

EPISODE 60

WRITING A SONNET

Hi there. Welcome to the beginning of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 60 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. But even though this is the sixtieth episode, in a certain sense it might as well be Number One all over again. Because now we've finally gotten to the part where we're going to start laying out the conditions for creating that new world, that ideal society, which I've been promising.

Now what I will be outlining will be plausible. It will be feasible. It will be practical. You could start doing it tomorrow were you so motivated. And of course I will be attempting to so motivate you.

But if you can't quite go there yet, if you think that an ideal society is impossible, then you can think of all of the following as just another exercise in Utopian thinking. And if you do that then you'll hopefully at least grant me that, as a Utopian thinker, I am in good company. After all, Plato's 'The Republic' set the standard for such speculation over two thousand years ago. Then at the dawn of the pre-Modern world, in 1515, Thomas More actually coined the term when he wrote the book, 'Utopia'. And around a hundred years later Francis Bacon, one of the first expositors for the Scientific Revolution, contributed his incomplete novel, 'New Atlantis'.

Now scholars argue over whether these and other early works were sincere blueprints for a future society, or whether they were, as 'Gulliver's Travels' clearly was, primarily satirical ruminations over human nature and the then present state of affairs. But, as I went over in Episodes 31 and 32, by the 19th Century there were any number of serious proposals for re-ordering society, from any number of directions.

For, as I went to some pains to emphasize back then, after the horrors of the end of the 18th Century, most people had assumed that the Western World had learned its lesson. And although the 19th Century itself was hardly Utopian, and was filled with all of its day to day problems and all of its day to day politics, at the same time virtually no one back then would have predicted the decay and degeneration which would occur in the 20th Century. Instead the thought was that by that time society

would have seen some sort of fundamental positive change. The only questions were how, when, and what.

So that one can even make the argument that various competing Utopian visions were one of the central features of 19th Century life. And, as I noted when discussing the 19th Century, these visions ran the gamut from wacky ones like Fourierism, which quickly disappeared and were forgotten, to wacky ones like Marxism and Liberal Democracy, each of which ended up taking over large portions of the world.

And I don't need to again go into the specifics of each and every one of those visions. Instead I will point out that one can separate them all into three distinct groups. The first of these are those secular visions which required force or revolution for their implementation. Marxism and certain of the anarchist formulations, such as what was behind the Paris Commune of 1870, come to mind. Next are the far more numerous secular theories which called for either voluntary communal efforts or for the gradual gaining of popular strength through the ballot box. In the first subsection are Robert Owen's New Harmony and those Fourier disciples, plus attempts by followers of the Frenchman Auguste Comte, and any number of other quasi-socialist labor-oriented groups. None of which you've ever heard of, because none of which were ever remotely successful.

The second subsection would include those Fabian Socialists in England and some of the American Progressives of the 1890's. And it also would include our friend Liberal Democracy. Because, as I've been trying to drum into your head all along, although we see it as real and normative, in reality it was just as much of a secular Utopian vision as was Marxism. Just without the overt violence.

Anyway, the third group of 19th Century Utopian visions would be what we could call the religious ones. And I've tried to keep religion out of this podcast, but the plain fact is that, especially in 19th Century America, there was a vast array of Heavens on Earth which were both proposed and actually tried. You'll remember the Shakers, who at their height had thousands of members, all living in totally celibate, and highly successful, small communities. A more blatant example are the Mormons, who convinced thousands of converts of their rather strange theology, and then succeeded in actually creating a fully functioning theocracy in the middle of the Western wilderness.

So in a certain sense, as I said, you can consider what I am doing now as just a continuation of that 19th Century idealism and Utopian dreaming. Except that it's not. First, because as I went over in

the last episode, at this point we really don't have any other option. Just as Marxism was tried and failed, so, too, can we say that about Liberal Democracy. Except that, of course, we don't. Because, as I went over way back in Episode 4, like those good citizens of the Soviet Union, we just can't believe that our idols are false gods. And just like those Romans of the mid 1st Century B.C., we just can't accept that our beloved Republic has devolved into an empty shell. But—for one last time—kindly get real. It is all around you. Burning building. Sinking ship. However you want to put it.

The good news, though, is that here in the 21st Century—as I went over in the Science section—there's no longer any need to speculate as to what human nature really is. The answer is clear. And the only difficulty in our accepting that and adjusting to it, as I've been saying time and again, is that the answer is completely different from what certain fumbling around in the dark 18th Century individuals presumed it to be.

Now in the main my blueprint is simple and clear. For ideological reasons, however, I expect that at least some of you will find at least some of the points hard to immediately accept. Never to mind, however. Because I will try to address all of them in much greater detail in upcoming episodes.

For the rest of this episode, though, what I'm going to be doing is laying out a broad outline, as it were, which any solution is going to have to recognize. I am going to be highlighting the key concepts which one has to accept in order to understand the entire vision. In other words, I am going to set the basic ground rules.

So let's start with three very basic key concepts. Three very basic ground rules. Three very basic realities that we've already gone over.

1. You cannot finesse your mortality.
2. Chasing that dopamine rush is not going to lead to happiness.
3. Existence is by definition limited. Therefore you cannot have it all.

Now all three of these ideas are interrelated. And they are also, if you've ever reflected on anything in life, kind of obvious. But the fact of their obviousness has never stopped most of us from forgetting them most of the time. Again, though, if you've ever reflected on anything in life, it should be more than clear that, were we ever able to stop forgetting them, then a huge portion of whatever unhappiness we do experience in life would then just disappear.

And you'll note that acceptance of these three existential truths has nothing to do with believing or not believing in God. Because for now we can continue to keep pushing that subject aside.

And, since we're leaving theology out of this, let's just deal with the neuro-biological. Namely, remember that the dopamine rush is not about pleasure per se. Rather it is about the anticipation of pleasure. Which is why, for many children at Christmas, the actual opening of the presents is anticlimactic. So this is yet another angle from which to explain why the ceaseless striving for things, for money, and for success that so many of us engage in is so useless and futile.

And the reality that the dopamine rush, the anticipation and experience of pleasure, in the end has nothing to do with happiness is another non-theological way to explain why so many of us are constantly afraid of that void, constantly seeking to divert ourselves from facing it, and always trying to find those endless distractions.

Although, again, that doesn't mean that we need to react to these three existential truths by moping around or despairing at the meaninglessness of it all. It just is what it is. We're here for our allotted time. This world can be awesome. It can be beautiful. And we should strive to see and to experience that awesomeness and that beauty as much as we can. But let's not kid ourselves. We are also here but for a moment. Even if that moment lasts a hundred years.

So let's start to create our new society by just accepting for once and for all the three truths.

Okay, now let's go on to the next key concept. Which, once again, should be obvious. Especially if you've been listening to this podcast all along. And this is that we're not going to be giving any automatic knee jerk credence to weird ideological dogma from the 18th Century. And this includes, say, a belief that Democracy is automatically the best form of government. Or that free market Capitalism is necessarily the best economic system. Not that these two statements might not be at least partially true. But if we're going to start with a clean slate and a clear stage, then we have to firmly get it in our heads that these core beliefs of Liberal Democracy are no more real, and have no more been scientifically proven, than have any of the core beliefs of Marxism.

Plus there are other key concepts which will come up shortly which directly contradict truisms that so many contemporary people hold, but, which I've gone to so much trouble to impress upon you, derive from some of those mistaken 18th Century assumptions. And I fully recognize that no matter how many times I've gone over this, it still might be difficult to wrap your head around this understanding. But if we're trying to lay a new foundation upon which to build a world which works, you're just going to have to try extra hard to wipe the slate clean, to clear the stage, and to see everything from that fresh perspective.

And we can flip this particular key concept around and put it this way: We will commit ourselves to following real science, and real common sense, and not ignore either one when they conflict with our ideological presuppositions. What's more, we will be on guard against 'fake science'. We will be highly suspicious of findings which too easily confirm those ideological presuppositions.

Now, as I've said, the first 59 episodes of this podcast should have prepared you for all of these points. But here's a new one, in fact one of the most important ground rules in this endeavor. And that is that there can't be any significant differences between the macroscopic and the microscopic. The Macro and the Micro. And let me explain.

Because when you're, say, studying Economics there's quite a difference between the Micro and the Macro. Microeconomics covers the theoretical laws governing the hypothetical self maximizing individual, and is what you basically study when you take Econ 101: Demand curves, cost equilibrium, risk aversion, etc. Macroeconomics deals with the problems of, and comparisons between, various nation states, and is involved with concepts such as unemployment, inflation, currency exchange rates, and GDP growth. And the two subjects usually come across as qualitatively different ones.

And when philosophers or social critics paint pictures of ideal societies, they almost always just deal with the Macro. Thus in Plato's Republic the emphasis was on what might be called the sociological structure. And said structure was supposed to then create model citizens. Nor was much if anything said about how individual differences would be dealt with. Likewise in modern Utopian visions such as those of the Marxists and those of the Nazis, it was assumed that the envisioned broad social changes would be sufficient. And to the extent that individuals were considered, it was mostly as a question of how to properly re-educate those who for whatever reason weren't getting with the program.

In fact, when you look at the entire spectrum of all of those ideal secular societies which have been theorized, it is difficult to think of any that ever paid anything more than lip service to the Micro aspect of it all. Rather, just as with Sociology itself, it is always assumed that if one simply comes up with the proper rules and structures, then it doesn't matter which individuals you plug into the system, because the secular structure will then hum along harmoniously on its own.

On the other hand, historically the only Utopian societies which ever worked for even a decade or two were not only religious in nature, but their entire emphasis was on the Micro, on the process of individual salvation. Not only that, but none of them even started with a vision which was explicitly

Utopian. Rather the reason why the original members congregated was that they were each trying to internalize the teachings of the founder in their own individual lives. And the communal aspect of the group arose organically. First, since they were each far more interested in spiritual matters than material ones. Second, because they found that holding all things in common greatly simplified the day to day physical matters which they still had to deal with. And third, because since they considered themselves to be brothers and sisters in the Lord, now each member of the ‘family’ could help each other in not straying from the straight and narrow. Most important, they had concluded through first hand experience that one of the central issues, if not the central one, which was keeping them from happiness or salvation or even just peace of mind, was that our innate human self-centeredness keeps us from getting along with our brothers and sisters.

Now, having just said this, don’t expect me to lay out some specific religious bill of goods. As I keep saying, that’s not the point of this podcast. Anyway, groups like the Shakers were composed of people who had already self-selected themselves out of society, to whom an intense spiritual vision was a central part of their lives, and who were thus highly motivated. Whereas what I’m trying to create here is a structure which can encompass everyone, not just a chosen few.

What is important to take from this brief discussion, though, is that, for any even semi-ideal society, it is simply impossible to separate the Micro from the Macro. As opposed to Economics, the Macro which I envision can only exist insofar as it is an accumulation of ever so many Micros. All of which means that we’re not talking about reforming *those guys*. We’re talking about reforming you. And me, of course. And the emphasis is always going to have to be upon you and me. Otherwise it’s just so much uselessness.

But here’s the really great thing about focusing on the Micro. Because with the Macro, no matter how wonderful the plan, there’s always a more than excellent chance of it never happening. After all, there are any number of events in history which only happened because of a series of flukes. So that, to a large extent, by waiting around for some exogenous Macro change to happen, you are just kidding yourself about your commitment to change.

What’s more, in many ways the present state of the world is even worse than I’ve been letting on. When the Western Roman Empire fell, that was just a small corner of the world, and all of the other civilizations continued on as before. But what with the ubiquity of cheap smart phones now pervading even tiny Third and Fourth World villages, the task of reorientation and regeneration, the task of lengthening attention spans and increasing concentration, is much greater and more profound

than what faced those lonely monks in the monasteries during the Dark Ages. So that, on the face of it, as I've been saying all along, if I had to place money on it, the odds are pretty strong against any Great Awakening.

But that's all the more reason to focus on the Micro. Because even in the worst case scenario, even with everything and everyone going down the drain, if you've already personally gone to the trouble of making the right changes in outlook and behavior, you are going to fare far better than the rest. You personally will still be able to find a semblance of meaning within all the chaos.

So that you win either way. Because if enough other people also adopt the mental and behavioral changes, then great, a critical mass will develop. But if that doesn't happen, if no one else joins you, with the result that everything continues going to hell, then you personally will still have the least bad outcome of everyone else.

And what are these mental and behavioral changes? Well, again, we'll get to them soon enough. For now, though, I will say that there is nothing in all of them which in the end is not doable by everyone. You're not going to have to run a marathon or learn differential algebra. And your mind may not like some of them in the beginning, but that's what minds are like: They are never eager to discard old habits and create new ones. Also, these behaviors are not going to be off of some pet list of my own personal dogmas. Instead I will be drawing them from what science has already proven to us. Both the hard science about how our brains actually function, and the social science which has by now determined what actually makes us happy and on the other hand what is really nothing but dead end addiction.

And much the same can be said about the allied subject of the requisite mental changes. Because the mindset of our new society is another of the critical foundations necessary for the functioning of said society. Again, though, you're not going to be asked to worship some Great Leader, or to embrace the Truth of the Four Whatever's. Rather I'm going to draw upon what both brain science and the rest of science has shown us about the true nature of the human condition.

The human condition. Now... This brings us to one of the most important points, one of the most important key concepts. Because you'll recall that one of the biggest mistakes of the Age of Enlightenment was a complete misunderstanding of what is today called the Nature/Nurture debate. Which meant that up until fairly recently much of established science didn't even recognize that there was any basic human nature. And of course so many of the Isms of the 18th and 19th Centuries just

assumed that the surrounding social environment, the ‘nurture’, was so important that human behavior, and thus human nature, could be manipulated relatively easily.

We now know, of course, that this is ridiculous. Instead many, if not most, of our behaviors are a result of millions of years of specific primate, and later hominid, evolution. And the result of all of this evolution is that not only aren’t we infinitely malleable, but some aspects of our lives and our ‘natural’ desires aren’t malleable at all. (Now, as discussed earlier, the meanings of words like ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ can vary wildly in context, and can even contradict each other. For instance, it may well be ‘natural’ for me as a typical lazy human to enjoy greasy, sugary foods. But one wouldn’t expect to find such products in a natural food store.)

So we have to be careful and, just as when separating the real science from the fake, we have to have clear minds about this. But, clearly, for our ideal society to succeed we must respect our evolution. We must respect our true human nature.

Okay. So far, so good. I would hope that what I’ve already gone over has sounded fair and reasonable, at least in theory. But now I’m going to give you four more key concepts which, to a lesser or greater extent, directly contradict mainstream postmodern thought. And right now I’m just going to lay them out. If they disturb you in any way, however, please have patience. Because, as I said, I will be going over them in much greater detail in future episodes.

With that in mind, then, let’s rip the Band Aid off, so to speak:

And here’s the first one: Respecting our evolution, we are going to recognize that we are not going to pretend that humans can be expected to be rational in every situation. Because, as I went over in Episode 44, it’s not that humans are incapable of being rational. Rather it’s that, due to the particular evolution of our brains and our minds, there are so many situations where we act, and/or react, emotionally. Further, due to malfunctioning mental shortcuts which our brains have developed so as to, as it were, ease the burden, we might think that we are being rational, whereas in reality we are being foolish.

And why is this so important for us to formally recognize? Because a central assumption of the Age of Enlightenment in general, and Utilitarianism, Classical Economics, and Liberal Democracy in particular, was that every single person is a rational decision maker 100% of the time. And even today people on all sides of the political spectrum revert to this argument whenever it suits their particular ideological purpose. For instance, the left wing uses the ‘rational free choice adult’ fantasy to argue

against limits on depictions of violence or pornography. The right wing uses the same fantasy to argue against limits on deceptive advertising or smoking tobacco.

But we're not going to do that. Nor are we going to buy into the idea of 'rational self interest'. Because almost by definition self interest is virtually always going to end up being emotional and, well, self serving.

So that's number one. Here's number two: We are going to respect our evolution by fully accepting and internalizing the undeniable anthropological truth that we are first and foremost a species of hypersocial primates. Now since we are not ants and since we are not trying to create some faceless mob or blob, we should necessarily honor and promote a sense of individuality and autonomy. But we also have to recognize that when push comes to shove the communal has to trump the individual.

And I agree that this is a tricky one. And it calls for an almost exquisite sense of balance. Not to mention that qualitative quality Wisdom. But this is what classical civilizations had always realized, and which had always worked towards. As I went over in Episodes 23 to 27, though, the assumption which Thomas Hobbes made—that in the dim mists of time we had started out as individuals—led to the entirely false foundation upon which Classical Liberalism was built: Namely, that by maximizing individual freedom we were somehow returning to our original nature.

Uh-uh. Our original nature was not just that we were social animals, but that we were hypersocial ones. And if we want to build a modern society which works, we simply cannot afford to pretend otherwise.

And respecting our evolution for the first two concepts leads inevitably to the third one. And this is that for any modern society to successfully exist, parameters must be set.

Now a statement such as that at any other time or place in history would have been yawningly obvious. But so many conjoined postmodern fantasies—that you are a central character, that you can have life without limits, that you can have it all, that no one and nothing should interfere with your desires, especially if it involves consenting adults and/or is a victimless crime—all of these in practice combine to create a mindset that pretends that anyone suggesting any sort of limits on behavior or—especially—thought is some kind of creepy, out of touch, and controlling authoritarian.

But almost by definition any organization of any kind of necessity must have some rules and regulations, and therefore by definition must be authoritarian. Further, as I went over in Episode 43,

we are literally born with a sense of natural moral law, and with a deep need for behaviors such as cooperation to be strongly enforced. What's more, as hypersocial creatures one of our strongest needs is to feel as if we belong to a greater family, clan, tribe, or nation. And the only way that this can happen is if everyone in that family, clan, tribe, or nation is following the same rules and held to the same standards. Again, one of the worst and most obvious flaws in the theory behind Liberal Democracy is the complete lack of recognition that this is necessary. The weird, naive belief that any sense of community can arise, that any social glue can develop, from everyone doing their own thing.

Now I'm not anywhere naive enough to say that setting the right parameters, getting the right balance, is ever going to be any sort of easy thing to do. Nonetheless we have to recognize that if we're going to be adult, if we're going to be remotely realistic, then we have to bite the bullet and take the responsibility and develop the wisdom. And set the parameters. And then enforce them.

Okay. If all of that wasn't enough, here's the fourth one: In respecting our evolution, we have to accept that, as I went over in Episodes 46 to 49, due to the exigencies of childbirth and child rearing, not to mention the demands of hypersocial living, human males and human females necessarily developed in some strikingly different ways. Which means that men and women are probably the most highly differentiated, and highly codependent of any of the primates.

Which means that yin and yang are innately and qualitatively different critters.

Which means that gender differences are most definitely not some sort of artificial construct. Which means that in many aspects of life double standards should most definitely exist.

And I could go over once again how so many of the Enlightenment thinkers had virtually no connection to or experience with the female half of the population. And how Jeremy Bentham in particular was completely asexual and 'all head and no heart'. And that therefore the current insanity that gender differences are artificial is totally a function of the ideologies derived from these historical facts, and has absolutely nothing to do with real science.

But I've already done that. Never to mind, though. Because, as I keep saying, I will be addressing in greater detail what I really mean with not only this point, but with all of the other ones, too.

For right now, however, I would like to wrap up this particular episode by talking about sonnets.

Because the whole point of the sonnet, when it was first invented in Italy in the 13th Century, was that it was so highly constricted. It was to consist of fourteen lines, no more, no less. The first eight lines had to present a question or problem, and then the last six lines had to present an answer or a resolution. Not only that, but the sonnet had to rhyme, and usually had to follow a precise rhyming pattern. Not only that, but in English in particular, it had to be written in iambic pentameter.

Now these rules may seem strange and arbitrary. And most certainly to the modern mind they almost scream out that they are way too highly restrictive for true poetic freedom. And yet sonnets have proven to be incredibly popular throughout history. And some of the most beautiful poetry ever written has been in the form of a sonnet. What's more, just about every major poet, from Milton to Wordsworth to Keats to Yeats, and of course Shakespeare, composed any number of sonnets.

So how can such truth and beauty be created out of such a seeming straitjacket? Good question. And I don't want to all of a sudden get too wise or too Zen with you. But you should perhaps consider the thought that true freedom can only happen within limitations.

Anyway, as I said, the purpose of this episode was simply to present a blueprint. An outline. If you've immediately 'gotten' it, that's great. But if you still have questions as to what I really mean, as to what are those parameters, as to which double standards am I talking about, as to how authority will be established and maintained, as to how we deal with those who do not automatically get with the program, or with any of the other freedoms and limitations which need to be nailed down, then just hold on. Because I will be dealing with them.

For right now, though, once again it is time for me to thank you once again for so far having listened.