I mean, I've been trying as a philosopher to engage with some economists on the future of work. And it's interesting. I mean, ever since John Maynard Keynes, in a way, their view about the future of work or our view-- so the tendency, for example, for me as a philosopher talking about economists, if I'm just talking to other philosophers, I get to oversimplify.

So I get to say basically look at what John Maynard Keynes said about technological unemployment and just say, well, all economists, what do they think? They just think that technological unemployment is temporary. It's painful. You lose your job. The power loom comes. The handloom, you can't be that. But don't worry. Your kids will be fine. So it's always temporary. And I guess, from a distance, that would be the view from economics.

But when you talk to an economist, of course they say, well, no, there are actually quite a few views within economics. That's the breadth thing, too. And if I'm just being a deep or aspiring philosophical depth philosopher and I think, well, philosophers would be reading me. They won't care if I oversimplify the economics.

And the economists, when they talk about philosophy, the other economists won't care if you oversimplify the philosophers. So I think these conversations, when people say that they're impossible, I would cite this exchange as proof positive that they can happen and they do happen and they're productive.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Yeah. No. I completely agree. And I think that there's some cost, there's some effort that goes into interdisciplinary work and interdisciplinary conversations. But I think there is actually something structurally about them, at least an expectation to use an economics kind of idea, leads to bigger returns.

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** If you're deep in a discipline, it's very hard to make a lot of progress. You're in a research program and you can chip away at problems. That's the idea of deep research programs, I think.

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** But when you break out of that and you kind of explore an entirely new space, which doesn't have a research program and a lot of progress hasn't been made, sometimes there's nothing there and sometimes there are big things there.

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** Yeah. And often, just the synergies in bringing two ideas together and saying, what happens if I put this idea that I got from anthropology, weird idea? But I'm going to try it out with this. Now, I think that's the interdisciplinary urge there.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Yeah. It can have big payoffs. I think we do see that. Speaking of the work that you've been doing on the future economy, your most recent book, *How to be Human in the Digital Economy*, touches on a lot of these themes, very much thinking about what the future of work looks like in particular and the role of human work.

In the sense, I think a major move that I find in the book is re-conceiving of work or conceiving of work in a way that certainly traditionally economists have not conceived of work. Whereas if you were to say the textbook economic understanding of work is that it's a disutility. It's something that we trade. We trade our labor. We would prefer not to.

But at the same time, we're willing to do it because we get paid and that's just the way it works. And I take the part of the project of the book is to think of work as something other than just purely a disutility, that we would happily turn over to the machines if we could. And what is the place for human labor in a world where, in theory, we could turn lots over to machines but maybe we don't want to?

**NICHOLAS**

Yeah. Well, I think work should be fun and I think it's one of the great-- when you talk about wealth inequality, I mean, it's pleasurable work, inequality. Isn't it? Because we certainly have people who love their work. Certainly, the best paid, and that's an overgeneralization, tend to have the most enjoyable work.

**AGAR:**

But the worst paid tend to have horrible work. So in a way, if you were to quiz-- I don't want to overgeneralize here. But many Uber drivers, they might say, oh, no, yes, this is the conditions under which-- I like driving people around, but the conditions of my work are not great. I would give it up if I didn't have to. Whereas if you ask Matt Damon, do you enjoy your work? I mean, I bet he says, I love it.

**MICHAEL**

I mean, he could quit. Right?

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS**

He could quit.

**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL**

He absolutely could feed his family without--

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Very few people can be Matt Damon. Enjoyable work does involve connections with other human beings. People become depressed when they're not with other human beings. We're an obligatorily gregarious species. And so if you're looking at ways to torture people, well, you can waterboard them and that will work. But you can also just lock them up. Keep them fed.

**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL**

That's horrible.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS**

Yeah. And then just see-- yeah, it's very hard for a member of obligatorily gregarious species to survive solitary and in confinement, because we thrive under those conditions. I mean, because I think machines do have an advantage in certain categories of work.

**AGAR:**

And, yes, I mean, I guess when you have your ultrasound or whatever, you should probably celebrate the fact that in the future any anomalies will be detected by a machine. It will be better than the human. And in the future, I don't know if I really want to be driven around by a human pilot. Humans get distracted. Humans there are autopilots, and they get lazy.

So those jobs go. But if we could actually compensate by saying that there are-- I don't want to make it too simplistic. But people love helping other people, and they quite like connecting with strangers. And that's the work that people love. Therefore, I say to you, Michael, can you help me? I need some help. I bet it kind of creates an urge to help.

And I think, if you could help me, you might enjoy doing it. So those kinds of jobs, I think we can create a lot of those. Because they require us, and we require them to avoid being depressed, isolated, sort of locked-in people watching Netflix all day.

**MICHAEL  
LIVERMORE:** It's interesting that we talk about this in terms of work. And I think that it's absolutely the case that there are certain sectors of the economy where people enjoy their work and it's often higher-paid sectors. So my brother is also an academic. We didn't come from an academic family. We just kind of ended up both doing this kind of work. And we sometimes joke. We say the stuff we do 200 years ago, it just wouldn't even be considered work. It would just be called "leisure."

**NICHOLAS  
AGAR:**

**MICHAEL  
LIVERMORE:** Like this is what you did with your free time if you had enough money. If you were in the aristocratic class, you wrote, you thought, you read the writings of other people. That's what "leisure" actually meant. Being a scientific researcher, that kind of stuff-- his work is more pure science. These were leisure activities.

**NICHOLAS  
AGAR:** Yes. Yeah. No. No. That's interesting. Isn't it? We make a distinction between leisure and work. But when you describe work that involves connecting with other people, relationships between different minds and things like that, those are work-- I mean, I hope they expand it. And so part of what I do in the book is to say, well, how can we create new work? Because I think lots of work predictably has a limited shelf-- I mean, if digital tech-- I mean, I don't know.

Will there be human pilots in the future in 40 years' time? Or will there be signs across the door, the park would say no humans allowed? I mean, the machines aren't perfect. The machines will occasionally crash. They'll malfunction.

I mean, there are lots of examples, but they'll crash less often than the human-driven plane, the human-flown planes. Because they are improving whereas human pilots can get a bit better. So I hope that we think creatively about how we can fill the space, how we can stop becoming isolated.

John Capaccio wrote a great book on loneliness, and it just talked about the tendency in our society to isolate ourselves from each other. Now, one of the things that forces people out is having to turn up to work every day. Now, you might say, well, I don't know. So I hope that we create lots of jobs that are both well enough paid so that people can say, well, look, when I help strangers, these are not my friends or my family. It's not something I do for that reason. I enjoy it, but I contribute to society.

**MICHAEL  
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah. So just to be the skeptical economist, economically-oriented perspective on this, so I think there's two kinds of thoughts that one might offer. So one is, well, let's imagine this future where the machines are doing the work, the work-work, the economic work, the disutility work, the stuff that people really don't want to do. Isn't it enough to have a world of volunteerism?

There's something that they want to do that. They can have a community center, or they can have an art gallery. Everyone in this world will have enough money if we live in an egalitarian society with high productivity. And what do we need work for in that kind of world? Then I think part of the argument might be, when someone's paid for their job, it's a way of signaling that it has social value. But maybe we don't need that.

Maybe just the pure experience of doing it and the fact that someone asks you to do it and you're expected to show up to your volunteer position, the same way you're expected to show up to your yoga class, and that gets you off your butt, that that's sufficient. Do we do we need to have the exchange economy as part of this world in order to generate the types of social relationships that you're interested in preserving?

**NICHOLAS  
AGAR:**

Well, so that's a great question and I don't want to answer that in a way that suggests yes, we definitely must. I'm the philosopher, I've decided. But here's a risk that emerges from that volunteerist approach. Of course, it's sad, isn't it, that, when people make predictions about how much TV they'll watch, people watch much more TV than they predict they will, which is not a great thing. So they do just turn on the TV, because it's easy.

I don't want to have to put it sort of more plainly, and I think it's become apparent. We fear people who are different from us. And so in a way, I guess, when you turn up to your big sort of racially, culturally mixed college and you say, well, I'll meet lots of different kinds of people here, there's a sad pattern where the Black kids find the Black kids, the white kids find the white kids, the Asian kids find the Asian kids. So they seek out people who resemble them in ways.

If I'm working at a Starbucks, maybe there'll be people who look like me and speak with my accent or come in. I'll feel more relaxed with them, but they won't be the only ones who I have to help. And there's sort of data evidence that suggests that the more-- work is great, because it places you in a consequence where you're dealing with people who don't look like you often. Oh, well, I don't about that person. I mean, they worship a strange God, so a bit shy about that.

But when you assign people a task, they tend to get over it. I mean, if I have to work with the person whose skin color is different from my own and I maybe feel a bit distrustful, then, when we have to actually work together to do something because it's part of our job, that barrier evaporates. So I think that's one of the advantages. In a way, I worry about the volunteerism, the volunteerist replacement for work where it sort of says, well, OK. Who do I feel most comfortable with?

Well, Australasians who sound like me, they're my kind. I will help them, but that's OK. Because the other people who don't look like me, well, they'll be helped by-- yeah. That's sort of when we talk about the disintegration of the modern technologically-advanced societies. Work I view as a countervailing force for that, because it forces us to work with each other and it forces me to connect with people I might feel quite shy about.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** And so just to drill down on that a little bit, it's very interesting because it's kind of pro-market, pro-commerce--

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** --in a way.

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** That's what we have.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** But from a very different-- right. OK. That's true. We could have another kind of institution that organized work.

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** Yeah. Well, I mean, I don't know. I mean, it's almost like a matter of in a way working with what you've got. Yeah. I mean, if you look at my political moral ideas, yes, I would love a society in which everyone gave to everyone according to their needs.

I mean, that's not a fantasy world. If you want to make progress, then-- it sounds funny. Doesn't it? I mean, paying people to work with people and to collaborate with people who are different from them is a mechanism that we currently have that works.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Right. It's just kind of pragmatic. And just to be clear, the benefit out of this, it sounds like it's twofold. There's the benefit of social cohesion that, if we were to allow ourselves to further bubble-ize-- we're so in our bubbles already. If we didn't have to go to work and collaborate with others who might be different than us, then we'd really be in trouble, that maybe society would fall apart.

But also, there's maybe even a kind of-- trying to think exactly how to characterize it. Either maybe paternalistic, it will be good for me and society could say it is good for me to work or for a person to work because their own natural instincts might be bad for them and they would be better off if we could kind of shape and incentivize their behavior for their own benefit. Or maybe it's a virtue story, where we're kind of structuring society to inculcate a certain kind of way of being in the world that's better, which is to say more open-minded and pluralistic.

**NICHOLAS AGAR:** Well, I would hope. I mean, I guess my fantasy for the future, a social digital economy, where in a way the work we do is increasingly social. And that's good for us, because it involves being with other people. And I guess we've got this market economy. You may fantasize about getting rid of it, but it does require me to work with people who are different from me and to collaborate with them.

And that's good because, in my experiences of having-- it's been a universal experience. When I have a conversation with someone who speaks with a different accent or looks different or clearly worships a God that I don't worship, those conversations, if I'm curious and open, they tend to go very well. I come out thinking, wow. OK. Even if it's just simply having a conversation with your Uber driver.

**MICHAEL LIVERMORE:** Right.

**NICHOLAS** You pay your fare. You don't pay for the conversation. But you come out thinking, wow. I mean, that person was from Nepal. I have never been to Nepal, and I've learned something about what it's like to be a Nepalese person living in Australia. It sounds naive and simplistic, but I enjoyed that.

I wouldn't have had that conversation if I didn't get into the Uber. Excuse me, you look Nepalese. Can I have a chat with you? That's not the way it works. But here I am sitting in an Uber, and we've got to talk about something. Otherwise, I just sit silently as he gives me an Uber rating of 2. But why not have a conversation? They tend to go well.

**MICHAEL** Yeah. And one of the things that's interesting about this, too, is just that it's this tension between people-- that's right, that that's how we enrich our lives, is by socially interacting with folks that are similar to us, that are not as similar to us, and that's a big part of what makes a good life. But yet, there's something about human nature that we don't automatically do that.

**NICHOLAS** No.  
**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** That we need social circumstances. That we will sit at home watching Netflix or playing video games rather than engage. And that, I think, is just a fascinating-- again, for an economist, this is bizarre. Right? It's good for people, why don't they just do it? Why do you have to create structures?

**NICHOLAS** No. Yeah.  
**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** But it's such an interesting psychological reality of humans, that we will tend to isolate even though we are kind of, as you say, socially obligates or gregarious obligates.

**NICHOLAS** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, in a way, probably many of us would be healthier if we did more exercise. And we know that.  
**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** Right.  
**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** But who does all the exercise that they should?  
**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** Right.  
**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** No. If someone says to you get out and have a walk, it's typically good advice. And yet, if the TV's on, that's something that we know about ourselves. We don't often make good choices and we need some nudges, I guess, to use that overused term, in order to do what's good for us. And I think being with other people, people who are different from us, is also something that we need to be prompted to do.

**MICHAEL** Yeah. So the other part of this then is we should probably be paid to exercise.  
**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** Well--  
**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** Which would be a good thing, actually.  
**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** Well, I don't know. In a way, when I think about incentives, I guess one of the problems with paying people to exercise is-- you know that study of kids and reading? So they noticed that certain kids weren't reading. And then, yeah, if you pay them to read--

**MICHAEL** Yeah.  
**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** But when the money stops, the reading stops, too.  
**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** Yeah.  
**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** I mean, obviously, I don't have an answer to that. But I know that, in general, we'd be better off if we socialized with people who are different from us. And maybe if we went for more walks.

**MICHAEL** I suspect, if we walk with other people. There actually is an interesting feature of the relationship between work and socializing, is just exactly what you said. When the money stops, the behavior stops. I mean, this is retirement. I mean, many people, when they retire and they aren't required to go into a work environment anymore, their degree of social isolation just skyrockets.

**NICHOLAS** Yeah.  
**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** And this is a serious issue in many societies, especially where people's kids move away and they just find themselves utterly alone in part because that structure of work is gone.  
**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** That's a great example. And there was a great French program that I wrote a bit about. I'm going to speak French here, and it will be a disaster. [SPEAKING FRENCH] So if anyone who's French is listening, I apologize. But looking in on my parents. And it was creating work, so it was a use of French postal workers and it was really creative.

Yeah. I mean, I guess people don't send many letters anymore and it means that French postal workers don't have to do daily rounds delivering the very few letters that-- there's less work. And so someone had the brilliant idea of saying, well, we've got these postal workers. Here, they can still deliver the mail. But what happens if we pay them to look in on isolated older people?

And everything you read about, that was a thing in *The New Yorker*. It was a great piece that just looked magical. These sort of French postal workers, I hope it's still going on. They were in their 50s or whatever. It's probably like, well, they were about to be laid off probably. Well, there is a problem and all I want you to do is to go around to these addresses and have a conversation with these people who are very isolated.

Yeah. There are so many creative solutions to this problem that, if you look-- I mean, I found this piece. I thought, well, that's genius. And I think, if we think in those terms, then there's lots of-- it's almost like one stone, two birds kind of thing. Maybe an environmental ethics sort of podcast, that's not the best analogy.

**MICHAEL** Right. We need a new analogy.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** Yeah. But I mean, it's like the postal worker keeps their job and the shut-in older person has someone to talk to.

**AGAR:** Yeah. And that's great.

**MICHAEL** It's such a different solution than what you-- or one category of addressing this issue that you do see, is kind of caring robots, that that's a go-to way of addressing social isolation, especially for older folks, is we're going to put a chicken in every pot and a robot in every living room.

**NICHOLAS** Yeah.

**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** And that seems less attractive.

**LIVERMORE:**

**NICHOLAS** Well, if you want to play to the strengths of machine learners and things like that, well, have them fly aeroplanes.

**AGAR:** Now, I guess there's a trope in sci-fi movies about sexbots and befriending robots. Humans are quite good at having sex with each other. Humans are quite good at befriending each other. We're kind of built to do that. I mean, there are horror stories.

They tend not to be the norm. So if you were to form a relationship, yes, it's sort of like an option of desperation. Isn't it? And the sad thing is with the technological imperative, sexbots and social robots are cool, if we could actually resist that urge to realize that world and instead say, well, let's put human beings in each other's lives.

I mean, there are things that, gosh, surprisingly, go exactly with our social instincts and that we're good at. We may not be good at detecting pre-cancerous growths on ultrasounds. We're not built for that. But we are built for kindly dropping in and having a conversation about what the weather's like with a socially-isolated person.

**MICHAEL** Yes, that is definitely something that has been happening in our evolutionary environment for a very, very long time.

**NICHOLAS** We can do it.

**AGAR:**

**MICHAEL** Well, Nick, I suspect we could keep talking for some time, but I appreciate your generosity of taking the time to chat with me already. It's been a fascinating conversation.

**NICHOLAS** Thank you.

**AGAR:**

[MUSIC PLAYING]