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MIKE LIVERMORE: Welcome to the *Free Range Podcast.* I'm your host, Mike Livermore. This episode is sponsored by the Program on Law, Communities, and the Environment at the University of Virginia School of Law. With me today is Leif Wenar, a philosophy professor at Stanford University and the author of *Blood Oil-- Tyrants, Violence, and the Rules that Run the World.* Hi, Leif thanks for joining me today.

LEIF WENAR: Thanks so much, Mike. I'm delighted to be with you.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So several years ago, you wrote and published the book*Blood Oil,* which deals with the problem of the natural resource, curse that afflicts many countries. And in the book, you detail many of those problems in a lot of ways that having natural resources can actually be really bad for the folks who are unlucky enough to live on those lands because of the relationship that exists, both the legal relationship and the power relationship that exists between governments and those resources.

And you provide a landscape, and a moral landscape. You discuss the legal landscape and something of a blueprint for what folks in the rich world, places like the United States and Europe, could potentially do to try to make some progress on improving that situation. Given the degree to which natural resources, especially fossil fuels, are just so fully built into the fabric of economic life, and it's not like we could just tomorrow say, it's very difficult, in any case, to say, OK, I'm just not going to use any sources of energy. And so you provide something of a blueprint. So maybe what we could just kind of start off with is that problem of the natural resource curse and how you kind of argue that we all end up implicated in this really often quite devastating situation.

LEIF WENAR: Thanks, Mike. You're right. The resource curse is a serious international problem that drives many of the headlines that we see in our newspaper every day. So think about the huge money that can be gained by selling off a country's natural resources like its oil, or its metals, or its gems.

Today, that money empowers some of the most coercive men in the world. So autocrats from Russia to Iran spend their resource money on weapons and repression. Armed groups like Wagner and the Congo's militias spend their resource money on atrocities and ammunition. Somehow, the business that we're in with these coercive men funds their violence and repression. We're in business with the men of war and blood whenever we shop for everyday goods online or in stores, whenever we fill up with gas, and that leads to this phenomenon called the resource curse.

And let me just give you some headline figures on the resource curse to give you a sense about how big a problem it is. So most of the world's autocrats today stay in power by selling off their country's oil. Most corrupt countries in the world are oil states. Most of the world's recent violent civil conflicts have been in oil states.

Most of the countries suffering hunger crises are resource-rich states. Most of the countries from which refugees have been fleeing are resource-rich states. And soon, most of the world's poor people will be in resource-rich countries. So the resource curse is a serious problem that we inadvertently drive by buying everyday goods because of the way the international trade system is set up.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Right. so this is-- it is, as you note, one of the most serious kind of-- or at least maybe a better way to say it is that it drives some of the most serious harms, kind of, in the world and kind of drives the-- just an enormous amount of suffering really when you get down to it. OK, so we're kind of implicated. And as you know, part of the issue is that we're implicated in this system that keeps really bad folks really doing really bad things in power.

One of the things-- obviously, one of the developments since the book came out is the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Obviously, Russia had been aggressive and has been going increasingly aggressive. And the relationship between Putin and kind of Contemporary Russia and natural resources is well known, but it's really exploded into the popular consciousness in the last couple of years.

And the West has taken steps to try to delink our economies, I guess, from Russia and to try to starve Russia of resources by making it difficult to export their natural resources of oil and gas, primarily gas. So what are your-- I mean, given the degree to which you've been thinking about this over the years, how do you-- how does it land--

how does this land with you, the contemporary attention that's paid to Putin and Russia natural gas? Is it kind of good that folks are realizing the nature of the interlinked problem of the resource curse? Is there too much focus on Russia alone? Yeah, so I'm just curious how that recent development kind of has played into your argument broadly about the resource curse and what we can do about it.

LEIF WENAR: Absolutely. Russia is a huge and a hugely important story. So in 2016, I published an article in *Foreign Affairs* saying that the West should start to get off of authoritarian oil. And I got together with a leading oil analyst, and we did some numbers.

And we said for Europe to get off authoritarian oil, including Russia. It would probably take a few years and tens of billions of dollars. Of course, that didn't happen in 2016. Instead of doing it peacefully, slowly, responsibly, and on principle, what happened is the West kept buying oil from Putin, sending him tens, hundreds of millions more dollars with which he then launched another invasion of Ukraine.

And now it's war. And now all of our options are bad. It's a disastrous situation. Of course, we have put on sanctions, but sanctions now look just like another weapon of conflict.

Instead of all of this conflict, we could have taken a peaceful principled approach those years ago. I'm not telling you. I told you so, but I am saying I'm telling us so we really should stop funding our worst crises in the world by sending all this money to authoritarians and armed groups and empowering them with unaccountable money.

Resource money is unaccountable. Power Whoever can control holes in the ground-- these oil wells-- just gets tens, hundreds of millions of dollars with which they can launch invasions, oppress their own people, buy dachas, buy off opponents from the oligarchs. This is unaccountable power. We keep sending these men. And that's behind some of our worst threats and crises for so long in our history.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Yeah. Yeah, I mean-- so let's talk a little bit about principle and what kind of principles we could use and what are the principles in play. Because as you know, the current sanctions regime vis-a-vis Russia looks like-- not necessarily an instrument of war, although it's certainly a kind of cousin in this context.

But it certainly looks like an instrument of policy that's just kind of directed towards a particular geopolitical actor that is engaging in behavior that we have good reasons to not like, in fact, principle reasons not to like, but also kind of just geopolitical concerns with.

I don't think anyone would argue that the sanctions are kind of purely a matter of principle that the West has engaged in. This is a very pragmatic set of behaviors. So how do we distinguish between a principled policy of, say, delinking a country's economy from as you call it authoritarian oil or authoritarian natural resources?

Presumably, maybe we could-- what that entails is just something like a sanctions regime, but it's a refusal to purchase these goods that have been extracted in a particular context. So how do we distinguish between using a regime like this for purely policy reasons which-- policy, that's a tough word but, say, for kind of pragmatic geopolitical reasons versus the kind of principled approach that you argue for in the book.

LEIF WENAR: The key to seeing this is looking at the strange way we run the world when it comes to natural resources today. For natural resources, all of our countries still use the same bad, old rule that used to legitimate the Atlantic slave trade and genocide and apartheid. It really is the old rule of might makes right. So let me give you an example.

Years ago, when Saddam Hussein's junta took over Iraq in a coup, it became legal for Americans to buy Iraq's oil from Saddam. And then years later, when ISIS took over some of those same oil wells, it became legal for Americans to buy Iraq's oil from ISIS. The default of American law, of every country's law is might makes right. Whoever can control resources in another country, we make it legal to buy the resources from them.

Now, that's an old rule. But if you look at it, it doesn't make any sense. I mean, if armed robbers see a gas station down the street from you in Charlottesville, Virginia law doesn't give that gang the right to sell off the oil and keep the money. But when Gaddafi took over Libya in a coup, we do with our own American laws give someone like that the right to sell the country's oil to us.

So whoever has the guns, we make it legal to buy a country's resources from them. That's the law that puts all of us consumers into business with these repressive and coercive actors. And that's the law that we need to replace because it doesn't make sense. And as you can tell, it drives the resource curses of authoritarianism, civil conflict, corruption, refugees, all those other things.

The law itself doesn't make sense. And luckily, there is a better principled law that the world has already signed up to which we could put in place in our own legal regimes to get us out of business with the men of blood abroad. And that principle is just the principle that every country belongs to its people.

The resources of a country belong to its people, not the powerful, not to whoever has the most guns, but the people of the country own the resources. If we really believe that principle, the great principle of Gandhi and Mandela, the great principle of the 20th century liberation movements and self-determination, if we believe that principle, it shouldn't be legal for us to buy oil from any autocrat or armed group who can seize it by force.

It should only be legal for us to buy resources from those people who are minimally accountable to the owners of the resources that is the people of the country. So the principled approach is to live up to the principles we proclaim and to say we'll only buy resources from people who are minimally-- and I do mean minimally accountable-- to the citizens of their own country.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: OK, great. So that gives us a principle where-- this isn't just purely an instrument of nationally oriented policy that there's a principle in play which is popular sovereignty, the notion that natural resources belong to the people in the countries where they are found. So, of course, I'm a lawyer at a law school, so then the immediate question is kind of, how do you implement this? What are some of the complexities that are going to arise?

And you deal with these a lot in the book but just to kind of get them out there. So one is making judgments about what you just said, minimally accountable to the people of the country, right? So that can be tricky.

Putin's elected presumably. I mean, I believe he is with like huge margins. And there's going to be some borderline cases, and it's going to involve often a somewhat uncomfortable exercise for, say, the United States or France or whoever else is engaged in this policy of making judgments about the legitimacy essentially of government in places around the world that are very different from them culturally, economically, historically. So yeah.

So how do we do this? How do we make those judgments substantively? How procedurally do you see that working out? And how do we avoid charges of kind of neocolonialism and ethnocentricity-- that are kind of very naturally going to arise in a context like this?

LEIF WENAR: Those are fantastic questions, and they're absolutely vital for any approach like this to answer. Let me pick up on one thing you said and make the problem a little bit easier. When we say that we believe that the resources of a country belong to the people of the country, we're not going to buy them from anyone who's not accountable to the people. We're not questioning the legitimacy of any government, right?

Commercial engagement with a country is different than diplomatic recognition. And let me give you an interesting example of that. So you may remember in 2011 when the rebels in Libya started opposing Gaddafi's regime. The American government first did something not surprising. It put sanctions on Libya, which meant that no American person could buy Libya's oil from the government that shows that we control our commercial engagement.

But then in April of 2011, the American government went even farther. And the White House issued an executive order saying that from this day onward, Americans may buy Libya's oil from the rebels so long as no money from the sales go to the government of Libya. So here we have a situation where America recognizes the Libyan government as the government of the country.

And Gaddafi was the head of state. But it says nevertheless Americans now have the legal right to buy Libya's oil from those people, the rebels who had no official status whatsoever. We can engage commercially with anyone we want to. That's our sovereign right. That's our power.

We're not bound by who's the head of state in another country, and we're not making any judgment on the legitimacy of any government. If we stood up for our principles and decided not to buy oil, say, from Libya now, we would say, look, who rules in Libya is none of our business. But right now, Libya will get none of our business for oil because no one accountable to the people can sell it to us right now.

So the problem is a little easier than the legitimacy of governments. We're just saying, look, we can't buy that stuff from you right now any more than we could buy, say, enslaved people from you. It's just not something that our principles allow us to do.

All right, but that still leaves us with your tough question, which is, how to have a rule to distinguish, say, governments that are minimally accountable to their people from governments that aren't. Let me say first that our rule right now is a bad rule. Our rule right now is whoever has the most guns and controls the oil wells will give them the right to sell us the oil. That is a bad rule. That's causing a lot of problem for them, for us.

We can do better than that rule. But how do we do it? We need standards that aren't ethnocentric or Western. We need standards that everyone in the world can see our good faith standards. And here's three minimal signals of a place where the people have some accountability over their resources.

First, can the people of the country find out what the government is doing with their resources? Second, can the people of the country protest what the government is doing with their resources without fearing imprisonment or death? And third, if a majority of people in a country don't like what the government is doing with the resources, will the government's policy change in a reasonable time?

So the test is minimal. And I do mean minimal civil liberties and political rights. And luckily, there are well-respected metrics of civil liberties and political rights for every country in the world.

The World Bank has one. Freedom House has one. *The Economist* has one. *Polity* has one. My NGO has made a metric of metrics, and it does draw a line of countries where the citizens could not possibly be holding the people who are selling off their resources accountable.

Those are the places where we shouldn't be in business with those who are selling the resources of the country off.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: And this would-- it sounds like would be made on a country-by-country basis. The State Department or some other entity within the US, equivalent bodies in other countries would have some kind of process and maybe even allow for due process. Whenever Venezuela is on the wrong side of that standard and wants to have an appeal presumably, we could allow for that kind of thing.

LEIF WENAR: Absolutely. And I'm going to say it might sound politically challenging to do that, but a country in the Global South has already started the process. So the Brazilian Senate has drafted what we call clean trade legislation which would disallow any imports of oil from authoritarian countries into Brazil and also, as it happens, stop their national oil country company from making any new deals with authoritarian regimes.

So Brazil has this bill, and they've got a part of the bill where they show how they're going to set up their own standards for which countries are disqualified from this kind of trade. It sounds challenging, but it can be done.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Yeah. Great. So yeah. Again, I think the appeal of pulling resources or making it more difficult for authoritarian regimes to do bad things is just very strong. And so I think a lot--

I suspect. And at least in my mind, a lot of the objections that would come up would be very practical kinds of objections. It's like, people are typically-- and maybe I'm wrong about this, but my guess is that you don't get a lot of pushback on the well, actually, I do like the idea of supporting authoritarian regimes, right?

Most people don't like it. It's just a question of can we figure out how to do it.

But another kind of issue that's going to naturally come up is just the-- I mean, the reality that-- in the current world, a lot of countries are going to fall outside of, I think, a minimal standard of accountability, China, Saudi Arabia, Russia. Brazil is an interesting case. I mean, there are elections in Brazil.

But in any case, a lot of the global economy is actually going to fall outside of-- I would think the standard that you would set or that one would probably reasonably set. So there's going to be this issue where this-- if the idea was kind of fully implemented where let's say minimally democratic countries were kind of in one bloc and authoritarian regimes were in another bloc, there would be a lot of delinking in the global economy. So then I guess kind of two concerns come up.

So one is that that wouldn't be sufficient to really undermine the authoritarian regimes. They would just form another bloc that would-- the authoritarians would still be able to sell their oil or sell what other resources. Prices for natural resources would be lower in the authoritarian bloc than they would in the nonauthoritarian bloc because I think the natural resources are less scarce there.

So in the wealthy part of the world, the less authoritarian part of the world, we would have more resource scarcity, so prices would be a little higher. In the authoritarian bloc, there'd be-- prices would be lower. But it wouldn't necessarily have kind of-- that's an equilibrium state that we could find ourselves in.

So I guess the question is twofold. One, do you find that equilibrium state to be just like implausible so we don't have to worry about it. Or if it is plausible, is that OK? Is that superior at least to the status quo? It's not ideal obviously.

LEIF WENAR: Yeah, that's a really important question, too, so let's look at it. Let me again try to make a big policy issue a little bit easier for us. The policies we're talking about here only have to do with a country's natural resources, right? We really are trying to fight the resource curse which strikes countries with a lot of oil, gas, metals, gems.

So the rules for commercial engagement really just do apply to those kinds of natural resources. It's only when we're dealing with the resources of resource-cursed countries that we put these questions about minimal accountability in play. So for example, China is not a resource-cursed country. And direct trade with China wouldn't be affected by this policy.

And since you mentioned Brazil, let me say Brazil is way, way over the line of public accountability. Even I can mention Kuwait is over the line of public accountability. So not all countries have to be Norway for us to trade with them. And there will be enough energy for all of the West to use. If we implement these policies, we just don't need to buy oil and gas from the authoritarians and armed groups anymore.

OK, but then the question still emerges. If we don't buy oil from, say, the countries in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, well, then maybe our prices will go up, and maybe China will just buy that oil anyways.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Good for China.

LEIF WENAR: Yeah, good for China. So as far as we can tell, price rises for energy like gasoline in the West will be moderate. And, of course, we can phase the process in to make the price rises as moderate as we want. As far as we can tell, getting off of authoritarian oil for the United States might mean 5% to 10% more paid for a gallon of gas.

And that's well within the range of normal variation that we see for gasoline all the time. So it would be expensive, but it actually would help us get off from fossil fuel cars anyways, which is something we need to do. This can push us away from oil towards the green fuels of the future.

Now what about China? China will get cheaper oil, but it might also get the resource curse. If we stop buying authoritarian oil, say, from the Persian Gulf, then China will become dependent for its primary energy imports on a region into which it cannot project power, right? This is a very troubled region of the world.

What's going to happen when the next Middle Eastern crisis comes up? China has no military there at all. Does China really want to deal with ISIS 2.0? What is it going to do then? Is it really in China's national interest to be so dependent on these countries who have proved so unstable in the past?

Having said all that-- I'm sorry, Mike. Just let me finish with one more thought. The primary power of these proposals isn't hard power, right? Hard power has been very difficult for us when it comes to oil for all these decades. So many invasions and sanctions and failed alliances.

The main power of these policies is soft power, the idea that a country belongs to its people. And that idea really is affirmed by a majority of citizens in countries in every region of the world, including the Middle East. If we take a principled and somewhat costly stance for that idea that every country belongs to its own people, the soft power of the idea will empower people in other country who are fighting for reforms within their country for more accountability to the people.

And people who are fighting for reforms exist in every country outside the palaces and also inside the palaces. If we stand up for the principle, it will help others to stand up for it too.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Yeah, so this actually, I think, is an interesting kind of segue into maybe some of those kind of-- because obviously you're a philosopher by training and by disposition presumably. And so you're engaged in this important work in the policy domain, but obviously, you have lots of kind of philosophical interests and commitments. And so one that kind of comes to mind in this context is we can imagine this world where it's not a good equilibrium, but it's something that might occur where some countries get off of authoritarian oil.

And they kind of form not a trade bloc but a kind of a natural resource trade bloc with slightly higher prices, 5% to 10%, which isn't nothing, but it's not going to tank anybody's economy. Then you've got the authoritarian resource bloc that enjoys-- I guess is the word-- slightly lower prices for fossil fuels.

Now, one possibility is that all of the negatives associated with authoritarianism basically and authoritarian regimes kind of are problematic for the authoritarian bloc. And the benefits that flow from democratic or accountable governance are enjoyed by the nonauthoritarian bloc. And that ultimately leads the authoritarian bloc either to shrink or to decline over time.

And there could be kind of a happy story there. You could imagine that an alternative where it just forms-- just an equilibrium forms. We don't know, right? It's just kind of speculative about what is going to happen.

And so I guess the question then is, how much of your own views about the value or the importance or the wisdom of delinking from authoritarian natural resources flows from these consequences, flows from a belief about, say, the soft power or what would happen vis-a-vis China foreign policy if its energy was so closely associated with authoritarian regimes? Because one argument I could imagine is just fine.

If it turns out that a authoritarian bloc forms that is kind of resilient and exists and is able to perpetuate over time, that's not ideal, but there's nothing we could do about it. And at least we know that we're living by our principles. And that's sufficient even if it actually doesn't undermine the authoritarian regimes in practice. And there's just as many authoritarian regimes as there would be even if we didn't change our behavior.

So it doesn't actually affect governance. But what it does mean is that we're not participating in it. And is that kind of a sufficient argument for you, or is that kind of enough to drive the argument? Or do we have to kind of take the further step to think actually-- part of what is-- well, it's not really worth doing unless it's going to actually reduce the amount of authoritarianism in the world.

LEIF WENAR: The consequences are extremely serious. Remember the statistics about the resource curse we started out with, authoritarianism, corruption, civil conflict, refugees, poverty, hunger. The resource curse really does make the whole world worse than it could be.

And let me add another dimension to that consequentialist argument. It's not just people over there who are badly affected. There is a resource curse on the West. This is the National Security angle to the project. Think about the threats and crises that the West has faced during your lifetime.

Right now, it's Putin invading Ukraine. That's a huge crisis. Before that, it was ISIS. Remember taking over the oil wells in Iraq. And Assad of Syria barrel bombing his own people.

Before that, it was Gaddafi with his years of supporting terrorists all over the world. Before Gaddafi, it was Saddam Hussein invading Kuwait in 1990. The Iranian regime for all these years since the revolution supporting militant groups from Hezbollah to Islamic Jihad. Saudi Arabia using vast oil wealth to spread an archaic version of Islam around the world for all those decades.

If you look back to the United States' greatest existential threat of all time, the Soviet Union, in the '80s, surging ahead of the West and the nuclear arms race, all of those threats and crises were paid for with our money, right? We paid for all of those bombs and bullets and missiles with our money to buy oil from those regimes and from those armed groups. The people who were buying the weapons were buying it with our money. That's the National Security problem.

The status quo is really bad. And the transition is hard, but we've got to do it because the alternative is potentially disastrous.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: It's already been terrible, right? There's no question about that the status quo is bad.

LEIF WENAR: Yeah. Yeah. And let me add a more personal angle to it. It's not just that all these world events are calamitous. And every time we look at the newspaper, we see some oil state in trouble. It's that we're personally involved too.

All sorts of things that we buy every day contain these natural resources that have been coercively extracted. You probably have heard about conflict minerals. It could be that in your cell phone is a little piece of the Democratic Republic of Congo that was harvested at gunpoint by one of the terrible militias in the Congo who have made the place so disastrous for decades,

millions of deaths from the conflicts in the Congo, millions of refugees all trying to get possession of these metals that go into our smartphones and our laptops and our cars. When we buy ordinary goods, we are tainted with the violence and the coercion that occurred at the source of extraction. And that's a business we really shouldn't want to be in. We shouldn't be buying conflict minerals. We shouldn't be buying blood oil.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: So OK. So then just to clarify, the position is that even if-- so, of course, we want to do what we can to undermine authoritarian regimes. And this could be one good way to do that. And I guess the question is, even if we're not convinced about the consequentialist case--

and so it kind of-- it goes to the second point, which is imagine we're not convinced about the consequentialist case. But it sounds as though you would find the case about this taint to be persuasive on its own. And I'm just trying to separate out the kind of acting for consequences in the world kind of argument from the-- like almost like a personal responsibility that even if we personally can't do anything about it or even collectively, the government can't do anything about it, it's still worth a costly effort on our part to delink ourselves from it.

LEIF WENAR: That's right. And in fact, there's a third stream of argument which you already touched on. So the consequences of going by might make right are terrible. We also don't want to be buying tainted goods all the time.

And third, the real question-- do we really believe in this principle that a country belongs to its people? I mean, imagine that we found out tomorrow that Joe Biden had sold off an oil deposit off the coast of Florida and pocketed the money to buy some stuff for himself, spent some of the rest of the money to buy off some senators and to pay some FBI agents to quash any dissent from American citizens who found out about it. I mean, that would be outrageous, right?

America's oil does not belong to Joe Biden. He can't just do what he wants with it. It belongs to the American people. If we want to have that oil sold off, well, we'll get Congress to approve it. If we want that oil to be privatized, we'll get Congress to approve it.

Oil resources belong to the people. That's the principle. That's the principle that Putin is violating. And let me just say that is the principle which is already enshrined in primary documents of international law.

If you look at Article 1 of both of the major human rights treaties, it just says that the resources of a country belong to the people. And in fact, for legal scholars out there, this is actually the only human rights that's declared twice in both of the human rights treaties. All of the resources of the country start off in the hands of the people. And if anyone wants to sell them off, they really do have to be accountable to the owners.

Do we believe that countries belong to their people instead of the powerful? If we believe that, then we should switch to this better rule for buying natural resources abroad.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: So an idea that you return to a bunch in the book and it's kind of-- it kind of comes out in your latest comments is this idea of division and unity. So it's obviously-- I'm kind of making a transition to some of your value theory and some of the more philosophical work. So in the blood oil context or in the natural resource context, you could say that we're not acting cosistently with our principles, right?

If we believe in popular sovereignty, we're not acting consistently by supporting authoritarian regimes that are not minimally accountable. You argue in the book and point to the various ways that support for authoritarian regimes in this way leads us to support divisions amongst other people or helps us-- or leads us to divide people from their government by supporting governments that don't have the best interests of their people at heart.

And in some of your recent philosophical work, which I think we might talk about a little bit now, you talk to the notion of unity and the relationship between various kinds of unity and the theory of value. So one thing I'm just curious about the relationship between your philosophical work and your kind of more broad kind of public policy-oriented work, let's say, is whether this notion of unity and division is kind part of what drew you to the issue of natural resources and the natural-- and the resource curse in the first place.

LEIF WENAR: It's interesting. As a philosopher looking at the resource curse, the big problem really is division at the deepest level. So when we use this rule of might makes right, of course, it divides countries against themselves.

Civil conflict, we see it in Libya and Sudan and Myanmar. And, of course, it divides countries against their neighbors. Ukraine and Russia are at war. Saudi Arabia and Yemen was at war. Of course, it divides our countries against their countries, right? The US and Russia, the US and Iran, Iraq, so on.

And it also divides us against ourselves. Think of all the arguments we've had over the years with these lose-lose political situations that the resource curse has forced upon us. Should we invade Iraq? Should we use military action in Libya? Should we invade Syria?

Should we tighten our security against terrorist attacks at the cost of our personal freedom? Think of all the bad blood that Americans have had against each other. Even people of goodwill trying to out these impossible foreign policy problems.

The resource curse is just division. And if division is the problem, then unity must be the solution. And this is really a philosophical claim.

Unity is what's good. Unity within ourselves, unity with the world, and especially unity with each other. That's the philosophical position that's driving the policy pronouncements. And that's the theory that I've been working on most recently.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Yeah, great. And so really, it's a fascinating paper as relatively recent. And so yeah, maybe we could kind of get into the details. I have a deep interest in questions around welfarism. And so it's a really-- it's a fascinating set of arguments that you make.

And so the paper is the value of unity. And this is a really beautiful encapsulation. At the end of the paper, you note that the word good kind of derives from the Proto-Indian-European language the word that means to unite.

And this is a little quote. The thesis of this article has been that goodness comes from unity, unity with the world, unity with each other, and unity within ourselves. So maybe we could just start with unpacking that a little bit.

So what is unity with the world or elsewhere you talk of unity between will and world? What does that mean? When is there unity, and when is there disunity between will and world?

LEIF WENAR: Good. Thanks so much for asking me about this. And this really is foundational philosophy. So we're shifting gears a bit--

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Yeah,

LEIF WENAR: --and--

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: --shifting gears a little bit.

LEIF WENAR: --talking about the deepest question. Let me just say what the question is. This is a question that Plato knew millennia ago. The question is the deep philosophical question, what is it that's good in itself, and what is it that's bad in itself?

So for example, love can lead to ruin, but in itself, love is good, right? Or agony can bring you clarity, but in itself, agony is bad. And the question is, what is the theory of what's good in itself and bad in itself independently of what it leads to?

So just to take some more obvious examples, money might be good, but it's not good in itself, right? Money is just good for what it can get you. Philosophers have been debating for all these centuries what is it that's good in itself.

On unity theory, as you say, what's good is unity with the world, unity with each other, and unity with ourselves. So unity with the world is easy. Imagine that there's no other people in the world and ask yourself, what do you want? What do you want right now? Maybe you want a delicious meal that only you really appreciate the taste of, or maybe you want to go for a walk in a deep forest and think about life's challenges.

Maybe you want to swim in the ocean. Maybe you want the Barrier Reef to survive another century. When it comes to your relations with the world, when you get what you want, that's good.

And let me just say when you get what you don't want, that's bad. So there's a lot of things you don't want. You don't want certain kinds of sensations, experiences, tastes. You don't want to be tortured.

If those things happen, then you're in disunity with the world. And that is bad in itself. So unity theory says, when it comes to your relations with your wor-- with the world, whatever you want, it's good if you get it.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Right. Good. And so one of the things that you're kind of-- you're obviously working a vast existing literature that as you note goes at least back to Plato. And so there are some other competing theories of the good or of value here that you're in conversation with.

Some of those that are currently in currency, like the view of hedonic welfare, pleasure and pain as the kind of underlying goods and bads, or alternatively preference satisfaction or desire-based theories, the things that we want are the things that are good. It's good when our desires are satisfied, our preferences are satisfied.

And so the account of unity that you were just describing, right? It is what is good is when we get the things that we want when our will maps onto the world when we get the desert or the walk in the woods. And that's going to fit pretty well. There's going to be a lot of overlap, at least there, with hedonic pleasure-based or a preference satisfaction theory.

So where is it where unity departs? And, of course, this also gets us likely into the notion of unity with each other. So what are we talking about there, and where are the fissure points between a unity-based theory of value and some of these other views that have been articulated?

LEIF WENAR: You're absolutely right that this is a question we've wrestled with forever. Let me take someone who advocated a competing theory. And this is one you mentioned, hedonism. So Jeremy Bentham at the end of the 18th century said, look, I've solved it. I've solved the question of intrinsic value.

The only thing that's good is pleasure. And the only thing that's bad is pain. That's it. Pleasure is intrinsically good. Pain is intrinsically bad.

That actually at the time was a big advance, and it did lead to a lot of really worthwhile reforms. But it can't be right, right? It just can't be right that pleasure is the only thing that's good and pain is the only thing that's bad.

Now what about kindness? What about love? What about altruism? Even if you never know that the person you were kind to or benevolent to received your care, even if you never find out and you never get pleasure from it, it's still good.

And even more clearly, pain, your own pain, can't be the only thing that's bad. Well, there's all sorts of things that are bad. So take sadistic torture, one of the worst things you can imagine. Of course, the pain of the victim is bad. Even Bentham would admit that.

But what about the cruelty itself, the cruelty of the torturer? Even if the torturer gets pleasure from what the torture is doing, what the torturer is doing is terrible, awful, repulsive.

So when you look at what's really good and bad, certainly, pleasure and pain make it on the list. Pleasure really is good. Pain really is bad. But they're not the only things.

Think about the wide range of things we think are good and bad in themselves. So start at the negative end.

Cruelty is bad. Spite, malevolence, domination, antagonism, subjugation, manipulation, these are all ways we express variations of disunity. Harassment, bullying, molestation, rivalry, these are all states of disunity. And they're all bad.

On the other hand, when you look at the things we think are good in themselves, it's so much more than just pleasure. Like I said, kindness, compassion, beneficence, healing, nurturing, alliances, solidarity, community, and that, of course, at the top of the spectrum is love. All of these things are variations of unity in different circumstances. Those are the states that we think are intrinsically good.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: OK, good. So this is-- so just to encapsulate, you tell me if this is a fair characterization is-- in the traditional hedonic or desire-based accounts, at least on your view, they're not accounting for a lot of what is good and bad in the world, right? So they're kind of incomplete.

And so what you're offering is a kind of unity where what is good like love is when we have unity of our wills, let's say, or our desires or our preferences. I want what's good for you. You want what's good for me. I get pleasure when you get pleasure. You get pleasure when I get pleasure. That's a kind of unity.

And then we take the opposite, which would be like sadism, where I derive pleasure from someone else's pain. That's disunity, and that's bad. And the argument is that this unity-based account captures more of our judgments about what is good and bad in the world. So just one, is that a fair summary?

LEIF WENAR: Yeah, that's absolutely right. This is the way I do philosophy, and I think it's often valuable to do. Start with the phenomena. Start with the data. Start with the world.

What is it that you really think are good in themselves and bad in themselves? And it takes some work to isolate it, right? But if you think about it long enough and philosophically, you just come up with a list of things that are bad and good. And it's so much more than pain and pleasure as I said.

And then the question is, what is the account that gives an explanation for all of those data points, if you want to put it that way? And as it turns out, the answer is unity, unity with the world, unity with each other, and unity with ourselves. And then you just can go back and do a sanity check. I mean, is that really plausible?

Well, look at how we teach our children. Don't we want our children to be unified with the world, with each other, and with themselves, right? We teach them to have skills to relate to the world. We tell them it's better if you become a person of integrity and commitment and prudence and to be generous and cooperative and good-hearted and act in solidarity with other people. Aren't we teaching our children to be unity-driven along these different dimensions?

If you do that sanity check, it looks like the theory is capturing our deepest convictions.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Yeah, it's really interesting. And there's a lot to unpack, and there's interesting methodological questions of how to do moral philosophy, of course. But maybe just to press a little bit on this to see if I'm understanding-- and also, I'm just curious how you respond. These are just thoughts that came to mind when reading the piece.

So one is a hypo. It's one way to proceed with these kinds of conversations. And so one of the-- you've got a couple of examples that you offer in the paper, and they're very evocative. One, if I recall correctly, has to do with gladiators or some other spectacle in Rome. And you've got someone who's being mauled by lions, but then the audience wants the person to be mauled by lions.

And so there's the original suffering, which is the person, and then there's the disunity between the spectators and the person who's suffering the kind of the primary harm. And because of that disunity, the pleasure that the spectators get counts kind of against value. It's kind of a negative thing. This is pretty classic.

This is an objection that people have to utilitarianism or in various forms is, what are we supposed to do if everyone in the stadium is getting so much pleasure from watching this person suffer? Does that commit us to the view that there's like-- that this is good, that we ought to support feeding people to lions in front of large crowds?

OK, so that's one hypo, and that's one that's been used as an objection to standard utilitarianism for a long time. Let me offer a question. I'm just curious what your thoughts are. So it's kind of like the-- it's not exactly the opposite, but it's a slightly different one.

So let's imagine-- I thought of Oscar the Grouch, the *Sesame Street* character, is kind of the person-- is what I'm going to use as an example. So Oscar the Grouch takes pleasure in bad things happening to other people. I don't know if that's a fair characterization of Oscar the Grouch's character, but let's just say that that's the case.

Takes pleasure in bad things happening to others. But he doesn't do anything to bring that about. He's passive. In fact, he thinks he has moral obligation to not do anything that will harm other people. He just thinks he just likes it.

He just he gets a little jolt of pleasure whenever he sees something bad occur. And he's indifferent when something good occurs. So, of course, his life is very satisfying because there's a lot of bad things happen in the world and whenever-- he's satisfying to himself from-- his own perspective would evaluate it to be satisfying, that he has a lot of pleasure.

He claims to enjoy his life. He would say it's worth living and all those other things. Again, he doesn't do anything bad in a world to bring about harm. He just has this set of very disunified preferences basically.

OK, so we have two worlds. A is the world that we currently live in. And B is the current world plus Oscar the Grouch, this kind of character that just derives pleasure from other people's pain but doesn't do anything to bring it about.

So I would think in a standard welfarist framework, we would clearly say that world B, the world with Oscar the Grouch, is better than the world without Oscar the Grouch. Taking into account the internal perspective of the folks in that world, Oscar the Grouch is happier. Everyone else is happy according to his own lights. And everyone else is the same.

But I think on unity theory, we would evaluate the world A to be better than B, I think. So that's kind of-- question one is, is that the case that the theory that you're offering would commit us to the view that world A without Oscar the Grouch is worse than world B with Oscar the Grouch? And then does that sit OK with you?

It strikes me as odd, as an odd conclusion to derive. But maybe it strikes you as exactly the result you would want to get.

LEIF WENAR: Thanks. It's good to do philosophy after all of the resource curse too. And it's a great outpost. So we're going to have to do a little bit more work to get the thought experiments set up, but it's a good one.

Let's distinguish Oscar getting what he wants from Oscar's pleasure after he gets what he wants. So here we have Oscar who really has strong desires that other people suffer but doesn't do anything about it. He just contemplates the suffering.

The claim of unity theory is that it is, in fact, worse. The world is a worse place when Oscar gets what he wants. It's just bad to be cruel or spiteful or vindictive or rejoice in the suffering of others, whether or not you're causing it or just contemplating it.

You can think of Oscar looking out his window, and there's a kid going by with the ice cream cone. And Oscar thinks, oh, I really hope that-- I really hope the ice cream drops off the cone. And it does. And he's gratified.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: He's so happy, right?

[CHUCKLING]

LEIF WENAR: The satisfaction of his cruel desire makes the world worse. Now--

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: That's the claim. That's the claim.

LEIF WENAR: --as you say, he might get pleasure from that. He might feel a little frisson of joy. That is a physical sensation. He might have some minor physical sensation of pleasure when that happens.

The pleasure is good in itself. Pleasure is always good in itself, but it's extremely unlikely to rule out the real badness of the satisfaction of his cruel, spiteful desire. What we say about someone like Oscar is they're badly constituted. They're a bad person. Not only is the satisfaction of their desire adding badness to the universe, but it's bad for people to be that way.

And this goes back to the Aristotelian tradition, the virtue theory. You should find pleasure in good things happening. You should not be pained at bad things happening. Oscar is badly constituted. It would be better if people weren't that way.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: So I kind of agree with that, but-- OK, so there's a couple of moves happening here, right? So I'll totally buy the separation of the physical pleasure from the pure preference satisfaction. So that's fair.

And right. We have to figure out how those things cash out against each other. So when we're evaluating the world without Oscar versus the world with Oscar, we have to ask like the goodness of the pleasure versus the badness of his. But let's imagine he doesn't get very much, but he gets a little pleasure, right?

And he's really-- he has a very strong preference, right? So we could calibrate those things so that the world would be worse on the unitary account, I think, with Oscar the Grouch in it. But just to-- kind of some the other moves, so there's interesting, the recourse to virtue ethics.

So I was wondering-- I mean, we can maybe get into if we have time, the distinction between value and morality-- that's another very interesting part of the paper. But for me, it did seem as though there was some virtue ethics or-- I even wrote down aesthetic ideas that are finding their way in here. So I don't approve of or like mean preferences. I find them ugly and unattractive.

I think I have reasons for that, too, and we could argue about them. As someone who disagreed with me, I could try to convince them. But if they don't have consequences, I feel odd-- let's just say-- being really worried about them. So I certainly think it's unfortunate that this unities exist in part because if there was more unity, there would be more desire satisfaction, or there would be more pleasure.

So unity of desire would definitely be a good thing. But it strikes me as slightly different from value that I'm making some other kinds of judgments about folks' preferences that might be reasoned judgments but just don't seem to me to not strike in a theory of value. So I'm just curious about your views on that.

Is value kind of an all-in enterprise, so it's OK to bring in virtue ethical or even aesthetic judgments into it, or am I justified in some sense of trying to kind of police the boundaries around a value theory and to want to resist aesthetic judgments or virtue ethics style judgments from affecting my views on these value theory questions?

LEIF WENAR: You're absolutely right that value theory is its own thing. And it really is distinct from morality and even political theory. It's not that it's not important for these things, but it doesn't exhaust at all what we want to say about what we should do, for example.

Let me just make a note. Aesthetics is within value theory, so aesthetics is part of your unity with the world. If you want to see the Grand Canyon or if you want to go to the Frick Gallery, that's getting what you want. And that, of course, can be very good. Beauty as you see it can be very good.

But value theory does not in itself tell us anything about morality or what constitution we should have and so on. Those things are built on value theory, but we haven't got there yet. In a sense in our conversation, we've done the extremes without the middle.

So we started out with the resource curse, which is a terrible problem in the world today. And here we are in the very, very deepest foundations of philosophy, what's good in itself? In between is morality and virtue and politics and all those things we need to work out. But let me just try to connect the dots here.

Again, what we see in the world of natural resources is divisions. Its them versus them, us versus them, and us versus us. It's not just the resource curses cause divisions within countries. It also causes people to be divisive.

I mean, think of the people themselves like the cruel despot or the corrupt official or an executioner with his sword or some kid drugged up and playing war with a loaded gun. We've created divisive identities in running our world with might makes right. And that is just the real world disunities that we see and that we can counter with better policies.

So we have on one hand very applied problems in the world, which can be captured in terms of unity and disunity. And at the other side, we have a very foundational theory of value, which is telling us what we thought of already just didn't realize, which is unity is good and disunity is bad. The rest of the story comes in what's in the middle, and I'm really excited to say that's what I'm working on right now.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Yeah, great. I just have one final question for you. I appreciate your indulgence. And I appreciate you taking the time with me today.

So this is-- those have been prior podcast guests. This show, we mostly talk about environmental issues. Obviously, this is related, but it's not exactly the same thing. But one of the hard problems in environmental ethics these days is people are trying to think about wild animal suffering and just kind of the problem of there's a lot of suffering in the natural world.

And what, if anything, should we do about it. And some folks think we should intervene. Lots of folks think that's crazy. But the question that this puts me in mind of vis-a-vis a the unity theory is there's a way in which the world is full of division. It's just the nature of the world.

Certainly, the natural world is full of things fighting with each other all the time. There's just opposition and conflict in the natural world. It's just kind of our Darwinian heritage. It's possible that we could separate out the human domain from the domain of reason and so on.

But I wonder if there's something kind of almost disunified about trying to seek out unity that the worl-- that there's a disunity between the notion of unity and the actual world that we live in, which is kind of foundationally one of conflict. So that's a metaquestion, but I'm just curious how that lands. Like, if I have-- that there's almost like a kind of a unity of accepting that there's a certain amount of disunity in the world. Again, I haven't really fully thought that out, but I'm curious how that lands with you.

LEIF WENAR: Yeah. No one could deny that there's a lot of disunity in the world. And we just have to do what we can to overcome the conflict as much as we can. As a philosopher, I take the longer view.

If you're interested in any of this, you can go to my website, which is wenar.info. That's W-E-N-A-R.info. And I wrote something in *The New York Times* asking whether humanity is getting better. With all of our divisions and conflicts and strife, there are reasons to think that humanity is getting more unified.

We can even go back to our dear friend Plato. I mean, Plato at the end of his life thought that a human society can only be unified if it has a maximum of 5,000 households in it. Aristotle after him thought that a city couldn't be bigger than the call of a herald could reach all the way across. They had very pessimistic standards for what the possibilities for unity could be.

But now, look, think about what Plato or Aristotle would say if they looked at what? The United Kingdom, 65 million people; United States, 330 million people; India, 1.4 billion people united in political formations that maintain a degree of stability and civility and peace. We are unifying on a greater and greater scale.

If we can get rid of our archaic rules like might makes right, we really can look to a future in which humanity is more unified still.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: Well, that's a wonderful way to end the podcast, a very optimistic note. And thanks for taking the time to chat with me today. I really do appreciate-- it's been a fascinating conversation. As you know, very wide-ranging between very practical and very philosophical questions.

And so thanks for all your great work in this area. And it was been a great talk.

LEIF WENAR: Thanks so much, Mike. It's been a real pleasure talking with you. And congratulations on the podcast.

MICHAEL A. LIVERMORE: And listeners, if you enjoyed this episode, let us know. You can give us like, a rating. Subscribe to the podcast, and follow us on social media. It'd be great to hear from you. Till next time.

[MUSIC PLAYING]