

EPISODE 23

GODS AND PARAMETERS

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 23 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now last time we went over some of the economic and sociological changes which were taking place up to and including the middle of the 178th Century. And, as with all chicken and egg problems, it's hard to say whether it was the changes in thought patterns, as exemplified by the Reformation, etc., which caused the social changes, or whether it was the ongoing sociological changes which made people more receptive to changes in belief systems. I would suggest that it all became a giant feedback loop, with each factor facilitating ever stronger deviations in the other.

Whatever the case with the chicken and the egg, however, what can't be denied is that the latter half of the 18th Century laid the foundation for the greatest change in the way that humans thought about themselves and about the rest of reality ever since, well, humans first started thinking deeply about such things. And, just to remind you, this isn't some strange, out there theory of mine. It is a plain fact recognized by all intellectual historians. (And when I use the term 'intellectual historian' I am referring to those people who study how thoughts and attitudes have changed over the centuries.)

Now the obvious place where they and I differ is that the vast majority of them think that this change over to the so-called 'modern' way of thinking was an indisputable good. Whereas my whole thesis is that it was one of the biggest mental mistakes ever.

But now that it is time for us to delve into that period, one of the problems that you might well have in understanding the thinking back then is that, whereas you and I have come along after a century or two of the modern way of thinking, the people back then who were laying the foundations for this were doing so from a several thousand year long background of what I keep calling 'classical' thought and culture. Which means that, for all of their self-imagined radicalism, they were still operating out of a completely different worldview than does almost anyone nowadays.

In order to illustrate this, let's start with an explanation of the first important concept that I'll be going over today. It's an idea that I call Implied Parameters.

So... Let's say that you were trying to explain the game of American football to someone. You might come up with something like, 'There's a team of eleven men who, through a combination of running and passing, try to move this oblong football to the opposing goal line. Meanwhile the other team of eleven men are trying to stop them from doing so.'

Or say that you were describing basketball: 'A team of five players passes and dribbles a basketball down the court in order to shoot a basket. Meanwhile the opposing team tries its best to make it as difficult as possible to get the ball near the basket for an easy shot.'

Something like that.

But in all of the explanations that you might come up with for these two sports, it is extremely unlikely that you would remember to add: 'So long as the ball stays within the sidelines'.

That's because we all just take it for granted that everyone realizes that the game needs to be played within the sidelines. The actual parameters are implied. But if we were describing the game to that imaginary Man from Mars, he wouldn't know that. If you were writing a computer program, your computer wouldn't automatically know that you were assuming that it knew about sidelines. And in these situations, to such entities, it would immediately appear that the winning strategy would be to take the ball outside of the sidelines, where there aren't any defenders.

Now how does this relate to the 18th Century?

Well, even though, as we shall see, during the French Revolution certain people did take certain ideas way outside of their implied parameters, in general all of the serious writers back then just assumed that any quote/unquote 'rational' contemporary would *know* where the quote/unquote 'rational' sidelines were. In fact, most of them probably weren't even consciously aware that there were sidelines that the game needed to be played within. After all, they were all the beneficiaries of over a thousand years of Christian teaching and Christian morality. And, just like my example of Dmitry back in Episode 4, even those 18th Century thinkers who thought of themselves as totally independently minded, and even anti-Christian, still had had that Christian training inculcated in them from Day One. So of course they assumed that their thoughts were just being independently rational.

As an example of what I am talking about with Implied Parameters, let's take the concept of Freedom of Speech. Nowadays it's taken to mean that anything short of yelling 'Fire' in a crowded theater is fine and dandy. But this conception of free speech only dates back to the beginning of the 20th Century. In the 18th Century 'free speech' certainly didn't mean that pornography should be permitted. It certainly didn't cover treasonous statements. No, back then it was just assumed that no

one outside of a depraved lunatic would go there. And it was just assumed that everyone knew that if people were allowed to go there, then society would inevitably collapse as a result.

Just like today we all assume that everyone knows that football and basketball would fall apart if the refs weren't enforcing the sidelines.

So that's one problem with understanding what was going on during the Age of Enlightenment. Here's another. Because some words today mean something completely different than they did back then.

Take that famous phrase from the Declaration of Independence, 'the pursuit of happiness.' Now in the present day, as I went over in Episode 6, it is still quite difficult to nail down exactly what one is referring to when they use the word 'happiness'. Are they referring to a general sense of well being and/or security? To the thrill of victory? To a positive, proactive state of mind? Or to the Benthamite hedonistic principle of 'whatever gets you off'?

Whichever angle someone is coming from, however, in the present day 'happiness' almost always refers to an individual's personal feelings or personal response or personal fulfillment. To Thomas Jefferson, though, and to every other political theorist in the 18th Century, 'happiness' had a completely different meaning. You see, back then the definition of 'happiness' was very similar to what the phrase 'civic virtue' had meant during the Roman era. Namely, it related to the collective presence of well being of an entire society. So that to Thomas Jefferson the 'pursuit of happiness' had absolutely nothing to do with individual pleasures, individual desires, or with what is nowadays called an individual's self esteem.

No, just like Rome, and just like the Greek philosophers before that, the Founding Fathers were primarily concerned with Virtue. And, classically, Virtue went beyond simple personal morality. It also had to have an element of improving the common weal of the commonwealth.

But even that gets tricky. Because, remember, first, what I have said about the thinking of the Founding Fathers being up to a century behind what was going on in Western Europe. And, second, remember what I said last episode about how, towards the middle of the 18th Century, everything was getting dumbed down, and moral codes were eroding and changing. Which means that, outside of serious political thinkers, for the first time in civilized history, what the individual wanted was becoming more important than the overall good of society.

But it's not just the meaning of the word 'happiness' which has changed over time. We might also want to briefly look at the meaning of the word 'progress'.

Now the people who write about intellectual history often make the point that up until the Age of Enlightenment there was no real concept of progress. That societies just assumed that basically everything and everyone would always remain the same. Same economy. Same technology. Same social system. Whatever.

This is simply not true. The Greeks, the Romans, they were always coming up with new knowledge, new ways of doing and making things. As I've pointed out several times, the Middle Ages, which we have always been taught were ugly and endless, in fact were filled with both technological innovation and social progress. And then of course there was the Scientific Revolution of the 17th Century, which is what really lay the foundations for the Industrial Revolution that followed.

Although what is true is that no one in any classical society had ever for a moment thought that more technology or more wealth was ever going to magically make the recipients of same automatically happy, as in virtuous or content. Throughout history that certainly had never appeared to be the case when individuals had accumulated more power or wealth. So why should it be that way if everyone in a society did?

Instead what people in classical societies believed, and, again, when I am talking about classical societies I am also including China, India, and the all rest, is that, although the words 'happiness' and 'virtue' might apply to an entire society, ironically the word 'progress' only referred to any single individual's betterment. (And by 'betterment' they meant the spiritual, not material, kind.) For instance, there is the famous pre-novel of the 17th Century, 'Pilgrim's Progress', which told a very thinly veiled allegory of a soul's struggle with, and conquest of, Sin. Because before the 18th Century it was commonly recognized, and, again, this came from real life experience, that as life went on some people got better, more spiritual, more centered—however you want to call it. But other people got worse.

In other words, the common understanding was that the reality of life was that some people progressed, some people regressed. In fact, one of the dominant images in the West before the Age of Enlightenment was the so-called Wheel of Life, which would depict endless souls on a sort of giant water wheel, with some rising rapturously towards Heaven, and others being tormented by demons as they descended into Hell.

Nor was this idea unique to the West. Because in India you had the almost the almost identical concept of the karmic wheel, this time with endless reincarnation thrown in. And, interestingly, the visual depictions were pretty much the same.

But now we're back to the observation that virtually everyone in every classical society innately

believed that there existed some sort of higher reality than this physical world of life and death that they lived in. And, of course, as the 18th Century was, uh, progressing, these innate beliefs were starting to change.

Which means that now we're going to have to talk about God.

Although, as I keep saying, for the purposes of this podcast I am not taking a position as to whether God actually exists or not. What I do need to do, though, is, in an intellectual historian sort of way, discuss the ways in which ideas and understandings about God were changing.

But before we do that... I need to go over one more extremely important concept about the situation in the 18th Century.

You see, in popular history we are always presented with a succession of ages or periods, as if everyone in, say 1780, thought a certain way, and then everyone in, say, 1830 thought in some different way. But we know from our common everyday experience that it doesn't work like that. For example, one of our major present day political issues is that the typical person in a small town in Kansas has a radically different world view than does the typical hipster in Brooklyn. And even here we're talking about the quote/unquote 'typical' person. Because if, say, Republicans in an overwhelmingly liberal city such as San Francisco only make up about 30% of the vote, that still means that about every third person who walks past you on the street in San Francisco is a Republican.

And then we also have to deal with that old cynical observation that it is the victors who write the history. Which very unfortunately is pretty much true. But it's not like anyone sits down and deliberately lies or makes stuff up when they are writing history. As I've already explained, it's more that they are interpreting the facts of what has happened through the lens of their preexisting ideology. For example, as we shall see, in the 19th Century, during what we now call the Victorian Era, the common sense was that this was the most enlightened and civilized and peaceful period ever. Now, however, that exact same culture is presented to us sexually repressed, authoritarian, Imperialistic, misogynistic, the whole nine yards.

Or here's one that I find especially bemusing. In the Fifties, when I was very young, it was taught that early U.S. history was primarily about brave pioneers in the wilderness living in perpetual fear of being attacked in their homes and killed and scalped by bloodthirsty savages. Just twenty years later, in the Seventies, everything was reversed, and now the story told to children was of terrorized Indians huddling in their teepees in the plains and living in perpetual fear of being attacked by the U.S.

Cavalry. Now in a certain sense both stories are totally true. And then it just comes down to which one of them more closely aligns with that preexisting ideological slant.

Anyway, what I'm trying to get at here is that, if one is really trying to stand back and be a disinterested observer, ever since around the beginning of the 18th Century there have been two distinct stories going on. Actually, it might be more appropriate to call them two distinctly different streams of thought. And they have each gone forward almost independently of one another. And that although we have given names to eras like the Age of Enlightenment or the Romantic Period, what has really been going on is that for the past several centuries these two streams have alternately gotten relatively weaker or relatively stronger or relatively weaker again.

Now the easiest way to label these two streams is to use the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative'. But, as I've said before, that's kind of simplistic. Because what was really transpiring was, on the one hand, the creation of what I have been calling the modern frame of mind. But the other stream wasn't just an attempt to hold on to what I have been calling the classical frame of mind. It was also an attempt to sort of evolve and update and clarify the classical frame of mind.

What you need to keep remembering, though, is that the two frames of mind of necessity would have to get further and further apart. After all, they ended up operating off of two totally different sets of those foundational assumptions that I went over at the beginning of all this.

And I don't want to give away the ending of all this. But it will turn out that the political stalemate and gridlock and breakdown which currently seems to be happening throughout the entire Western world is in actuality the end game, the final battle, as it were, between these two states of mind. Even though the proponents of Liberal Democracy simply think that they are upholding decency and legitimacy and Everything Good. And even though the vast majority of those who are called Populists are not consciously aware that what they are actually doing is defending the last remaining vestiges of classical thought.

But that's for the end of all this. Right now let's go back to the beginning of the 18th Century and get back to talking about God.

Now—and just to remind you—up until around 1700, outside of a few strange birds like Thomas Hobbes, virtually everyone (and I mean everyone) was dead serious about their religious beliefs and about their belief in God. And, also just to remind you, this was true in spades with all of the scientists who we remember from back then. Copernicus was an ordained priest who shared his

heliocentric theory with the sitting pope of the time. Galileo was a devout Catholic until the day he died. Isaac Newton actually spent more time thinking about theology than he did thinking about math and physics. As I've already mentioned several times, the overwhelming response back then to the realization that the entire Universe was held together by simple mathematical relationships of force, motion, acceleration, etc., was that all of this was a stunning affirmation of the existence of a supernatural and supra-rational God.

But if you believed in the beauty of rationality, and if you understood that now science was providing clear, rational solutions to questions which even the most enlightened of the ancient Greek thinkers had only been able to give foggy qualitative answers to, sooner or later your mind was going to engage all of those mythical, foggy ideas from the Bible, such as Jonah being swallowed by a whale, or Methuselah living for 969 years.

Now for someone like John Locke (who, you'll remember, was not a rationalist like Descartes) the solution to all this was just to believe in the Old Testament stories of miracles all the more. And very shortly we'll see where that line of thinking ended up. But, as the 18th Century dawned, a new idea also dawned: That God's Universe was miracle enough. That, even if God could cause personal miracles to happen, why would He (or It, or Whatever It Was) want to?

Thus was born Deism.

Now in the present day there is a lot of confusion over what exactly Deism entailed. To a lot of Conservative Christians it seems to sound a lot like Unitarianism. You know, a church for people who don't really believe in God. But those who historians today call Positive Deists were actually even more into a serious appreciation of God and the Divine than were most regular church going folk. To them God was a mystical force with a grandeur and a majesty which was just as Cosmic as some of the most sophisticated representations of God in Eastern thought. The God of these Deists was much larger than the jealous or selfish God of the Old Testament. Nor was It even confined to the Heavenly Father of the New Testament. As the famous philosopher Spinoza, one of the earliest pre-Deists, conceptualized things, the entire material Universe, along with all of our thoughts and desires and dreams, was still just a tiny subset of what the true God actually was.

Of course, once you go around telling the common folk that the stuff about Jonah and the whale wasn't true, a lot of these common folk are going to think that you are just as much of an atheist as that fearful creep Thomas Hobbes was. And in fact many sincere Deists, from Spinoza to Thomas Jefferson, while walking around with their lofty conceptions of the Divine, were nonetheless suspected

of, and accused of, being atheists. After all, most of us common folk aren't deep philosophers like Spinoza was. We like our Sunday Services and our Bible stories and simple parables of Good and Evil.

Which brings up an interesting side point. Because, before the Reformation, for all of its flaws, and I certainly agree that it had flaws, the Catholic Church—and, by the way, the word 'Catholic' literally means 'all encompassing'—anyway, the Catholic Church did have an extremely large tent which sought to include all types of personalities. Thus if you tended towards being an intellectual you could be a Jesuit. If service to humanity was your thing you could be a Franciscan. If you were just a normal schlub to whom religion was nothing more intense than being an important add on to your regular life of work and family, then there was the Mass and the incense and the cathedrals.

And, once again, to a large extent the Reformation destroyed all that. Because by demanding a certain cribbed Puritan kind of mental outlook, Protestantism excluded all of the rest of humanity whose personalities were more emotional, interpersonal, devotional.

And unfortunately this phenomenon of specialization, as it were, would also end up dooming Deism. Because, again, this austere, elegant mathematical conception of God only works for those people who are already good at austere, elegant mathematical conceptions. Nonetheless, it is important to realize and to remember that the Positive Deists of the 18th Century were not only devout in their own way, but that they were also sincerely trying to synthesize science with religion.

And this honest attempt at actual evolution, actual improvement in the status quo of the society which had been inherited, would continue with a large segment of the educated throughout the 18th Century. After all, in the present day we know that in biological inheritance, a large part of our DNA is referred to as junk DNA. And in like manner it would have been certainly reasonable to someone in the 18th Century that, whereas society and culture had worked so well so far to get knowledge and civilization as advanced as it was, there were also no doubt 'junk' traditions, beliefs, and practices which men of wisdom could work on to weed out in order to create a more just society.

Which was probably the main motivation behind the century's emphasis on trying to ascertain and define that Natural Moral Law that I keep talking about. For, again, just as science was finding clear, even mathematical, explanations for the physical processes which the ancients had only provided vague generalizations of, so, too, it was thought that the same might be done with morals and ethics.

Not that anyone outside of Jeremy Bentham and a few other autistic types ever thought that such things could ever be expressed by simple, or even complex, math. On the other hand, though, it was thought that if we could reach a state of Pure Reason, then that might do the trick. And, among

others, towards the end of the 18th Century, Immanuel Kant, often considered the greatest of all philosophers, attempted to do just that.

Now Kant is famously difficult to both read and to comprehend. So here is an extremely short synopsis: In essence Kant was taking Descartes one or two steps further. First, he postulated that humans, by being conscious, were in a qualitatively different position than was the rest of Creation. Second, he reasoned that through Reason alone we could, each of us, if our minds were clear enough, come up with the exact same set of moral imperatives. Which would include, among other things, absolute honesty, always striving to be focused and hard working, and compassion towards both fellow humans and other lesser animals.

Of course, as I've mentioned before, this sort of outlook is not what is being referred to in the present day when we talk about the Age of Enlightenment. Quite the opposite, in fact. And this is because of those two strains, those two streams, that I have been talking about. And so, after this brief discussion of, as it were, the first stream, the next few episodes will necessarily be tracing the development of that second stream.

But before we go there, let me make one final historical point. And this is that, to a large extent, most of the thinkers who were in the process of creating these two streams were not necessarily enemies of one another. That is to say, a lot of what was going on back then was kind of like a gentleman's debating club. After all, there was absolutely nothing superhuman about Kant, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, Adam Smith, or any of the other people who I will be mentioning. They were all just normal, fallible men who were laying out various arguments. The fact that we, in an ex post facto sort of way, now attribute to them Truth with a capital 'T' is a function of us, not them.

And a corollary of this is that the fact that most of these men were sincere in their beliefs has absolutely nothing to do with whether those beliefs were valid or not. Because, when you think about it, some of the dumbest ideas in the world have been created by people who were utterly sincere.

Finally, never forget that chicken and egg problem. Did new, brilliant thoughts create the new, modern way of thinking? Or did mental and moral laziness engendered by an easier life that had been facilitated by technological and economic advances, did that laziness latch on to philosophical ideas which themselves were rather lazy?

In other words, was this an Age of Reason? Or was it an Age of Rationalization?

Because, remember, no historian disputes the plain fact that the latter half of the 18th Century, particularly in France and Britain, was when the mental attitudes, the moral framework, the entire

raison d'etre, of humanity radically changed. And, whatever or whoever was responsible, the entire purpose and meaning of life was inverted. As I've just gone over, even basic words, basic concepts, ended up turning inside out. 'Progress' went from being a moral journey into becoming an economic one. 'Happiness' changed from referring to the totality of social welfare to signifying individual fulfillment. The Self changed from being the home of those seven deadly sins to becoming something the purpose of which was to maximize.

And speaking of sin, a brief word about Freedom. Now in the political sense 'Freedom' had also always been sort of a communal concept. Namely the right of one people or culture or country not to be bossed around or changed by another. By the 17th Century it would also come to be identified with property rights. In the personal realm, however, to a Christian, for example, 'freedom' meant freedom from sin. To a Hindu 'freedom' meant freedom from rebirth. To a Stoic or to a Buddhist 'freedom' meant freedom from desire.

But this was about to change. Because as the Age of Enlightenment took hold 'freedom' was about to take on a completely opposite meaning. As in freedom to sin. Freedom to desire.

Of course, this was where that second stream that I've been talking about would almost necessarily end up.

And now we are about to follow it there.

Until then, though, once again I would like to thank you for so far having listened.