

EPISODE 20

THEREFORE I AM

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 20 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now for the last few episodes I've been presenting variations on the theme of Everything That You Believe Is Wrong. For instance, that the Middle Ages were in fact quite advanced and progressive. That the so-called Renaissance never really happened. That the Reformation did indeed happen, but that instead of it being a positive force it was in reality an incredibly negative and destructive one.

Now in saying all that, by no means do I mean to imply that I think that it would be somehow better if we had all permanently stayed in the 13th Century. No, once unleashed the Scientific Method would have worked its magic. Busy hands and minds would have come up with technological improvements. Etc., etc. But, absent the ideological twists and turns which did occur, the alternative advanced society which would have arisen might well have been far better than what we have ended up with.

Anyway, today I wanted to take a break from the all of the negativity which an honest telling of history unfortunately evokes. And instead I want to talk about a truly positive aspect of what was involved with the foundation of the unfolding of the modern.

Although to do that I would first like to step back again and briefly look at some more of the key concepts which underlay the classical view of human nature and of civilization. To provide, as it were, some more background. So here goes:

Now if your image of Nepal is of a realm of mountains and even more mountains, with the highest Himalayas and Mt. Everest topping it all off, then you are mostly correct. But near that country's border with India the altitude is low, the land suddenly flattens, and the climate is hot and sweaty.

In this area about 2,500 years ago there was a small kingdom. And, as the story goes, the king,

wanting to protect his son the prince from ever learning about the hardships and misery incumbent in life, made sure that his son was never exposed to anything or anyone that wasn't healthy or happy. But one day the young man happened to see an old man. And he was shocked. What? You mean that life wasn't always endless fun and games? So that very night he left his wife, his newborn baby, and his kingdom behind and set out to be a sanyassin, or yogi renunciate.

Many years of poverty, simplicity, even bodily mortification followed. He sought out all the supposedly wise men of India. He meditated for countless hours. But still he could not find the answers to still his troubled mind. Finally one day, while meditating under a bodhi tree, enlightenment came to him. As you probably have figured out by now, he had become transformed into the Buddha.

Today, of course, Buddhism remains one of the world's great religions. But although it believes in such otherworldly phenomena as reincarnation and, uh, other worlds, it claims that in the end everything turns out to have been an illusion, and that when you peel all the layers of the onion away you ultimately end up with nothing. No personal God. Or maybe not even an impersonal one, either. Which is why even many atheists tend not to get mad at Buddhism. Even though most atheists would otherwise get mad at notions such as reincarnation or other worlds.

Not that we're veering into a discussion about the truth or falsehood of this or any other religion. Rather I'm bringing up the subject of Buddhism because of its psychological insights.

Because here is what the Buddha taught: That no one can ever be truly happy in this world. Just can't. It's just not going to happen. Because the game is totally rigged.

And here's why: We are always desiring something. What's more, if and when any desire is ever fulfilled, our minds will immediately start desiring something else. Because the supply of desires is infinite and it goes on endlessly. Which is bad enough in and of itself. But the plain fact is that the vast majority of desires for the vast majority of us are never ever going to be fulfilled anyway. The odds of you winning that Olympic gold medal, or becoming President, or recording a Platinum selling album are pretty much zilch. Now many of us would just settle for having a happy marriage, a fulfilling career, and children who don't disappoint us. But even that trifecta happens all too rarely.

And what about if you are fortunate enough to win that gold medal or have a number one hit? Sooner or later, and usually sooner, you're back to being the same old schmo. Worse, if you, say, do accumulate ten million dollars, there are very, very few people who don't immediately set out to accumulate ten million more. And the more intense and outlandish our desires, the less we seem to be satisfied once we achieve them.

But here's the worst part. For the sake of the argument let's say that you become a revered Olympic champion. You are then elected President. Everyone everywhere loves you. Especially your devoted life partner and your wonderful children.

You are still going to get old and decrepit. You are still going to have to die and have it all ripped away from you.

And this is true whether or not you believe in God. Whether or not you care a fig about philosophy. Because this is the true down and dirty essence of existence. The game cannot be won.

But the reason that the Buddha started to gather followers was not just because of his depressing conclusions about the point of life. No, it was because at his moment of enlightenment he also realized what we can do to bring about an end to this state of affairs. Namely: If desire cannot help but make us miserable in the end, then all that we need to do is to just stop desiring.

Simple really.

Okay, maybe that's not so easy. But here's what you can do. Learn to not be so *attached* to those desires. In other words, it's in the nature of our minds to always be desiring. But by long practice of meditation and by becoming calm and centered we can associate ourselves with that portion of our consciousness which is apart from our mind. (And, yes, it is there.)

And here's the other half of the process. Forget about those grand, grandiose desires about fame and fortune. Instead learn how to be moderate. More important, learn how to be satisfied with moderation. Substitute the simple pleasures like enjoying the green grass and the sunshine. And at the same time recognize that sometimes there are going to be snakes in the grass and accept that sometimes storms will come and wreck things. And if everyone could just dial back the intensity and learn to be modest and humble in their desiring, then the odds of having that happy marriage and that fulfilling career also go up dramatically.

Now if this sounds like some sort of solution to you, then you'll quickly understand why Buddhism became so popular.

But I've been cheating a little. We're supposed to be concentrating solely on Western culture, and here I am bringing up Buddhism. So let's spend a little time looking instead at Stoicism.

In everyday speech we speak of somebody as 'stoic' when they can hold their hand over a flame without flinching, or they can receive the news of the death of a loved one without showing emotion. But in the classical world Stoicism referred to a specific school of philosophy which started with the

ancient Greeks and continued on through the heyday of the Roman Empire. For instance, Marcus Aurelius, the famed 'philosopher king', was a Stoic.

And here is what Stoicism encapsulated. First it recognized that, no matter what we do, most of the things which happen to us in life that make us really happy or really sad are beyond our control. That drunken driver careens into us when we were just driving along minding our own business. We are the best qualified for the job, but the boss's nephew gets it instead. Or how about: That \$1 lottery ticket makes us millions. But the unfortunate reality is that these sorts of sadness and happiness tend not to last. Which also means that they never end up being nearly as good or as bad, let alone as important, as we almost always thought that they were at the time.

From all of that it necessarily follows that we shouldn't be nearly as attached to worldly success or failure as most of us usually are. After all, whether I am a king or a pauper, the 'I'—the Self as consciousness—always remains the same.

But this doesn't mean that we should therefore see ourselves as passive flotsam and jetsam being pushed around by a cold, impersonal Universe. Quite the opposite. Because the one thing that we do have control over is our Will. And it therefore behooves us to be as fully conscious as we can be every waking moment of every day, and to exercise that Will by constantly expressing it through the practice of virtuous behavior.

Which of course raises the question: What is virtue? Well, the answer from the Classical philosophers, more or less, is that virtue is those behaviors which end up making us feel calm, centered, and *good*. For example, honesty is a virtue, because when we are dishonest there is an inherent cognitive dissonance in our brains between what we know to be true and what we also know that we have told to others. So that even if our acts of dishonesty can bring us all sorts of worldly rewards, true happiness can only occur when we are absolutely forthright and honest.

Now I am not saying that Stoics were necessarily atheists or even agnostics. In practice most of them did have a conception of God. But what I am pointing out is that even in the ancient world it was possible to effectively solve the existential burden of existence without resorting to the magical or the Divine.

Needless to say, if one constantly practices virtue and is at the same time contentedly immune from the slings and arrows of fortune, this would seem to be a good prescription for a well lived life. And that this is true whether or not one believes in the existence of God. So it shouldn't surprise you

that throughout history many thinkers have been attracted to this sort of outlook. Nor should it surprise you that many early Church fathers, notwithstanding their distrust of anyone even admitting to the possibility of leaving God out of the equation, had great respect for Stoicism. And that, once Western Europe was re-introduced to Greek thought in the High Middle Ages, Stoicism would appeal to those people who were uncomfortable with all those questions about God and theology.

And it's pretty clear to see that—even though it comes at the question from a different angle and from a totally different cultural tradition—Stoicism pretty much reaches the same diagnosis about the worth of worldly attachments and the same conclusions about how to live as does Buddhism.

Thus well over two thousand years before the dawn of the Industrial Revolution or of the Age of Enlightenment both East and West had developed cogent and coherent philosophical understandings of the well lived life that didn't require belief in God or Messiahs or miracles or any sort of specific religion at all. What's more, without any need for belief in anything natural or supernatural, they sufficiently addressed the supposedly tragic questions of why, oh why, do bad things happen to any of us, and why, oh why, don't we always get to have what we want.

Let's amend that a bit. These philosophies did require a belief in the reality of rationality. The Buddha had rationally deduced that the logic involved in thinking that we can be happy by satisfying our desires is faulty. The Stoics declared that Reason was the great gift which lifted us above the animals and which helped us to determine what was virtuous and what wasn't.

Indeed this belief that reason and logic were things that were real and permanent, that in fact were the glue that held both thought and civilization together, can be traced in an almost straight line from the earliest philosophers up until the year 1750. Including and especially during those supposedly ignorant High Middle Ages.

Speaking of the Middle Ages, though, that brings up one other thread that leads into today's episode.

You see, back around the 12th Century, when the classical Greek philosophy and ethics of Aristotle had been rediscovered, the new professors at the new universities being set up had a bit of a problem. The Church had already decided, thanks mainly to St. Augustine, what Christian philosophy and ethics were. So now somebody had to come along to make sure that the two different systems agreed with one another.

This somebody turned out to be St. Thomas Aquinas, who in the year 1274 finished his 3,500

page 'Summa Theologica', one of philosophy's most famous works. And the analytical approach which he used to blend the two systems together was a technique which had been perfected 150 years earlier by another Medieval logician and philosopher named Peter Abelard. It was called Scholasticism.

Since this isn't a course in philosophy, you'll be spared the specifics. But the main thing that you need to know about Scholasticism is that it put an extreme emphasis on what were considered settled, final conclusions by the Church and by Aristotle. Questions could be raised, of course. Debate and disputation were encouraged and even looked forward to. And all of this was done with meticulous order and decorum. But although specific points and emphasis were open to amendment, the basic understandings would not change. And the basic thrust of the whole process was in the end to help students fully understand the Truth that had already been figured out. After all, the thinking went, what were the odds that you, the humble student, were somehow smarter and wiser than Aristotle or Augustine?

Now on first blush this sort of attitude does seem backwards, even anti-intellectual, according to our current sensibilities. But you should also keep in mind that our current model of how science should proceed—with slow, peer-reviewed incremental progress—really isn't all that different.

Nor did the so-called Renaissance or Reformation change this approach in any way. Although Martin Luther ended up deciding that the Church was actually the Anti-Christ, he still argued his points scholastically. As did Calvin and the other Protestants. After all it was how Luther and Calvin had themselves been educated. And by now this philosophical system was so ingrained that it didn't occur to anyone that it could be any other way.

So now let's jump forward to November 10, 1619. It was a dark and stormy night. That Thirty Years War was just getting started. And inside a small hut on the outskirts of a small town in Bavaria a young French soldier who was fighting for Holland got a small stove good and hot in the hopes that he might be able to warm himself. When he finally fell asleep he had a series of three dreams/visions which forcefully impressed upon him the need to devote the remainder of his life to philosophy.

And the Western world was never the same again.

Because the mental journey that young soldier Rene Descartes started out on that dark and stormy night was truly momentous. Indeed, although one can find similar examples of psychological bravery in the stories of the Buddha, the original yogis, and perhaps in the early Greek philosophers, one can also argue that Descartes was the first Western thinker to ever fully step away from that

metaphorical protective fence, and instead stare straight down into that mental abyss of the dark night of the soul.

What he did was to ask himself what was it that he really, really *knew* for sure. For instance, What if there were no God? What if what we think of as objective reality is only some kind of subjective dream? What if the world had really been created by some evil demon? In other words, was there any solid, undeniable rock of Truth on which he could then build his house of understanding?

And, after long mental struggle, here's what he finally came up with: 'Cognito, ergo sum'.

I think, therefore I am.

Now what he meant by this was that the very fact that he was thinking about something meant that his consciousness 'I' must have already been existing in order for that thought to occur. In philosophical terms, he was declaring that his essence—I—*preceded* his existence.

Without our having to go into the various logical inferences and deductions he made from that first insight, you should know that he then proceeded to prove (at least to his satisfaction) the existence of God, of goodness, in fact of an entire superstructure of philosophy and ethics. That is to say, according to Descartes one did not need to resort to the authority of the Church, of Scripture, of Aristotle, or of anything else derived from human behavior or belief. All that one needed was reason, pure and simple.

This is why he is referred to as a *rationalist*. Although this in no way means that he was somehow anti-religion or anti-emotional or anti-human warmth. In fact, even though he lived in the middle of the continuation of the Reformation, he remained a devout Catholic his entire life. He relished human friendship. He cried copious tears when his only daughter died. His analysis of 'reason' only applied to his distinction between that and 'authority'. After all, as I have already said, *everyone* reasons (or at least tries to). But the 'pure' reason of logic or mathematics or geometry is of a different order than the reasoning done after first accepting the authority of a religion or of an ideology. And pure uncorrupted reason, not tied to any religion or ideology, is what Descartes at least claimed to be also using with his philosophy.

But Descartes was much more than just a philosopher. He was also a brilliant mathematician. In his spare time he invented analytical geometry. He also invented the idea of using x , y , and z to signify algebraic unknowns, and was the first to use superscripts to show when a number was squared, cubed, etc. Indeed, his mathematical innovations are some of the most significant in history. And he is generally credited with having paved the way for both calculus and modern physics.

So—however you end up thinking about his philosophical conclusions—you should also understand that it was Descartes, more than any other person, who set the stage for what is now known as the Scientific Revolution of the 17th Century.

Now you'll recall that it was Franciscan friars like Roger Bacon, because of their devotional slant which didn't require proofs from Aristotle or Aquinas on anyone else about the reality of the religious experience, who back in the 13th Century were the original theorists behind the scientific method. You may also recall that it was the lack of technical instruments such as the microscope, the telescope, and accurate timepieces, not to mention the advent of the Little Ice Age, which kept science from progressing all that much in the next several centuries.

But this doesn't mean that science (then called 'natural philosophy') totally died out. When Copernicus came up with his heliocentric theory around the year 1500 there was a whole network of natural philosophers and mathematicians throughout Europe who kept in constant contact with each other. Nor did the roughly contemporaneous Leonardo da Vinci operate in a vacuum. (And, as a side note, it is somewhat depressing to know that, just as the Greek tradition of placing statues at graves was the reason why Greek sculpture developed in the ancient world, it was the Italian Renaissance's need for bigger and better and more accurate weapons of death which was the impetus for advances in ballistics and other aspects of math and engineering.)

Anyway, science continued on throughout the Reformation. In the late 1500's the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe painstakingly accumulated by far the most accurate observations of the various planetary positions to date. Which Johannes Kepler was then able to use in 1607 when he had that brilliant insight about planets orbiting in ellipses, not circles, which was the actual proof of the heliocentric theory. And around this same time Galileo was using the newly invented telescope to provide additional evidence.

So it's not like the Scientific Revolution happened out of nowhere. And others, such as Francis Bacon (no relation to Roger), also promoted a 'scientific' viewpoint. But one cannot underestimate how important Descartes' demolishing of the Scholastic approach was in heightening and legitimizing that combination of reason with the patient observation of nature which those Franciscan friars had originally developed in the 13th Century.

Or, to put it another way, it turns out that Descartes' approach to philosophy was remarkably similar to the approach taken in the scientific method.

Just as this isn't a course in philosophy, however, it also isn't a course in the history of science.

So I will only jump ahead to the latter part of the 17th Century, and briefly look at the life and learning of Isaac Newton, who is often regarded as the greatest mind that ever lived.

Born in 1643, Newton was an indifferent student until 1665, when he had to leave London for a couple of years because of an outbreak of the plague. While living in the countryside he started studying mathematics seriously, immediately invented the binomial theorem, and started work on what was to become calculus, probably the most important mathematical breakthrough of the past thousand years. One day he actually did see that apple fall, and this started him to thinking: Why did it fall down instead of, say, sideways? Does the Earth's 'pulling' of the apple also pull the moon, which is much, much, much further away? And if so, why doesn't the moon then fall to the Earth?

He pretty quickly came up with the idea of centrifugal force. Then about eleven years later he figured out the basic laws and theory of gravity. Needless to say, he soon became one of the youngest Cambridge professors ever. He went on to figure out, among other things, the three basic laws of motion, much of the first comprehensive understanding of the nature of light and color, and how to make the first reflecting telescope. In 1687 he was finally persuaded to write and publish the book 'Principia Mathematica', and this act is considered to be the most groundbreaking mathematical and scientific event in all of our history.

As with Descartes, however, the modern take on Newton is that he only believed in an empty, 'rational' mechanistic Universe. Kind of like a clock which may well have been wound up by a God, but which now would be ticking away for eternity without any need of any kind of divine presence. In reality, however, Newton actually believed in a beneficent, active, loving God. He thought that miracles were perfectly plausible. And in point of fact he ended up spending much more of his lifetime thinking about questions of theology than he did questions about mathematics.

And that's the point with virtually all of the world's scientists up until at least the year 1700. Not only didn't they see science as in conflict with a belief in God, but they saw it as a stunning affirmation of the existence and presence of God. After all, how amazing was it that—in this seemingly chaotic world of creatures constantly eating other creatures—our God given rational minds would discover that the wider Universe was actually rationally held together by simple and elegant mathematical relationships?

Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton: They all held this attitude and conclusion. And they all believed that we had souls, the purpose of which was, through the exploration of the natural world, to perfect our understanding, to thereby glorify God, and to help lead us from this

eternally grubby and grabbing mortal existence back to that clear, rational Godhead.

The hope and positivity that they felt in their higher moments was palpable. The intellectual progress which they were making in putting together the jigsaw puzzle of the world was astonishing. And although they themselves were primarily seeking knowledge for the sake of knowledge, it was also apparent that their more technically minded fellows would soon be figuring out ways to use this new knowledge in ways to make the life of every human a little easier.

What's more—going back to the philosophy side of this—most philosophers of the 17th Century were also enthusiastic followers of the rationalist methods of Descartes. After all, to realize that one need not be tethered to either myth or to doctrine, to realize that one could take into account the possibility that maybe the wise men of the past, even the Aristotles and the Saint Augustines, could in fact have been wrong in some of their insights or conclusions, and yet, simply through clear, rational thinking you could still arrive at the truth, all of this was incredibly liberating. And as with what was happening with science, it was like some corner had been turned. It was as if what lay ahead was surely the certainty of a true Truth.

So once again: What could possibly go wrong?

Okay. Enough with the positivity already. Because it turns out that this isn't all that was going on in the 17th Century. And next time we're going to be starting to look at the other side. At some of the darker forces which were bubbling up. At some of the not so nice foundational forces which would underlay the 18th Century and influence the emergence of 'modern' thinking.

But that is for next time. For this time, once again I'd like to thank you so much for so far having listened.