EPISODE 40
HERDING HUMANS

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 40 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now last episode we engaged in some science speculation. Which to me at least seems highly persuasive and also, in the end, actually highly inspirational. Today we're going back to science fact. In this case, an extremely important science fact. And, since this fact flies in the face of what our culture has been telling us our entire lives, I suspect that you might not find it all that inspirational. In fact, you might well find it depressing. Or even disturbing.

But that's the thing about Science. It's not there to necessarily make us feel good or to fulfill our fantasies. It just is. What it is. And the thing about Truth is, if you don't accept it and then also don't figure out how to deal with it, then it's not the Truth that suffers from that. It's you who does. And your surrounding culture.

Oh, and speaking of 'it is what it is', there's a point from the last episode that I should probably go over again. And that point is that we really are in no position to say how this purported Cambrian moment is going to work itself out.

Now I suppose that most of us would like to imagine a beautiful future where everything resolves into some form of Utopia. I know I would. But the problems which immediately present themselves when dealing with such speculation are: A) To a very large extent it's under our control whether we screw everything up or we learn to go with the flow, B) It's entirely plausible that at present we lack the consciousness to really comprehend what a larger consciousness would be like, and C) We tend to project onto our fantasy Utopias the foundational assumptions of our Age of Enlightenment ideologies.

So let me now spend a little more time on 'C;. Because last episode I touched upon both what I called the New Age fantasy and the techno-Utopia fantasy. But let me generalize upon that now and say that all secular Utopian dreams of the past couple of hundred years or so can be classified as 'Utopias of Radical and Unlimited Individualism'. After all, isn't this the paradise that Jeremy

Bentham foresaw? Isn't this what Anarchists thought would happen after central State authority was removed? Even Marxists, who we associate with a brutal totalitarianism, only saw the dictatorship of the proletariat as a temporary phase. And they dreamed that after that the state would naturally wither away and then leave each individual free to be whatever.

But I think that if you think about all of these 'visions' for a moment that you'll agree that in the end they seem remarkably similar to fantasies of personal omnipotence which have been going on since forever. Such as Midas being able to turn everything into gold. Or Aladdin getting his three magical wishes. Or the much more sophisticated parable of Faustus making his deal with the Devil. After all, isn't the concept of Me walking around in the perpetual sunlight doing whatever *I* want to do just like Faustus? Except of course for the devil part...

Anyway, if your vision of Utopia is anything like this, then that just shows how deeply ingrained into our psyches all of those Age of Enlightenment ideas are. Because no matter how repulsed we might think that we are with all of the various Isms, or with conspicuous consumption, or with whatever, our imaginations are still constrained into thinking that Freedom means freedom to desire.

But as you may recall from our short lesson in Buddhism: Desires are infinite. (And, interestingly, Classical Economics comes to the same conclusion.) Which means that by definition there will always be more desires out there begging to be fulfilled. Which means that, no matter how perpetually sunny a day it is, and no matter how easily Desire A or Desire B is fulfilled, still, by definition, a mind which desires will never be at rest. At peace. And if our minds aren't at peace, then how is Peace in general going to be a defining characteristic of this purported Utopia?

Okay, enough with the Buddhist philosophy for this episode. And instead let's talk about the Blank Slate again.

Now, just to remind you, the term 'Blank Slate' was coined by the philosopher John Locke. And it referred to the epistemological presumption that, if we can only know what we have previously experienced, then before we've experienced, namely, at the time of birth, we must have been blank slates. That the meaning of this term should change into describing a psychological or cultural anthropological process is often mistakenly ascribed to Rousseau. However, as I went over in an earlier episode, it is much more plausible to trace this transmogrification to Jeremy Bentham. After all, his vision of people as basically personality-free consumption units (which is also, by the way, the

vision of Economics) certainly lends itself to the corollary that personalities are endlessly malleable. And indeed one of the hallmarks of Liberalism has been this deep seated belief that if we just changed environments then we could also change people's attitudes and people's behaviors.

And if you happen to be one of those who still believes this, then I hate to have to burst your balloon. But real, actual modern science does not believe this. And that's because modern science has found that so many of our behaviors, our propensities, seem to be genetically at least semi-hard wired into us. In other words, contra John Locke or Jeremy Bentham, the reality is that we actually arrive on this planet, as it were, pre-programmed. Not that, as I've readily acknowledged before, we are like ants or robots. Because we do have free wills. What's more, our education, our cultures, perhaps really strange individual environments, can all at least partially override this 'programming'. Moreover, whether or not you buy into the idea that we are only half-evolved here in this Cambrian moment, the fact remains that we humans obviously display a wide variety of how much or how little each of us is pre-programmed for each and every trait.

Still, the more research that is done, the clearer it is that the human condition is almost opposite that of the Blank Slate. In fact, in a sense people conducting experiments in the social sciences are just trying to find the behavioral 'default settings' for humans. And further, since we have now established that humans are hypersocial animals, it pretty much follows that we should expect those default settings to probably reflect the ways in which hypersociability, and most definitely not individual sovereignty, has molded us.

Which also means that some of the results of those experiments will so strikingly challenge that vision of individual sovereignty that they may well strike us at a very deep level as very hard to accept.

So now let's look at three of these experiments—actually three of the most famous experiments in social psychology—in order to see what I mean. And as I go over them, pay particular attention to the second one. For that will provide the central lesson for the rest of this episode.

Anyway, here's the first one:

Solomon Asch was a psychology professor at Swarthmore College in the early 1950's who specialized in Jungian thought. But he is best remembered for a simple, yet extremely suggestive, experiment in social psychology which he conducted at that time.

The subjects in this experiment thought that they was being tested on visual perception. And when they entered the room they saw seven other student types whom they assumed to be fellow

subjects. The task was to look first at 'Line A' and then compare it to 'Lines X, Y, and Z'. 'Line Y' was obviously of the same length as 'Line A', and in straightforward, fair, control tests no one ever had a problem distinguishing this.

But this was not a fair test. Because the seven other people in the room were actually confederates of Professor Asch. And after a couple of run throughs when the confederates gave the correct answer, all of a sudden they all started giving the same incorrect answer. This was done for a total of twelve rounds. The actual subjects were always asked last, and the aim of the experiment was to see if their answer would change as a result.

There were a variety of responses. The majority of people did give the correct answer for at least some of the rounds. But if we humans were indeed separate, rational decision making individuals as per the Age of Enlightenment or as modern day libertarians or economists would have you believe, you would expect everyone to give the correct answer all of the time. In fact, you would expect the test subjects to loudly tell the others just how stupid they were being.

But in reality absolutely nobody did that. Instead even those subjects who stuck to their guns until the end were also incredibly confused, and abjectly apologized to the others for being so apparently wrong. About a third of the subjects ended up switching their answers, although afterward they claimed that they did so only to conform to the others, and that they were still seeing the lines correctly. But here's the really scary part: Another 25% of the participants not only changed their answers, but actually ended up perceiving the lines differently. They actually saw the shorter lines as longer. Simply because the rest of the room had said that they were.

Now most of us when hearing something like this would probably tell ourselves that this would never happen to us. But let me remind you that the test subjects here were extremely well educated students at a highly selective college. More important, this experiment was repeated any number of times at any number of places and under a variety of conditions. And the results were always the same.

So that, yes, this would indeed happen with you.

And now here is the second experiment:

Because it turned out that several years later Solomon Asch was the doctoral advisor for a PhD student named Stanley Milgram. And by the early 1960's Dr. Milgram was teaching at Yale University.

In his relatively short career Milgram came up with any number of noteworthy ideas. For instance, he once dropped pre-addressed envelopes with money in them around New Haven, CT, in

order to see how honest everyday people would be in such an everyday situation. As it happened, most people were indeed honest, and most of the letters, including the money, were properly delivered.

He was also the guy who proved the 'Six Degrees of Separation' hypothesis, which suggested that we are all connected to every other person in the world through a relatively short chain of mutual acquaintances. (And, by the way, recent research has pinned the average length of that chain at 3.54 people.)

But Stanley Milgram is most remembered for one of the most disturbing experiments in the history of social psychology. Just as with Asch, once again the test subjects thought that they were taking part in some other experiment, this time one of Pavlovian learning behavior. They were sat down in a room with two way glass, and on the other side sat another person who they were supposedly going to teach by applying mild electrical shocks each time that subject failed to learn. With them in the room was an authoritative looking researcher, dressed in a lab coat and holding a clipboard, who was supposedly conducting the experiment. And at the beginning of the session they were given a demonstration jolt of the electrical current so that they knew that it was real.

What they did not know was that, once again, the subject in the other room was actually a confederate of the real researcher, and that during the entire experiment this other person would never actually be shocked.

As with Asch and the lines, for the first few supposed 'lessons' the confederates duly gave the right response. But soon they were making glaring mistakes. And each time they made a mistake the researcher calmly told the test subject to give them a shock. At first the shocks were seemingly mild, but as the session progressed and the confederate was still not learning, the researcher directed the subject to keep turning up an authentic looking dial so as to increase the supposed voltage.

For their part the confederates convincingly acted as if these pretend jolts were really hurting them. And after a while they started crying out in pain and asking for the experiment to stop. But if the subject who was believing that they were applying the 'shock' objected to the person playing the part of researcher, said researcher would calmly tell them that this experiment was necessary for science, that they should ignore the other person's pleas, and that they should therefore continue increasing the shock. And so long as the subject kept following orders the man in the other room would scream all the more and all the more writhe in anguish. Finally the man in the other room would slump over in his chair as if he had died.

And how many of the subjects would continue to (in their minds) torture this poor soul until they had killed him?

Virtually all of them.

Simply because someone in authority had told them to.

It is true that a very few brave souls—interestingly, exclusively male—did say that they weren't going to continue, got up, and walked out. And many more—especially female—exhibited signs of extreme stress at having to seemingly cause extreme pain to another person. But, again, almost all of them, male and female, kept following the orders nonetheless.

Once again, this wasn't a one off experiment. In fact, it was replicated over and over again, under many different conditions. For instance, Milgram theorized that perhaps there was something specific to students. So he substituted regular citizens. He thought that maybe the obedience was due to the experiment taking place at a prestigious institution. So he substituted a plain industrial building in the industrial city of Bridgeport, CT. He thought that maybe it had to do with the pseudo-scientist being male. So he substituted a female. He even tried the experiment in foreign countries with supposedly foreign cultures.

And so long as there was a person in authority in that lab coat and clip board, the results were always the same.

Which means, once again, that you, too, would have kept on dialing up the pain.

And now, finally, here is the third example:

Because, as it happened, years before, when growing up in New York City, Stanley Milgram was best friends in high school with a guy named Philip Zimbardo. Who years later coincidentally also became a social psychologist. And in 1971, while teaching at Stanford, Zimbardo ended up conducting probably *the* most disturbing experiment in the history of social psychology.

Under contract for the U.S. Navy, the professor was supposed to study the psychology of prison life. So he randomly divided 24 student volunteers into two groups, the 'guards' and the 'prisoners'. He then sent them away without letting them know exactly when the experiment would take place.

One day out of nowhere each of the subjects who had been designated as a 'prisoner' was suddenly ‘arrested’ at his room, blindfolded, taken under guard to a makeshift prison in the basement of a campus building, stripped, shaved, and given an ID number and a prison uniform. Those who had been previously randomly assigned as 'Guards' were also now activated, given uniforms and billy

clubs, and—although not allowed to actually hit anyone—were otherwise free to maintain discipline however they saw fit.

At first the pretend 'prisoners' took the whole exercise as a joke, and sarcastically belittled the pretend 'guards'. But the 'guards' immediately retaliated by coming up with punishments such as having the 'prisoners' do push ups, taking away privileges, and putting troublemakers into solitary confinement. Within a few days the 'guards' were consistently acting arrogantly, abusively, even sadistically. And the 'prisoners' became passive, dull, and depressed.

The experiment was supposed to last two weeks. But Zimbardo, horrified at how far and how fast everything had gone off the tracks, stopped it after only six days.

And, remember, the participants were not a bunch of lowlifes taken off the street from somewhere. They were not even a normal cross section of Americans. Rather they were a group of highly intelligent students at an incredibly elite university. And this took place in 1971, in the San Francisco Bay area, at the height of the Peace & Love era, when nobody would have ever thought they they themselves could act in such a way.

Now, again, these are three of the most famous experiments in social psychology. And if you ever took the proverbial Psych 101 there is an excellent chance that you are already familiar with one or more of them. Although if you ever took part in discussions of them, those discussions probably had to do with the nature of conformity, of blind obedience, and of Nazi prison camps and Stalinist Russia. And probably, once the textbook was closed or the discussion was ended, your mind chose not to dwell on the unpleasant implications that these finding might have on normal human existence.

But maybe it should have. Because—again—these experiments were not some weird isolated phenomena. The first two were replicated again and again. (For obvious reasons the Stanford Prison Experiment has been re-enacted but not redone. And current ethical guidelines mean that Milgram's experiment would also not be attempted today.) But what all this means is that we're not just talking about what goes on in concentration camps. We're actually talking about what goes on in real life.

Although to explain what I mean by this perhaps it's best to start by talking about herding cats.

Now as you may know, for millions of years the direct ancestors of the modern domesticated cat led almost exclusively solitary lives. Indeed, about the only time when any cat even vaguely socially interacted with another cat was when a mother brought up her kittens. This means that for millions of

years there had never been any such thing as a cat society. Which makes it very strange that nowadays cats would be able to live even tangentially with other creatures. Such as us. So we may call them 'aloof' or 'haughty' or whatever. But what's really going on is that they have virtually no innate social desires, skills or behaviors.

(About the only such skills that they do have is when mothers lick their kittens or teach them how to hunt. Which is why your pet cat might lick you or deposit dead mice at your feet. What's really going on is that she's trying to tell you that she likes you. And this is literally the only hardwired way that she knows how to do it.)

Anyway, so it should be no surprise whatsoever that it is impossible to herd cats. They don't follow instructions very well. After all, their brains have never been required to move around in concert with other cats. It's just not in their repertoire.

Dogs, on the other hand, started out as wolves. And wolves have been one of the most complex of social creatures for millions of years. Which means that dogs have an incredibly rich assortment of social behaviors which are both innate, and which can also cover a whole gamut of 'emotions', from facial expressions to barks to tail wagging to body postures. These they can use to fit into the human society which they now find themselves part of. All they need understand is that we their owners are the 'alpha dog' and that they are somewhere back in the pack.

But there's that rub with wolves that we went over in Episode 38. As with baboons and most other social mammals, the only way for a group of males to live together is for there to be a highly specific and highly stylized pecking order. And what the alpha male decides to do, the rest must follow.

However, the downside of this arrangement is that usually the further down the pecking order you are the more psychologically stressed out you are. Plus there's the little problem that young lower ranking males are constantly trying to get higher, so that alpha males are constantly stressed out and perpetually on guard lest they be replaced.

All of which takes up a lot of energy. And all of which becomes mind numbingly impossible once you are dealing with up to 100 males in a Paleolithic village. Which is why, compared with other primates, human males have only those vestigial dominance needs remaining. And which is why 150 human strangers can take that plane ride from New York to Los Angeles and only be suffering from boredom and stiff legs at the end of the journey.

So if we no longer have alpha dogs, if we no longer have the need for constant displays of dominance, how then are social interactions governed and group decisions made? How are complex social behaviors planned and carried out? How does one herd humans?

Part of the answer is that we herd ourselves.

By following rules.

For it may not have occurred to you that our ability to follow rules is a central human trait. But it turns out that this ability has been another one of those game changing behavioral events without which we as a species could not exist. In fact, at least one anthropologist has written that obeying the rules is the most essential biological feature of man.

After all, rule following for even the most intelligent of other animals is on the most simplistic level. A dog may be ordered to 'stay', and a chimp or a parrot may be taught the meaning of hundreds of words. But a dog can't to told to 'stay until it is dark'. Even Alex the parrot's owner only claimed that he knew the most basic syntax. No chimp could be taught the series of steps needed to create even the simplest of stone tools that were made by Homo Erectus.

And there is a post-modern fantasy that rule following in civilization is somehow a function of the Industrial Revolution and modernity. That somehow before then we lived by the clock of the sun and whiled away our time in open ended tasks like agriculture. But while it is true that the modern era has taken rule following to an almost absurdly complex level, it would be more than foolish to pretend that rules have not been the defining characteristic of human life since the beginning. The religious disputes of the Reformation Era were all about which sets of rules to follow. The courts of Louis XIV and of the Ming Dynasty were obsessed with rules. The religious rites and rules of the Christian Era merely replaced the previous Pagan religious rites and rules. Even the Huns and the Vikings and Genghis Khan's hordes had a precise set of rules to live by.

Those denizens of those Amazon villages are also nothing if not followers of endlessly complex rules. Kinship rules of who to marry and other rules about who is an enemy. Rules on how to speak their language. (Primitive languages turn out to be far more complex than more modern ones.) Rules on how to dance the sacred dance. Rules on how to hack out a canoe or perfect a poison arrow that can accurately travel a hundred feet.

Even going back to the early Paleolithic: It happens to be very difficult to find just the right kind of stone and then, more importantly, to properly knap it so as to form any sort of blade. It happens to

be very difficult to start a fire from scratch. In fact, what we consider even the most primitive of societies have any number of complicated steps to follow for any number of different procedures. So that without our innate ability, indeed our innate proclivity, to be taught and to follow rules and to do as we're told we simply could not have survived as a species.

Being obedient and following authority.

To do as we are told.

After all, if we are no longer genetically pre-programmed to follow alpha dogs, if our males are no longer consumed by dominance displays, and yet—being hypersocial—our species has even a greater need to be on the same page, as it were, how else could this be accomplished other than by our being born with a general propensity to follow a generalized authority? There's that saying that 90% of life is just showing up. What it implies, though, is that this involves showing up and then also following the rules. Wolverines or cats or any other solitary animals, no matter how hyper-intelligent you made them, would just never 'get' this.

But 'following authority' as an essential human virtue is probably not something which you have been taught to believe in life. After all, it's one thing to acknowledge that maybe we are not first and foremost individuals, or that in terms of evolutionary psychology the individual should not always take precedence over the group. But just about the most central tenet of this culture's vision of itself is the belief that 'No one tells *me* what to do!'. Authority is seen as something almost intrinsically bad. Conformity as something even worse. Especially in the United States, this is baked into one's political beliefs, whether one otherwise identifies as right, left, or center.

And this has been going on in the West since even before that Age of Enlightenment. Which is why I earlier spent some time talking about the Reformation. Because recall how Martin Luther set everything in motion by deciding that *his* interpretation of the Bible was ipso facto more important and relevant than the Church's. Before that it had never really occurred to anyone to think that way.

Ever. Anywhere. Because, as you'll also recall, when Socrates was ordered to 'voluntarily' drink the hemlock, he—the most independent of ancient thinkers—unhesitatingly did so. After all, he reasoned, if he had personally benefited his entire life from the stability that authority provided, he would have been a total hypocrite to reject that authority just because he disagreed with it now.

But now we know that Socrates wasn't just reasoning his way to this conclusion. He was also rationalizing an instinctive response that he had been born with.

So that here is the big lesson from this episode. And I say this as someone who, having seen all the evidence and having now known about it for decades, still thinks that I would have been the lone participant to have said, 'You guys are nuts. It's obvious that this line is longer'. I still think that I would have been one of those few brave souls to say 'Screw you', and get up and walk out of the Milgram experiment. And I know that I'm probably just kidding myself. But I also know that, even if it were true that I'd be that one in a hundred or one in a thousand person, that's just it. One in a thousand. And that's totally irrelevant when talking about humanity in general.

Because we may romanticize guys on motorcycles rumbling down that lonesome highway. We may enjoy listening to those folk rock songs which go, 'I wasn't born to follow'. But at best we are all just kidding ourselves. Because the scientific truth is that we are hypersocial animals. And the scientific truth is that, yes indeed, we were born to follow.

Now before your mind either tries to go on to another subject, or reacts by suggesting that in some way I am being ideological, let me remind you once again that the Milgram experiment in particular is one of those rare social science experiments which is as clear cut as is anything from Chemistry or Physics. After all, it didn't matter what culture, gender, or social class the participants came from.

Further, once you accept the idea that we are hypersocial animals, it makes perfect sense that *of course* natural selection would quickly select out all those people who didn't follow orders. After all, the person who turned left when the rest of the group turned right would be out in the cold all by himself. The guy who didn't 'field his position' when all the men went out to hunt a mastodon wouldn't get any food to eat. In other words, for hypersocial animals natural selection and individuality just don't mix.

But before your mind then starts dwelling on the inevitability of Fascist regimes and a future of Big Brother to the fourth power, let me point out that although, yes, those outcomes are indeed possible, there are also other ameliorating influences which have arisen through evolution. And these ameliorating influences—once again, up until the Age of Enlightenment—are to a large extent what kept us from those dread totalitarian results.

Which unfortunately, however, of necessity you're going to have to wait for until the next episode to hear about. Because, once again, the time for this episode is up.

Although once again let me thank you once again for so far having listened.