EPISODE 5

BENTHAMITE PRINCIPLES

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz and this is episode 5 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. So far we've been, as it were, laying the foundation. And last episode I tried to show how right now Western European and North American culture is analogous to what happened with the Soviet Union: Hundreds of millions of people hooked into some strange ideology cooked up in the 19ᵗʰ Century which is at total variance to actual reality or to actual human behavior.

And I wouldn't be surprised if you might have found that analogy hard to swallow. After all, our understanding of the Soviet Union is so ugly. But the main reason I used it is that it is much easier to see it when somebody else is making an absolute fool of themselves than when you happen to be the one who is doing it. Trust me, though. If you ever get yourself out of the head space that we call liberal democracy you will shake your head in wonder as to how you ever swallowed all of those absurdities.

And, just to remind you, that's my job here: To get you out of that head space. And to do that it is not enough to rant and rail about how the world has gone wrong. And it is not enough to get all poetic on how the world has gone wrong. Rather my job consists of explaining all the nuts and bolts of just how and why the world went wrong. And there are a lot of nuts and bolts.

So I hope that this never becomes too tedious.

Today, though, I don't think that it will be tedious. Because today you're going to get what they call a Big Reveal. What you're going to hear is the absolutely true story of how all this got started.

Now as I've already intimated, the story is so unbelievable that you very well might not believe it. And if that turns out to be the case, then I'm not sure what I can do about it. Except of course to suggest that you go research it yourself.

But let's assume for now that you are going to trust me with this. So let's get started.

University College London is generally regarded as the third most prestigious institution of higher learning in England, right behind Oxford and Cambridge. Founded in 1826, its main campus is

in the Bloomsbury section of London, near the British Library and the British Museum.

Now if you go into the entrance of its large, stately, central building, and you ask at the information desk, they will direct you to head down the main corridor to your right and to then make a left at the T. At the end of that corridor is a large wooden Victorian case with a glass front. Inside the case you will see what appears to be a life size seated figure of an old man in clothing from around 1820, complete with an incongruously large straw hat. What this is in reality is the clothed skeleton of a man, with a wax head on top. (The real head, thoroughly mangled in the embalming process, used to rest on the case's floor, between the two legs. But it has been stolen so many times by student pranksters that now it is locked away.)

These are the mortal remains of Jeremy Bentham. His what he called an 'Auto-Icon'. And his wish to be remembered in this way was not some sly joke or the strange whim of an old man. No, he had gone to great lengths to describe how he wanted this done sixty years earlier when he had written his first last Will and Testament while still in his twenties. Indeed, it was his absolutely serious intent that all great men should be processed in this way, so that their clothed remains could be set on public park benches for the edification of future generations. In like manner clothed skeletons of preceding generations of owners of great estates could be conveniently placed along the long driveways to their noble houses. And as he himself approached death he had another motive: Now his disciples could bring his Auto-Icon out to be with them when they held their meetings.

Jeremy Bentham was born in 1748, the son of a wealthy lawyer. A child prodigy, he was studying Greek at the age of four, and he graduated from Oxford at sixteen. At twenty he was admitted to the bar, but during his first actual case he became so thoroughly repulsed with everything that had to do with both lawyers and the court system that he quit. In fact, it soon transpired that he was thoroughly repulsed by just about every way that this world of ours worked. He spent the rest of his long life (before he died in 1832) trying to reform the world that he found so not to his liking, furiously writing away, eight hours or more a day, day in and day out. In literally millions of words he described how all the laws and customs of England were pathetically wrong, and how *his* ideas—meticulously and precisely laid out—would improve them.

Nobody paid much attention to him at first. But then in 1781 one Lord Shelburne came across Bentham's writings, and he became a patron of a sort. Now Jeremy had an entree to the higher classes and to a literary crowd. But because he was a small, frail, extremely didactic individual, he still did not have much success in the wider world.

In 1785 he went to visit his brother in Russia, and while there he had an idea which would obsess him for the next twenty years or so: the Panopticon. This was to be the prison of the future, a place where a warden could sit in a central tower, able to spy upon every inmate (without their knowledge) twenty-four hours a day. A contractor would be paid a certain amount per prisoner for their food, and in return he would get to work them as hard as he liked, keeping the profits for himself. Bentham saw all of this as the most progressive type of reform possible.

He enthusiastically supported that French Revolution which ended up working out so poorly. He got furious with Lord Shelburne when he wasn't given the 'safe' seat in Parliament which he assumed had been promised him (which it hadn't). He had seething contempt for Sir William Blackstone, England's greatest jurist. He believed that there should be no limits on how much interest a person or a bank could charge.

But mostly Bentham is remembered today (if he is remembered at all) for his development of the philosophy of *utilitarianism*.

Now this is often summed up as a system which seeks 'the greatest good (or the greatest happiness) for the greatest number of people', although he was not the first person to come up with this formulation. Nor, superficially at least, is this a sentiment that many of us would argue with. Who wouldn't want everyone to be happy all the time? But the obvious problem with this idea—going back to Socrates and beyond—was with how anyone could accurately, objectively, and fully define the terms 'good' and 'happiness'. This was a large and weighty problem that most of the great minds throughout history had struggled with.

Of course, for Jeremy Bentham this was no problem at all. First, he equated 'happiness' with 'pleasure'. Next, each and every individual person gets to define 'good' and 'happiness' for themselves! And since by definition we were all absolutely equivalent, this meant that the wisest man's understanding of 'good' and 'happiness' was no more valid than the laziest drunkard's. In other words, if I take pleasure in going to the opera, and you take pleasure in playing hopscotch, well, then, who's to say that one is better than the other? In effect, we each have accumulated the same number of happiness units. And these units Bentham labeled *utiles*. Society shouldn't exist to make any aesthetic judgments; it should only exist to maximize total utiles. As Jeremy was fond of putting it, 'push-pin was worth as much as poetry'.

Now you might think that your 'pleasure' in climbing a mountain or seeing your child succeed is of a different order and quality than your 'pleasure' at playing Candy Crush on your smartphone. But

Jeremy didn't believe in Qualities. He only believed in Quantities. And it turns out that—and here's a surprise—in real life he never actually went to an opera. He never actually climbed a mountain. He never had any children. All he did was sit and write and write and write in his exacting and overwrought and querulous way.

His only interest in the fellowship of other men was to explain his ideas to them. Being a freakish prodigy, he had had no personal experience with childhood. His mother died when he was twelve. When he was 57 he proposed to a lady whom he had briefly flirted with when he was 45. She turned him down, and that was about it with all relationships with all women for his entire lifetime.

In 1808, when he was sixty, he gained his first real devoted disciple. This was a Scotsman, a former preacher, now an atheist, and now also a true utilitarian believer named James Mill. James already had a baby son named John Stuart, and he immediately set to raising the child by Benthamite principles. The boy was shielded from all religious training. That and all other cultural matters were solely studied as academic subjects. Most importantly, there was never to be any play, and never any contact with other outside children. Only adults.

His father's specific desire was to create a utilitarian genius, and John Stuart Mill quickly ended up out-prodigy-ing even Jeremy Bentham. By eight he was a master of Greek, Latin, English literature, and Algebra. At the age of thirteen he immersed himself in Adam Smith and political economy; he was personally tutored by David Ricardo, the leading economic thinker of the day. At fourteen he took on university courses in Chemistry, Zoology, and higher mathematics.

At twenty he had a complete nervous breakdown.

Tellingly, he credited romantic poetry with his recovery. Perhaps there was something beyond the purely quantitative approach. Later in life he allowed that maybe hopscotch didn't provide the same sort of pleasure as the opera. He also seemed to understand that the pure libertarian Benthamite idea of 'let the buyer beware' in all transactions put those with less education and less intelligence at a disadvantage. He recognized that naked individualism was not sufficient; that common cultures were needed. He was even happily married for seven years. And he also had a successful career with the East India company.

Now if our story ended there it would just be one of those strange tales of another one of history's bizarrely odd people and his ugly manipulation with the mind of a small child.

But it doesn't.

Because for all of his tinkering with Bentham's ideas, in the end John Stuart Mill stated, and I quote, 'There is hardly anything in Bentham's philosophy which is not true'. In the end John Stuart Mill became the great utilitarian thinker and popularizer that his father (and Bentham) had dreamed of. Indeed one of his greatest works was called 'Utilitarianism'. And by the mid-nineteenth century he was acknowledged as one of the preeminent economists, philosophers, and political thinkers of his time. In fact, historians readily point to him as *the* principal architect of…

You guessed it: Liberal Democracy.

That's right. This is the modern world's 'origin story': A brilliant four year old boy is separated from the rest of the world and brainwashed into believing in a materialistic, atheistic cult founded by an exceedingly strange little man who was no doubt somewhere on the autism spectrum and who was probably also at least borderline insane. The boy then grows up to establish an ideology which gradually displaces all other types of thinking, so that at some point no one ever realizes that it is an ideology any more. Seriously. That's it. It's almost as if you were transported into the world of the future, and somehow Scientology had now become the entire planet's one true religion.

Because, as we shall see later on in our review of history, all of the great theories of the 18th Century's Age of Enlightenment were pretty much blown to pieces by the traumatic events of the French Revolution. And the Nineteenth Century was primarily Conservative and Victorian. But because of John Stuart Mill the Enlightenment's classical liberal ideas of the magic of the marketplace and the sanctity of individual choice, of 'freedom' to desire, as it were, gained a new following. And as the years progressed these concepts of free-thinking and the centrality of the individual Self would become the intellectual foundation for the intellectual elite.

Now am I being a little too simplistic here? Well, of course I am. But, really, not by that much. For, as we shall see later in much greater detail during our walk through history, one needs to look at many centuries and many, many thinkers in order to fully explain how 'modern' thought developed. Jeremy Bentham didn't come out of a vacuum. It's a complex web of cockeyed thoughts and wrong beliefs that laid the foundation for his particular frame of mind.

And here is an extremely important point. Because few historians would argue against John Stuart Mill as being the principal theorist behind liberal democracy. But most of the people who are strenuously defending the sacred truth of liberal democracy nowadays are probably not even aware that it was built almost entirely upon Bentham's theory of Utilitarianism. Remember Mill's conviction that 'there is hardly anything in Bentham's philosophy which is not true'. And remember the fact that one of

his major works was in fact titled 'Utilitarianism'.

So that in reality if we were to choose the *one* person who is most responsible for all this that you see around you today, that person wouldn't actually be John Stuart Mill. Rather it would be his patron and teacher, Mr. Jeremy Bentham. Liberal Democracy is therefore in effect nothing more than Utilitarianism being called something else. And to make matters worse, as we shall see further down the line, all of Mill's attempts to humanize Utilitarianism, to in effect soften those Benthamite principles, just succeeded in Liberal Democracy becoming filled up with contradictions.

But wait, there's more: Both Bentham and Mills' father were strident atheists. Mills himself was too smart and careful to talk about his religious beliefs while he was alive. But he did have an essay published after his death that strongly confirmed his belief in atheism. So if you consider yourself religious, if you consider yourself, as they say, 'spiritual but not religious', even if you just sort of kind of think that there must be some Meaning to all of this, well, just be well aware that Liberal Democracy, like Utilitarianism, presumes atheism as a core foundational assumption.

Now on a personal basis I don't care what your religious beliefs or lack of religious beliefs are. You just need to know that in any fully developed liberal democracy, atheism is therefore going to be, by definition, the default setting. And you also need to know that not just Bentham and the Millses, but also Herbert Spencer, Bertrand Russell, and all the other additional theorists of liberal democracy were also all virulent haters of any and every organized religion.

And if you're thinking right now, 'Hey, this is getting ridiculous. American democracy had nothing to do with this thing that I've never heard of called Utilitarianism', well, you're right. But please never forget what Episode 2 was all about. That the American democracy of fifty or a hundred or two hundred years ago is a completely different animal than is the ideology of Liberal Democracy.

So when you look at the complete collapse of organized religion in Western Europe and the replacement here of traditional faith with either the so-called 'prosperity Gospel' or with squishy humanism and pop psychology, well, that is all a direct result of the ideology of utilitarianism/liberal democracy, of the thinking of Jeremy Bentham, replacing every other way of thinking.

And then consider these insights: If you believe that it is more important to have free elections in, say, Iraq or the Congo than it is to have stability or justice or economic progress, well, this is directly because of Jeremy Bentham. If you believe that censorship of any kind is the worst possible thing that any government can do, this is also a direct result of Jeremy Bentham. If you believe that anything that two consenting adults agree to do is just fine and dandy, then this, too, is directly because

of Jeremy Bentham. If you believe that it is not up to me or you to say what is good or bad or right or wrong, and that to do any of this is somehow being 'judgmental', once again this is also directly because of Jeremy Bentham.

And the fascinating thing here is that once one buys into the foundational assumptions of Jeremy Bentham, all of these ideas, in fact almost every idea that separates our postmodern world from all that came before it, they all follow as logically and as clearly as does the proof of a simple theorem in plane geometry.

That is, of course, to repeat, if you buy into his foundational assumptions.

And if your mind finds this hard to accept, then let me pose this rhetorical question: What do you think the odds are that it is a total coincidence that virtually every postmodern certainty just happens to line up exactly with the conclusions of Jeremy Bentham?

Because if you're like most of humanity you mind will find this hard to accept. After all, as I've already pointed out, we all like to think that the things we believe are our beliefs. That somehow we came up with them. But, as I've also already pointed out, very few of us have spent years on that mountaintop laboriously going back to first causes in our minds and then reinventing philosophy.

So the reality is that you did not come up with any of these thoughts on your own. And if you still don't believe me, then let me point out that one would be hard pressed to come up with any other culture throughout history which did believe in any one of these postmodern ideas. No, the reason you believe them is that you absorbed them both as a result of direct teaching and because they surround and pervade the postmodern culture that you are part of. In fact, if you are even vaguely part of the intellectual elite, then probably just about everyone you know also believes these things.

But even if you don't happen to share these beliefs, there are still hundreds and hundreds of millions of people who do. And, once again, it's not because any of these ideas are self-evident. (Jeremy Bentham, by the way, didn't believe in self-evidence. He didn't believe in Natural Law.) And it's not because these ideas are a result of some religious revelation. Nor are they the accumulated wisdom of sages.

And they definitely don't have anything to do with science or the scientific method.

No, if you believe these things, rest assured that they all emanated from the head of some very disturbing little man from two hundred years ago named Jeremy Bentham.

And here is the supreme irony. For it also turns out that so many of our postmodern ideas about gender, sex, and intimate relationships are all a function of this guy who, as far as is known, never

personally experienced any gender, sex, or intimate relationship in his entire life.

Let me explain. You see, up until the end of the 18th Century everyone everywhere in every culture ever discovered just took for granted that men and women had qualitatively different essences. Yin and Yang, as it were. But, as I've said, Jeremy Bentham didn't believe in Qualities. Only Quantities. So to him, in his idealized world, once they had been stripped of their hidebound culture and tradition, men and women would be equivalent consumption units, or, if you prefer, equivalent utile generating mechanisms, each with the exact same rights, responsibilities, and expectations. And in such a world there would be no need for those traits which had been valued when Male and Female had been seen as intrinsically mutually dependent beings. Such as courage and discipline on the one hand. And tenderness and sympathy on the other.

And this world was also one in which there was, by definition, no love or affection. After all, love and affection presume that someone is putting somebody else ahead of themselves. And in the world of utilitarianism we are all self-maximizing individuals. So that, if we do enter relationships with other people it would only be for the pursuit of mutual profit, and such relationships in the end would be solely of a legalistic nature.   Further, in this context 'mutual profit' meant the joint pursuit of pleasure and/or the joint avoidance of pain.

And this joint pursuit of pleasure could be for five minutes or five years. Nor, since Yin and Yang no longer existed, need it be between a man and a woman. So it might not surprise you that Jeremy Bentham secretly wrote over 500 pages on the subject of gay sex. Secretly, because in 1810 if anyone had found out what and where his theory really led to he would have been banished not just from polite society, but from any and all society. Further, he himself declared that he personally found the whole idea of gay sex to be disgusting. But that didn't stop him from obsessively thinking and writing about it. Because the foundational assumptions of utilitarianism, the theory of utilitarianism, logically demanded that the pleasures of gay sex be treated as exactly the equivalent to the pleasures of any other kind of sex. Or, for that matter, equivalent to the pleasure of going to the opera or playing hopscotch or whatever.

Further, if there is no longer any qualitative difference between male and female, then that whole sacramental idea, that thought that in marriage you are somehow mystically combining those two different qualities so as to arrive at some sort of overarching synthesis, well, that idea goes out the window, also. So that, even though Bentham himself didn't take it that far, you can readily see how the plausibility of gay marriage would therefore also just naturally arise from utilitarianism's foundational

assumptions.

And here's something else that never occurred to Bentham but which naturally follows from the foundational assumptions of utilitarianism: Namely transgenderism. Because if there is no longer any intrinsic difference between male and female, and if, for whatever reason, I prefer to pleasure myself as a female, then why should society stop me from doing just that?

Now sexual beliefs and mores have changed so radically in the last fifty years or so that sometimes it is difficult to remember just how radically different those of the postmodern era are from those of virtually every other culture which has ever existed. And it's not my intention right here right now to discuss the rightness or wrongness of different sexual mores. But you are just putting your head in the sand if you do not see that there is almost a one to one correspondence between one's enthusiasm for liberal democracy and one's enthusiasm for the acceptance of gay sex and/or transgenderism. Because these behaviors follow logically and inexorably from the foundational assumptions of utilitarianism/liberal democracy.

Although, as I've already mentioned. I really don't want this podcast to get hung up on arguing about current events.

I'm just trying to point out that we can also trace so many of our other postmodern beliefs to Bentham as the sole and/or first source. And that, further, we can trace almost all of our present day postmodern problems to the complications that arise from trying to force humans to act in accordance with Benthamite Principles. And that it is just really stretching any sense of common sense to think that this is just some sort of strange coincidence.

Although, as I keep saying, it is all very complicated and intertwined. Which is why it is going to take all those episodes.

In the meantime, though, right now I'd like to direct your attention to something else about Jeremy Bentham's theory and his mental state that is rather disquieting. And this is his fixation on that Panopticon, his prison of total control.

Now many of you might not know that until the 19th Century prisons basically didn't exist. Except as places to hold political prisoners or criminals before their trials. Punishment for serious or semi-serious crimes was physical, such as lashes of the whip or hanging. And lesser crimes were dealt with by some sort of public shaming, such as a day in the stockade or wearing a dunce cap.

But by the mid 18th Century many people were getting queasy at the idea of harsh physical punishment for anything except the worst of crimes. So many Christian reformers came up with the

idea of building prisons, so that criminals, sort of like involuntary monks, could spend their time contemplating the wrongness of their acts and becoming better people.

But this wasn't the line of thinking that was behind Bentham's obsession with prisons. No, he saw them as places which would be so harsh and so controlling that no one would ever even think of breaking the rules.

But wasn't Bentham's ideal utilitarian world a place where everyone would be totally free to pleasure themselves as they saw fit? Ah, but there's the rub. Because, as we shall see, the proviso was that in pleasuring yourself you also weren't supposed to harm anyone else. And, as we shall also see, utilitarianism thus demanded that you undertake complex mental calculations about total group benefit before you yourself ever undertook any action. After all, wasn't that a 'rational' thing to demand? And if people refused to be rational and play by the rules, well, then…

But, again, later on we'll get more deeply into all the absurdity that Utilitarianism, and thus also Liberal Democracy, generates. For right now, though, I trust that you'll see that the fact that prisons dominated Bentham's mind was not some strange aberration, but instead came directly from the foundational principles of his Utilitarian philosophy.

In other words, total freedom for the population demanded total control of the population.

Just like Marxism, by the way.

And today, under Liberal Democracy, instead of the temporary humiliation of a day in the stockade or the temporary pain of thirty lashes, here in the United States we have over two million people doing hard time. And another almost five million on probation or parole who can be sent there for almost any offense.

So, to sum up, when I describe the theory and practice of utilitarianism, I'm sure that many of you, if not most of you, find it absurd and/or repulsive. But when we call the exact same system Liberal Democracy somehow it's supposed to be up there with mom and apple pie.

And, like I said, all of this is almost too ridiculous to believe. It's almost as if you were transported two hundred years into the future and somehow Scientology had become the world's One True Religion.

What's even more fantastic is that, as opposed to, say, Karl Marx, or, in my hypothetical example, there being statues of L Ron Hubbard everywhere, Jeremy Bentham is almost lost to conscious history. And good luck if you want to find out substantively more about him than what I

have just laid out. When I checked on Amazon all I could find was one biography, reprinted, by the way, by a company called Forgotten Books, that was originally written in 1905.

And yet...

Right now, day after day, even as students are walking by, his clothed skeleton is sitting upright on that chair in that glass fronted wooden box on a main corridor of one of the top universities of the world. On top of that clothed skeleton is the wax head with its disturbingly grinning face surmounted by an overly large straw hat.

By the way, I've been there. I've seen it. Trust me, it is indelibly creepy.

So, especially if you consider yourself a true believer in liberal democracy, maybe you, too, should go over there to London and gaze upon him. For here is your Founder. Here is your Jesus. Here is your Buddha. Here is your Karl Marx.

And his dream will have been fulfilled. For you will have made your pilgrimage to his Auto-Icon.

Now how postmodernly weird is that?