

EPISODE 27

PROBLEMS WITH THE LOGIC

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 27 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now in the last few episodes I've been going over a highly condensed outline of the major points of what I have been calling the second stream of Enlightenment thought. Which is now almost always presented to us as the only stream of Enlightenment thought. And in a couple of episodes we will continue our story with what happened once people attempted to put these new *liberal* (as in *personal liberty*) ideas into practice. Then we will be looking at all the findings of modern day science and how they pretty much totally contradict all of those 18th Century theories.

But right now in this episode I'm going to attempt to go over some of the contradictions and impossibilities which should have been apparent in those supposedly rational theories and assertions right at the outset. And, more so than other episodes, I think that you should pay special attention to this one. Because, even without all of the science which is coming up, these contradictions and impossibilities should be sufficient in throwing all of those Age of Enlightenment ideas out the window.

Before I get into all that, though, it's time for another observation.

Now a couple of episodes ago I pointed out that the latter half of the 18th Century is kind of a parallel to the latter half of the 20th Century. And when we finally get to the history of the 20th Century I will be going over all of that in much greater detail.

Right now, though, I'd like to direct you towards something else. And this is that so much of the 18th Century's thoughts seem remarkably like what goes through our own individual minds when we pass through adolescence.

Now you may or may not be aware that the existence of adolescence is a rather recent phenomenon. For instance, the word 'teenager' wasn't even coined until the 1930s. You see, up until at least the mid 19th Century, for most classes of people there wasn't the luxury of any break between childhood and adulthood. If you were male you left your home and became an apprentice at the age of

twelve or fourteen. If you were female you were shifting from helping to take care of your siblings to preparing to have a family yourself. And that's if you were lucky. For the lowest classes there was an endless agricultural peasant life which would then during the Industrial Revolution transform into an endless factory worker life. And even the upper classes weren't immune. One was expected to graduate from University at age 16 or so, having mastered Latin, Greek, Trigonometry, the whole nine yards. Plus there were all those upper class conventions to which it was demanded that one comply.

So for all of these people there would never be time for 'me' thoughts.

But with the development of adolescence this would all change. Starting with the, now older, university students of the early 19th Century, continuing with the artist and bohemian enclaves of the latter 19th and early 20th Centuries, and culminating by the 1940s and 50s with the 'everyman' teenage Holden Caulfields, it became standard form to question authority, to feel alienated from the phony adult world, to continually try to re-invent the wheel of society from the vantage point of a half-baked adolescent level of knowledge and a half-baked adolescent ability to reason.

Now nowadays most of us assume that 'twas ever thus. That youth has always questioned the wisdom of elders and the point of society. What's more, most of us have plenty of opportunities to cringe at some of the thoughts that we had when we ourselves were adolescents. I mean, there was a short period when I was fifteen when I was not only an atheist, but I also thought that Ayn Rand had all the answers. But then, of course, most of us do thankfully grow out of that adolescent phase.

So it might be helpful to think of the 18th Century as mankind's adolescent phase. After all, up until the 18th Century most of the energy of Civilization was absorbed in just barely keeping it all together. But by that time, what with the Scientific Revolution, the beginnings of industrialization, etc., now some space was developing for so-called 'freedom of thought'. And just like so often happens with present day adolescents, 'freedom of thought' for adolescent humanity translated into 'freedom to think dumb thoughts'.

So here's another, hopefully instructive, way to think of my thesis: Because just like there are certain people who, in the wisdom of their being fourteen years old, decide that there is no God, and then they never get any deeper than that as they get older, and they remain lifelong atheists, so, too, one can see the entire Western World as having ended up holding on to some half-baked adolescent ideas about the nature of man. And that it has therefore built up its entire superstructure of beliefs upon that half-baked foundation.

Well, anyway, let's get back to those contradictions and impossibilities.

Now I say the people back then 'should have' been able to see all this, even though some of the examples that will be discussed, such as those that come from game theory or the logic of collective action, weren't really formalized until the 20th Century. However, common observation has always existed. And even back then it should have been clear that, once you consider the dynamics of group behavior, if everyone did indeed follow their naked self-interest, then it most certainly did *not* necessarily follow that everyone would benefit.

For instance, if we are all watching a parade and I stand on my tiptoes, I will get a better view. On the other hand, if we all stand on our tiptoes then no one gets a better view. If I run faster then I might win the race. But if we all run faster then we all end up in the same relative positions.

These are examples of what is called the Fallacy of Composition. That is to say, you can't always take the example of one individual and then extrapolate that the same holds for an aggregate of individuals. For that matter, sometimes the pie is only so big. Sometimes life is a zero sum game, wherein if one person wins the other person loses.

Far more relevant to the Enlightenment's idealization of the individual, however, is what is called the 'free rider' problem. If I join a food cooperative, for instance, but I don't volunteer to work at the store, I will reap the benefit of lower prices without having had to put out any effort. In the larger society, if I don't pay my taxes or serve in the army I will still have the same peace and security and social services as the person who does. And it will always be in my self-interest to do this.

The free rider problem then feeds into what is called the Tragedy of the Commons. For instance, if there is a social resource, such as a large grassy commons where villagers can graze their sheep, or a large lake where villagers can fish, it is in my self interest to always use more than my 'fair' share. But if everyone follows their self-interest, then the resource becomes destroyed. And nobody gets anything.

Now Thomas Hobbes—who, again, was one of the first to assume that society and social behavior were artificial, not natural, constructs—recognized all too well that individual self-maximization would lead to misery. Which is why he came up with his extremely pessimistic conclusion that the only way out of this chaos was to have an all powerful sovereign or dictator who told everyone what to do and then forced them all to pay their taxes, etc.

Hardly an upbeat result, though. And not one that would prove to be all that popular with the wealthier, less disciplined, and authority hating citizenry of a hundred years or so later.

So in response to this was developed the idea of rational self-interest (also called enlightened self-interest). The thought here was that, since we are all rational creatures, we will all recognize that it is ultimately in our self-interest to volunteer at the co-op, to pay our taxes, and to limit our grazing. Because—as just stated—otherwise these social goods will fall apart and we will all be the worse off. Therefore, it follows that our ultimate self-interest is to be selfless! And thus we will all agree to so behave in that way!

In the real world, however, no one ever suggests that we do away with traffic lights on the premise that it is in everyone's self-interest not to wreck their cars, and therefore it follows that everyone will always approach intersections cautiously. And in the past several hundred years absolutely no political entity has ever even attempted to implement voluntary taxation. Or for that matter any other aspect of 'rational self-interest'. Yet this concept of 'rational self-interest' is still a central myth for both libertarians and theorists of liberal democracy. And people of all political persuasions continue to invoke it whenever it suits their purposes.

After all, on a superficial level, the idea does seem to make a certain sense.

However, a little reflection should get you to see that 'rational self-interest' is actually an oxymoron. Because it is certainly possible to put rationality first. And it is definitely possible to put self-interest first. But the whole concept of self-interest almost always implies that one is putting one's personal desires ahead of the rational, selfless solution. So that, by definition, you can't do both. And if this is difficult for you to see, consider the fictional character Mr. Spock, who was totally and solely rational. Because such a creature appears to be so strange and alien to us precisely because he has no self-interest as we understand the term.

Or, to put it another way, so long as self-interest is involved, in practice 'rational' will always devolve into becoming rationalization. Further, it will always be in your self-interest to get everyone else to play by the rules and for you to then cheat.

And that is simple, basic logic.

To see how this works in a more or less mathematical construct, consider the Prisoner's Dilemma:

Let's say that you and a confederate committed a major crime. The authorities don't have the evidence to convict either one of you on that, but they do have enough to get you both on a lesser charge, for which you will each serve a year. However, they then they offer you a deal. If you rat on your friend on the major charge, then you can walk. And he gets a ten year sentence.

Now self-interest would dictate that you do that, right?

The problem, though, is that they have also offered the same deal to your friend. And if both of you rat on each other, then they don't need either one of you, and you each get five year sentences.

So it would seem like the rational thing for both of you to do is to stay mum. But the self-interested thing for you to do is to rat on your friend. But just so long as he himself is being loyally rational.

So which of these behaviors qualifies as 'rational self-interest'?

Of course, none of these fallacies, inconsistencies and paradoxes arise if we assume that humans are innately social animals and are not primarily selfish individuals. But, just to remind you again for the umpteenth time, that assumption of selfish individuality was indeed the basis of Enlightenment (and later secular human/liberal democratic) thought.

And the idea that a huge aggregation of selfish individuals could somehow comfortably co-exist if they would just be 'rational' was foolish enough. But remember that the utilitarian theory went further and said that each and every one of these people could pleasure themselves in whatever way they so chose. Just so long as they didn't harm one another.

So how do you think that this concept would hold up when confronted with reality?

Because classical thought, whether Christian or Pagan, Buddhist or Confucian, had always held that the principle reason why a civilized people were considered civilized was because they restrained themselves from *all* manner of worldly appetites. So, yes, ideal citizens would be non-violent. But they would also be non-lustful, non-glutinous, non-prideful, etc. So to suggest that people could let themselves indulge in every single indulgence except that of violence would have seemed inconceivable to the classical mind. Certainly no wise person in any other culture had ever suggested that such a behavioral model was possible.

To this Jeremy Bentham (and others who followed him) responded: It is clear that all people hate violence which is done unto them. In fact, an absolute repulsion to violence is a true universal trait. Therefore in a future liberal world, after the corrupting influences of authority, religion, culture, and tradition have been removed, all interest in violence or of harming others will naturally disappear.

But anyone with any knowledge of history or of other cultures knows how ridiculous such a statement is. For instance, Rome was easily the most 'civilized' of the ancient civilizations, with peace, prosperity, sharp legal minds, and well built roads. Yet crucifixions and gladiator fights to the death

were also everyday occurrences. Nobody was repulsed by them. Extreme violence easily co-existed with refined taste.

And that's not counting all the pervasive violence in all the other gradations of ongoing societies, from the Vikings to the Byzantines to the Europe of the Reformation. Even in the 18th Century there were all sorts of violent acts, such as public hangings, that modern sensibilities would find horrific. And today the fantasy of hyper-violence, whether in movies or in video games, is extremely popular. Moreover, a vegetarian would say that anyone who eats meat is voluntarily participating in acts of horrific violence.

So if it turns out that there is no innate human repulsion to violence, and if religion and tradition no longer hold sway, and if Natural Moral Law doesn't exist, then the question naturally arises: How and why does this theoretical liberal society outlaw violence in some a priori way?

Because you and I might indeed prefer to be non-violent. But what about the Nazi biker? To his mind there is nothing wrong with violence. In fact, to him nothing could be more 'natural'. He was born that way. It's in his genes. And if, for example, the Church no longer has the authority to tell us not to be gay, then what authority do we possibly have to tell the Nazi biker not to be violent? Because, remember, the guiding principle of this society is that no one has the innate moral authority to tell anyone else what their moral code should be.

Nor can a rejection of violence arise from the authority of a democratic vote. For if that were the case then we could also democratically vote that people couldn't be gay. Or that Jews can't live in Germany. After all, Hitler was elected in a democratic vote. Austria overwhelmingly joined up with Hitler as a result of a democratic vote.

And so long as that Nazi biker, with his violent winner-take-all, king of the hill mentality, fully accepts that it is a fair turn of events if he is violently overthrown by someone stronger than him, then there is absolutely nothing inconsistent or illogical about his world view.

So think about that for a moment.

Because it is perfectly rational.

For the sake of argument, however, let's just say that every single person in a society did agree not to do harm to each other. That still begs the question, though, of just exactly how you are defining the word 'harm'.

Outlawing physical harm would seem to be straightforward enough. Except that certain

proponents of torture have argued that so long as there is no *lasting* physical harm then practices such as waterboarding are okay. More pertinent to utilitarian or liberal democratic theory, though, people who indulge in S&M say that personal liberty means that no one should ever be able to stop consenting adults from physically hurting one another if it brings them pleasure.

But even were we able to resolve these questions, it is obvious that it is very easy to harm another without ever physically touching them. For instance, I can sneak into your house and steal all of your money. I can also take advantage of your ignorance of finance and get you to sign away all of your money.

Now a true libertarian might say 'caveat emptor', let the buyer beware, to this last example. But would they be so blasé were I to photoshop a picture of their mother having obscene sex with Saddam Hussein and then plastering this on billboards all over their hometown? Would they say, 'Well, I know the billboards to be false, so it doesn't matter', or, 'He is just exercising his legitimate freedom of speech, and I don't have to look at it if I don't want to'? Probably not.

Because emotional pain can hurt far more than physical pain. Most men would much rather get stomped by those Nazi bikers than have their wives cheat on them or divorce them. Young children are far more affected by constant bullying and social exclusion than they are by an occasional fight.

And these are issues upon which most of us would agree the emotional harm has an 'objective' basis. But what about all those instances when someone's claim to emotional harm is totally subjective? Such as when one person innocently says something that nonetheless offends another. Or when one person's sincerely held religious or political beliefs genuinely hold that another's behavior is wrong or even evil.

To take it to the extreme: If I sincerely regard myself as a being who is vastly superior to mere humans, and if you don't then properly refer to me as 'Your Highest Excellency', are you then objectively insulting me? Are you causing me harm?

Because—again—we have done away with the principle of Natural Moral Law. We have done away with the authority of the Church or the State or of culture or of tradition or of any sort of common law. We have instead proclaimed the complete right of the individual to do whatever it is that they want to do. Just so long as it does not harm others.

But, just as with 'rational self-interest', it should be clear that—no matter how superficially plausible such an idea sounds—there is an irreconcilable difference between 'personal liberty' and 'not harming others'.

And hopefully it should also be apparent that in such a situation, instead of a stress-free, peaceful world of independent individuals, what would instead happen is that the new liberal authorities would have to immediately start issuing a whole new raft of rules and regulations so as to deal with all the unpleasant harmful outcomes which would inevitably result once everyone got to do whatever it is that they wanted to do. Further, it would in practice be impossible to draw the line as to what was 'real' harm and what wasn't. Meaning that the more credence which was given to someone's subjective experience of emotional harm, the crazier and more restrictive those rules and regulations would necessarily have to be.

Finally, lines would have to be arbitrarily drawn as to when and where 'hurt' was more or less important than 'personal freedom'. For instance, it might give me personal pleasure to use a racial epithet when addressing you. But hate laws may then be passed which might send me to jail for the 'crime' of, in effect, merely making a certain sound. On the other hand, your grandmother might be horribly hurt by your engaging in premarital sex. But these same authorities may decide that your practice of personal freedom absolutely trumps all of the pain that your grandmother has suffered.

The result of all this is that what started out as a theory of complete personal liberty would end up in practice as complete governmental control. Instead of freeing the individual, the individual would be more and more boxed in by all of the things that they couldn't do, or even say.

Which might very well explain all of those totalitarian tendencies already noted about the thoughts and writings of Jeremy Bentham.

Rules and regulations.

For it is always important to remember that, even though most Enlightenment thinkers weren't nearly as radical as Bentham, all that he was doing was taking their foundational assumptions and taking them to their logical, if also insane, conclusions. That is to say, his total rejection of all previous legal, moral, and religious authority, his mania for quantification, his disregard for human emotion and personality, his substitution of a childishly simplistic hedonism for any sense of truth or beauty or virtue, and his ironclad belief that in doing so he was somehow, as it were, being scientific, were all just a furtherance of what many others were saying and believing.

Thus it should not be surprising that one of the central ideas of 'mainstream' Enlightenment thinking was that this new world of the supremacy of the individual would be ruled by (as they put it) 'laws, not men'.

Which seems rather strange, considering that from the Code of Hammurabi in ancient Babylon down through all of history, nations and empires had prided themselves precisely on the fact that they were ruled by codes of law. In fact, the Majesty of the Law was considered to be the absolute bedrock of any reasonably functioning civilization.

And of course it is also true that throughout history the wealthy and the well connected have all too often had the scales of justice tipped in their favor. But there is no evidence that this was any more prevalent in the 18th Century than in other eras.

So what was going on now? Did Enlightenment thinkers believe that some new, more expanded set of paragraphs and sub-paragraphs would somehow solve the problem? That in the end there wouldn't always be some set of particular humans who sat in the seats of power, each with their own particular personalities, and who then decided which laws to enforce upon whom and how to interpret them?

Well, sort of. After all, Authority was supposed to be dead. Human error was supposed to be dead. The fantasy was that the Law could somehow exist independently of human agency.

But wouldn't any sane creature much rather be judged by a real human being than by a set of cold, impersonal rules? Because in the real world the range of human behaviors and the interplay of human personalities are both far too complex to quantify and encode. In the real world no two cases are exactly alike. In the real world there at least occasionally needs to be room for compassion and mercy.

Of course, one would also want this human judge to also be a wise person.

But there's the rub. Wisdom, like truth, beauty, and virtue, was a *quality*, and therefore virtually impossible to define in pseudo-scientific, quantitative terms.

So in this 18th Century, supposedly rational, mental construct, rules and regulations would be so much fairer and so much more efficient than merely human justice.

And how, by the way, has that worked out in the present? Well, one writer has calculated that each and every one of us commits (mostly unknowingly) at least one felony each and every day of our lives. So that the authorities, able to pick and choose over which of all the felonies on the books to prosecute, now have much more power over us than did any authorities back in the 18th Century. In fact, it is a common saying in the law that any prosecutor can get any grand jury to indict a ham sandwich. And then there are all of the millions of our fellow incarcerated citizens. And the millions more out on parole. Not to mention all of the continuing outrageous cases of miscarriages of justice.

Laws, not men, indeed.

Any and all of which were, and are, bad enough. But here's the (literally) killer app of the Enlightenment's belief in the supremacy of 'personal freedom':

Because once you do away with a belief in a soul or an afterlife, once you do away in a belief in the 'higher pursuits', once you say that individual rights are paramount, then it is difficult to see what 'meaning' that you are left with other than a simplistic hedonism. Much more importantly, almost by definition the preservation and protection of your individual life must now take precedence over anything and everything else. Logically, it must now become your highest, most critical concern. Because, since you are now soulless, once your individual life is gone then you literally have nothing. No opportunity to taste new pleasures or accumulate new utiles. No more goods or services.

Nothing.

So let's say that we've gathered together a society of these new liberal/libertarian people. Who have somehow solved the problem of never harming one another, either intentionally or unintentionally, objectively or subjectively. And who have all learned the art of studiously and accurately determining the length, intensity, and aftereffects of each and every desire.

And let's say that it's a sunny Sunday afternoon and everyone is thoroughly and happily pleasuring themselves each in their own individual way in an everlasting ongoing tea party.

Then the Nazi bikers show up.

Who's going to stop them?

Because the distinguishing characteristic about policemen and soldiers has always been not that they were willing to kill others, but that they were willing to die for the welfare of others. In this new world order, however, where the preservation of one's individual life is the only thing that has any possible meaning, who in the world is going to willingly die for any reason? In other words, among all those people who have truly internalized this set of beliefs, who is ever going to volunteer to be a policeman or soldier?

Because **When the pursuit of your individual life is the greatest good, who will ever then give up their individual life for the greater good?**

And it is hard to see any way around this one. For no matter how many millions of others who you can convince of your liberal theory, all it will ever take is for a handful of those Nazi bikers to show up and spoil the party. Not just spoil the party, but take over the whole system.

Because you're not willing to, if needs be, kill or be killed.

But they are.

Anyway, like I said, this was a pretty important episode. And if you were still holding on to any personal libertarian ideas, I trust that I've now destroyed them. If not, then wait for the Science part. Where we'll do that much more thoroughly.

Right now, though, we're going to step sideways for a bit. Because I suspect that all along you might have had a bit of discomfort with my relentless demolition of everything about the 18th Century. After all, that was when America was born. And, what's more, if you've studied any American history, you've always been told that our Revolution was primarily a function of Enlightenment thought.

So what gives?

Well, next time we'll be looking into just how and just why the American Revolution, etc., was most definitely not a function of the Enlightenment.

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