

EPISODE 41

TRUST

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 41 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now in the last episode I dwelt upon what might appear to at least some of you as somewhat depressing news. Namely that we could not be here today existing as a species unless we had evolved to follow orders and to obey authority. Although I would hope that, once you have thought about this for a minute, it would be blindingly obvious in retrospect. After all, we are not cats. We spring from a long line of highly social primates. And to become a species that can now live in groups of literally millions, we have necessarily had to become hypersocial, with all of the deference to authority that such a state implies.

On the other hand, though, it's probably also important to once again point out the obvious opposite: Neither are we ants. We are each unique individuals with our own unique set of complicated desires. And, as I've already mentioned several times, whether stated or implicit, the goal of classical civilizations was to find, within the context of supremacy of the larger culture, the proper balance between the individual and the group.

Because along with our inborn propensity to follow orders, modern science has also shown that we also each do have an inborn need for a certain sense of autonomy. In fact, psychologists have developed a term—*reactance*—to describe our resentment and rebellion when we are confronted with rules and regulations which we consider unnecessary and/or demeaning.

All of which then raises the obvious question: Just what exactly *is* Authority? Especially legitimate authority?

Here post-modern, ideological, liberal democratic thought is (once again) incredibly unhelpful. Because what we are presented with is a binary choice. On the one hand there is some hypothetically all powerful evil dictator, totalitarian political party, or oligarchy of shadowy figures sitting around some conference table somewhere. Then this is juxtaposed with the seemingly magically inspired democratically expressed 'will of the people'. And I have already discussed a variety of problems

inherent in the theory of democracy. But for now I will merely point out that, whether it was the Communist apparatchiks in Moscow, or it is the captains of industry and the unelected bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., our lives are governed by an endless thicket of rules and regulations that neither we nor anyone we know had any hand in creating.

Not to mention that—as I've also pointed out earlier—regimes which we call 'authoritarian' often actually have in fact far fewer rules to follow than do our so-called 'advanced democracies'. After all, those regimes merely set out a group of political red lines not to be crossed. And so long as you the citizen don't cross them, the authorities could care less what you do. Not only that, but at present the governments of 'authoritarian' countries such as China and Russia, when polled by legitimate polling firms, typically have approval ratings from their respective populations of 70-80%.

Whereas here in the 'advanced democracies', not so much.

Which we can discuss later. For right now, though, it is just sufficient to know that amorphous Authority, so long as it has been around long enough to have gained legitimacy, is all that most any of us require in order for us to follow it.

It is one of the most basic parts of our human nature.

Although I suspect that you may still find the entire last episode to be more than a bit disturbing. After all, those Asch subjects actually perceived shorter lines to be longer. Milgram's subjects actually did as they were told from someone they didn't even know, even to the point of apparently killing somebody. Any numbers of wars have been fought and evil conducted just because people were following orders. It would seem that surely there is nothing inherently benign about Authority.

Well, yes and no. For on the one hand it is true that any student of history—or for that matter any observer of the world around them—can come up with any number of examples of obedience to authority going way, way wrong. And were Authority to continuously manifest itself as in '1984', with each of us constantly looking over our shoulder in dread and fear, then indeed everything about it would be scary.

But in practice that isn't how it works. Or at least that isn't how it primarily worked up until the modern era.

And the reason for this is that in general we tend to trust one another.

Strangely, given the supposedly 'humanistic' values of the Enlightenment, this reality of trust also directly contradicts one of those 18th Century bedrock principles. Recall that both Adam Smith's capitalism and Jeremy Bentham/John Stuart Mill's utilitarian democracy were built upon the assumption of inherent Selfishness. Those Hobbesian fantasy figures who got together to make the first Social Contract did so because in their selfishness they specifically did not trust each other. Voltaire's liberal hedonism was based upon his conviction of absolute selfishness, as was his outrage that the Church or State should dare stop him from doing what he wanted to do.

And—as I've kept pointing out in this podcast—this idea of innate selfishness still pervades modern thought. I've noted how biologists are absolutely convinced that the essence of the gene and of life itself is selfishness. Game theory, which is seen as essential in political science, economic planning, and war gaming, is based upon a primal assumption of selfishness.

But that's the theory. In practice—and I'll be covering this a little more thoroughly in a couple of episodes—but in practice it turns out that when economic games are played in the laboratory (even with real money) people overwhelmingly tend to trust total strangers. And, again, this has been replicated any number of times, and—although it does vary a bit with culture—across any number of cultures. The default position for humanity seems to be one of trust. And by and large it is only when the 'opponent' does not reciprocate this trust that the game player reverts to selfishness.

And I am sure that in your everyday life there are any number of instances where you act in a trustworthy way to people with whom there is zero chance that you will ever meet them again. Moreover, if and when any such person ever acts in an untrustworthy way to you, it would be surprising if you did not feel genuinely hurt.

But if you stand back and contemplate for a moment the fact of our complex, interrelated human existence, you can see how trusting one another, even complete strangers, had to develop in the way that it did. For instance, there are stories of extremely primitive tribes in which each member sits with their back up against a tree to eat, lest someone sneaks up from behind to steal their food. But it is extremely difficult to see how such a setup could have been prevalent in those groups which immediately preceded the Neolithic. Because there was just too much culture that was necessary to be transmitted, too many complex tasks which needed to be done.

So that, while it is undeniably true that we are all born to do as we're told, we also simultaneously have an ingrained trait to freely co-operate. In fact, the lightning fast evolution and

civilizing that we have undergone in the past 10,000 years probably owes more to our ability to co-operate than it does to our innate instinct to obey authority.

But there's nothing inherently contradictory both about being co-operative and being obedient. Indeed I would guess that there is a high correlation between people who have one of these traits and people who have the other. After all, both traits are manifestations of what is no doubt the most basic need in a hypersocial animal: The need for social order.

Social order. That's another one of those terms which the post-modern world regards as almost intrinsically negative in essence. It sounds like an archaic 19th Century term at best and as a euphemism for Fascism at worst. After all, the Enlightenment vision in general, and utilitarianism and liberal democracy in particular, presumed that—once we got rid of the stifling authority of the Church and the State—self-interested Rationality would be all that you needed to keep everyone in line as they each sought to maximize their personal pleasures.

And—again, as I keep pointing out—although we generally don't think of 'humanism' as an Ism, a central point of this podcast is that it in fact is. And that it is only because of the vagaries of history as to why from our vantage point we properly recognize, say, Marxism or Nazism as 'Isms', but we give humanism a pass. Which is why we can readily see how the maintenance of 'social order' under Communism resulted in a rigid top down structure, but we fail to see how this could be the case with us here in these United States.

But the beauty of pre-Enlightenment societies was that they weren't Isms. They had arisen somewhat organically. And they had done so in a way so as to both ameliorate some of the possible negative side effects of always doing what we're told and also to (seemingly paradoxically) reinforce our individual senses of autonomy. And if you think that I'm already painting too rosy a picture of human nature by stressing trust and co-operation, then let me shock you further by adding this:

A corollary of humans tending to trust each other is the fact that we also tend to be honest.
(Otherwise there wouldn't be that trust.)

Again, game theory—as well as liberal democracy—starts out by hypothesizing that, being completely selfish, we will be honest only when it suits our purposes. It then proposes that in most instances honesty will be a good strategy: That you don't cheat others because somewhere in your brain you calculate that you ultimately gain more by being trusting. Or something similar to that. But—again—this is solely because these theories *started out* with the assumption that we are self-maximizers. And now they are simply seeking to justify their original false assumption.

An upshot of all this, though, is that game theory—and liberal democracy—by assuming that selfishness is our default value, also necessarily sees honesty as only a means to an end. So that, under the right circumstances dishonesty might well serve us better. Which is why I pointed out in an earlier episode that the best way to ‘win’ at the game of ‘rational self-interest’ is to get everyone else to play by the rules. And then you cheat.

But remember Milgram's anonymous letter finders. There was no possible self-maximizing strategy in them forwarding the untraceable money. But they did it anyway.

And, again, any number of other experiments in social psychology and behavioral economics have shown the same tendency. Our default human nature is to be honest. And it is only when others rip us off, as it were, that we tend to change our tune.

For if the reality is that we evolved to be hypersocial animals working together for some good greater than individuality, then it also makes perfect sense that we would also evolve to be trusting, honest, even generous. And that this mutual sense of trust would then act as a sort of lubricant which would ease the friction and the stress of dealing with not only the other people that we know, but, more importantly, with all the various people whom we run across that we don't know. And in terms of evolutionary biology, the less energy we require in order to deal with stress, the more energy we have for the rest of our lives.

Because never forget just how stressful those baboon and other primate pecking orders can be. Especially for the males. But by mostly doing away with strict hierarchy, and by substituting an atmosphere of trust and co-operation, for humans it was now far easier for one person to take orders and direction from another without too much loss of a sense of dignity and autonomy. And this was especially important in the uniquely complex human hypersocial environment. After all, the person giving the orders in one situation might very well be taking them in another.

Okay. Time for another (hopefully) obvious caveat:

Because I don't mean in any way to suggest that were it not for the evils of Jeremy Bentham et al we would all be living in a big happy family of peace and wonder. Nor am I claiming that instead of a distant past in which rugged individuals sat down to write a social contract there was a distant past in which Noble Savages all lovingly shared with one another.

No, it would be beyond idiotic to pretend that the human condition hasn't always included dishonesty and conflict. First and foremost this has to do with the plain fact that we are indeed

individuals. Each with those unique and (often) widely varying personalities. What's more, on many subjects even reasonable people can honestly disagree. But we also all know from personal experience that many people can be very unreasonable. (Especially when they disagree with us.) Indeed many people have so many internal contradictions that they can act irrationally, even violently, all without any input from anyone else.

So—once again—remember that concept of the Cambrian Moment. And although it's certainly possible to imagine a Utopian future in which everyone has evolved to be reasonable and in which all of our desires are moderate, we ain't there yet. Nor would we have been there now even if that Age of Enlightenment hadn't come along.

(Although we certainly may well have been a lot closer...)

Anyway, to see how it is that we've gotten as far as we have gotten, let's go back to those original pre-Neolithic groups of 150 or less. Now in this state of affairs trust with new, unknown alien clans or tribes would be cautious at best. But trust within the initial group, if assuming the group was functioning smoothly, would probably be fairly robust.

(Oh, and by the way, this would be a good time to point out that there is no good reason why we should expect the behavior of a primitive tribe of today, such as in the Amazon or New Guinea, to be analogous to those pre-Neolithic tribes. After all, those tribes of today are living on marginal land in marginal conditions. And, Arcadian fantasies aside, when you think about it, in many ways most of them have actually had hundreds or thousands of years to get on the 'civilization train'. So that if they act dysfunctionally or weird, that is in no way evidence that the immediate ancestors of the Neolithic also acted dysfunctionally.)

But back to those immediate ancestors. Because it was quite the trick of evolution to create even a smoothly functioning group of only 150. How did it do this?

Well, how about those rules and regulations? Because if everyone was on the same page, as it were, as to how things were done and what behaviors needed to be performed, and if those rules and regulations were perceived to be above and beyond the purview or whim of any particular individual, then, again, so much potential psychological stress could be eliminated. So long as everyone followed the same rules and regulations.

Now, might not some of these rules, including those which anthropologists call taboos, be irrational, even counter-productive? Of course. But here is one instance where the 'magic of the

marketplace’, where survival of the fittest, actually kicks in. Because in general those mini-societies which adopt dysfunctional rules aren’t going to be as successful as those which adopt more functional ones. And as the Neolithic dawned, and places like Mesopotamia started developing agriculture and therefore started accumulating more and more people, those mini-societies with the least irrational rules and regulations would tend to dominate.

And was this process always ‘fair’? Once again, of course not. After all, a brutish barbarian will easily defeat a peaceful philosopher. But unless that brutish barbarian is then wise enough to adopt the rules and regulations of peaceful cohabitation, his regime is not likely to survive his personal death. And then we are back to the slow agglomeration of the ‘marketplace’.

So now we can envision a process through which homo sapiens, whose brain was of a size to accommodate groups of around 150, could expand into groupings of, today, millions of people. Because the anthropologists are right to point out that kinship rules and tribal affiliation are important. But these bonds seem to be inherently much weaker in our psyches than is that natural pre-programming that sets us up to follow those rules and regulations.

Of course, we generally associate the term ‘rules and regulations’ with both literacy and a legal profession, both of which have been mostly absent throughout most of human history. So clearly some less formal structure would have also had to evolve so as to keep everyone in those slowly agglomerating hyper-societies more or less on the same page.

And this less formal structure can be summed up in a term that even anthropologists recognize: Namely, social norms.

Now I fully agree that many social norms can appear trivial, especially when viewed from the outside. For instance, if you look at photographs of large crowds from around 1900, you’ll notice that every single man, without exception, is wearing a hat. Usually of the exact same style. Now there was no law back then requiring men to wear hats in public. Nor can one make any sort of a priori argument as to any inherent practical or psychological necessity to wear hats. So one could easily conclude from this particular social norm that social norms in general are arbitrary, artificial, and, in the end, unnecessary.

However... Although admittedly virtually no one in 1900 ever thought twice as to why they were wearing a hat when out in public, someone who did think about such things might well have pointed out that wearing a hat was the socially approved way of both showing self-respect and respect

for one's fellow citizens. Further, such a person might add that although this particular form of showing respect was indeed arbitrary, the underlying sociological need to show such respect was quite important.

Anyway, even if you wanted to argue about the inherent need for all of the various other examples of superficial social norms, it is also obvious that many other social norms are *prima facie* necessary for the smooth workings of even a small hypersociety. Honesty. Sobriety. Non-violence. Fairness. Sexual restraint.

Now, clearly, the particulars of such 'essential' social norms may vary slightly or somewhat by culture. Moreover, depending on the culture, the degree of severity in enforcing each and every norm can certainly vary. But, as I've been more or less pointing out throughout this podcast, when you look at the array of all of the literate societies which have ever existed, you will find roughly the same mix of these 'essential' social norms.

And the really interesting thing about social norms is that in general you don't need an overbearing legal system or a pervasive police presence in order to enforce them. No, traditionally, all that you really needed was social pressure.

Now you might well remember the example from American colonial history about how people who had committed minor crimes, and/or who had blatantly gone against the social norms, were placed in a public stockade. Or perhaps forced to wear a dunce cap. And when you learned this it was no doubt presented to you as the most backward and degrading of punishments. But consider that the humiliation that such a person suffered usually lasted only one or two days. And then the miscreant, properly chastened, was welcomed back into their society.

On the other hand, today we in the United States have more than two million people incarcerated in (usually brutal) prisons. Most of them for very long sentences. And 200,000 of them for life without parole. And these life sentences are often as a result of an accumulation of relatively minor offenses.

So... When you also consider that there was virtually no crime in colonial America, and that citizens were able to walk around with no fear and in total safety, which of these two systems do you think might be the better one?

It's pretty obvious that the punishment of wearing a dunce cap is almost laughably trivial compared with the punishment of being sent to prison. And yet the plain sociological fact is that it was more effective at deterring crime. How could this be? This makes no sense at all if you think that we

humans are an large, unrelated set of rugged individuals. After all, why should independent *I* be the least bit emotionally upset about what independent, unrelated to me, *you* thinks about me wearing a dunce cap?

But when you realize that we are in fact hypersocial animals it all makes perfect sense. Because we evolved to intuitively understand that the whole was greater than, and much more important than, the parts. And that it therefore followed that it must be a terrible thing if we screwed up with the whole by breaking its social norms. Blatant non-co-operation, then, became something which would cause us immediate and deep shame and humiliation.

Although never forget that, for the successful integration of a huge number of unique individuals to take place, evolution could not have relied solely upon guilt and negativity. For then this new sort of social arrangement wouldn't have been any better at relieving destructive stress than the dominance/hierarchical model which it was replacing.

So it's important to remember that for most of the time, for most of the people in the community, the main pervasive emotion was definitely not that of fear either of breaking the norms or of the punishment which might arise from not following orders. Rather it was a positive uplifting emotion of *social acceptance*. That is to say, what held everything together and made sure that in the end everyone co-operated was the secure knowledge that everyone else around you was there not only to take care of each other—especially the sick and the weak—but also to be actively emotionally concerned about the physical, psychological, and spiritual welfare of all of the other members of the group or society.

After all, genetic ties may or may not be all important in the rest of the animal kingdom. But, even if this is the case, then it would also follow that human trust would then be another one of those evolutionary game changers. Because it turns out that the mixture of a common language, a common religion perhaps, and common mores and social norms all combine to create a sense of inclusion in—for lack of a better name—what we can label a nation. And this sense of citizenship can then override both the pull of furthering one's personal genome, and even the somewhat stronger pull of self-preservation. Meaning that the ideal and reality of social acceptance is so strong that it can even lead to one sacrificing one's own life for the good of the whole.

So now we know that we were born to follow rules. To do as we're told. And that it is absurd to imagine humanity developing to even the mid-Paleolithic without those endemic traits.

But we also know that we did not evolve to be faceless drones pushed around by mindless powers that be. Nor were we destined to become (usually) losers in an endless game of King of the Hill. Rather a shared set of cultural values and social norms fashioned at least a rough sense of equality and a generally positive sense of social acceptance.

Until the Age of Enlightenment, that is.

So, before we leave this episode, let's take another quick look at those three experiments which formed the basis of the last episode.

For they are indeed disturbing if we are sticking to the foundational assumption that we are all rugged, rational, self-maximizing individuals whom nobody can tell what to do. After all, the first two (repeatedly replicated) experiments convincingly showed exactly the opposite.

Once we accept, however, that in reality we are actually hypersocial animals who could not have continued to exist these past 200,000 years unless we both did trust each other and yet also do as we were told by those in authority, then said experiments are still scary.

Except for different reasons. Because it then turns out that what Asch and Milgram unknowingly did—just as optical illusions trick our brains into believing that, say, a two dimensional drawing is actually three dimensional—what they did was to exploit our instinctive trust in others.

Thus when everyone else in the room says that the shorter line is longer there is a strong push in our brains to override what we ourselves have perceived. This is not so much proof of conformity than it is proof of our evolutionary need to rely on others to confirm or deny our own perceptions. Because, way back when, maybe that lion that we thought we saw actually wasn't there. Or maybe we weren't seeing the lion that *was* about to attack.

Similarly, since we are not solitary cats but rather hypersocial beings who need to perform incredibly complicated behaviors together, it is imperative that we instinctively trust and obey those who are in legitimate authority over us. And a scientist in a lab coat and with a clipboard certainly seems to qualify as that. Moreover, when he keeps reaffirming to us that the purpose of the experiment is for the furtherance of science (ie for the good of all) it is extremely difficult for our brains to override that.

So that the truly nightmarish features of all this really have to do with—you guessed it!—the results of those beliefs of the Age of Enlightenment. Because our brains evolved to trust others in our group. But the flip side is that we also evolved to be one of those trustworthy others. And when we are mistakenly brought up to believe that we are instead stand alone individuals it is all too easy for us to

be manipulated by those others who were brought up to believe that *they* were selfish individuals, and that they therefore no longer had to be trustworthy.

(Again: *Of course* all sorts of torture and other bad things happened in human history before the 18th Century. But this is (once again) partially explained by the fact of our semi-evolution and the perennial existence of bad actors. The main difference, though, is that almost always those torturers and assorted other bad guys were people from *outside* our trusted group. And our brains had also evolved to *not* automatically trust outsiders.)

Perhaps the scariest display of what inevitably arises from our mistaken belief in the 'rational independent individual', though, is that Stanford Prison Experiment. Because, as just discussed, rates of incarceration before the modern era were virtually zero. Those 'prisons' which did exist, such as the Tower of London, had perhaps ten cells or so. And these were reserved almost exclusively for political prisoners. Highwaymen and murderers, who usually arose only in times of social disruption, were dispatched with forthwith. And the rest of the time social pressure worked almost perfectly to keep most normal citizens in line.

But what happens when we declare the supremacy of the individual and deny the greater importance of the larger society? Because remember that the reason that social pressure worked so well had less to do with the implicit threat of token punishment and personal humiliation and much more to do with the positive warm emotional bonds which made everyone feel as though they were on the same team and also part of an accepting group.

Now put that aside for a moment and remember that a main driving force behind much of Jeremy Bentham's life was his central 'reform' of society, the Panopticon. In fact, he was literally obsessed with this idea of a so-called 'model' prison in which prisoners would be relentlessly monitored twenty four hours a day, and in which these prisoners would then be forced to work for private contractors. And what would otherwise seem like a bizarre preoccupation for this supposed founding theorist of 'personal freedom', secular humanism and liberal democracy now starts to make sense. For once you deny the primacy of social pressure in keeping everyone within the fold, in fact once you deny the existence of social pressure, of social belonging, then everything and everyone becomes atomized. And the only recourse you have left for those atomized individuals who misbehave is to throw them in jail.

And, since without social controls some people necessarily will misbehave, you then inevitably will develop those two castes of prisoners and guards.

But, as Zimbardo's experiment graphically showed, bad things happen almost immediately once you divide people up into prisoners and guards. There is no longer any sense of mutual trust, of social belonging. Groups do indeed form, of prisoners and of guards, but the explicit power structure *starts out* as being that of master and slave.

Which of course is the exact opposite of the personal liberty which a belief in individualism was supposed to produce.

And which is perhaps the scariest insight of all.

Anyway, I'm not quite done with this. But I am also in the position of temporarily running out of time for this. Which can be remedied, of course, by starting another episode.

In the meantime, though, once again, I would like to thank you so much for so far having listened.o