

EPISODE 11

THOSE ENLIGHTENMENT VALUES

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number eleven of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. And, as promised, we will now shortly commence our promenade across history. Now I don't know how excited you get by history, but, trust me, it is extremely important that you know exactly how and exactly why we got to where we are today. If for no other reason than that the only way that we're going to be able to figure out how to get back on the right road is if we know how and where we got off it in the first place.

So get prepared for a lot of weird, interesting, fascinating stuff that you probably didn't know about already.

And it's coming really soon.

Right now, however... It's time for an extremely short course in 18th Century philosophy and political theory.

I know, that might kind of sound boring. And in fact it usually is. But I've been going on and on about the Age of Enlightenment and Enlightenment values. And by now you may or may not have bought into what I've been telling you how the assumptions assumed around 1770 have set the stage, have laid the foundation, as it were, for the world that you see around you today. But they have. And rest assured that no professor of intellectual history would argue the point.

But so far I've kind of been coy. So far I haven't really explained exactly what those Enlightenment values specifically were.

So now I'm going to do it.

First, though, to be sure that we're all clear about everything, for those who might have come to class late, as it were, let me re-state the gist of my argument: Namely, it is that almost every mainstream pundit or academic out there these days, whether they are left wing or right wing, is going to tell you that everything good about the modern world and of Western Civilization is a result of that period of intellectual history called the Age of Enlightenment. They will tell you that in this relatively brief period of time the Western world basically changed its entire way of thinking about Work,

Leisure, Virtue, Happiness, the Meaning of Life, you name it.

They will also claim that these so-called Enlightenment values are responsible for, among other things, the Industrial Revolution, the belief in free markets and free enterprise, the incredible expansion of science and technology, the economic and political dominance of the West, and basically in Progress in and of itself. Further, they claim that in the political realm these Enlightenment values are responsible for the modern world's emphasis on rationality instead of superstition, its tradition of legitimately derived authority, its respect for individual rights, human rights, the rule of law, free speech, and freedom and democracy in general.

To this I say that that all sounds great. Incredibly wonderful, in fact. But also that it all has about as much relationship to the real reality of the postmodern world as did Soviet claims of creating a worker's paradise or Nazi claims to being just glorified Boy Scouts working together to build a proud Germany. In truth, as I have already argued in episode 8, almost all of the real material progress of the past two centuries has been totally a function of the advancement of Science. Which started advancing way before the 18th Century. And which by definition has absolutely no connection to any ideology of any kind.

Further, the West did not come to dominate the rest of the world because of freedom or democracy or Enlightenment values. It did so through brute force and racist Colonialism. Which was aided and abetted by the industry and weapons which resulted from the technology which resulted from the scientific method. Which had been initiated by those Franciscan monks deducing from their Christian faith back in the 13th Century.

So... Whereas I totally agree with them that minds and attitudes did drastically change back then, what I am saying is that in reality what the Age of Enlightenment ushered in was a legitimization of greed, selfishness, self absorption and crass materialism. That in fact our present day dystopia is the inevitable insane endgame of the theory and practice of those Enlightenment values. That the only reason that it took so long for dystopia to arrive is that it took so long for those Enlightenment values to fully override what we might call the traditional ones. And that, finally, to the extent that we continue with those Enlightenment values, what comes up next will be an inevitable totalitarian nightmare.

Okay, when I put it that way it does seem a little strong. And I don't blame you if you'd rather go watch a ballgame than listen to a lecture about intellectual history. But stay with me anyway. Because this stuff is really important. After all, before we go into the history section and figure out

how we got there, we should probably have some sort of idea of what 'there' is.

So let's start by quickly reminding you of a couple of essential points that in theory you're supposed to have internalized by now. But that I still might have to remind you about because the plain fact is that our minds find it really hard to deal with new definitions. Anyway, the first point I have to repeat is that when I use the word 'liberal' it refers entirely to the original 18th Century meaning of the word and not to the modern American sense of the word, as in politicians like Nancy Pelosi or Bernie Sanders. And this 18th Century meaning is what some conservatives are referring to when they call themselves Classical Liberals. And the second point that I should repeat is that the term 'Liberal Democracy' refers to the particular political ideology developed by John Stuart Mill, and has little or nothing to do with the good 'ol American way of life or government before around thirty years ago.

So, next, let's define the time period encompassing the Age of Enlightenment as between the years 1750 and 1800. Now History is hardly ever neat and clean, so those dates are slightly arbitrary. But they are pretty close, and I use them because sometimes people mistakenly use the term Age of Enlightenment to include the entire 17th and 18th Centuries. But as we go through the history of those times we'll see just how dramatically different, say, 1630 was from 1790.

Although this leads into another issue. Because even within the period 1750-1800 there was no such thing as a monolithic ENLIGHTENMENT. Yes, there were certain ideas that were widespread, even prevalent. But, just as in any other time in history, in the late 18th Century there was a whole spectrum of intellectual viewpoints, from the revolutionary to the archly conservative. Nor did the men that we do remember, such as Voltaire, Diderot, David Hume and Adam Smith, necessarily agree with each other all the time. Further, to make it more confusing, many of the great thinkers of that time really don't fit into the 'Enlightenment values' and 'Classical Liberalism' slot. Goethe, Kant, and most of German thought were a lot closer to the later Romantics. Rousseau was an outlier who actively doubted most of the Enlightenment values. Edmund Burke thought of himself as a liberal Whig but is now considered a patron saint of Conservatism.

In short, what it comes down to is that when people speak about the Age of Enlightenment they are really talking about a relatively small group of French philosophes and another smallish group of Brits, most of whom were Scottish.

Really, though, and as I suggested back in episode 5, what it really comes down to is that when we in the present day talk about the Age of Enlightenment we are really talking about those ideas as filtered through the minds of Mr. Jeremy Bentham and Mr. John Stuart Mill. Now this is extremely

important to understand, because even though Jeremy Bentham was undoubtedly a product of the Enlightenment, those Enlightenment ideas which he did not approve of are no longer thought of as proper Enlightenment values.

Let me explain.

As a great for instance, take the concept of Natural Moral Law. This was the idea that moral codes of behavior can be arrived at by a careful examination of Nature itself, and that man made laws which do not line up with this Natural Moral Law are therefore just downright wrong. The idea is said to have started with Aristotle, and it continued through the Roman Era and Medieval Christianity. Hobbes and Locke were great proponents of this, and by the 18th Century the discoveries of natural science made most people think that it was only a matter of time before great thinkers, using the scientific method, figured out the true Natural Moral Law. Our Declaration of Independence with its 'inalienable rights' is a reflection of the near universal belief in Natural Law at the time. Even Adam Smith, the founder of free market thinking, was far more interested in Natural Moral Law than he was in Economics.

Note that for the vast majority of these thinkers, no one would have thought to have claimed to as yet have discovered the complete set of these laws. Rather they thought that through the scientific process—patient, unbiased observation of human behavior, followed by proposing various hypotheses and then testing them out—such a list would soon be found.

As I've already mentioned, though, Jeremy Bentham didn't believe in such things. In fact, he had absolute contempt for the idea. To him man made laws, democratically voted upon, were therefore all that was valid. And the very fact that they had been democratically voted upon was the only thing that made them valid. Which is why in the present day when apologists for liberal democracy list the great intellectual ideas which we inherited from the Age of Enlightenment, Natural Moral Law is not one of them. In fact, most philosophers and other academics of today would find the whole idea of Natural Moral Law as beyond laughable.

Even though virtually every Enlightenment thinker other than Jeremy Bentham thought of it as absolutely central to Enlightenment thought.

Although when you study history very much, you find out that this sort of thing happens all the time. What people thought was most important when it was going on is often totally ignored by future generations. And often those people and events that our history tells us were essential turning points didn't even cause a blip when they first happened.

So with all that in mind let's list the various foundational assumptions that experts in the field would pretty much agree were the basis for what are now referred to as Enlightenment thoughts and ideas. And as I go through them, keep in mind that, as with the science in the last episode, I'll be going into much greater detail further down the line.

Anyway, here's the first foundational assumption: The primacy of the individual. Now, as we'll see, this was an extremely revolutionary idea, since in all previous civilizations, both Eastern and Western, the larger society had always been seen as paramount. But here's how 18th Century thinkers arrived at this result:

You see, up until the 17th Century the West, just like every other civilization ever, had relied on a creation myth. In our case it was Adam and Eve and the Book of Genesis. But then, at this point in time the first glimmerings of skepticism arose. But this was still a couple of centuries before Darwin, so that none of these new proto-atheists had a clue as to evolution or to any other biological explanation, for that matter. So what then did become the alternative creation myth?

Well, according to Thomas Hobbes, at the beginning, in the dim mists of time, humans, who apparently had appeared out of nowhere, wandered around as asocial individuals. But then as they bumped into more and more other people, conflict inevitably arose. Therefore, out of sheer fear and self preservation, they all got together and in essence agreed to a legalistic social contract, which in essence gave up their individual sovereignty for the safety of being ruled by a government.

And although Thomas Hobbes was hardly 'liberal', this idea of a social contract somehow remained as the basis of thought for the next 150 years. So that later liberal theorists, assuming that our natural state had been one of sovereign individuality, concluded that each and every human's most basic instinct must be that of Liberty. It also therefore followed that that government was best which governed least, and which thus gave each of us humans the maximum room to be the free individuals that we started out as. Allied to this, of course, was the belief that although government itself was perhaps necessary, in truth it was always going to be in conflict with these natural rights of man.

The next major theme of Enlightenment thinking followed from this belief in the primacy of the individual. And this theme was Self Interest, or plain and simple selfishness. The presumption here was that each sovereign individual naturally sought to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain. In short, everyone was in it for themselves. And that therefore even seemingly altruistic acts really weren't, because what was really going on was that the person being altruistic was in actuality attempting to look good in the eyes of others, increase their social standing, or whatever.

Somewhat allied to this was the conviction that each and every person was a rational decision maker. That is to say, before undertaking any action, on some level a person mentally subtracts the psychic cost from the psychic benefits of said action. When deciding to purchase something in the marketplace a person determines whether their happiness in acquiring the good will be greater than their sorrow in losing their money. And the presumption was that this rationality, even if poorly executed, in the end applies to all human behavior.

Building upon this idea is the concept of rational self interest. Those isolated individuals who sat down in the mists of time to hash out their social contract did so because they rationally concluded that it was in their ultimate self interest to give up their individual sovereignty for some peace and security. Further, in any present situation, if, for instance, there are two pies and we decide to share them, then we each will have the pleasure of eating a pie and neither has the pain of fighting over it. Finally, in a larger society the reason that people work together is that because they understand that because of greater efficiency, each person in the end will selfishly get more.

Moreover, since reason will solve all problems, then there should be absolute freedom to express all thoughts. After all, if those thoughts turn out to be erroneous due to false beliefs or superstitions or just plain faulty reasoning, then the free marketplace of ideas will quickly sort them out and discard them.

So one of the giant foundational building blocks of Enlightenment thinking was this rational self-maximizing individual. And the next major theme of the 18th Century was, as I've already alluded to, what one might call Scientism, or a fetishization of science.

Now it is really vital that you understand just how big a deal science had become by the mid 18th Century. The work of Kepler, Galileo, Francis Bacon, and Rene Descartes in the first half of the 17th Century had culminated in the insights and mathematical proofs of Isaac Newton in that century's latter half. Although the true founders of the scientific method, those 13th Century Franciscan monks, were largely forgotten, their original hypothesis of an ordered, rational Universe open to investigation by man, God's 'Book of Nature', as it were, had been stunningly proved. Unfortunately, however, this astonishing success in figuring out the physical world through inductive reasoning from observation, as opposed to deductive reasoning from first principles, led people to believe that the rest of the wide realm of knowledge would also reveal itself in a similar manner.

The first casualty of this way of thinking was the whole idea of Authority. As we shall soon see, up until the so-called Scientific Revolution of the 17th Century for the previous 1500 years or so the

Scholastic approach, which was deduction from first principles, as formulated by Aristotle, had been the means to knowledge. Further, it meant that although one could certainly come up with new insights from the law as laid down by Aristotle, it would be the height of vanity to question that law. And of course the same held true in spades regarding the received theological wisdom of the Church.

So it might not seem so strange that people who had successfully questioned the scientific authority of Aristotle would now do something similar with the theological authority of the Church. The door of which, of course, had already opened with the Reformation which had started in the early 16th Century. By the late 18th Century, however, all authority, both civil and ecclesiastical, was being challenged. That is to say, the whole idea of there being a Church. Or of there being an aristocracy. Or of certain humans having greater rights than others. Or of all previous theories of economics. Or of the very structure and concept of government.

So that's one aspect of Scientism. Here's another: Many of the new findings of natural science had been quantitative and mathematical. This led to the belief that all true knowledge of everything also must in the end be measurable and quantitative. Further, if previously supposed 'qualities' like goodness or virtue could not be quantified, then by definition they no longer existed.

This fixation on Scientism also dovetailed in two significant ways with the fixation on Reason. First, as regards religion, now not only were specific stories, such as the Garden of Eden, open to doubt. But the very idea of Faith was becoming suspect. Second, as regards human affairs, human interactions were starting to be seen as something like profit and loss statements, and no longer a function of personal, emotional relationships. For instance, one should no longer buy turnips from one's friend and neighbor, but rather from the seller with the lowest price. In the realm of law, human judges were seen as too prone to manipulation by those human relationships and sympathies. Therefore they needed to be replaced by impersonal laws and regulations.

All of this bleeds into a fundamental shift in philosophical outlook. Now without getting too lost in the weeds here, and hopefully without getting too simplistic, either, understand that up until the 17th Century philosophy was just as much subject to Scholasticism as science had been. In 1620, though, Descartes became the first major philosopher to challenge this approach. But his philosophy largely harkened back to that of Plato: Namely, first, that there was an essence, a Soul or Ideal, which preceded the existence of the physical world. And, second, that it was through reason alone that we could determine all truths. And for most of the 17th Century this philosophical outlook was the dominant one.

In the latter part of that century, though, John Locke became the first major philosopher who espoused the theory of existentialism. That is to say, that all that we can possibly know is through experience here on the physical plane, and that no such things exist as eternal ideals. Interestingly, this belief did not stop him from believing both in God and in the stories of the Bible.

And although today academics no longer consider Locke to be that deep or sophisticated a philosopher, that didn't stop his ideas from becoming extremely influential in the early 18th Century. And then in the middle of the 18th Century along came David Hume. Now he was an out and out atheist, and he took the existentialist outlook to its logical conclusion. Not only did a consciousness not exist until it had experienced sensory input, but, as I've already mentioned, consciousness therefore must have arisen from dead material. And the illusion that it is conscious is just that, an illusion. Further, because our sensory inputs are necessarily subject to error, then any and all truth that we might come up with must also be subject to error. That is to say, even though Scientific Doubt exists so that the sincere scientist can ultimately find the real Truth, according to Hume there is no such thing as real Truth. All that there ultimately is is Doubt.

Now I know that this is starting to sound like some stoned hippie spouting off around 1967, and it's also true that professional philosophers tend to regard Hume as several levels lower than, say, Immanuel Kant. But, as we shall see further on, Hume's philosophy to a large extent was what people were looking to believe in in the mid 18th Century.

Besides total Skepticism, though, what Hume's philosophy also justified was a belief in Materialism. And by that term I'm not referring to keeping up with the Joneses, but rather the philosophical belief that all that the Universe consists of is Material. No spirit, no soul, no God. Personal or impersonal. Now it's not like before Hume no one had ever been an atheist. But in most times and places people kept those ideas to themselves. By the mid 18th Century, though, even though the vast majority of people were either still True Believers or more vaguely defined Deists or Unitarians, any idea of an afterlife, in heaven or anywhere else, started to lose traction. Before this time the word 'progress' had referred to a soul's progress back to God, as in the book 'Pilgrim's Progress'. Now progress started to mean more and better stuff.

Finally, there developed the belief in the 'Blank Slate'. Now some people mistakenly accuse Rousseau of coming up with this concept, and also identify him with a belief in 'noble savages' and the like. But he never had such a belief, and, as we shall see, in many critical ways he was a severe critic of Enlightenment thinking. Rather the idea of the Blank Slate comes from John Locke. And he used it

in a philosophical context, not an anthropological one.

Let me explain. Remember that Locke was an existentialist, and, according to him, we don't exist until our supposed consciousness tries to make sense out of all the sensory data which enter our brain. So that his argument was that, in that strictly philosophical sense, we all start off as blank slates.

The current meaning of the word, however, is far more anthropological. That is to say, it supposes that we arrive in this world without any, as it were, pre-programming. Thus in theory our outlooks and personalities are infinitely malleable, and therefore our 'good' or 'bad' behavior is a function of whatever environment and/or culture which we grew up in. Although this idea is not so prevalent today, in the mid 20th Century such a belief system was pretty much standard fare in most of the social sciences.

Now you'll no doubt notice that this Blank Slate idea is an extreme version of the age old debate about Nature versus Nurture. Which you might be interested to know was still going on strong during the Age of Enlightenment. So why, you may ask, do we associate a belief in the Blank Slate with all of the social sciences which just so happened all sort of started out at around that time?

Well, we're back to Jeremy Bentham. And John Stuart Mill. Because, again, what present day pundits are really referring to when they're talking about the wonderful Age of Enlightenment, whether or not they realize this, is said Age as filtered through those two individuals. Now this doesn't mean that these basic ideas didn't happen independently of Bentham. It's just that he took those ideas and followed them through to their logical, if demented, conclusion.

Because remember that, if Bentham were alive today, he would without a doubt be placed somewhere along the autism spectrum. After all, he didn't really have any normal human experiences of happiness, fellowship, or any sort of learned wisdom. And since he saw everything in hyper-rational, analytical, mathematical terms, in a sense he was a perfect avatar for a supposed Age of Reason.

And this inability to even understand that other human beings might have different ways of relating to the world and to others colors the last Enlightenment value that I want to discuss. And this was the idea of the equality of the sexes. Because here what was really believed in the Age of Enlightenment was quite different from how the concept is thought of today.

You see, back then it was obvious to everyone from their personal experience that men and women had essentially different mental and emotional makeups. So to argue that men and women were equal was in no way saying that they were equivalent. Rather it was to suggest that a woman's

viewpoint, although necessarily qualitatively different than a man's, was not only equally valid, but that it added a new crucial element to the mix. Nowadays we can use the terms yin and yang as a shorthand for this complementarianism. Back then they used phrases like head and heart, reason and feeling, sense and sensibility. With the idea being that it was necessary to balance the two, not only in an individual, but in the larger society. And that by boosting women's contribution to the dialogue, as it were, such a balance would be more readily achievable.

But for Jeremy Bentham emotions, the heart, what was known as the feminine, simply did not exist. Because remember that, for a small subset of radical liberals, of which he was one, there was no intrinsic human nature. It was all Nurture, all environment. This meant that all seeming differences between the male and female personality were purely a function of culture and tradition. And, of course, since almost all of these radical liberals were men, they naturally concluded that the truly natural outlook was theirs, the rational, self-maximizing individual 'manly' one.

So that we end up with the postmodern irony that what we now call feminism is an outright denial of what in previous centuries would have been called 'the feminine'.

And those, dear listener, are the major Enlightenment assumptions which led to those Enlightenment values.

Okay, two final quick points here. First, when we go through brief biographies of the principal Enlightenment protagonists, we'll definitely see some personal shortcomings. But I don't think that any of their intellectual viewpoints were intentionally evil. No, by and large, they all thought of themselves as being honest, forward thinking and 'modern'. And most of them were sincere.

But although they idolized science and the scientific method, it is extremely important for you to never forget that none of these Enlightenment ideas were remotely scientific in origin. That is to say, it's not like the science of the day had in any way established that people were individuals first, were rational, were selfish, or were blank slates. The science of the day was barely beginning to understand electricity and other physical phenomena. It knew absolutely nothing about human behavior. So that these Enlightenment ideas were nothing but pure speculation from the men who were speculating.

And it's not that at least some of these ideas, given the level of knowledge at the time, weren't at least plausible. It's just that there was never any proof of them, either then or since. Yet somehow our whole framework of assumptions of the rights of man, etc., etc., etc., was built upon them. And then, on top of that, as I've pointed out since the beginning of the podcast, at the present time, even with the

wealth of science that we now know about human behavior, no one has gone back to re-examine these assumptions.

In fact, to a large extent these assumptions have now acquired the don't-ever-even-think-to-question-this dogmatic status of religious truths.

And those of you who are already somewhat familiar with the science of the brain and of human behavior will have already seen some of the gaping holes in these Enlightenment values. For the rest of you, though, my discussion of the findings of modern science are going to have to wait for a while.

Because, as promised, now we can finally commence with the history. After all, it's fascinating in its own right. And I know that so many of you, for a whole slew of various reasons, no doubt have some confused and/or wrong ideas as to how we got here from there.

So let's get started. In that next episode that is on the horizon.

In the meantime, though, I once again I thank you for so far having listened.