Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Forty-Nine, with Matthew Yglesias

Public Philosophy and Polarization

Transcribed by Christiaan J. of Rev.com, August 24, 2018.

For those interested, here's how to cite this transcript or episode for academic or professional purposes:

Weber, Eric Thomas, Anthony Cashio, and Matthew Yglesias, "Public Philosophy and Polarization," Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode 49, Transcribed by Christiaan J. of Rev.com, WRFL Lexington 88.1 FM, Lexington, KY, October 9, 2017.

Radio announcer: This podcast is brought to you by WRFL, Radio Free Lexington. Find us online at WRFL.fm. Catch us on your FM radio while you're in central Kentucky at 88.1FM, all the way to the left. Thank you for listening, and please be sure to subscribe. Hello, and welcome to Philosophy Bakes Bread. Food for thought about life and leadership.

Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread is a production of the Society of Philosophers in America, AKA SOPHIA. I'm Dr. Eric Thomas Weber.

Cashio: And I'm Dr. Anthony Cashio. A famous phrase says that philosophy bakes no bread that is not practical, but we in SOPHIA and on this show aim to correct that misperception.

Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread airs on WRFL Lexington, 88.1FM and is distributed as a Podcast Next. Listeners can find us online at philosophybakesbread.com, and we hope you'll reach out to us on Twitter @PhilosophyBB, on Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, or by email, at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com

Cashio: Last, but not least, you can always leave us a short recorded message with a question or a comment, or you know, we like our bountiful praise here. It's got to bountiful. We don't just want praise, it's got to be bountiful, and we may be able to play it on the show. You can reach us at 859 257 1849. That's 859 257 1849. On today's show, we're very excited. I know, I'm super excited-

Weber: Yes.

Cashio: ... to be talking with Matt Yglesias. Welcome, Matt. Thank you for joining us.

Yglesias: Thanks for having me.

Weber: Awesome.

Cashio: Matt, and we're going to be talking about public philosophy and polarization. Matt is a senior correspondent and co-founder of Vox.com, which he started with Ezra Klein and Melissa

Bell in 2014. Vox.com is a popular news publication that offers commentary and explanations about the news of the day. Matt's writings focus on politics and economic policy. He also co-hosts The Weeds podcast twice a week. Twice a week, that's a lot.

Yglesias: I love podcasts.

Cashio: A show that gets into the weeds of politics and policy. Good. Well, gonna be a regular here then.

Weber: Indeed.

Cashio: In addition to his writings for Vox, Think Progress, The Atlantic, Talking Points Memo, and The American Prospect. Matt, who's apparently a very busy man-

Weber: Yes.

Cashio: ... has authored two books, including most recently, The Rent is too Damn High, which is a book about the policy origins of the middle-class housing affordability crisis in America.

Weber: That's right, Matt is a star in political and economic commentary. Not everyone out there knows that he majored in philosophy in his undergraduate studies at Harvard. In fact, I had the opportunity of meeting Matt for the first time in December of 2011 when he kindly joined a panel at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Washington, DC, a panel titled From Philosophical Training to Professional Blogging, with Dave Roberts and Andrew Sullivan.

Weber: In addition, Matt has not only served as a philosophical writer and television pundit, but also as an entrepreneur with vox.com, illustrating, as William James often said, "The cash value of ideas." It's such a pleasure to have you, to get a chance to talk with you, Matt. Thank you again so much for joining us.

Yglesias: Yeah, it's very good to be here. We'll have to cash value TK, but ...

Weber: All right.

Cashio: All right, Matt, well, we like to start our show with a segment we call "Know Thyself." We want to get to know our guest, and about them and about their background, and so we're going to invite you to tell us about yourself. Do you know thyself? Maybe you tell us a little bit about yourself, and your background, where did you grow up, how did your background shape who you are and so on. Tell us about yourself.

Yglesias: Yeah, I mean, who knows? I grew up in Manhattan, so I'm always been out of touch with real America. I think a lot of people in the media only learn to be out of touch over time. But I started early.

Cashio: Trained out of touch.

Yglesias: Yeah. Exactly.

Cashio: But you were born into it.

Yglesias: Which is good. It's sort of my parents were urban gentrifiers before it was cool. And so my ... We had always a lot of books around my house. My father actually dropped out of high school, but he was a novelist. So he's a sort of a bookie kind of guy, but not a formally educated kinda guy, and was always very sort of, I don't know, encouraging to reading things, this or that. And I think he had a copy of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. Yeah, so I don't know why he had that. But I've read that in high school. That was my sort of introduction to philosophy through a now I'm sure, terribly unfashionable-

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: ... venue. But I thought it was a fascinating book. And so I ... That was pop-by intro class when I was a freshman in college. And I liked that. So I signed up, took it. Went on to, I really enjoyed that class. And wound up majoring in the field, because in part my family never really encouraged people to try to be too practical. Which is good. And I was writing. I mean, my dad's a writer. His parents were both writers. They mostly focused in fiction. I'm not very creative either, which I think helped make me some way suitable for philosophy undergraduate stuff.

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: But then I was really sort of ... I was just in school when people started writing blogs, which was a great opportunity for me. Because I just liked that ... I love writing. I know some people in the field of journalism who really love reporting, and they almost hate the part where they have to get their notebooks, turn them into stories. But I'm not like that at all. I love to write.

Cashio: Right.

Yglesias: I'm incredibly lazy about other things. And so it's this thing where you just type something up, and hit Publish. It was great for me. And I loved it as a hobby. And because digital sort of started blowing up in the mid-oughts. It's almost became a bit of an accidental career for me. Even when I was freshman, sophomore. Even as I graduated, it wasn't really thinkable that you could have a career as like a guy who writes stuff on the internet. But it turns out you can.

Weber: Yeah, indeed. Now, you mentioned something about feeling not very creative. So that means you're a good choice for philosophy. What do you mean by that?

Yglesias: Well, you know, it's like there's a certain amount of what I think normal people find to be annoying pedantic-ness that goes into some of this. Where you have a lot of like, "What do you really mean by that?" Or, "Is it like this?" Sort of like pain in the ass, hair splitting instead of moving on with that.

Cashio: Yes.

Yglesias: But I've really enjoyed that.

Cashio: We strive not to be pedantic.

Yglesias: But that's in my character. My wife I know feels I'm very excessively literal person who never gets what everyone's talking about. But to me, that was all very sorta suitable to the way the sort of philosophical take on how you think about the world, how you think about questions is to be really exacting about what it is people mean, and what it is people are trying to say. And not sort of skip lightly over it. Which I think is important.

Weber: So it's kinda like people who are ... In the sense of creative that are flowery, and kind of accepting of things being rough in some ways, or interpretable in many, many senses. Versus the person who really wants to get at the precise answer. Is that part of it.

Yglesias: Yeah. I mean, I definitely feel in journalism, in my field, some people including some really great writers, some great journalists almost use a kind of a forceful pros to kind of-

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: ... overwhelm your sense and be like, "Oh, yeah. This guy, he really captured that," right? And that's not me. I never really captured anything. And I try to instead bore down on what's really happening. Like what really-

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: ... makes sense here? What can we really defend, and what can't we? I mean, I'm sure like everyone, I have my moments of rhetorical flourish and things like that. But I've never been a really sceney writer as a journalist. And I've never been too much one for crazy cool terms of phrase. I try to be clear.

Weber: Well, there's that philosophical advice that many give, which is, "Kill your darlings." You know, you're like, "This favorite flowery line that you've written probably isn't so good as we think it is. And may be imprecise, and just sounds really nice."

Yglesias: Right. I mean, exactly. And if you're skilled at writing, one thing that that can let you do is get away with a lot of sorta equivocations and other kinds of dodges. Right? It's if you're trying to really be clear and really be logical, and really make sense, it's I think helpful to sort of pair that stuff back.

Weber: Yeah. Well, in your philosophical studies. So you enjoyed that first class. Was there anything that in particular hooked you in further courses that made you say, "You know what? I don't just wanna take another class in this. I wanna major in this. This is awesome." Did something hook you?

Yglesias: You know, I sort of ... I loved my sorta Introduction to The Promise of Philosophy class. I thought it was a really cool just tour of a whole range of things. And then later when I was a sophomore, I took a class that Richard Heck taught that was more on, he called it Realism and Anti-Realism. But it as about like ... Just sort of basic it's like, "Are numbers real things? Are possible worlds real things?"

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: And it- That to me really sort of, it bridged the gap perfectly between the kind of rigorous grounded analytical tradition, and the sort of like smoking pot in your dorm room like, "Whoa, man." There's something really interesting-

Cashio: "Have you every thought if number were real, man?"

Yglesias: Right. "If they're not real, how do we math?"

Weber: Yeah. That's right.

Yglesias: But it was like a ... You know, it was a way of thinking about those kind of questions in a way that actually made sense, instead of just being an a--hole about it. And that's what really did it for me. Even though now I kinda look back, I'm like, "What was that? Who even cares, right? Is seven real?" I don't know.

Weber: Well, you know-

Cashio: There's people who care.

Weber: Yeah, right. "Are utopias real?" Or does it make sense to ... So we say unicorns aren't real, but they're an idea.

Yglesias: Right.

Weber: And three is an idea.

Yglesias: Right.

Weber: And the idea of socialism or democracy, or whatever. Are these ideas real? What does it mean? And so on. Anthony, you wanna ask one of our favorite questions?

Cashio: Yeah. Yeah, I will. We ask this of all our guests. You're not in the academy anymore. But I think it's always interesting to ask. What do you think when you're in your own work and in your own thinking, what is philosophy to you? We just wanted to ask you that. You majored in philosophy, and what is that?

Yglesias: Oh, man.

Cashio: What is that? What is philosophy?

Yglesias: What is philosophy? I think it's the ultimate nature of reality.

Weber: Nice.

Yglesias: Yeah.

Weber: So rather than just someone's invention, and this is their opinion. It's about getting at truth of these things?

Yglesias: I like to think so. Yeah, it's about trying to get at the real truth behind the concepts that we use in our everyday life.

Weber: Would you say that your philosophical studies in some sense prepared you? Or just very loosely only for the kinda trajectory you had?

Yglesias: I think you see a lot of people ... I mean, we were able to put that panel together of sorta people in the broader field. I think you find a lot of over-representation of people who study philosophy doing the sort of political writing that I do. Obviously a lot of political science, economics, and stuff goes into it too. But I think it's very helpful for people who want to write about public affairs and some time dealing with philosophy, dealing with approaches to argumentation, and logic. And I think especially, it's a cliché, but nowadays there's a lot of pressure to publish fast, fast, fast. Be fast about things. And actually understanding the logical structure of arguments is a good way to do that without just making stuff up. You learn a lot in philosophy about how to contribute something of value to a conversation without necessarily having spent six months original field research on it.

Weber: Interesting. Yeah, that's a really good point. In other words, if someone simply presents an argument for this or that economic policy, and it's got all these steps, you can sort of check for consistency. You can question assumptions underlying them. You can, right? Test out whether or not in fact the conclusion follows, those sorts of things?

Yglesias: Yeah. I mean, I think I remember when I was an undergraduate, they were trying to talk people into the idea that you wouldn't ruin your life if you majored in philosophy. And the example they used was ... But you know a lot of people who major in it end up going to law school. But I think-

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: ... it's a similar kind of thing, right? I mean, lawyering, political punditry. You're trying to develop arguments, right? And not necessarily being able to argue about the same thing every day of the week, right? And those kinda analytical based skills is a lot of what philosophy undergrads wind up doing.

Weber: Sounds right to me. Yeah. Well, thanks everybody for listening. This has been our first segment with the great Matt Yglesias of Vox.com. This is me, Eric Weber talking with Anthony Cashio as well, my co-host. And we're gonna be back after a short break. Thanks for listening.

Cashio: Welcome back everyone to Philosophy Beak Bread. This is Anthony Cashio and Eric Weber here talking today with the great Matt Yglesias, who is the senior correspondent and co-founder of Vox.com. Today's episode will focus on public philosophy and polarization in the second segment. Let's start by talking about the problem of polarization. We'll come back to the topic of what philosophical thing it might do for us, if anything in the next segment.

Weber: So Matt, one thought that we should probably start with is kind of the sort of sense of that you know, "Kids today are disappointing," right? We say there's a problem in polarization today. But maybe there's always been a problem of polarization. Maybe we're making too much of this. Is that right? Or do you think that the worry about polarization is cliché and a misconception? Or is it real? And what do you take it to be as a problem if you do?

Yglesias: I mean, this is definitely one where it's important to try to think about what do we mean? Right? There's a really good book my Morris Fiorina, which says ... Which subtitles the myth of a polarized America. And so he's saying this whole polarization narrative is wrong. But it turns out ... I mean, what he's saying is that if you study public opinion, right? You do not see a highly polarized public. And that in fact if you look at the 60s, he would people were more polarized back then. You had a lot of support for sort of fairly frank Jim Crow white supremacist type. You also had black radical movements. You had people joining far-left terrorist organizations.

Yglesias: So in his view, well actually we're less polarized than we used to be. But I think normal people who say there's a lot of polarization, they're not disagreeing with him about that. But they're talking about the political system, right? They're saying Congress is more polarized than it used to be. And that voting behavior is entrenching and supporting that Congressional polarization. And I think that's pretty clearly the case, right? I mean, these days when somebody kicks up a legislative idea, it starts as either or a Republican or a Democratic idea. They try to build usually a one-party coalition. Maybe get a couple people from the other side. And we now take for granted that that's sort of business is gonna be transacted in D.C.

And in most state capitals. And that is very different most of 20th century American history, when legislating was much more sort of entrepreneurial and often cross party. And the parties were organized around ... Not really organized around firm ideological principals. So, it's changed a lot. And there's some upsides to the way we current organize our politics. But there's a lot of downsides, and I think people who see them as downsides are not mistaken.

Weber: Interesting.

Cashio: I'm curious which the upsides are. What do you see as the upsides?

Yglesias: Well, you know, the main upside is that I do think it's clarifying from a service standpoint of democratic accountability. You know that a Nancy Pelosi speakership would be systematically different from a Paul Ryan speakership.

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: You used to have certain odd dynamics where if a sort of conservative Republican senator was defeated by a Northern liberal Democratic senator, that might put a Southern segregationist in charge of the judiciary committee, and actually make Civil Rights legislation less likely. When wanted it to be ... So the old sort of, the muddled parties, they have their good sides. And there's things to be nostalgic about there. But from the standpoint of citizens understanding what's going on, the kinda politics as bloodsport is a little bit clarifying and useful. I mean, nobody ... It's a lot harder these days to be mistaken about what the consequences of your vote -

Weber: Interesting.

Yglesias: ... would be. And it's a lot easier to know what side you ought to be on, right? People used to say, you know, "Well, Italians would vote Republican, because Irish people were Democrats."

Cashio: Right.

Yglesias: That's not a very good reason, right? Whereas nowadays, we see more people understand which party stands where, which seems good.

Cashio: Do you think that's led to a certain amount of thoughtlessness?

Yglesias: I think-

Cashio: I mean, "Now you know I just know. So I don't even have to critically analyze?" Kind of the politicians? And the letter next to their name, and know to vote?

Yglesias: I mean, what I think it more leads to is a sort of, we're seeing more and more erosion of sort of procedural norms, right? And ideas about ... We just don't do it that way, right? Ideas about sort of process fairness, both in the conduct of elections and in the conduct of government. Because when people are so closely aligned on teams, right? It becomes so hard to separate your sort of subset of views about what you want the government to do from just sort of, "Look, I want my team to win the election," right?

That used to be stuff for party hacks who are involved in distribution of patronage and stuff would just care about winning. But issue activists would care about some conception of the good, which would include some notion of fairness. Now it's all collapsed, right? If you believe in abortion rights, the only way to advance that cause is for Democrats to win. And so a win at any cost mentality takes over. I think you rarely seen that from Republicans since 2010 in terms of how they've done gerrymandering, how they've done voting rights type issues. And I think more and more progressive people feel like they've got not alternative except to sort of respond in kind.

Weber: Interesting. Well, one of the recent developments that's been sort of surprising, you mentioned public perception and so on, and polls. Well, there was at least ... And this is a small sample size admittedly. But Oprah held a 60 Minutes conversation with voters from Michigan.

Yglesias: Yeah.

Weber: And-

Yglesias: Yeah.

Weber: ... one of the consequences of this conversation was that it came out that people on the Left and people on the Right both said that they anticipated divisions getting worse, to the point of they could reasonably they thought imagine a civil war occurring in our future.

Yglesias: Yeah. That sounds bad.

Weber: Well, but are such worries silly? Or are they just kind of, they're worried, and there is a lot of polarization. But that's not realistic? Or do you think things are getting that bad?

Yglesias: I mean, I don't think it's totally silly. If only because, at some point you need to have people who for the system to operate, people need to believe in some kind of legitimacy of procedural outcomes and how it goes. And I do think as a consequence of sort of growing polarization, you're an erosion of that. Right? I mean, when George W. Bush was elected in

2000, there was a lot of talk initially of, "Well, he lost the electoral college. He's gonna have to sort of acknowledge that in his governance, and hew to a moderate course." And then he didn't really do that.

Yglesias: And then 16 years later when Trump won, he lost the electoral college by a much larger margin ... Lost the popular vote rather, by much larger margin than Bush did. And there was nobody even saying, "Oh well, he's gonna have to be bipartisan." Nobody thought that. It would be so naïve to expect that someone would restrain themselves, because of the questionable legitimacy of their win. And it's just sort of now it goes without saying that everyone will press advantage to the maximum all the time. And that is inherently dangerous, right? I mean, the stability of democracy is based on the idea that you say, "Okay, I lost fair and square. I may not be happy about it." But sorta take the L and then try to do better next time. And you're seeing some of that mentality erode I think.

Cashio: Well, I'm just worried it's gonna lead to some kind of political quietism, right? You just kinda, you give up and it doesn't matter kind of where we go with it. You don't see that happening, do you? Hopefully not.

Yglesias: No. I mean, I would hope not. I mean, I think it's interesting. I remember when I was in school, I did my sort of couple political philosophy classes. And you read these books about justice and how should society be. And at least something that I didn't see people talking about in that kinda academic, but heavily theorized way was, how do you try to do political change, right? People wanna do things sometimes for selfish reasons, or interest group reasons. But I think it's very clear that people do have some kind of impartial motive that makes them wanna go out in the streets and protest, and makes them wanna Tweet angry things at columnists they disagree with, or whatever it is.

Yglesias: But people have very little in the way of scrutiny, or guidance, or any even basis for thinking about, "What is the right way to engage with the process as a moral agent?" And in that way, how can we respect other who are involved and have some kind of understand of means of good faith engagement, and right or wrong. And what kinds of outcomes we need to listen to, what kinds of ways of pursuing change are legitimate. I mean, these are sort of practically speaking incredibly-

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: ... important subjects.

Weber: Well, as far as pursuing change, one of the frustrations points back again to the issue of polarization where there's some things that you might think of as kind of basic facts that you'd hope you'd be able to get everyone to agree upon. And some of them are just sort of simple empirical matters. And others are inevitably sort of charged in a way. Like in a 2014 Pew Research Center poll that came out, it said that 86% of steadfast conservatives said that the poor have it easy in the U.S. And 86% of solid liberals think that the poor have hard lives in the U.S. And I mean, I'm not saying this is sort of a basic empirical matter, I guess it depends on what you mean by having it hard and having it easy. And it depends on what you're comparing it to, I suppose. But there is unbelievable divide on the question whether or not the poor have easy or hard lives. And that seems like a pretty big spectrum of difference to say, easy versus a hard life, you know what I mean? Well-

Yglesias: Yeah.

Weber: ... what do you think about sort of the challenge of just basic kind of coming to agreement about some basic facts?

Yglesias: Well, I mean it's very challenging. And I do think there's a lot of evidence that's sort of engaging in the political mindset makes people worse at that kind of thing. No, but you know that people learn through political engagement what it is that is the answer your side is supposed to give to those kinds of questions. And they end up sorting on those. It's a very thinking like a political activist is a not great way of thinking about facts in the world.

Cashio: I really like that. I think you're absolutely right.

Yglesias: Right. And-

Cashio: Dead on.

Yglesias: ... you see that all the time, right? And people ... Obviously people disagree all the time. But you don't see necessarily like a family who's trying to decide where to go for dinner, these insane kinds of huge factual disagreements. Even if they may not like the same food, or have the same preferences, or something like that. Usually they can sort of come to grasp with reality. But politics is a little bit special. And it's special in a way that's not super great. And I do think that that is a ... There's a lot of different political institutions around the world. But having a sort of two party system encourages everything to become this kind of team sport in a way that is not that healthy.

Weber: Quick question, Matt. Would you say that you're a political activist? And would your critics say that you're a political activist?

Yglesias: I would not say that I'm a political activist. But critics might. But I mean, I try to engage. I care about things. I mean, I'm not gonna be someone who pretends like, "I'm just writing stuff up for no reason." I care about politics and political outcome, right?

Weber: Right. Right.

Cashio: Do you think things would be better if we had more than two parties?

Yglesias: I mean, I think certain things would be better. I think it's ... I was in Germany recently for their election where they've got six or seven parties in parliament. And at a minimum, it makes things less stark, right? I mean, the professional politician know they have to work with members of other parties after the election. But also the citizens know that to have an affirmative identity with one party doesn't necessarily mean like a maximally negative take on some enemy organization. It's a different kind of mentality.

Weber: Well, one of the challenges, I got one last question for you for this segment. One of the challenges we've got right now is that people who are on the right and on the left tend to be sort of treated as if they're sort of opposites of each other. Like they're the same kind of thing. And so we had white supremacists in Charlottesville saying that they wanted a certain kinda

preferential treatment to remain for white people. And then you had folks who are advocating for equality on the other side being called ... I don't know-

Yglesias: Sure.

Weber: ... all the details one might pull out-

Yglesias: Sure.

Weber: ... ant ANTIFA and everything. But it seems like a false equivalent, am I wrong about that? Or how do you make sense of polarization when basically it's turning into, "Well, these people are white supremacists. And these people who disagree with them, well they're clearly the other extreme," right?

Yglesias: Yeah.

Weber: Is that what was going on? Or is that unfair?

Yglesias: I mean, I do think you see a certain amount of sort of lazy journalists. The lazy journalist epistemology is just like, "There's two sides to the argument, so I quote them. And there it goes. Now I'm even-handed." And there's the sort of profession developed that as a norm over the years. But it doesn't make any sense as a way of telling truth about the world. Which I think people do more and more recognize. But it makes a lot people in the media uncomfortable to try to be put in a position of telling people, "No, these two things are not the same."

Weber: Yeah. And yet don't we need them to be uncomfortable at those things and go ahead and do it though?

Yglesias: I think so.

Weber: Right. Well-

Cashio: Yeah. The lazy journalist epistemology is my new favorite phrase.

Weber: I like that too. Well, everybody-

Cashio: Shamelessly stealing that from you. I like that.

Weber: That right. Thanks everybody for listening to another segment of Philosophy Bakes Bread. We're gonna come back after a short break. Talking once again with Matt Yglesias. Senior correspondent and co-found of Vox.com. I'm Eric Weber and my co-host is Anthony Cashio. Thanks everybody for listening. We'll be right back.

Cashio: If you're hearing this, that means podcast advertising works. WRFL is now accepting new applications for advertising in a selection of our original podcast series. If you or someone you know owns a business in central Kentucky, and would be interested in advertising on WRFL's original podcasts, please email development@wrfl.fm.

Cashio: Welcome back to Philosophy Bakes Bread. This is Anthony Cashio and Eric Weber. And we're here having a great conversation with Matt Yglesias. Senior correspondent and co-founder of Vox.com. In the last segment we had a really interesting conversation about polarization in America today. And then this thing that we're gonna ask you about, what we can do about this polarization that we've kinda seen in politics, and sort of how it's kinda trickle down into our own very thinking about different problems. So do you think public philosophy can help in any way? That's one way to start there.

Yglesias: Yes.

Weber: Excellent. Now we can go home.

Cashio: All right.

Yglesias: Well I mean, I think-

Cashio: All right.

Yglesias: ... something-

Cashio: It was a yes or no question.

Yglesias: Something we know, public intellectuals do very well. And people think about moral philosophy issues, in particular is how people understand how much sort of that's important is off the grid of the day-to-day sort of political early, right? It's interesting to think of the fact that Franklin Roosevelt who most people would think of as like a great progressive leader in America. But he oversaw this terrible internment of Japanese Americans. Unconscionable compromises with Jim Crow system in the South.

Yglesias: Whereas Donald Trump I would say is this cretinous reactionary. But nothing he does on those kinda topics is gonna be nearly as bad as anything FDR did. And that's not because of what happened in the mid-terms, or who said what on Twitter. It's a long-term sort of shift in moral consciousness on people's parts, right? And we will look back on the present day from, I don't know, a 100 years from now, 200 years from now, and we'll be looking at big changes in attitudes toward homosexuality. Maybe in changes toward the rights of animals and their treatment. And we're not necessarily gonna see the most contentious issue in Congress today as fundamentally the most important thing people change their thinking about. And it's something that people who think deeply about issues and who know how to engage with the public are able to, I hope, put things on the table that are beyond the kind of Washington D.C. argument of the week type thing. And that ultimately, move us as a society beyond those kind of arguments.

Weber: Very interesting. So Matt, running Vox.com. Certainly people on the political Right will say that there's a sort of a position or a progressive kind of lean of the outfit.

Yglesias: Yeah.

Weber: How do you deal with at least the potential charge of polarization, or how do you think about issues of bias versus being unbiased and so on? And do you have any examples that stand

out in your mind of cases where you had to think about that, right? Where you're thinking about what's right, sure. But you do wanna consider ways in which you present what you're doing fairly and think about how people disagree. And how do you navigate issues of having a position and kind of an inclination and so forth? Versus dealing with worries about polarization.

Yglesias: Yeah. I think there's sorta two different things that arise in media. One is kinda like substance. And I'm very comfortable sort of brushing off people when I say, "Oh, no. You have a left-wing bias when you say that cutting the Estate Tax won't pay for itself." And I don't ... That's right. I mean, that's facts. It's judgment. It's a fact that I research. Not everyone is gonna love my work, that's fine. Where the question of bias, I really do think comes in that was, when you get into stories about scandals, and other things that are sort of politically salient, but not really about the issues. It's hard.

Yglesias: If you read, "Okay. Tom Price took flights on private jets around here and there." And you have an opinion about Tom Price that's grounded in your view about healthcare, right? And the sort of harm he's doing to the country. But you know that this private jet thing is getting him in hot water. And it becomes ... How worked up about it can you become, right? And is that good faith? Is it cynicism? What's really driving your interest in these kind of things, versus if people attack politicians who you admire on the basis of little things they do here and there. It's easy to tune it out, even when you step back and you're like, "You know what? Maybe those Hillary Clinton speaking fees, maybe that really was corrupting?" Right? "Maybe that really is bad for sort of the public sphere even if I strongly prefer her to Donald Trump as a President."

Yglesias: And that's I think where it's hard. And it's always time for self-reflection to try to really think like, "What is it that I care about?" Like, "What is my objection to people who I find objectionable really about? And how can I avoid just sort of bad faith, like throwing the kitchen sink type stuff at them." 'Cause that's what leads to ... There's so much dumbness in political media, and it's driven by that. By people not just wanting to say like, "Look, I disagree with this guy about abortion and taxes." Right? Which is in some ways fine, right? It's like people can agree to disagree and still move on in life. But when you feel like you need to undermine the other guy by-

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: ... coming up with other kinda stuff, and getting really upset, and you're shouting about Benghazi all the time. A really sorta toxic element seeps into the world. And it's tricky.

Cashio: So then how do you go about it? I mean, just sort of in a practical sense, is thinking about the topics you wanna write about specifically? Do you think, "Well, this is a scandal. But if I don't cover it, it's gotta be covered, 'cause we're a news organization." And then once you do pick that, how do go about thinking about the language you're using crafting it? That so it's not so over the top.

Yglesias: It's hard. I mean, that's why I bring it up.

Cashio: Right.

Yglesias: I mean, this is the kind of thing where you try to check yourself. You try to not have a completely monolithic newsroom so that people can have some room for give and take. And like, "Is this really a big deal? Is this really something that we care about?" I mean, we try at Vox to

primarily have a sort of issues focused coverage of things, and try to just keep a focus on things that really matter and things that are really important. But it's not just a sorta professional or an institutional struggle. I mean, I feel it in my own heart. It's just like it's easy to get your blood boiling about Donald Trump's golf vacations. And just think to yourself. It's like if you thought this guy was a really good President, would you be mad that he was golfing? Or would you be saying, "Hey, you know. He's got phones. He can do what he wants. Let the guy golf."

Yglesias: And there's so many examples out there. I mean, people have done stories on this. Guys on Twitter who were raging at Obama for golfing, and who are now raging at liberals for raging on Trump for golfing. And it's terrible. But I've been there too. I'm weirdly hung up on Trump's golf trips. And I know that I wasn't mad when Obama went golfing. And that I thought it was dumb that conservatives were mad about it. But it's just, it's hard for me. It's like Puerto Rico is ruins and he went golfing. Like, "What the f---?"

Weber: Yeah.

Cashio: And he went down. He finally went for some threw some papers towels.

Yglesias: Yeah. I mean, that was nice. It's a real human frailty-

Weber: Yeah.

Yglesias: ... that I think, it's just like I eat too many French Fries, you know?

Weber: Me too.

Yglesias: So you have to struggle about these things.

Weber: Well, Matt. Here's a question for you. Would you say that you have great friends whose views you very strongly oppose? Have you got kind of like a Scalia to your Ginsburg?

Yglesias: I mean, not quite at that level. Especially now. When I was newer in Washington, I played in a regular poker game on I think Wednesday nights. That was mostly with people who ... A lot of people worked at the Cato Institute, which is a libertarian think tank.

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: And I got to know a lot of people through that who came from a sort of a very different political perspective from me. And mostly learned that they were just as wrong as I had always suspected. But understand it better. And it’s useful...

Cashio: That's always a good feeling.

Yglesias: ... always to talk in a pleasant way with people. You come to understand people's ... A bad thing about the way we talk about politics is you often understand people's views better if you talk to them when they're not sort of in official argument mode.

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: A lot of times we do ... I think when people think they're putting their best case forward, they're actually performing something that's completely inscrutable to outsiders. Right? That you're not really trying to persuade anyone at all. And it's useful to know people on a social level.

Weber: Interesting.

Yglesias: You know, the other thing beyond that, I mean this is a total cliché of everything Washington, but also just family life is that there's, in my opinion at least, surprisingly little correlation between people adhering to big political principles that I think are correct, and people being sorta nice people or a--holes in their individual life, right?

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: I mean, the two things have remarkably little to do with each other.

Weber: Interesting.

Cashio: Right. I live in a place where I have political views that are pretty much different from the entire populous. And I'd live a very lonely life if I can't figure out how to get along with other people.

Yglesias: Right. I mean, that's the thing right?

Cashio: They're all what we'd call, "Good people."

Yglesias: I mean, I'm sure lots of them are great.

Cashio: Oh, they really are. They're really fantastic people. We vote against each other. But-

Yglesias: Well, and I was just reading this thing in The New York Times that's reporting on Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood producer and his apparently horrific track record of sexual assault and so on. And this is a guy who ... He's like a donor to lots of good causes. He has lots of beliefs that I completely agree with, and seems like some level of Harvey Weinstein is trying to be a really good person who helps the world. And some other level of him is this horrible monster.

Weber: Well, Matt. Both Plato and Aristotle had a lot to say about how important friendship is.

Yglesias: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Weber: And so it seems like polarization, is the kinda thing certainly on Facebook anyway, that leads to unfriending. At least in that sense of the term. And so I just wonder whether or not you think the idea of friendship, with the way Aristotle would put it as that it's a kind of a key political virtue. Would you say that's naïve today? The other thing I'd say is, so for Aristotle in their day, they were talking about a much smaller town, you know?

Yglesias: Right.

Weber: It wasn't a country of 300 million people. We're talking about a few 1000 people. And maybe that's much more possible in a smaller more homogenous population.

Yglesias: I mean, there's definitely something ... I mean, considering a lot of that sorta old-timers around here say is that the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the politicians themselves has degraded, right? And so the Senate is kinda like a small town. There are just a 100...

Weber: That's interesting.

Yglesias: ... people up there. And once upon a time, or so they say, they were all buddies despite their disagreements. It was like my poker game, or whatever. And could relate on a human level. And now at least so the story goes, they're sort of more to their corners. They spend more time flying back home to the district. More time fundraising. More time going on cable to yell at each other. And you can imagine that doing some real harm. I mean, there is something humanizing about speaking to people on a social level. On the other hand, right? I mean, there's 330 million people in the United States. We obviously have to be organizing-

Weber: Right.

Yglesias: ... the country along some kinda abstract impersonal system, right? I mean, it's far too many people. The ultimate basis of who's gonna be President, it honestly can't be like, "He seems like he's a good dad, and we like his dog." Or, "We had fun at brunch." 'Cause people used to talk about this all time. And when Bush was running against Gore, people would be like, "Would I like to get a beer with him?" And it's like, "I don't know." I mean, it's a big country.

Weber: Well, one thought about friendship is that when your friends are having a hard time, you try and help them out. And so when New Orleans had problems, the country acts. Interestingly when Sandy hit the East Coast, there were people not so sure they felt such need to help.

Yglesias: Right.

Weber: Remember? And that was pretty ugly. And now again when Puerto Rico and so on. And so public assistance in times of crises is sort of perhaps one measure of help. And yet, people seem perhaps less friendly then they may have been. I don't know if that's true. What do you think?

Yglesias: Well, I mean, this is an interesting question, right? I mean, because sometimes you build an in-group and out-group mentality. And it makes helpful to people who are in the in-group, but more hostile to the people in the out-group. And I think one of the big sources of moral progress over the years is trying to get people to expand that sort of zone of fellowship, and to care about not just someone in another neighborhood or another state, but in another country. Or care about a monkey, or whatever else is like that. And it's challenging though, because you do attenuate some of the bonds of solidarity as you ask people to go bigger and more abstract.

Weber: Yeah. But that's a nice way of putting some of the points from the Plato and Aristotle thought were very important. I love it. So thanks everybody for listening to yet another segment here of Philosophy Bakes Bread with the great Matt Yglesias of Vox.com. And this is Eric Weber

and my co-host is Anthony Cashio. And we're gonna come back with one more segment after a short break. Thanks everybody for listening.

Cashio: Welcome back, everyone to Philosophy Bakes Bread. This is Anthony Cashio and Eric Weber. And today we have been having an awesome conversation with Matt Yglesias of Vox.com. And we've been talking about public philosophy and polarization. In this final segment, we will wrap with up with a big picture question or two, some lighthearted jokes, and hopefully a question for all of us to ponder as we go upon our merry ways. So Matt, we've been talking about the way that the politics is sort of seeping into our media, and the way it's been seeping into the way we think about specific issues. And so I wonder if you have any advice maybe for our listeners as they're reading news stories and navigating arguably increasingly polarized media, maybe on how to be savvy and careful with their own thinking about how to sort of avoid falling into certain traps?

Yglesias: Yeah. I don't know. I think that it behooves everyone. Not that people shouldn't be engaged or be passionate about topics that they care about. But I think everyone when they read the news these days ought to take a deep breath before you say anything about it. Calm yourself. Maybe read it again. I mean, it's a little bit contra to interest, 'cause we get a lot of good web traffic off people doing very rapid social shares of things, and viral news stories. But I've seen things flying around lately, reports about cholera in Puerto Rico, or a completely unverified story about a whole ICU worth of people who died.

Yglesias: And I see these stories getting sorta pushed around, or even discussed by people, smart people, who if you ask them, "Should you believe a completely unverified sort of sensational story that you saw on Twitter that you have no idea who the source of it is, or anything about him?" They'll be like, "No, that's crazy." But people do it all the time, because they get amped up. And you just-

Cashio: All the time.

Yglesias: ... should remember. I mean, have courage in your convictions, right? You can believe that the politicians that you hate are bad, without believing every random thing that you happen to hear about them, and amplifying it across the universe, right? That your principles are grounded in deep things, not on what you saw on Facebook this morning. And so you can be a little more relaxed about it.

Cashio: Deep breath, guys.

Weber: Yeah. Deep breath. I like that. Yeah, there's a sense in which in lore of philosophy, certain thinkers would say that to know what's right, you need to calm your tempers.

Yglesias: Yes.

Weber: Bishop Joseph Butler thought that you could hear the voice of God in your inner ear as your conscience. And, "You have to calm your passion though, and in the cool of the afternoon, you can hear God's quiet voice," he would say.

Yglesias: He didn't have modern earphones though.

Cashio: That'd be nice.

Weber: Yeah. When your earphones are blasting a podcast, it's hard to hear too, right? Well, here's another big picture question. We haven't talked about your book, but here's the question. Is the rent still too damn high?

Yglesias: Yeah. I mean, if anything it's higher. This is a book that's about ... We've had for decades, forever a conversation about affordable housing in the United States. And that's a primarily a topic related to poor people, which is vital and important, and critical. But we're starting to see in a lot of big coastal cities, and also to some extent in some of the sort of more affluent college towns in the center of the country, is a situation where middle-class people with okay jobs and incomes that are around the national average still can't afford decent houses. Everybody knows, if you tried to move to New York City with a household income of $55 000 a year, you struggle to raise a family in that kind of circumstance.

Weber: Yep.

Yglesias: So this is a book that's about that. It's about how we came to sort of overly restrict house building in the United States, and what we might be able to do about that. I saw a poll floating around yesterday. It said people in the Boston area, their number one source of dissatisfaction was what the price and availability of housing. It's become a bigger conversation in the California State legislature. And it's an important topic in people's lives. And also to the subjects we've been talking about on this podcast. It's a subject that does not just recapitulate sort of basic republican versus democrat, like totalizing clash of worldviews. So it's to me an interesting ... It's more enjoyable to engage on this issue than on some of the things that are most just like strict party warfare.

Weber: Right. I mean, except of course that 86% of steadfast conservatives think that the poor have it easy. And so-

Yglesias: Yeah.

Weber: ... might those people not say, "Come on."

Cashio: Yeah, that's-

Weber: "They've got it easy. Why are we so worried about the cost of housing?"

Yglesias: Yeah. I mean look, everything touches on sort of big ideological principles on some level. But this a subject where I found more productive conversations with people than if we're just talking about income taxes.

Weber: Well, one area in which I've often found very interesting kind of reason for people on both sides of the isle to care, is this notion that people who work in public service for a community often aren't able to live in that community.

Yglesias: Yes. Yes.

Weber: And thus have to be from somewhere else, have to have a longer commute. If you're a firefighter, and you don't actually live in San Francisco, and you've gotta ... You can't call in firefighters really fast so easily if they're not making enough to live in the town, right? And so

you can have some serious problems in that way. And that's of course getting at the selfish motivation for luckier people to be worried about this, right?

Yglesias: Yeah. I mean, this has become ... We call it workforce housing here in D.C. where I live. And it's become a huge issues is, are we gonna have nurses and firefighter, and teachers able to reside reasonably close to the community? And you know what? It's one way to think about it, right? I mean, it's one way to ... I mean, there's political problems. They're in part questions of narrow self-interest. And they're in part questions of big moral principle. But some of it really is just in a common sense way, it's like how are we gonna work together as people who live in once city, to resolve our common challenges? And that's the sort of friendly view of politics. And it's sometimes true.

Cashio: I guess back to that idea that we were talking about before, about sort of expanding the zone of friendship, right? Expanding it out, everyone's gotta be in the neighborhood.

Yglesias: Yeah. And a sense of community.

Cashio: Absolutely. All right, Matt. Well, we have one final big, big question for you. And we ask this of all of our guests. And I take the question comes from the name of the show. Would you say that philosophy bakes no bread as the famous saying goes? Or that it does, and why, and how? I guess, like show your work? I guess, is a way to say it.

Yglesias: I think to me there's a reasonable amount of bread in philosophy. I've always found it helpful in sorta my life to have learned how to draw a good distinction, to tell people the difference between arguing about substance and arguing about definitions over things. And to think sometimes about the most abstract sort of moral foundations in political principles. So I think, I mean of course we've come to have a more sort of elaborate and abstract economy where more and more of us are doing things for a living that don't bake any bread in an obvious way. I mean, does anyone need political commentary? Probably not. But philosophy helps me do that. And I buy bread with the money. So yeah, that's not bad.

Cashio: It's that cash value gain.

Yglesias: Right. Exactly.

Weber: Right on. Right on. Well, great. Excellent. One followup on this is sort of, what would you say to the people who would say that it doesn't bake bread? What would you say to them?

Yglesias: I think that people sometimes get overly obsessed with what they think that is practicality. And underestimate how sort of changeable and unpredictable the world is. My mother was a graphic designer in the sorta analog era. And she worked ... She cut things, and she pasted them. And she had big physical piece of type. And that was a very practical sort of trade in her day. There was a lot of demand for people who could do page layout and printing in New York in magazine publishing where she worked, and also in books. And then over the course of just a few years that was all completely sort of swept away by desktop publishing.

Yglesias: And it's unfortunate for her. She's also not unique in having had a trade and a craft sort of devalued by technological change. Whereas it turns out that my dad, he writes stories. Which seems kinda impractical, but has actually been less disrupted over time but things that have happened. And yeah, so I just think when people are think about their education, it's good

to practical. It's also good to just learn for the sake of learning. But to have a reasonable amount of humility, and do you really know what's gonna be practical and what's gonna hold up over time? And it's hard.

Weber: Right. Right. Well, fantastic. Well, as you know Matt, we wanna make sure that people know both the serious side of philosophy, as well as the lighter side. So in this last segment we have a bit that we call, Philoso-funnies.

Pre-recorded Weber: Say, "Philoso-funnies."

Pre-recorded 3-Year-Old Sam: Philoso-funnies.

Pre-recorded Weber: Philoso-funnies.

Pre-recorded 3-Year-Old Sam: Philoso-funnies.

Weber: So we'd love to hear if you've got a favorite joke, or a funniest fact or a story either about polarization, or about public intellectual work, and public philosophy, or just about philosophy in general. Have you got either a story or a funny joke to tell or anything?

Yglesias: Well, I'll just tell about my exit from philosophy, which is I was a senior in college, and I was doing an honors thesis. And I presented it, I did a little oral defense thing. And it didn't go that well. It wasn't that ... The work wasn't that good. And at the end, [Christine Corscar 00:54:41] who was one of the examiners there.

Weber: Yeah.

Yglesias: She-

Cashio: Oh, wow.

Yglesias: ... asked me, you know, make conversation. She says, "What are you doing this Summer?" And I said, "Well you know, I've actually got a job lined up with a magazine that I'm pretty excited about." And she looks at me, she pauses and says, "That seems to be about your speed."

Cashio: Oh, boy.

Yglesias: And you know.

Cashio: Oh, wow.

Weber: Oh my God.

Yglesias: She was right. I really enjoyed my career in journalism.

Weber: Well, your speed has been blazing fast and taking over the world of this stuff.

Yglesias: I know some other people who went out to grad school, and great things there. But I always thought that was fitting end to things.

Cashio: Yeah.

Weber: It's an interesting ...

Yglesias: She's a strong believer in the Kantian duty to truth. And there you have it... It's tough out there.

Weber: One of the jokes we've told before is, if you can't say anything nice, have the decency to be vague.

Yglesias: Yeah.

Cashio: Exactly.

Yglesias: Always good advice. Always good advice.

Weber: Well, Anthony and I always gather just a couple of jokes as well. If people don't laugh at the jokes, they can laugh at us I suppose. So we'll offer a couple of these for you.

Cashio: All right, I'll do the first one here. So George W. Bush is seen Potomac River on foot. And then, so we have different headlines here. The Washington Post wrote the headline, "President Bush crosses the Potomac River." The Washington Times runs the headline, "Bush's conservative approach saves taxpayers a boat." Mother Jones writes the headline, "Bush can't swim." No one? Okay.

Weber: All right. For editors. I think I told you I'd come back to editors.

Yglesias: That's a good one.

Cashio: I think that captures it well.

Weber: Yeah. How many editors does it take to change a light bulb?

Yglesias: How many?

Weber: Only one. But first he has to rewire the entire building.

Cashio: Government lies, and newspapers lie. But in a democracy, they tell different lies.

Weber: All right, last one.

Cashio: Was that a communism joke? I think it is.

Weber: We got one more. An honest weatherman says, "Today's forecast is bright and sunny with an 80% chance that I'm wrong."

Yglesias: I like that one.

Cashio: I think that one's definitely my favorite. All right. Well last but not least, we wanna take advantage of the fact that today we have powerful social media that allow two-way communications even for programs like radio shows. So we want to invite our listeners to send us their thoughts about big questions that we raise on the show.

Weber: That's right. Given that, Matt, we'd love to hear your thoughts if you've got a question that you propose for our listeners for a segment that we call, You Tell Me. We often sort of get feedback from listeners, and then we'll sort of offer a response or invite a guest back, or whatever. Have you got a question you propose for us to ask our listeners?

Yglesias: Oh, man. I should've prepared for this more. I'm always interested in what people think we should write more about in the political world, right? I mean, it's easy to sort of all be chasing our own tails, and cover stories that other people are covering, 'cause that's what people are talking about. But I'm always interested in what people are interested in, and feel like we're not sorta on.

Weber: That's a good ... That's an important question actually.

Cashio: Are you sure you wanna open yourself up to that?

Yglesias: I gotta know. Hard to research.

Cashio: Yeah.

Weber: Well, there you go. That's a good question actually.

Cashio: All right. Well, thanks everyone for listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread, Food for Thought about Life and Leadership. Your host, Anthony Cashio and Eric Weber are really grateful today to have been joined by Matt Yglesias. And we hope all you listeners will join us again. Consider sending us your thoughts about anything you've head today, that you'd like to hear about in the future, or about the specific question, questions we've raised for you, especially Matt's question. What should they write more about in the political sphere? Political correspondents, what do you wanna hear more about? And so this is your chance. Let him know.

Weber: That's right. Remember everyone, you can catch us on Twitter, Facebook and on our website at philosophybakesbread.com. And there you'll find transcripts for our many episodes, thanks to Drake [Bowling 00:59:06]. An undergraduate philosophy student at the University of Kentucky. Thank you, Drake.

Cashio: Thanks, Drake.

Weber: And one more thing, folks. If you wanna support the show and wanna be more involved in the work of the Society of Philosophers of America, SOPHIA, the easiest thing is to go learn about us and consider joining as a member. Philosophersinamerica.com is the website for that.

Cashio: And thank you, Matt for joining us. We had a really wonderful conversation.

Yglesias: Thank you.

Cashio: If you are enjoying the show, maybe take a second to rate and review us on iTunes or your favorite sort of podcasting network. And you can of course always email us at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com. And you can also call us and leave a short, recorded message with a question or a comment that we may be able to play on the show at 859.257.1849. That's 859 257 1849. Join us again next time on Philosophy Bakes Bread, Food for Thought about Life and Leadership.

Radio announcer: Hey there. If you're enjoying this podcast from WRFL Lexington, you may enjoy our live radio stream at WRFL.fm. And of course via radio at 88.1 FM in the central Kentucky area. We have a wide variety of programs you're sure to enjoy. Just go to WRFL.fm/schedule and see what programs appeal most to you. Thanks again for listening to this podcast from WRFL Lexington.