

Nasty, Brutish and Short with Scott Hershovitz

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Capering]

Christiane: Joining me on the show today is the philosopher Scott Hershovitz, whose new book explores philosophy and ethics through the lens of questions raised by his own children. But as Scott explained to me, his sons Rex and Hank aren't interested in philosophy just because they've been raised by a philosopher. In fact *most* children are natural philosophers.

Scott Hershovitz: If you're raising kids, you are raising philosophers. At least for a while. The research suggests that between the ages of like three and seven, kids are just spontaneously raising questions in philosophy. And so I say like, "Look, if you've got a young kid, you are raising a philosopher and the question is, are you going to nurture it? Or are you going to let it wither away? Or worse yet, are you going to like extinguish it by communicating that you're not interested in the kinds of philosophical questions that your kids are asking?"

Christiane: Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: Scott Hershovitz's new book *Nasty, Brutish and Short* explores philosophical and ethical issues that come up when you're talking to young kids. And as it turns out, these questions are ones that all of us, regardless of age, probably struggle with.

[interview begins]

Christiane: So Scott Hershovitz, your book *Nasty, Brutish, and Short* is chock-full of fascinating ideas related to ethics and obviously philosophy, but also current events. We're not going to be able to cover everything today, but I encourage listeners to pick up a copy and explore the issues themselves. But I do want to cover some of the issues that you talk about, some of the chapters that you write about. But before we do that, could you briefly explain what you're doing in this book?

Scott Hershovitz: The full title is *Nasty, Brutish, and Short: Adventures in Philosophy with My Kids*. And I think of it really, as having two aims. So like the basic structure of the book is, "I'm going to tell you funny stories about my kids, which raise questions in philosophy. Then, I'm going to explore those questions with the help of my kids and with the help of some professional philosophers, too." And sort of the two things I'm hoping people will take away from this book, is a new appreciation for kids. I think they're really sophisticated thinkers. I think they're actually really talented philosophers, in some ways, more talented than adults.

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And so I'm hoping that people will recognize that in kids and engage them in philosophical conversation. The other ambition I have relates to the adults who will read the book. I'd like to help, especially adults that have been away from philosophy for a while, that maybe have lost the philosopher that was in them as a kid, recapture some of the wonder that they have at the world. And also, for people that have been engaged in philosophy, maybe to get them to think about some issues a little bit differently by seeing them through the eyes of children.

Christiane: And what makes children good at philosophy? And what could we, as adults, hope to sort of recapture by reading your book?

Scott Hershovitz: So I think there's two things that make kids really talented philosophers, or at least two things. One, is they're just puzzled by the world all the time. They've been dropped down in it, a lot of it doesn't make sense to them, and they don't know what the standard explanations of things are. They don't know what adults take for granted. So they're just filled with questions about things. And then the second thing I think is really helping them, is they're not yet afraid of seeming silly or of getting things wrong. They're in the business of being silly and they don't really have a clear picture that other people have views of them yet anyway. They're not so focused on, and that means that they're willing to try out their ideas and try out their arguments. And they're often sort of really creative, both in the questions they ask and in the answers they give.

If the question's like, "What can adults recapture?" I would hope it's some of that willingness to be silly. I think that's part of what's involved in being a professional philosopher, is to ask the questions that other people don't think are worth their time or don't even recognize that they need to ask. So there's this line I quote in the book from St. Augustine who says, "What is time, provided that nobody asks? I know. But as soon as somebody asks, I realize I have no idea." And philosophers and little kids are in the business of asking that question.

Christiane: So you take us on a tour of some key concepts in philosophy. And I want to know, first of all, which chapter was your favorite to write? Which was your favorite concept to explore with your children?

Scott Hershovitz: Certainly the one I had the most fun writing was the chapter about language, which asks two questions. It asks, "Is it really bad to swear? Why do parents and adults seem to care so much? Whether kids say bad words, why are any words bad to begin with?" And then the second question it asks is, "What are slurs and why are slurs bad?" I had fun writing that chapter. In part, it wasn't part of the original conception of the book, but my editor told me in response to drafts of earlier chapters that I swear too much. And so right around that time, my kid did something really funny in relation to swearing. And I thought, "Aha! This is what my editor gets in return. She gets a whole chapter about swearing." So that was a little bit of revenge.

The chapter where I learned the most, was the chapter about sex, gender, and sports. That chapter starts with Rex running his first 5k in second grade. The race was sex segregated. And actually a girl was the top finisher, not just for the girls, but for all second graders. And a boy got a ribbon too, since it was sex segregated.

And so the chapter just opens up with the question, "Why do we sex segregate sports? And does that make sense for kids? Does it make sense for adults?" But then once you see reasons for doing it, it raises this question, "Who's going to be eligible to participate in women's sports?" And I just learned, I read a lot of philosophy about sex and gender and a lot of trans philosophy for the first time working on that chapter. And I learned a ton and I didn't know what my view would be when I started writing that chapter. So it was fun for me and educational to approach an issue with an open mind and to read lots of really phenomenal philosophers writing about it, and then arrive at a view that I think is really well grounded.

Christiane: Do you use philosophy to explore your values? Do you use philosophy to justify your values, or is it a little bit of both? And maybe you can use that chapter on sex and gender for some examples.

Scott Hershovitz: What was fun for me to write the chapter, is I got to learn a lot and I didn't know what I'd think before I started. Actually, let me just say a little bit about the arc of the argument in the chapter. So one of the things that was super fun about writing it, is it turns out, there's lots of feminist philosophy on sports, which I hadn't encountered before. And so in the phase of the chapter that's asking, "Why do we sex segregate sports?" The two philosophers whose work features most prominently, are Jane English and Angela Schneider. Jane English was a phenomenal amateur athlete, who died tragically young climbing the Matterhorn. And just before she died, she published an article called, "Sex Equality in Sports." And she said, "There's two kinds of goods that sports brings to people's lives." She called some like the basic benefits of sports. These are things like fun and the opportunity to do things that help keep you healthy and produce self respect and develop skills. And she said, "Everybody should get the opportunity to participate in sports for those reasons."

Then, she said, "There's also scarce benefits to sports." These are things like fame and fortune and the opportunity to finish first place in the race. And she said that, "Just in their nature, these aren't goods that can be available to everybody, these are goods that are scarce." But she made an argument that equality requires that women have access to the scarce goods of sports on equal terms to men. That no particular woman or no particular man can claim the scarce good of sports, but women not to get an equal share. And I actually think the best explanation of why that is, was given by this other philosopher, Angela Schneider, who was also a really phenomenal athlete. She was an Olympic silver medalist in rowing, and then became a philosopher of sport.

And she points out that in our society, we really value athletes. We accord them all sorts of leadership opportunities. They stand at the forefront often of social movements. We pay attention to athletes more than most anybody else, maybe Hollywood actors and actresses are

the only people that get similar attention. And she says, "If we don't sex segregate sports, then our eyes are going to be on men exclusively and we're going to deny women these positions of power and influence." I found that really compelling. But then we were watching the Women's World Cup with our son, or actually both of our sons, and Rex asked, "Can a trans woman play woman's sports?"

And we realized actually, we didn't know the answer. We just weren't up on like what the eligibility rules were for these international competitions. And then when I went to investigate, I discovered well, there's actually like a good deal of controversy about this. And it seemed like the controversy had been handled in ways that were really demeaning to lots of athletes whose eligibility to participate in women's sports was called into question. I just thought, "I don't know what to think here." And it strikes me as a really challenging issue. In part, because there are at least some biological reasons or some biological facts that are connected to the drive to segregate sports in the first place. But there's also a strong desire not to have biology determine our social world and control the outcome of our lives.

And so I thought there was a tension here. So here's the answer to your question. I approached it with an open mind, reading lots of philosophers and lots of commentators on both sides of these issues just to try and understand it. And I ended up thinking that once you had Jane English's view and Angela Schneider's rationales for sex segregating sports in the first place, that it was actually quite clear that trans athletes ought to be eligible to participate in men's and women's sports in accord with their identification.

Christiane: It sounds like here, you started out not being sure where your values were or what you thought. But are there instances where it's okay to start with the value and then work from that?

Scott Hershovitz: I think about philosophy, like when I'm wearing my professional philosopher hat, is my job is not to defend a particular view. I think that's kind of dangerous actually. That if you get dug in defending a particular view, you're going to maybe misconstrue the strength of the arguments in favor of your view and dismiss the strength of the arguments against your view. So when I put on professional philosopher hat, I think my job is, "Let's try and understand this issue in a deeper way. Let's try and understand why people are disagreeing about it. Let's see what the best things that are, that could be said on behalf of each of these views." I don't think everyone should approach all debates and arguments like that, but that's kind of how I think about the ethics when I've got my professional philosopher hat on is, I should try not to get too invested in my own ideas.

Christiane: We've sort of slipped into already focusing on ethics, which is obvious, because this is a show about ethics. But you write that a lot of philosophy with kids tends to be exploring ethics, right? Because it's just they're such juicy applied things that you can explore with kids. And so of course, we have to talk about the trolley problem. And I thought it was interesting because most people explain the trolley problem as a vehicle to explore ethics, right? To explore where we stand on certain issues. And one of the things that you write that the trolley problem

can help us explore, is thinking about issues related to abortion, which I thought, that's always an issue that we need to be thinking through, but especially now. So we're post the Supreme Court leak about a key decision about Roe V Wade. So how does the trolley problem help us think through that issue?

Scott Hershovitz: The very first appearance of trolleys in philosophy, least so far as I know, was in an article by the English philosopher, Philippa Foot, called "Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect." And I'm not going to recall all the details of the argument offhand, but she was interested in this Catholic doctrine of double effect that it may not be okay in some circumstances, permissible to intentionally kill someone. But if there's some act that is permissible and it will have as a byproduct of the action that's permissible that somebody will die, that might be okay. The original version of the trolley problem, Foot was interested in the driver of the trolley. And the driver of the trolley was headed down the track and there were the five workers and he could pull the switch... Or not pull the switch, he could just like turn, whatever you use to steer a trolley onto the different track himself and kill one worker. And I suppose the question was like when you think about the doctrine of double effect, if you're turning the wheel to avoid killing the five, but not intending to kill the one, does that make it permissible to turn the wheel? So that's one kind of connection that the trolley problem actually historically, just appeared in a conversation for the first time about abortion. The suggestion I make in the chapter is a related, but I think slightly different kind of connection that you might draw.

So I'm attracted to a kind of Kantian solution to the trolley problem, where we're required say, to treat people as people, not as physical objects in the world, not as bags of body parts. And this would explain why it's not okay in the variation where there's like the very heavy man standing on the bridge to push him off the edge. Then, we're not treating him like a person, we're just using his body. But in the standard like bystander at the switch kind of case where you're like watching the scene play out and you could pull the switch, you're not actually using the sole worker on the spur, you're not using their body to stop the trolley or to save the other five. In fact, you'd be quite relieved if they found a way to escape.

It's no part of your action that you're using them in this way. And so I'm not sure that's a complete solution, but it's like the beginning of a solution that attracts me. But then I also think that has implications for abortion, because I think when the state requires that women carry pregnancies to term, they're using their bodies to sustain the life of the fetus, treating them as a kind of like gestational tool rather than as people who get to choose whether or not to have their bodies used that way. So, that's another connection that I see.

Christiane: I really loved your passage about skepticism and you're talking to your son about skepticism. That really resonated with me. So how about you explain to us what you call the skeptics game?

Scott Hershovitz: That chapter opens with my four year old wondering whether he's dreaming his entire life. And so I connected it up for him in the moment to Descartes and in the book to this like longer tradition, which dates back to ancient Chinese philosophy of people having this question of maybe everything's just a dream. And it sort of winds its way through a little bit of like a primer of contemporary epistemology. One view I arrive at in the chapter, is we should

understand assertions of knowledge to be context sensitive. They depend on what the stakes are of the conversation that we're having. So my friend, the epistemologist, Sarah Moss, likes to illustrate this sometimes with a conversation about brownies at a picnic. And somebody has put out brownies. And my wife goes and she gets some brownies from the table and I say, "Do they have nuts?" And she says, "No." Now, whether it's okay for her to say "no" depends on what the stakes of the question are. Which is to say, she knows that I don't like nuts. That's why I'm asking. So the stakes are really low.

But if the question had been asked by a colleague of mine, whose daughter is severely allergic to nuts. And if he had said, "Does that brownie have nuts?" the stakes are now much higher. And I think quite plausibly, she needs a different evidentiary base to say "no" in the second case than she does in the first case.

So lots of philosophers think that assertions of knowledge are context sensitive in that way. There's a philosopher named Gail Stein who says that, "Whether or not you could say you know something depends on what the relevant alternatives are." And I give an example in the book, where I talk about being in Tijuana, Mexico and thinking that you've seen a zebra. And comparing that actually to being at the San Diego Zoo and thinking that you've seen a zebra. If you're at the San Diego Zoo and you think you've seen a zebra, you can be pretty confident that you have seen a zebra because it's very unlikely that anybody's trying to trick you with say, donkeys disguised as zebras. But in Tijuana, that's apparently actually a thing. They dress up donkeys as zebras as a kind of tourist attraction, they call them zonkeys.

And so if you're in Tijuana, Mexico, and someone says, "Did you see any zebras today?" And you say, "Yeah." And they say, "Are you sure?" And you say, "Yeah, I know I saw zebras." You actually need a much better evidentiary base for saying, "I know I saw zebras," than you would if you had been at the zoo because in Tijuana, there's a relevant alternative that there just isn't at the San Diego Zoo. So then there's this observation that I associate with this philosopher N. Ángel Pinillos. He points out that part of what happens in a lot of our political conversations, is people play what I call, the skeptics game. Maybe I got that phrase from him, I can't remember. Where they try to introduce relevant alternatives that aren't actually relevant. Or they try and set the standard for knowledge super high.

So I give this example in the context of climate change. Chris Sununu is being interviewed and he's asked whether human beings are responsible for climate change. And he says, "I've studied this question a lot. I've looked at the science. Do I know *for sure* that human beings are responsible for climate change? No, I don't know *for sure*." And what I want to draw people's attention to, is what he's doing when he inserts "for sure" into that sentence, which is to say, he's trying to set the standards for knowledge really high. To make any possible alternative, no matter how fanciable, something relevant that we've got to rule out.

And I don't think that's a fair thing to do in these conversations. There's lots of things that we don't know for sure. Like, I don't know for sure that I'm not dreaming this interview. Like, that's

the point of Descartes. But I don't need to know for sure. And the stakes in climate change are actually such that if I waited until I knew for sure, we'd run the risk of catastrophic outcomes. What I want to do in that chapter, is draw people's attention to this skeptics game where people are asking us to focus on our doubts. We should pay attention to, is there a reason for us to focus on those doubts in this case?

Christiane: You give your kids advice on how to distinguish a good faith question from a bad faith question and so help us do that, too.

Scott Hershovitz: So I tell my kids you want to think about the aims of the person that having a conversation with. Are they asking questions because they really want to understand things in a deeper way? If they are, then I think you should answer their questions and you should engage them and take them seriously. But often, people are asking questions as a way of forestalling action, as a way of directing your attention to these unreasonable doubts, as a way of surreptitiously objecting or just stalling the conversation.

So I want them to pay attention. Like, "What are these people's motives here? Are they trying to understand things? Like do I think if they discovered they were wrong, that they would tell me as a way of sort of testing their trustworthiness?" If you're dealing with news sources, do they issue corrections? Do they have genuine experts on? Or other questions I teach my kids to ask like, "What's the emotional valence of this conversation? Are you trying to outrage me or are you trying to inform me?" Is something I want them armed with when they go on Twitter or watch cable news.

Christiane: So we're talking on May 27th. We've just experienced the shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde. And I just wanted to know, how do you talk to your kids about stuff like that, as a philosopher?

Scott Hershovitz: Our older son just reads the news on his own. He's 12 now. He acquires much of the same information that we do. Our younger son, we told about it. I offered him reassurance. And I've been trying to decide if the reassurance I've been offering him is false or not. We told him what had happened. We talked about how awful it was, we told him that these events are still rare. That it's really unlikely that it's going to happen in our community at his school. And I think that's true. It's how I help myself sleep at night and see him out the door every morning, is that I know that though there's a steady drumbeat of these events, we live in a very big country, with lots of people, they're still relatively rare.

But I said this with some reluctance, because I had a lot of frustration at people who took to Twitter immediately to say, "Oh, this is rare. We shouldn't make this a policy priority. We shouldn't care about it." So there's this guy on Twitter, a political commentator, Richard Hanania, who, within minutes was saying, "These are rare events. Don't get focused on this." Matt Yglesias was saying, "Remember, this is the best place to live. Everyone wants to move here." And I think those people were doing something akin to the skeptics game that we were just

talking about, which is to say, we care so much about these events, I think, not because of the frequency with which they happen or the likelihood that our children are going to die. We care because of like beyond just the loss of life, we care because what they reveal about our society and how people value us and value our children. And so many people treat our children as if they're expendable to support a certain kind of gun culture. So yeah, I don't think it's super likely that my kid is going to die. I'm really upset that I have to worry about it, but I'm especially upset that so many people seem to think losing 19 kids on a somewhat regular basis, is just a cost of something that they value more than those kids. That's what really makes me angry.

Christiane: So you write at the close of your book, how if we have kids or kids in our life, we can raise them to be philosophers. But I'll leave the readers to read the how, because I want to know why we ought to be raising philosophers?

Scott Hershovitz: If you're raising kids, you are raising philosophers. At least for a while. So the research suggests that between the ages of like three and seven, kids are just spontaneously raising questions in philosophy. And they kind of trail off around age eight or nine, as they approach adolescence. It's when they start to get that sense of what other people think of them, they start to take some of the standard explanations of things for granted. They started to shift their attention, maybe more towards a set of social concerns than just making sense of the world set of concerns. And so I say like, "Look, if you've got a young kid, you are raising a philosopher and the question is, are you going to nurture it? Or are you going to let it wither away? Or worse yet, are you going to like extinguish it by communicating that you're not interested in the kinds of philosophical questions that your kids are asking?"

And I make an argument for trying to nurture this. Two reasons: One, is I think it's really terrific for kids to hold onto this propensity to think deeply about the world and to question things. I think we might be better off as a society, if more people were more deep thinkers and willing to question the world around them and just had this disposition where they wanted to understand things and to learn more about the world. So I think the parents should want to help their kids hold onto that disposition. The second reason, is I think a lot of the habits that you develop when you're a philosopher would be really productive for our culture, if more people had them.

So there are—more in England and other countries than here right now—but there are these nascent programs, where people go into elementary schools and they do philosophy with kids. And you teach them ethic of the conversation, that we're going to take turns and we're going to listen to each other's arguments. We're going to try and understand each other and we're not going to shout anybody down. And it may be naive of me to think that if that sort of discussion and inquiry was a regular part of our education, then people would carry it forward more into adulthood. But we're so bad as adults at having conversations across deep divides, that it makes me want to try things. And philosophy education is one thing that we could try.

[Interview ends] [music: Latché Swing, Songe D'Automne]

Christiane: If you want to know more about our guest's other work, or some of the things we mentioned in today's episode, check out our new and improved show notes page at prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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