

EPISODE 10

SO WHY AM I REALLY DOING THIS?

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number ten of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now as I pointed out in the last episode, at this point we're at the end of the beginning, as it were. And we're about to go into a lot of history and a lot of science, with the ultimate aim of seeing reality and the human condition as they are, and not as our ideology has led us to believe that they are.

But that admittedly is a huge undertaking. And so I thought it might be a good idea to take a sort of break and once again go over why you need to hear this and why I need to be telling it to you.

Because I know, maybe even more than you do, just how massive the problem is that we face. I mean, you can go just about anywhere in the world now, and at least some portion of the population is spending almost every waking minute staring at their smart phone. That guy who pointed out that the postmodern world is in essence a race to the bottom of the brain stem pretty much nailed it.

So I get it that most of us feel that we're not in any kind of position to do anything about it anyway, so why bother? We're kind of like that frog that is slowly boiling away. As the water gets a degree by degree hotter, as each of our dignities, as each real human interaction, and as each sense of meaning gets stripped away, instead of jumping out in fright, instead we ...adjust.

On top of that, as I've pointed out, there's the plain fact that so many other of us have so totally bought into the system. And to a large extent it seems that the higher one goes up the educational ladder, the more bought into the system everyone is. Which is really weird when you realize that so much of said system would have been considered as absolutely bonkers insane at any other time or place in history.

And the thing about it is that the more irrational someone's belief system is, whether that belief system is Mormonism or is liberal democracy, the tighter it is that they hold on to it.

Then on top of all that is the reality that, especially in this day and age, everyone wants a simple answer to everything. Not to mention an answer that is totally within the context of their preexisting belief system. And this is something which I definitely do not have the intention of providing.

So why am I deliberately subjecting myself to the overwhelming probability of not being able to effect any sort of effective change? Especially when it is so difficult these days to get anyone to focus their attention on *anything* that requires them to focus their attention? Especially when I'm asking them to re-examine all manner of thoughts and conclusions? And especially when it would be so much easier and so much more fun for me to be circumnavigating Australia?

Well, to answer myself, let me once again point out to you that to the extent that you stick with these episodes, then at the very least you are going to find out a lot of interesting information. Your understanding of history should get deeper and more complete. You'll find out why, without even considering science or common sense, the internal logic of Enlightenment values and of liberal democracy just don't compute.

More importantly, after the history I'll be going over all the scientific evidence. Because it turns out that pigs can't fly and camels can't hop like kangaroos. And like them we are animals. Animals which evolved with certain behavioral proclivities and certain behavioral parameters. And once you know the true human condition you should readily see how absurd our current postmodern thinking is.

Although, like I said, most people don't want non-obvious answers. And they certainly don't want to stick around for the long haul. And, anyway, I've already solved the problem to my own satisfaction. What's more, my self esteem really doesn't need the validation of, as it were, broadcasting to the wilderness. So the question remains: Why *am* I doing this?

Well, there are two big reasons. The first one is incredibly important and the second one is cosmically important. So let's start out with the incredibly important one.

Now let's say, for the sake of argument, that my objections to what our culture has become are just the result of my fuddy duddy, outdated, old fashioned belief system. And that the Hollywood liberals and the New York Times readers and the academics and all the rest are actually right. And that all I and the other holdouts need to do is drop our repressed outmoded ways of thinking and get with the program.

In fact, let's take it further, and pretend that the utopia of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and liberal democracy could have actually worked when they wrote about it. And that in such a world we all would have been free to sit around peacefully pleasuring ourselves as we saw fit with no harm to others and no need for outside control. Wouldn't that have been lovely?

Well, here's the problem with that scenario. Because what Bentham and Mill were living in was the society of the 18th and 19th Centuries. This was a world of good manners, of relative peace and

quiet, and a world where playing push pin or hopscotch was about as out there as people got. Most importantly, it was a world where social norms and ingrained self-discipline kept people on the relative straight and narrow.

And it was certainly a world where a nightmarish totalitarian vision such as that depicted in '1984' was way beyond conceivable.

But here in the 21st Century '1984' is now in the rear view mirror. Right now as I'm speaking China is installing six hundred million video cameras in every possible nook and cranny of the country. England, that cradle of liberal democracy, has already pretty much done so.

Then add to this all the big data that the big internet companies are constantly hoovering up. Add to that the fact that the cell phone in your pocket is telling someone somewhere exactly where you are almost every minute of the day. So that right now, so far the only two things keeping our present day reality from making '1984' seem benign and old fashioned are, one, the fact that there's too much data to actually analyze, and, two, the lack of an active will on the part of the government or Google or whoever to completely control your life. The fact is, though, that technology will no doubt soon take care of problem one. And good old human nature will no doubt soon take care of problem two.

And if you think that there is going to be any sort of active resistance to this, then think again. Because it turns out that the vast majority of people in China and the vast majority of people in England really like the fact that millions of cameras are constantly monitoring them. After all, those social norms and self-restraint of the 19th Century have long ago been replaced by the freedom of rampant self-interest and desire. Which means that hopscotch is no longer even in the top ten thousand of out there forms of entertainment. And libertarian types can argue all they want over whether citizens should be afraid under such circumstances. But the plain fact is that they are. The plain fact is that they want Big Brother looking out for them.

So here's the deal. It's pretty much inevitable that in the very near future your behavior is going to be totally controlled. And the more advanced the society, the tighter the control. It's technology, man. You can't fight it. Now we could be intelligent about this and try and find the right parameters that we can ask people to behave within. And by 'right' I mean the parameters which take into account our real human nature and the real needs of a larger human society. Or we can continue going with those classical liberal ideas from the 18th Century, ideas that had absolutely no foundation in science and no foundation in tradition or wisdom, and which were spun out by a bunch of guys who were whacked out on caffeine and snuff. And we can do this knowing full well that, as with the French

Revolution producing Napoleon and the Weimar Republic in Germany producing Hitler, this variety of 'freedom' has always ended up with a horrible backlash.

Or of course there's also that third option. We can remain as the frogs that we are, lost in our fog of entertainment, and slowly and surely boiling away.

So that's one reason why I have to do this podcast. And here's the other.

And it has to do with the not so small matter of the question of Consciousness.

And I'm probably jumping way too far ahead of myself on this one. But I feel that I need to. Because this is without question the most important reason behind why I'm subjecting myself to the time and discipline of making these recordings.

Now I don't know just how much you are personally invested in trying to figure out the meaning of life and all of that stuff. And I certainly don't mean to imply that each and every human out there is or should be naturally mentally inclined to such speculation. But it may interest you to know that, in the Western world at least, up until around the year 1750 it was considered a prime responsibility of those who were privileged enough to receive an education to at least familiarize themselves with the thoughts and doctrines of the great philosophers and thinkers of the past. That is to say, doctors and lawyers and ministers of the cloth and such were expected to not only own the Great Books, as it were, but to also have read them and to be able to converse about them.

And the same was true in Greece and Rome, and in China and India. Now I'm not going to pretend that back then everyone all stood around in robes and discussed epistemology. No, most of them, like most of us, were chasing wealth and status. But at least each of those places and cultures had an expressed higher goal of something like 'The unexamined life is not worth living'.

But after 1750, not so much. And today it sometimes seems like all of those smart phones, all of those sixty hour work weeks, all of those Netflix and all of those extracurricular activities are in reality just serving the purpose of deliberately keeping us from ever stopping to consider what it all means. Or indeed if it all means.

So I am going to jump ahead. And if you feel that anything which I am about to say conflicts with your understanding of science and reality, then I'm just going to have to ask you to be patient and wait until everything is covered in much more detail further down the line.

Now when we were teenagers most of us, theoretically at least, knew that at some point we were going to die. But it seemed so vague and in the future, and meantime the present tense was so

here and now and elastic, that we tended to do all sorts of things which a person who was really conscious of their mortality wouldn't. And then when we got older we looked back at those things with a shudder.

And later on I will use our teenage consciousness or lack thereof as a metaphor for what went down in the 18th Century.

Of course, right at the beginning, in Episode 1, I compared so much of our present day behavior to that of a ten year old.

Either way, though, right now I'm going to address you as an adult. Because one of the things in the postmodern world which keeps us in the fog that we're in is the vague belief, which is supported by our vague understanding of science, that life and existence are some sort of infinite resource of the Universe. After all, aren't there billions and billions of stars out there? Aren't astronomers every year discovering hundreds of planets around nearby stars? Isn't popular science telling us that life is very likely present not only on all those exoplanets, but even perhaps on the moons of Jupiter or Saturn?

Well, right now I'm here to disabuse you of any of these notions. Because, and this certainly isn't the only time I'm going to be saying this, but it turns out that popular science is just as much a victim of ideological nonsense as are political thinking and popular history.

So let's start with the existence of the Universe itself. Now at this point we all know about the Big Bang. Namely, that around 14 billion years ago, in an instant, the Universe sprang out of an infinitely dense nothingness, and that within virtually no time all the fundamental forces of said Universe were created and matter started coalescing out of energy. And for some reason we think that since we can read these things and hear these things we somehow have a grasp on what went down.

Although, of course, we don't. Although we continue to pretend that we do.

Anyway, here's something outside of the Big Bang, etc., that you might not be aware of. It's called the fine tuning problem. And the fact that it is called the fine tuning problem instead of the fine tuning miracle in itself says a lot about the ideological slanting of basic scientific truths. But, anyway, here's a really, really short description of it:

You see, the Universe is held together by such forces as gravity, electromagnetism, the strong nuclear force, etc. In all it is estimated that there are at least 25 independent, but interacting, physical constants. And the thing of it is, nobody has any idea of why each of them is as strong or as weak as it is. But it also turns out that if any of them were changed, even by a tiny fraction, then the Universe as we know it would cease to exist. Either it would immediately fall in on itself, or energy wouldn't

coalesce into matter, or atoms would never get more complex than the simplest one, Hydrogen. Or any one of a multitude of scenarios. All of which would mean that not even molecules, let alone the simplest of life, could exist. So to say that there is a less than one in a billion chance of the Universe as we know it even existing in the first place is understating the problem by many orders of magnitude.

Now when we get into this further down the line, I'll point out that apologists for a meaningless Universe do have certain arguments for whistling past this particular graveyard. But what you need to know for right now is that the very fact that the Universe exists at all with matter and energy and stars and planets and such is breathtakingly improbable.

So next let's deal with those stars and planets. Because if you follow science at all, I'm sure you're aware of all the recent breathless announcements of the zillions of probable planets in our galaxy alone. But here is some of what they're not telling you:

For starters, nice, relatively large yellow stars like our Sun make up only 3% of the stars that are out there. Most of the rest are small red dwarfs, and there are all sorts of reasons why such stars are extremely unlikely to be able to support life, not least of which is that you almost definitely need yellow light to generate photosynthesis. What's more, most of the planets so far discovered don't even remotely fit our understanding of how planets should be.

But surely, what with those billions and billions of stars out there, there still should be thousands and thousands of matches, right? Not so fast. Because it turns out that there are vast sections of our galaxy, whether because of gamma rays or lack of heavier elements or for other reasons, which are totally unfit for any form of life. And, trust me, there are all sorts of other conditions which are involved which make the notion of a 'habitable' planet extremely suspect. Which, again, we'll be getting into further down the line.

But now let's turn to life itself. Because at this point, despite what you might have been led to believe, we still don't have a clue how it got started. Let me correct that. We do have a clue, in that, at its most basic level, life is a self-sustaining oxidation equation. What we don't have is any plausible natural environment in which this equation could occur. Now this doesn't mean that such an environment never existed, since clearly we do have life here on Earth. But what it does mean is that, with an example of exactly one, namely us, and, worse, without us even knowing what that environment was, we have absolutely no way to predict how common or rare life could or would be anywhere else.

And here is the next-to-final more than absurd improbability. Because when you hear 'life on

other planets' you probably think of Star Wars or Star Trek aliens and/or extraterrestrial plants and animals. But the 'life' that astrobiologists are talking about is, at its most complex, something which is on the level of a microbe. A teeny, tiny microbe. Something so small that you can fit thousands of them on the period at the end of a sentence. And the evidence these days is that it is overwhelmingly probable, because of some really obvious parameters, that this is as large as any life on some other planet could or would possibly get. Moreover, although they're not going to tell you about it, mainstream biology has now pretty much concluded that the development of the complex cell, which is the basis of all plant and animal life on Earth, had to have been less than a one in a quadrillion occurrence. And that's not even taking into account multi-cellular beings, let alone plants and animals as we know them.

And, again, I'll be getting into all of that in much greater detail further on.

But right now let's quickly multiply all of these different independent events. First, you have the less than one in a billion chance that the Universe could even exist coherently. That times probably less than around a one in million chance that there could be another Earth which met all the conditions for life. That times a big question mark, since at the moment we still have no idea how readily life can in actuality form. And that times one in a quadrillion, which is how likely it is for a microbe to transmogrify into a complex cell.

Now them is pretty long odds. In fact the odds are so ridiculously small that I would hope that realization of same might just tear you away from that video game or that Instagram account long enough to at least try to begin to contemplate what the hell might be going on here.

But there's still one thing more to add to the mix. And this is, as I said, the not so small question of Consciousness.

Now, here and now, I'm not about to unpack the mystery of Consciousness for you. But what I am going to do is to point out for you that modern day science has never come close to unpacking said mystery, either. That is to say, ever since around 1750 mainstream science has been of the opinion that consciousness must have arisen from some biological, material process. Or, as they put it back then, 'matter that thinks'. But what you need to know is that this is all it has ever been: An opinion. No one has created consciousness out of matter. Worse, no one has even come up with a remotely plausible peer reviewed theory on how that could happen. And remember that science isn't supposed to be based upon opinions. It's supposed to be based upon proof.

So that when in the present day you hear certain Silicon Valley types talk about the inevitability

of computers becoming conscious, and then of course superconscious, that's about as scientific as talking about invisible leprachauns or secret aliens on the Hale Bopp comet. Because after over 250 years of believing that consciousness must have a material cause, there is still not the tiniest bit of proof of that.

Now I'm not saying that the hypothesis isn't possible. For all I know someone will prove such a state of affairs tomorrow. But as of right now, as we stand here existing, at the end of this long chain of insane improbability, it also behooves us to consider just what in Creation is going on with this consciousness thing.

I mean, in episode 8 I pointed out how non-obvious it is that the Universe should be able to be described by a set of relatively simple mathematical equations. Now how much more non-obvious is it that these equations would only be apparent to someone who was conscious, but that so far as we know consciousness just popped out here in the middle of nowhere, cosmologically speaking, around 10,000 years ago. And why in the world isn't that more interesting to you than whatever it is that Caitlyn Jenner is up to these days?

Because if you really begin to internalize the sheer improbability of all of this, it seems to me that you can reach one of three conclusions. The first, and simplest, is that there must be a God. And that our small consciousness is in some way a reflection of some greater, all encompassing Consciousness.

The second is a somewhat more sophisticated take on the first. It starts with the observation that a clever dog can figure out that bringing its leash to its owner will probably result in a walk. It can figure out that when it hears the can opener it means that it is going to be fed. But the idea of a dog food factory, or of how to build a truck to get the dog food to a store, or whatever it is that a store does, these ideas are totally beyond a dog's comprehension. And, in like manner, we're pretty smart for a bunch of hominids. But it could well be that the Universe is of a level of complexity which is far beyond our ability to conceptualize it. And that that's just the way it is, and it's just the way it's going to be. And so we can call all that it is that we don't know, and that, given our constraints, will never know, for lack of a better name, we can call that God.

Or, if you don't like the word 'God', then we can call it 'X the Unknown'. Or whatever.

Because a lot of people, for whatever reasons, don't like the word 'God'. And a lot of people, because of their ideological imprinting, are just absolutely convinced that not only is there a materialistic explanation for everything, but that they *are* the ones who are indeed at the end of the

evolutionary chain and that therefore they are the ones who are indeed smart enough to have figured this all out.

So, again for the sake of argument, let's accept their point of view. Let's posit that there is no X Factor, that the Universe is just a giant bunch of energy and matter in flux. Still, when you actually accept and consider the absurdly long odds against intelligent life coming into being, doesn't that instead make everything all that much weirder and more mysterious? And then when you throw the reality of Consciousness in on top of that?

I mean, if there is any responsibility inherent in existence, then don't you think we owe it to future generations, or to past generations, or to *somebody*, to slow this world down a bit and to start thinking about something other than pressing that metaphorical lever so as to get one more immediately dissipating rush of dopamine?

Now I'm not trying to push the God hypothesis on you. I'm just trying to say that the less that you believe in God, then the more important it would seem that someone somewhere should figure out why it is that all of a sudden there is this tiny island of meaning manifesting itself out of an otherwise infinite infinity of meaninglessness.

Because I for one would certainly like to solve that problem. And I can't really comprehend why you and/or anyone else, for that matter, would lack the basic curiosity to solve it, too.

But here's the thing. Back in around 500 A.D., when the western Roman Empire collapsed, there were about 500 years of Dark Ages. Which is a really long time. That's like the period of time from the year 1500 to the present. But the Dark Ages were only in Western Europe. The eastern part of Rome, namely Byzantium, continued on just fine. So did China. So did India. Africa and the New World weren't affected one bit.

In the present day, though, we have so many interesting and varied ways to blow things up. And I'm not just talking about global warming, or even thermonuclear war. For some of the plausible future science scenarios out there are even way scarier than those two possibilities. So then what would we have had? Two billion years of microbial scum. Followed by a billion years of simple single complex cells floating around. Followed by 500 million years of multicellular thingies. Followed by 10,000 years of consciousness. Then splat. And once again the Universe goes dark.

Well, I don't like that idea. I mean, it's bad enough that so many of us choose to be dumb and choose to be irrelevant. It's bad enough that we keep on thinking that just getting our rocks off one more time is somehow going to make us happy. It's bad enough that we're more or less trading our

birthright for the number of likes we can generate or the number of phony Facebook friends we can accumulate.

But this is Consciousness that we're talking about. Awareness. Liquid Being in the here and now. And I know fully well that I myself will be ending soon enough. But I really don't like the idea of Consciousness itself ending.

So that is why I am really doing this. On the off chance that you might agree with me.

Anyway, at this point the introductory part is officially over. And now we can start in with the history, albeit with a little philosophy thrown in. For by now I've kind of let it be known that I'm going to be telling you that a lot of what you probably think you know about history has been a mixture of ideological obfuscation and plain old simplification and unintended ignorance.

But another way to say this is that you are about to find out all kinds of fascinating facts, stories, and insights that you hadn't been aware of. And that your understanding of it all might well be getting deeper and wiser. And so I ask you to stay with me for the ride.

In the meantime, though, thanks again for so far having listened.