EPISODE 24

PHILOSOPHES

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 24 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now in part of the last episode I went over how the 18th Century could have turned out: Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, Positive Deism, and the pursuit of Natural Moral Law. And now today on this episode we're going to start in on what actually did happen. You know, that second stream.

But before we get into that, a couple of reminders:

First of all, my thesis is so intensely different from other analyses of the world of today that I'm having to present an incredible amount of Western history, philosophy, and several branches of science. After all, dramatic claims require dramatic proof.

And the nerd in me, in trying to be super thorough, could make this podcast go on and on forever.

But I understand that some of you might really enjoy hearing about history, but maybe not so much about science. And others might love science but feel totally adrift in history or philosophy. So I also understand that I have to keep it all moving along.

Unfortunately, whenever one condenses something one usually has to also dispense with the nuance. And although it is true that most people probably prefer simplicity, almost always when you delve into a subject you find that it is a lot more complicated than you had originally thought.

So please keep in mind what I just went over in the last episode. Because, unless you are an expert in the field, by and large the present day ideological victors have written the narrative of the world that you think that you know. They have not done this because they are intentionally evil. They have done it because they truly believe in their ideology, and that ideology causes them to see the world as they see it.

And you should always remember that the terms 'conservative' and 'liberal' are only vaguely related to their modern meaning. As an example, back then it was the conservatives who believed in the importance of community and of government intervention (if necessary) in order to help the poor.

It was the liberals who believed in the cult of the individual and who wanted to shrink government down to its smallest possible size.

And here's something else to keep in mind when it comes to my offering of short biographies of the main characters. Know that very few, if any, people throughout history have been entirely good or entirely evil. Even Stalin had a genuine soft spot for artists and poets. Even Hitler, a vegetarian, was modest and polite to the secretaries and drivers who worked for him. And the Nazis were the first national government to ever enact far reaching legislation against animal cruelty. Go figure.

Thus let it be stated that I am not in favor of stick figure presentations of anyone.

And one final thing. Always be aware that in any period of history, whether it be ancient Rome or the world of today, the vast majority of people were and are just getting up and going to work and dealing with personal and family issues. Again, think back to your high school. What percentage of kids there were *really* into science? What percentage *really* cared about writing a controversial article for the school paper? And what percentage were basically just going from class to class and sort of punching their academic time card?

I mean, even if you had shown up in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, almost everyone who you would have run across wouldn't have been political at all. But would have just been baking strudel and driving buses and selling newspapers, etc.

And it was the same in the 18th Century. Obviously a dramatic revolution had started in the way that the human condition was regarded. But most people weren't involved with that. Most people were still just trying to make a living, still primarily concerned with their immediate surroundings, still going to the same old churches and still having the same old thoughts.

So, with all that in mind, let's continue on with our story of the descent of man.

Now with the exception of Italy, most of the rest of Europe is about as geologically stable as you can get. Therefore the massive 8.5 earthquake which occurred about two hundred miles off the coast of Portugal on the morning of November 1, 1755, was highly unusual.

Fissures of up to fifteen feet wide appeared in the main streets of Lisbon, its capital. What's more, the angle was such that a giant tsunami sucked all of the water out of its harbor and then rushed it all back in. In total, it is estimated that up to 30,000 people died.

But it's not like Europe had never experienced mysterious disasters before. You'll recall that in the 14th Century the Black Death had killed over 30% of the population. More recently the Great

Plague of London in 1666 had killed 100,000 people. Much more recently, in 1720, another outbreak of plague had killed over 100,000 people in Marseille in the south of France. And in 1738 yet another outbreak had killed 50,000 in eastern Europe.

But that was nothing compared to smallpox, which, it is estimated, in the 18th Century killed over 400,000 Europeans *each and every year*.

And if you want to stick to geological catastrophes, in 1783 the eruption of the Laki volcano in Iceland would initially kill over 25% of that island's population. Then the smog created by its incredible volume of sulfur dioxide and other particulates would destroy the world's weather patterns for the next few years. (As an example, it got so cold the next winter that in New Orleans the Mississippi River froze over.) Over six million people would die as a result of all the pollution and famine. And the attendant misery is cited as yet another of the many causes of the French Revolution.

So ever since time immemorial there had been no absence of clues that this world that we live in wasn't exactly a bed of roses. Not to mention the pretty obvious fact that throughout history few people had ever gotten to die peacefully in their sleep after a long and fulfilling life.

And—going back to the Lisbon earthquake—if you wanted to be simplistic and see God's direct hand in everything, all you needed to do was to glance over to Portugal's colony of Brazil, with its over one million suffering African slaves. And you would have then concluded that God's judgment on Lisbon actually had been pretty light.

Finally, up until this point Christianity had never remotely made the claim that the point of existence was to have your personal desires fulfilled and to have everything come out rosy.

Yet for some reason historians of the Enlightenment have always acted like this natural phenomenon by itself created some sort of massive horrible crisis of faith, where formerly devout and trusting Christians now had to face a Universe which was cold and heartless and bereft of a loving God. As if beforehand the world had been perceived of as some sort of ongoing Garden of Eden where nothing bad ever happened.

And the reason that historians do this is that a French writer named Voltaire used this earthquake as the basis for a polemical novel called 'Candide', which sought to prove his thesis that the Universe was, well, cold and heartless and bereft of a loving God.

Now if there's only one figure you know of from the Enlightenment, that person is probably Voltaire. He is famous for the saying, 'I may disagree with what you say. But I will defend to my death

the right for you to say it.' Which... he never actually said. And when you drill down into his actual mind and life, you will find that he was quite the piece of work.

First off, Voltaire wasn't his real name. Rather he had made it up in his youth so that he would sound more aristocratic. Even though he had already been brought up in a very well to do family.

Okay, writers come up with pen names. And, boy, did this guy write. 20,000 letters. Over a thousand pamphlets. Any number of books and plays.

Intelligent, and a witty, though snide, writer, good looking and very socially adept, he was prone to being jealous, insulting, and witheringly sarcastic. Although he could also be fawning and obsequious when it suited his purpose. It is reported that he drank between fifty and seventy cups of coffee a day. Every day of his adult life. Born in 1694, in his late teens he immersed himself in the increasingly hedonistic libertine crowd in Paris, and by the early 1720s, mostly due to his social skills, he had risen quite high in that society. And, with a couple of hit plays, he now gained fame as a writer.

But he made his fortune through a couple of underhanded deals. First, in 1720, through his social contacts he was one of the few who made some of the money that so many others lost during the Mississippi Company bubble. Then in 1729 he and a mathematician friend figured out a way to scam the government lottery.

He became quite rich as a result.

In the meantime he was thrown in the Bastille several times for needlessly insulting various nobles. Finally he was kicked out of France and exiled to England for three years. While there he took up a cause with which he would be associated for the rest of his life, namely that of political and religious toleration.

Now Britain at the time was famous for its toleration. But back then the term was closer in meaning to what we now mean when we say 'barely tolerant'. For example, back then religions dissenting from the Church of England were tolerated. But if you were a member of one of those religions you couldn't run for Parliament. You could not be part of high society. You couldn't even enroll in Oxford or Cambridge.

Toleration for Voltaire, however, was something else. To him it meant acceptance of those who violated all current norms of decency and mutual respect. Acceptance of, you know, somebody like Voltaire.

Which was more than passing strange for someone who was personally so intolerant. Now historians disagree about what his true beliefs were, since he wrote so many contradictory opinions.

But it is generally agreed that he hated Jews. He definitely thought that Negroes were a distinctly inferior species of humans. He despised the idea of democracy because he had utter contempt for the lower classes. He had that same contempt, though mixed with envy now, when he thought about the aristocracy.

Although he saved most of his vitriol and intolerance—and this was an endless vitriol and an endless intolerance—for Christianity in general and for the Catholic Church in particular.

He claimed that he vigorously believed in a transcendent God, and there is no reason to call him a liar. But he was also a prime example of that influential group of 18th Century thinkers who historians refer to as 'negative Deists'. Instead of being filled with awe—as someone like Newton was—at the concept of a God who expressed Himself solely through the intelligence of mathematics and physics, these men instead were characterized by a consuming rage at all organized religion. They of course saw themselves as fearless fighters against superstition and entrenched power. But those on the other side saw them as libertines trying to have it both ways: Seeking to maintain the psychological comfort of a meaningful Universe while evading judgment from a personal God for their various continuing sins.

Which would explain the negative Deists' intense desire to rid the world of all those priests, who by their very presence were reminding them of that judgment. After all, Voltaire was a hedonist long before he became an advocate for the toleration of hedonism.

Philosophes. That's what Voltaire and his fellow thinkers in France came to be referred to as. The irony here is that the term 'philosopher' had always conjured up the image of someone who was self-restrained and apart from the world. But Voltaire craved attention his entire life, and his personality was anything but restrained. And he positively delighted in personally attacking those with whom he disagreed. Moreover it is certainly conceivable that a true philosopher, after long and considerable contemplation, might conclude that hedonism—which in its purest philosophical form referred simply to the enjoyment of the senses, such as sight and smell, and not necessarily to full blown lust or sensuality—anyway, one might conclude that philosophical hedonism was a proper understanding of the world that we find ourselves in. But Voltaire's hedonism was little more than a self-absorbed justification of his preexisting attachment to fine foods, social status, the pleasures of the flesh, etc.

The further irony is that Voltaire was primarily a writer. Of mediocre poetry and of popular plays. (He also did write one serious book on history.) But he was not steeped in philosophical theory.

He did not come up with any new ways, good or bad, of approaching epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, or anything else related to the field of philosophy All that he was really doing as a supposed philosophe was arguing for toleration (primarily of his outlook), despising the Church (and State), and writing those polemical tracts.

As opposed to most of the other people that I have been profiling, Voltaire actually did have relationships with women. Although it wasn't exactly a healthy married life with wife and children. Rather his best known affair was for about fourteen years with an already married mother of three named Emilie de Chatelet. (Her husband, by the way, didn't seem to mind.) Ten years into that the 50 year old Voltaire started a sexual relationship with his 32 year old niece. They lived together, though unmarried, for the next 34 years. Towards the end of that he legally adopted a young girl named Raine de Varicourt, who he then married off at the age of 19 to a protege of his, a man he knew to be totally gay. (Which at the time was still an unmentionable sin.)

On the other hand, by the time of his death in 1778 his behavior perhaps wasn't all that much out of the ordinary. In fact, by the time of his death he was incredibly famous, and lionized as a champion of liberty.

It seems that by then the rest of France had caught up with him.

Nowadays France is comfortably in the middle of being a midsized nation. But from the 14th to the 18th Centuries it was unquestionably *the* most important power in Europe. During that entire period Germany and Italy were hopelessly fragmented conglomerations. Spain got fabulously wealthy from the New World in the 16th Century, but historians agree that it was still a cultural backwater which quickly blew all of its riches. Even the rise of Holland and England in the 17th Century didn't threaten the ultimate power of France, since their populations were so much smaller. To give you an idea of their relative sizes, in 1700 France had 21 million inhabitants. England 7 million. Holland less than 2.

The French had always been Catholic, too. But there were times during the Reformation where it seemed touch and go whether or not the Huguenots (which was the name for French Protestants), whether they would become dominant. And although they ultimately lost out, one of the lasting effects of this prolonged upheaval was that the perceived authority of the Church and of the Pope had become greatly diminished.

Now in the modern era the whole idea of kingship seems bizarre, but this was indeed the dominant form of government throughout most of human history. In most cultures, though, the king

was never thought of as some limitless dictator, but rather as someone whose power was circumscribed by custom, by the need to consult with his noblemen, etc. What's more it was usually drummed into a young prince's head from an early age that he was always to be seen as moral and religious, that he was supposed to be the servant of the people, and that he was to regard himself as their honorary father, and to always, at least in public, honor the dignity of his culture. In return the citizens would treat the office and the person of the king with awe and respect.

Kind of like a social contract.

In another of its unintended consequences, though, the Reformation, by questioning the very idea of papal authority, now in a seemingly contradictory way brought about the theory of the Divine Right of Kings. The idea here was that if a king was a king, and if he was no longer even theoretically bound to abide by the higher authority of the Church, then now his only possible and proper judge could be God Himself. You'll recall that this was somewhat the position of Thomas Hobbes.

Except, of course, that Hobbes didn't believe in the God part.

But whereas England spent most of the 17th Century in civil wars and the like trying to settle the question of divine rights, in France the centrality and power of the king was never questioned. Further, it just so happened that Louis XIV, who ascended the throne at the age of four in 1643, and would then rule for the next 72 years, was a master at consolidating and centralizing his power all the more, while at the same time emasculating his nobility. And then his great grandson, who took over as Louis XV when he was only five, reigned for the next 59 years. So that for 131 years, up until 1774, there were only two men controlling the most powerful country and economy in the world.

Historians are divided over whether these two Louis were 'good' or 'bad', competent or incompetent. But the undeniable fact is that, by putting so much power in the hands of one person, and by denying that they were answerable to anyone but God, they were ever so surely destroying the legitimacy that the people had traditionally given to the king as a good father, but as a fallible human ultimately constrained by tradition, church, and his fellow aristocrats.

Instead these kings had become, to a large extent, dictators.

Although obviously in reality they were still fallible humans. For instance, they both had innumerable mistresses. But here is where the difference between the 17th and 18th Centuries becomes so important. Because Louis XIV had not only always chosen his mistresses from the highest nobility, but he had always been nobly discreet about it all. He had always maintained the facade. But by the time that Louis XV became of age in the 1730s, Voltaire and his libertine friends had to a large extent

taken over Parisian high society. And this Louis made the bad mistake of not only being much more public with his displays of marital infidelity, but of also inviting lowly commoners, most famously Madame de Pompadour, into the royal bedchambers.

You'll recall that the sexual liberation of the 18th Century only applied to the rich and the powerful. But that didn't mean that everyone else couldn't watch, as it were. Then as now a celebrity culture captivated the masses. Then as now tales of sex—and the tawdrier it got the better—are what sold. In England, for instance, probably well over a million copies were printed of William Hogarth's series of engravings of 'A Harlot's Progress', 'The Rake's Progress', and the like. And this in a country of just seven million people.

In France there were the *libelles*.

Back in Martin Luther's time the printing presses had churned out cheap pamphlets denigrating the faith of one's father. By now the focus had become much more personal, and libelles, the French name of these broadsides, were salacious and slanderous attacks on individuals. Ostensibly for political and social purposes, the main reason that they sold was—let's face it—for the same reason that tabloids sold so well until recently and that our social media have degenerated so quickly today. For the thrill of tackiness.

And it's not like the upper classes weren't providing plenty of grist for the mill.

The result was a feedback loop. The more that the 1% followed the siren song of promiscuous sex, the steadier the drip, drip, drip of loss of tacit respect that the lower classes had always had for the upper ones. Which meant that the aristocracy felt less and less bound to even pretend to adhere to old notions of morality.

So that by the early 1770s Voltaire's behavior and attitude was seen as perfectly normal. At the same time, though, there was such a cynical erosion of social faith that the new king Louis XVI was not going to fare nearly as well as had his predecessors. In short order the libelles would become downright pornographic. And the slide down the slippery slope would greatly accelerate.

Not that Enlightenment France was all fun and sex games. Not all of the philosophes were just trying to rationalize their own gluttony or licentiousness. For instance, there was Denis Diderot.

A sincere materialist atheist, Diderot was not a table thumper about his beliefs. He led a relatively poor life away from high society. And he was an extremely diligent and hard working man.

He is best known as the principal instigator, editor, and writer of an incredibly ambitious project

to publish all of mankind's knowledge in one massive eighteen volume Encyclopedia. Consisting of many non-partisan articles on industry, commerce, science, and the like, it also inevitably reflected the anti-authoritarian and anti-organized religion views of most of the philosophes. And permeating the whole enterprise was that new conception of Progress.

As I went over in the last episode, the word 'progress' had traditionally referred to an individual's journey. Either a physical journey, as in from Point A to Point B. Or as in a soul's journey towards Heaven.

But since most of the philosophes didn't believe in such things as souls, let alone Heaven, the word 'progress' now became that new idea. From now on it would mean material progress, with new science creating new industries, and new technology creating more efficiency and greater wealth. It was then assumed that such a state of affairs would automatically make everyone happier.

And remember how those seven deadly sins had all been examples of humans wanting more food, money, sex or whatever than what they should have been satisfied to have only moderate amounts of?

Well, from now on More would always be Better.

And now let's quickly look at Rousseau.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was a complex man and a sensitive soul. Until senility took hold in old age, he was a gifted composer as well as a talented writer. He was certainly not immune from human failings. Although, to his credit, he did at least feel great guilt over them.

Born in 1712, until 1750 he had mostly led a poor and wandering life. In that year he wrote an essay in which he boldly declared that this new conception of Progress was actually about the worst idea that anyone had ever had. That all that the development of more industry and technology was going to accomplish was going to be greater wealth for the few and greater misery for the masses. That an increasingly complex world would inevitably become an increasingly artificial world. That in fact the ideal life was one of simplicity, lived as far away from urban sprawl and high society as possible.

He became instantly famous.

And it's pretty easy to see the reason why. As with England in mid-century, even though the new middle classes were rushing towards consumerism, cultural rot, and absorption with the trivial, a large part of the French reading public was also very uncomfortable with all of this. And although both in Roman times and in Elizabethan England there had also been brief 'Back to Nature' movements,

Rousseau's essay arrived at a time when much of France was particularly ready for it.

Men had been wearing elaborate and powdered wigs for more than a century. Women's coiffures were even more extravagant, and would take hours to create. Virtually all upper class women never even nursed their babies; they had wet nurses for that. A suffocating culture of manners and politesse occupied everyone. What with all the dangerous liaisons that the new sexuality almost demanded, even husbands and wives had lost trust with each other. Everything everywhere had become totally artificial.

But now, with Rousseau, Authenticity suddenly became all the rage.

In fact, just about the only people in France who didn't respond positively to this new philosophe named Rousseau were all the other philosophes. Voltaire in particular hated him. After all, *his* personal motto had always been (and I quote): 'The superfluous, that most necessary thing'. And the Authenticity movement posed this question for those philosophical atheists like Diderot: How could a proper materialist be properly happy with *less* material?

Worse, Rousseau wasn't just a cerebral deist, content to contemplate the majesty of mathematics, but an emotional one who thought that religious devotion was absolutely essential for both personal and societal happiness. Indeed, this belief in God finally broke up the personal friendship that he had previously had with Diderot.

Nor did the Establishment take all that kindly to him. Voltaire might have had disdain for his social betters. But he had even greater disdain for the rest of humanity, and the philosophes in general despised concepts like democracy. Instead they favored the idea of an enlightened monarch or despot who, from the top down, and with total power, would make the changes necessary to improve society to their liking. In other words, they had never been against the political System per se, just the present day manifestation of it. Rousseau, however, called the entire social and political structure phony, and offered instead a vision of small societies peacefully co-existing. No wonder most of the upper classes found his ideas threatening.

And the religious authorities? Rousseau, while seeking to promote religious feeling, also had the radical thought that all religions, even non-Christian ones, were equally valid. This ended up accomplishing the neat trick of making him totally unacceptable to both the Catholics and the Calvinists.

Thus he managed to offend both traditionalists and modernists. Then there was the problem that many of his ideas were not all that precisely expressed. Put all of this together and it is not

surprising that back then (as now), deliberately or not, much of what he wrote was misconstrued.

For instance, he is famous for championing the cause of the Noble Savage, the supposition that man in his primitive state was good and noble, and all evil has come from the corrupting effects of civilization. In reality, however, he did no such thing.

Instead he readily acknowledged that primitive men were violent and immoral. But he also argued that, contrary to most Christian teaching, man's intrinsic nature was good. An analogy might be of the pea plant, which will naturally climb up a trellis. But if a trellis is not there for it to climb up, it obviously won't. For Rousseau, the trellis upon which man's natural goodness could climb was proper moral education. So that his Arcadian vision was of properly trained, good citizens who were highly cultured and disciplined. But who were also totally non-artificial. And thus 'natural'.

Anyway, for better or worse, Rousseau's writing ushered in an Age of Sensibility. Simply put, this meant the feelings were just as important as reason. In practice, the real effects of this movement were usually superficial, since in practice a genuine return to nature would have required both giving up the material pleasures that everyone was growing so fond of and also starting a life of much greater self-discipline. As an example of Sensibility—this strange amalgam of the artificiality of Voltaire and the authenticity of Rousseau—later in the century the incredibly spendthrift and frivolous Marie Antoinette and her ladies in waiting would dress up as milkmaids and have a special place at the Palace of Versailles where they would pretend to be peasants.

Kind of like an 18th Century version of the present day cliché of the Hollywood limousine liberal living in a giant air-conditioned mansion and then carefully separating their paper garbage from the plastic.

Meanwhile France, with its increasingly dysfunctional government and society, was hurtling towards 1789.

Anyway, that's it for today. And once again I would like to thank you so much for so far having listened.